I'm an
Infinite Regressor
but I've got Stories to tell
J
PLUS

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I should probably leave a note here, so I'll just say treat this story as a memetic virus and infect as many people as you can (the fandom must grow).

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Chapter 1

The Partner I

Sinnoa

Infinite Regression. There is a genre by that name.

It's called 'Infinite Regression' when the protagonist dies, then returns to a state before death to endlessly challenge the hurdles in their path. Naturally, the protagonist somehow overcomes them, no matter how perilous the obstacle. After all, they simply keep trying until they succeed.

What once was doomed to be a bad ending is transformed into a happy ending, or the protagonist miraculously saves a side heroine destined to die from an incurable disease, or—

Infinite Regression is essentially a cheat key to end all tragedies.

However, speaking from experience, the infinite regression depicted in various novels is nothing but despicable propaganda. It's like one of those cram schools that only displays the names of students who got into prestigious universities.

"Shit. This isn't going to work."

I set down my cane-sword.

The 1183rd regression. The world had ended again.

Those who were destined to succeed will succeed; those who weren't, won't. I belonged to the latter. I had to accept the fact that, no matter how desperately I tried, I couldn't prevent the world's destruction.

This is not a story of success, but one of failure—the mere afterword of someone who, despite possessing the ability of infinite regression, ultimately couldn't prevent the end of everything.

First thing to note is that the human mental state, or rather, mental strength always has an expiration date. No matter how normal someone appears on the outside, repeated regressions will undoubtedly forge an invisible crack in that surface.

A prime example of this is the story I'm about to tell concerning grandfather Schopenhauer.

"My direct ancestor was a very famous philosopher."[1]

Old Man 'Scho' often boasted about his lineage. I myself had heard the name Schopenhauer tossed around, but honestly, unlike his esteemed ancestor, Scho was far from a philosopher.

"Are those muscles of yours for Scho? Do some exercise, man."

Despite his clocking in at 60 years old, his body was all muscle. More familiar with an iron body than philosophical ideals, Old Man Scho always emphasized the importance of exercise.

"Come on, all that muscle disappears with each regression anyway..."

"Weight training is a habit. Habits don't disappear," Old Man Scho said sagely.

These days, I possess a skill known as [Resume], which allows me to retain my muscles and internal power even when I go back to the past, but back then, I was just a novice who hadn't even experienced regression ten times. It was pretty hard to sympathize with Old Man Scho's philosophy.

In terms of nationality, generation, taste, beliefs, and political leanings, Old Man Scho and I were complete opposites. There wasn't a single centimeter of common ground between us. And yet, there was one reason we always stuck together.

"Tsk. This run is messed up again."

"So it is."

Infinite regression.

That's right, Old Man Scho and I were regressors with the same ability. Somehow, in the world where I lived, there weren't just one, but two regressors. Considering that infinite regression was granted to only one person in most creative works, this was quite unusual.

"Damn, we're screwed. That monster can't be killed."

"What should we do, then?"

"I'll go ahead, you come later. While I hold it off, you try to escape and struggle 'til the end. Then maybe in the next run, you might see a way?"

"Fuck. Always leaving the hard parts to me..."

"Hey! Watch your language! Mind your manners, you brat!"

The one saying the Korean sentiment of "mind your manners" so fluently was Old Man Scho, who was actually German, funnily enough.

I first met Old Man Scho on my 6th regression. Back then, he could barely say "hello" in Korean. However, as soon as he realized there was another infinite regressor like himself, he immersed himself in studying the language.

By the 7th and 8th regressions, his Korean improved dramatically. Eventually, by the 10th regression, he was better at Korean than me.

The man could even read the *Analects* in Korean instead of German.

"Old man, your passion is really something else."

"It's not passion, you fool! It's habit! You don’t learn German, so I had to. A person who has mastered memory skills, bah! What in the world are you doing, not studying? It was said, 'He who learns but does not think is lost.' How can you be so lazy about learning when you’re much younger than me? Tsk, really..."

"....."

He might have learned a bit too well.

Anyway, thanks to Old Man Scho equipping his brain with K-conservativeness along with Korean, our communication drastically improved.

There were not one, but two infinite regressors, each a cheat key in their own right. Isn't that something?

Sometimes I sacrificed, sometimes Old Man Scho did, and together, we kept making our mark on this world.

"We did it! We actually did it!"

When we defeated the monster 'Ten Legs', which no one had overcome in ten runs, both of us cheered.

After blasting away that hateful, mop-like, tentacled head, Old Man Scho tossed his sword aside and rushed at me in a burst.

"Oh my! Thank you! It's all thanks to you! I couldn't have made it this far alone!" Old Man Scho laughed like a child.

Truth be told, from the 6th to the 10th regression, we worked together as allies, but somewhere in our hearts, we had always been wary of each other. It was difficult to trust someone else in a world on the brink of destruction.

Both I and Old Man Scho. We had seen too much to easily trust anyone.

But the moment this white-haired German old-timer embraced me with a bright smile, I felt the last vestiges of that mutual suspicion between us completely melt away.

I looked into Old Man Scho's gray eyes. It was clear he felt the same.

Yes, we were pilots who had crash-landed at the end of the century, but while we couldn't say we were born from the same land, we

were comrades who had jumped with our delicate parachutes towards the same landing spot.

From that day forward, many things became unimportant between us. Nationality, generation, tastes, beliefs, political inclinations—all lost their natural pull on us.

In an atmosphere where gravity had faded, we felt significantly lighter.

"Actually, this regression thing is really hard to get used to."

Old Man Scho opened up to me about his human side, the part called 'weakness' in a world that had met its end.

We would fill a thermos with coffee in the morning or grab a bottle of soju and head to an empty café (many of which had been abandoned as the baristas had fled the ruined world) to chat over trivial matters.

"Why?"

"We wake up on June 17th when we regress, right? But a minute after we regress, my wife dies."

"Excuse me?"

Old Man Scho explained: June 17th, 13:59. That marks the point when our regression begins. But just around 14:00 on June 17th, a gate opens in Seoul, South Korea, and everything south of the Han River vanishes.

That day, unlike the two of us who were in Busan and escaped the catastrophe, Old Man Scho's wife was attending a conference in Seoul.

"Just one minute. Only a minute."

Old Man Scho downed his soju.

"My wife was in the auditorium, conducting an event with several famous scientists."

"Even if you warn her the gate is opening... she wouldn’t be able to escape."

"That's right."

It was a disaster that turned Seoul into a wasteland. Even if Old Man Scho called immediately after regressing to tell her to evacuate, it was physically impossible to avoid the tragedy.

"Calling her is no use, she won’t pick up immediately. She sets her phone to silent during important events... I have to call three times in a row for her to answer."

"....."

"Then there's no time. I just manage to say 'I love you', then there's a *thump* from the sky and the call cuts off. Just 10 seconds. That's all the time I get to hear my wife’s voice..."

"Any other family?"

"None. I only have my wife," Old Man Scho muttered.

His real name, Emit Schopenhauer. His alias, Swordmaster.

I began to understand why he was so obsessed with gaining immense power.

With each regression, Old Man Scho's drinking increased. By the 9th regression, he'd say the soju wasn't real alcohol before drinking, but by the 19th, he’d down three bottles on the spot.

"Even if I drink myself to death, as long as I regress, my liver resets. It’s a win, isn’t it? Hehehe..."

He said that, but Old Man Scho's complexion was not bright.

By then, we—*he*—had endured approximately 120 years if we combined all the regressed time. However, the time he had spent talking with his wife amounted to just about 120 seconds.

The journey of an old man crossing a desert just to sip water was

becoming ever more grueling.

"There has to be someone with teleportation abilities out there."

At some point, Old Man Scho's goal began to change.

"What?"

"A teleporter. If I can just find them, then as soon as we regress, I could rush to my wife."

"But... Old man. Even if a teleporter exists somewhere in the world, can you really meet up with that person within a minute? It takes us 30 minutes just to meet up after regressing."

"....."

Old Man Scho fell silent.

I could tell that it was not a silence of affirmation.

Over a century, my companion who had tried to prevent destruction with me was slowly consumed by increasingly bizarre thoughts. He muttered incessantly.

"Maybe if I find resurrection magic, I could bring dead people back to life?"

"If I could copy someone else's abilities, get teleportation and telepathy, I could surely solve any problem within a minute."

"It can be done. Surely it can be done."

It was like a sandcastle collapsing.

The pinnacle of the collapse was the 23rd regression.

I started the regression as usual, following the same route. After dealing with the dungeonized area in under 30 minutes, I moved to a pre-arranged meeting place. It was a hideout we had set up in an earlier cycle.

"Huh? Old man? Old man, are you there?"

No one was in the underground training center. I couldn't find any signs of someone entering or leaving.

"....."

A sense of ominous foreboding seized me, prompting me to move immediately.

My starting point was Busan Station. Old Man Scho's was the old Baekje Hospital building.

I passed by an elementary school that had been torn down to half its size due to a monster's rampage, then entered the old hospital building. Everyone had already evacuated, so it was deserted.

Old Man Scho was dead on the rooftop.

"....."

It was not murder.

From the beginning of the starting point, there was no one capable of killing Old Man Scho—be it monster or human. Even I couldn't have.

The only one who could have killed him was himself.

Old Man Scho's body was headless, but the rest of his torso was intact. He was tightly clutching a smartphone in his left hand.

"Madness."

Footnotes:

1 - Arthur Schopenhauer was a German philosopher. He is known for his 1818 work *The World as Will and Representation*, which characterizes the phenomenal world as the manifestation of a blind and irrational noumenal will.

Chapter 2

The Partner II

Sinnoa

The same phenomenon repeated itself on the 24th and 25th runs.

I had to experience the timeline where Old Man Scho died a total of three times. The only factor separating these runs from the others was whether a single comrade was with me, yet the perceived difficulty had increased five or sixfold. It was then that I realized how much I had been relying on Old Man Scho all this time.

It finally happened in the 26th run.

"I'm sorry."

Old Man Scho handed me a coffee as soon as he saw my face.

There was a café in the old Baekje Hospital building. He must have predicted that I would come rushing over and was using the empty café to brew coffee at his leisure.

The café au lait Old Man Scho prepared was truly delicious. It was back in the 11th run, I think? It must have been thanks to the barista skills he acquired then.

"Show your face, old man," I called out in German. By the 26th run, I too could recite poetry in foreign languages.

"Is this you forgiving me?"

"7, 7, 7."

"...?"

"Do you know what those numbers mean?"

"...A casino slot machine jackpot?"

"No. They're the runs I endured without you. Together, they add up to 21 years. Damn, after not seeing you for over 20 years, I was about to forget what you even look like. Let's talk face to face."

Old Man Scho didn't respond, seemingly cowed into silence.

I sat opposite him and gulped down my coffee. By now, I could waltz into whatever café I so pleased and loot a quick cup, but I hadn't been able to drink the real deal for five long years.

As someone who had just lived through a run of seven years before dying, indulging in genuine café au lait and not some assembly-line imitation was a luxury I couldn't afford. Regression wasn't all bad. Coffee. Draft beer. Cigarettes. Not-yet-deceased comrades... Experiencing them all again was tremendously important to me.

"Twenty-one years, huh... Remarkable. From my perspective, I last saw you less than an hour ago."

It seemed not for Old Man Scho.

More precisely, the most precious thing on his list of 'memories to keep fresh in mind' was still just out of reach.

"But I understand. I haven't seen my wife's face for over a hundred years myself. I know what it feels like."

"....."

"I can see her face in photos. I can watch videos I've saved to hear her voice. But still, there's a dry well inside me that remains unfilled."

My sense of foreboding was not misplaced.

If this had been like any other regression story, Old Man Scho would have kept his mental fortitude, I would have found some miraculous solution within the restrictions, and the elderly couple might have reunited after overcoming a century of separation.

"I want to see my wife in person."

But as I said, my story is not a tale of success but an afterword chronicling a series of failures.

Old Man Scho's spirit had broken. In less than 30 seconds, he had taken his own life three times just so he could talk to his wife.

There was no way for me to save him.

"Do you not understand me? You are the one person who should understand. Use your abilities to help me..."

"That's not possible," I flatly refused.

Just as Old Man Scho had a natural talent for swordsmanship, I too had various abilities besides regression. Opportunities to discuss my powers will come in due time, but for the purposes of this discussion, the ability Old Man Scho was referring to was Time Seal. And I had no intention of using it on a comrade I could very well see with my own two eyes.

"I know you know, old man. Once time is sealed, it's over. It never comes undone—no number of regressions can break it."

"Maybe, but I could still talk to her in my dreams."

"You would just be repeating the same day forever."

"How is that any different from our current situation?"

This time, I was the one left without an answer.

"Still," I said after a moment's hesitation, "it's not possible. We can't afford to lose our strongest ally like this."

"So be it."

Had he anticipated my reaction? As soon as Plan A was rejected, Old Man Scho immediately proposed Plan B.

"You keep trying until you find a solution. Keep regressing until you can save people in Seoul within a minute of starting. Or, until you admit it's impossible and give up like I did."

"What about you?"

"I'm tired. Really... I've grown weary. So I will just rest a while until you come to a conclusion."

That night, Old Man Scho took his own life.

That was the so-called "rest" he mentioned.

"...My God."

Fitting for a swordsman who had reached realms lofty enough to be titled a Sword Star, Old Man Scho could wield an explosive Aura powerful enough to blow one's head off. It would have been a painless death.

The 27th, 28th, and 29th runs brought no changes.

Old Man Scho was found dead on the rooftop of the café building that once housed the hospital.

Whenever I went to the café after clearing the dungeon at Busan Station, there would always be a cup of café au lait on the table, greeting me with a warm puff of air.

Underneath the coffee cup, there was a note.

Shouldn't you think about giving up, my friend?

I smiled wryly. "...I guess I've stumbled across a regular café to visit every decade."

Once, I imagined the life of my comrade.

For Old Man Scho, life had been reduced to calls with his wife lasting about 10 to 20 seconds and then spending 10 minutes preparing a café au lait for an old comrade who might visit him. This repetition had not changed, from the 29th to the 1183rd regression.

A body on the rooftop. A cup of café au lait on the table.

Who was crazier: the regressor who had not once taken his own life in over a thousand cycles, or the one who had incessantly done so over a thousand times?

I couldn't tell.

However, with each new run, a gradual change began to make itself known in the content of the calls between Old Man Scho and his wife.

「God! You finally picked up the phone!」

「Emit? What's wrong? I'm at a conference right now...」

「I love you, Adele. I love you. I will always love you.」

Old Man Scho always recorded his conversations with his wife, perhaps to replay the calls before ending his short life. Thanks to that, I could overhear what the elderly couple talked about every time.

「I love you, Adele... I love you.」

During the first ten or so regressions, there was no significant change. Old Man Scho was simply trying desperately to convey his love to his wife. But after the 30th cycle, the content of the calls began to subtly change.

「Adele, actually, I'm repeating my life. The world is going to end, but I still love you.」

「Oh my God. Have you been drinking? Why are you acting like a child? Wait a minute, Emit. There's something strange in the sky...」

Regression.

「Do you remember? Twenty years ago in Turin. I went under the bridge and picked a yellow flower for you. What was the name of that flower?」

「What? You're calling me to ask that now?」

「Please answer me, Adele. I'll die if you don't.」

Regression.

「Sorry, what was your brother's name again?」

「Maximilian, but why—?」

「Ah! Yes, Maximilian! Haha, I had forgotten! Thanks!」

「Hah... hopeless. Wait? There's some sort of noise coming from the sky...」

It was curious.

As the regressions continued, the calls Old Man Scho had with his wife shifted from being merely one-sided transmissions to something resembling a real conversation. They were brief, lasting only about 20 seconds before cutting off, but when pieced together, they almost seemed to form a proper exchange of dialogue.

「I've never liked that guy Maximilian.」

「Huh? Suddenly?」

「He doesn't think family is important at all! The guy's got his priorities all mixed up. He just pretends to listen in front of you.」

「Emit? Wait. Something odd is happening in the sky...」

「Honey, remember Christmas? When your brother brought someone he said was his girlfriend. Honestly, is Maximilian gay?」

「Huh? Where's this coming from? Why are you asking this over the phone...? Wait, Emit. It's weird. I hear something in the sky.」

「Exactly! My intuition is never wrong. Adele. Your brother is absolutely gay!」

「God! Emit, what are you talking about all of a sudden?」

「No, I have nothing against it. It's just that you and your brother assumed I wouldn't accept it and have kept it a secret all this time,

and that feels disappointing.」

「I'm going crazy. What the...? Wait, let's save this conversation for when we meet in person! There's this bizarre sound coming from the sky.」

「Adele. We need to be more open-minded with each other! I'm not a closed-minded old man like your father!」

If one ignored the fact that the elderly couple's lives were “paused,” per se, their exchange appeared to be a proper two-way conversation.

"So the old man's words had some merit."

Eventually, I had to admit it. What Old Man Scho called “rest” was indeed just that.

With each passing cycle, as the calls grew longer, the life returned to Old Man Scho's voice, and memories of the past, once long forgotten, were revived. Over time, he seemed to care less and less about this world coming to an end.

Even so, Old Man Scho did not stop taking his own life. Or rather—to put it in his words—he did not stop making calls to his wife.

By the 500th cycle, I had stopped eavesdropping on Old Man Scho's calls.

They had gradually become too intimate for outsiders to eavesdrop on. I never had any desire to know even the slightest detail regarding the old man’s sexual preferences. Perhaps he couldn't even imagine that I'd been eavesdropping on his phone conversations all along.

However, every time a new run began, I would be sure to stop by the building and have a cup of café au lait.

Emit Schopenhauer, my former colleague from the distant past whose memory was now shrouded in obscurity. His choice of café au lait felt like a ritual, a way to fortify ourselves for the challenges ahead.

This was no different during my 1183rd regression. Beneath the coffee cup, the note lay there like always.

Are you still not giving up, my friend?

Well, to be honest, I had given up, but I didn't want to admit it to this young man. (By now, my age far surpassed his.) Perhaps someday, I'll confess, but for now, a little mischief wouldn't hurt. After all, I've spent thousands of years alone. I've earned it.

'...Come to think of it, I wonder what Scho is talking about with her?'

Suddenly, curiosity struck. It had been a long time since I retrieved Scho's old smartphone to listen to his recorded calls.

When I pressed the play button, Scho's distinctive, lively voice burst forth.

「Honey! I've told you a thousand times, drink only zero-calorie soda! Sugar isn't good for your health!」

「What?」

I sipped my café au lait inside the café, the argument playing out like the ambient music of a coffee shop.

The coffee was delicious.

Footnotes:

Chapter 3

The Observer I

Sinnoa

The café where I often met Old Man Scho...

No, let me correct that.

The café where I often met the corpse of Old Man Scho is dotted with small fish tanks here and there, probably to cater to a certain barista's preference.

Though there's nothing particularly rare about the species living there, their tails possess a magical calming quality. All you had to do was look at them. Perhaps the flow of time almost seems to slow around those fins. Or maybe it's simply because the blank stare of the fish's eyes looks downright foolish.

As I sip on Old Man Scho's café au lait and watch a blue tropical fish perform its intricate, underwater ballet that ripples through time, one person invariably comes to mind.

The Saintess.

Today, I think I'll talk about her.

When the Gate crisis erupted worldwide, Korea fared relatively well, surprisingly enough.

It wasn't thanks to the government, though. From the outset, half of Seoul was devastated, including the National Assembly Building in Yeouido. Over a hundred politicians were vaporized that day. Whether that was a mark of good or bad fortune is a matter of personal opinion, but at least in the early days, it temporarily paralyzed Korea's political leadership.

The reason the Awakeners of Korea managed to navigate this crisis despite that was something else entirely—something that came in the form of a translucent, almost holographic message that appeared before their very eyes.

[The Saintess of National Salvation shows interest in your heroic deeds.]

That, for instance, was the sort of message displayed for me when I took a leading role in subduing the Gate at Busan Station. And I was not the only one who experienced this phenomenon.

"Huh? What's this?"

"...The Chancellor of the Red Cape? He's interested in me?"

Awakeners began to make themselves known nationwide, and inevitably, these messages found them. The sender varied from person to person, but every one of them had one thing in common: They all noticed someone was paying attention to their actions.

"It's the Constellations!"

Someone named this phenomenon the 'Constellations'. It seemed all too familiar to Awakeners who were fans of web novels. On the other hand, for the uninitiated like me, the concept was baffling.

Eventually, I approached someone who seemed all too eager to explain as they puffed out a palpable 'I know what this is! I've seen it!' energy.

"Excuse me, sir. Sorry to bother you when we haven't met before, but what are Constellations?"

"Oh, you don't know about Constellation stories!"

The Awakener was eager to explain.

"It's a way for transcendent beings like them to watch us Awakeners —expressing their interest and even sponsoring us! You know, like online streaming? We're the streamers, and the Constellations are the viewers dropping donations!"

"Wow."

"The Constellations are incredibly powerful too. Some are terrifying entities like Cthulhu, while others are deities who are friendly with humans... Anyway, it's a good thing! Always try to look good for the Constellations. Ahh, which Constellation should I choose? Is the option of [Choose None] still the trend?"

The Awakener continued to ramble on for a while. At the time, I just nodded along in vague acceptance. With monsters roaming around through the Gates, it wouldn't be all that surprising if there were also transcendent beings who munched on popcorn while watching the human world.

[The Conqueror of the Alps admires your valor!]

[The Chancellor of the Red Cape respects your strategy.]

As the cycles repeated, I grew accustomed to the existence of the Constellations. They seemed to follow my every move, praising me or offering encouragement whenever I did something unique or unexpected.

[The Saintess of National Salvation praises your accomplishments.]

I was particularly proud that the Saintess, known for favoring benevolent Awakeners, seemed to cherish me the most.

Had it not been for the Constellations, my life as an Awakener would surely have felt bleak in a way. While the identity of the Constellations remained a mystery, most of the Awakeners—myself included—developed a fondness for them.

"...This is odd."

Old Man Scho had a different take on it. Back around the 10th cycle—before he took his long "vacation"—Old Man Scho had grown suspicious of the Constellations' presence.

"Huh? What's odd?"

"I recently got in contact with some friends overseas. Most are dead,

but a few survived. And the ones that did... they say they've never seen anything like this back home."

"Anything like what?"

"Bah, come on. The messages from the Constellations, the messages! My friends in Germany have neither seen nor heard of them." Old Man Scho frowned, scrunching his nose with the force of it. "Just in case, I asked some of my friends in other countries, and they also said they've never gotten the messages before."

"....."

"Then that means this bizarre phenomenon is unique to Korea... Surely you see how strange that is? Why would the Constellations only operate here if they are transcendent beings? What reason would they have to favor Korea?"

"Uh... maybe they like K-pop?"

"Bullshit, Doc."

A moment later, messages flooded in.

[The Saintess of National Salvation is disheartened by your conversation.]

[The Conqueror of the Alps asks you to withhold your doubts.]

[The Chancellor of the Red Cape scoffs at your shallow understanding.]

It was as though they had been waiting. By that point, Old Man Scho and I had already garnered significant attention from the Constellations. It was no wonder since Old Man Scho was undoubtedly the greatest Swordmaster, and I was...

Well, I was an irreplaceable resource of sorts.

I glanced casually to the side. Old Man Scho was furrowing his brow, seeming to see something in front of him as well.

"You too, old man?"

"Yeah. These things are watching every little thing we do," Old Man Scho grumbled, swatting the air with his hand as if to shoo away an annoying fly. "Anyway, there are too many things that are fishy here. They never sent me messages before I started picking up Korean. But once I spoke even the tiniest bit, they magically started sending messages my way."

"....."

"If what you said isn't true, and they're not high on K-hype, I can't explain it. Doc, don't trust these Constellation things too much."

Regrettably, Old Man Scho never unraveled the secret of the Constellations. By the 26th cycle, the gramps had gone on a long vacation with his wife, leaving him with no time to explore the mystery further.

But not me.

Being an infinite regressor is like being the Bill Gates of time. It'd be no exaggeration to say that all I have is time.

'Why do the Constellations only appear in Korea?'

I stroked my chin. It had remained a mystery intriguing enough throughout my swathe of regressions to warrant an entire run's investigation.

First of all, Old Man Scho's observation was correct. It wasn't just the foreign Awakeners—even those in Korea who had not learned the language never received these apparent messages.

'Thanks to them, the quality—or should I say, the conscience—of the Awakeners in Korea is relatively sound.'

In other countries, the Awakeners caused terror attacks, massacred civilians, and ran rampant, committing crimes on the daily. Korea alone saw a lower crime rate among its Awakeners.

Why was this phenomenon occurring? I had two theories.

First, the Constellations were truly addicted to K-pop culture and only cared about Korean Awakeners. And second—

'Do the Constellations only speak Korean...?'

If this was true, it would have massive implications. Just think about it. Even the stubborn Old Man Scho mastered foreign languages in just a few cycles. But these so-called Constellations only spoke Korean? What kind of transcendents could they possibly be?

'In other words, the Constellations aren't transcendents.'

A hypothesis formed in my mind.

But monitoring every Awakener in Korea and sending them personalized messages would be difficult if they weren't transcendents. Surely, there must be some underlying secret to it.

From the 35th run onward, I officially began my Constellation Investigation. I was determined to finally get to the bottom of what sort of beings had admired and balked at my actions thus far.

'First, I need to attract the attention of the Constellations.'

Attracting their attention was simple. Constellations had a habit of taking an interest in exceptional Awakeners. As soon as I began the 35th run, I pushed myself to use all my abilities to clear the Gate that erupted at Busan Station within 20 minutes. The 1st cycle ended with my death because I couldn't close the Gate. By the 3rd, I managed it after a week. In that 35th run, I had cleared it in less than 20 minutes, and none of the 399 humans summoned to the Busan Station concourse lost their lives except one. The only items I farmed were silver bells from the souvenir shop too, so there was no time wasted.

It was a literal speedrun, a record bound to astonish the Constellations.

[The Saintess of National Salvation is astonished by your feat!]

[The Monarch of the Crimson Horse feels a sense of rivalry at your

strength.]

[The Conqueror of the Alps takes note of your course.]

[The Chancellor of the Red Cape is wary of your abilities.]

Sure enough, the Constellations took the bait immediately. Messages from four, then seven, then eleven Constellations poured in, stacking up one by one. I ignored the messages for the time being. Only after I left Busan Station and reached an empty parking lot did I speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Constellations, I know you are Korean."

Poof.

The messages that had been flying in non-stop like Hogwarts acceptance letters suddenly halted all at once.

I watched the sky clear as the messages that had cluttered my vision disappeared, then turned my gaze skyward.

"I also know that you are not transcendents. I could reveal this fact to all the Awakeners... But I am more curious about your true nature. Please tell me who you really are."

-.....

There was no response.

To be honest, I was quite nervous at the time. Although the possibility was slim, what if the Constellations were genuinely transcendents who dined on kimchi and seaweed, listened to K-pop during tea time, and watched K-pop TV in the evenings? What if they were simply acting on a mysterious, nationalistic favoritism toward Korean-speaking Awakeners?

'My brazen proposal might provoke the Constellations to attack all at once.'

I took a combat stance. My Awakening ability wasn't geared toward

combat, but after spending time with Old Man Scho, the greatest Swordmaster, my combat abilities had grown considerably. If necessary, I was ready to die right then and there and move on to the next cycle.

[The Saintess of National Salvation invites you.]

That was when the message appeared.

Fortunately, no scenario of Constellations appearing to punish an impudent mortal unfolded. Instead, dozens of Constellations remained silent, and only one communicated its intention to me. That Constellation was, coincidentally, the first to express interest in me—the Saintess of National Salvation.

"An invitation?" I asked cautiously. "What kind of invitation?"

After a moment, a message returned.

[The Saintess of National Salvation invites you to the Jamsu Bridge in Han River.]

Seoul.

The hell on earth where Old Man Scho had lost his wife and numerous politicians were buried.

'Ah.'

...It hit me then that the Constellations had never once spoken in any regional dialect.

I've mentioned several times that Gangnam was reduced to rubble when a Gate erupted there. However, areas not touched by the Gate's influence remained surprisingly intact. Jamsu Bridge, for one, still looked exactly as it did before the world turned upside down.

The place where the Saintess of National Salvation had agreed to meet me was a sky-blue convenience store near Jamsu Bridge—an unexpectedly public-friendly location for a rendezvous with a

Constellation.

Under the convenience store's parasol sat a woman with her hair tied back. Although her aqua-colored hair was unusual, it wasn't uncommon for an Awakener's hair color to change upon coming into their powers, and her appearance was otherwise ordinary. She certainly didn't give off the feeling of a being beyond human limitations.

"Good day. Are you the Saintess of National Salvation?"

She studied me silently, her gaze swiftly scanning me from head to toe. Her eyes resembled those of a fish, seemingly "submerged" rather than "lost" in thought.

"The Busan Station Gate?" she asked.

"Yes, that's correct."

"...I never expected you to make the trip from Busan to here in less than a day."

With half of Seoul gone, most of the transportation networks leading to the capital had been crippled. Roads and railways—nearly everything was destroyed.

Put another way, though, that meant there were still a few usable routes left. Old Man Scho had wanted to get to Seoul before his wife disappeared, hence the extensive research that had been conducted on 'the fastest way to get to Seoul from Busan'.

...No matter how fast, arriving within a minute was impossible, rendering the research futile. But thanks to that, I was able to meet the Saintess of National Salvation quickly.

"My code name is Undertaker. Nice to meet you."

"Ah, yes... But 'Undertaker'?"[1]

"It's a nickname with a story. Feel free to call me 'Doc'."

After shaking hands with her, I sat opposite her. Far in the distance,

Seoul's skyscraper, also known as Sauron's Tower, loomed like a shadow.

"Before anything else, I'd like to ask you something."

"....."

"Are you the Saintess of National Salvation, or are you her representative? What are Constellations exactly? Are they truly transcendents?"

She was silent. Numerous, fleeting thoughts seemed to flicker across her eyes. After a moment, she bit her lip and clenched her fist. Then, she sighed softly.

"...Yes. I am the Saintess of National Salvation."

Bingo.

Just as I was about to nod in acknowledgment, she looked me straight in the eye.

"And you, you are a regressor, right?"

Footnotes:

1 - An undertaker is an individual whose business is to prepare the dead for burial and to arrange and manage funerals.

Chapter 4

The Observer II

Sinnoa

"....."

"Right?"

I didn't respond immediately.

Honestly, I was a bit surprised—yet at the same time, admittedly, caught by intrigue. While I had occasionally revealed that I was a Regressor, it was rare for someone else to recognize this on their own. So far, the only person who had was Old Man Scho.

"Why do you think that?" I hedged.

"I figured if you were a regressor, you would eventually come looking for me. Besides, you were slaying monsters at an unbelievable rate. But judging by how you ask... I'm guessing this is our first cycle together?"

I leaned forward a bit more. The green plastic chair of the convenience store creaked as it scraped the ground. Initially, I was merely curious about the existence of these Constellations. But now, my interest had shifted more toward the human before me.

"That's correct. Although I've been curious about the identities of the Constellations, this is the first cycle I've really started to delve into it."

"If you truly are a regressor, Mr. Undertaker, I believe we must absolutely establish a collaborative relationship."

"A collaborative relationship?"

"Yes. But right now, I cannot be sure whether you are a regressor or not. Not with what I can see."

The woman spoke cautiously, and though her expression was tense, her tone was steady.

'She at least has some backbone there.'

My eyes narrowed. "How interesting. Why can't you be sure I'm a regressor?"

"Because this same situation could arise if you had the ability of Prophecy or even the mind-reading skill of Clairvoyance. So..." She bowed her head. "I'm sorry you had to come all the way to Seoul. I can't fully disclose what the Constellations are, how much I know about them, or what my abilities are yet."

"Hmm."

Proper manners and mindful discretion. A lottery ticket worth scratching, by all accounts.

"All right," I agreed. "If you could be certain that I am a regressor, would you be able to answer all my questions then?"

"...Yes."

"Then there's a simple solution."

She looked up.

I turned on my smartphone. "We'll set up a password."

"A password?"

"Give me words or phrases that only a regressor would know. Even specific actions would do."

It was a method Old Man Scho and I had previously used, and one that had been proven to work during the 7th cycle.

"Anyway, you set those conditions, and I will carry them out exactly in the 'next cycle'."

She immediately understood. "Ah, that's a great idea. Hmm. Then in

the next cycle, please come here and lay a red T-shirt out on the table. Just sit quietly for about 10, no, 15 minutes. Then write 'Moral Law' on the T-shirt in big letters."

"Hmm."

"If you do that, I will contact you first."

It was a neat and tidy method.

"Understood, Saintess of National Salvation."

"Ah... I'm sorry, but that nickname is a bit..."

"Everyone's code name among the Awakeners is just as childish. I let it slide and ended up with 'Undertaker' as my alias. 'Saintess' is dignified in comparison."

"How did 'Undertaker' even...?"

Whoops.

I quickly got up from the table.

Again, I have an extreme dislike for my alias. How I ended up with such a nickname is a story for another time, ideally in the far future —or better yet, never.

"I'll be going now, Saintess. Until next time."

"Oh, of course. I'll see you next time. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Regressor."

The 'next' I spoke of and the 'next' she thought of were a whole world apart.

We parted easily, like streams that meet then go their separate ways, and after that day, I no longer received any messages from the Constellations.

To be honest, I found myself a bit disappointed. Someone who had been reacting to my every action was now gone. I felt the absence

more keenly than expected.

Of course, my goal wasn't to flatter the Constellations, but to prevent the world's destruction. I quickly pulled myself together and threw myself into the 35th run.

And I failed spectacularly.

If I had succeeded, there would be no need for the 1183rd run, after all.

'Did she say a red T-shirt?'

The 36th world, my 36th life, began.

I immediately fulfilled the promise I made in the previous world.

First, I cleared the Gate at Busan Station.

[The Saintess of National Salvation is astonished by your feat!]

[The Monarch of the Crimson Horse feels their competitive spirit stir at your strength.]

[The Conqueror of the Alps takes note of your course.]

[The Chancellor of the Red Cape is wary of your abilities.]

As before, messages from the Constellations poured in.

While it was nice to receive them again, I ignored them for now.

I followed the route developed by Old Man Scho as quickly as possible, heading north to Seoul. Along the way, I didn't forget to stop at a clothing store that hadn't been shut down yet and bought a shirt.

[The Saintess of National Salvation questions your actions.]

The Constellations kept talking to me as I traveled.

When I arrived at a convenience store near Jamsu Bridge, I sat down at a parasol table, spread out the shirt, then wrote "Moral

Law" on it in marker.

[.....]

[.....]

The previously noisy Constellations fell silent all at once.

I leaned back in the chair and drank convenience store coffee. The place had not been looted yet, so the products were intact.

It wasn't long before someone approached the convenience store.

It was a woman with a hiking backpack on her back. Judging by the length of cycles, I had met her 20 years prior. She was the Saintess of National Salvation.

The joy of reunion didn't surge anew. To live long as a regressor, one must get accustomed to farewells and reunions.

Only this time, I was the one waiting to greet her.

"Excuse me, but by any chance..." She very cautiously observed my expression.

I nodded. "Yes. I am the regressor, Saintess of National Salvation."

The Saintess gasped.

She stood frozen, clenching her fists. What she was pondering, I couldn't tell, but after a while, the Saintess finally spoke.

"Please follow me."

Finally, it was time for the truth of the Constellations to be revealed.

The Saintess's dwelling was located in Yongsan.

With Yeouido and the Gangnam area having evaporated overnight, Yongsan was now essentially the front line against the Gates and

one of the most dangerous places in Korea.

"Please, come in."

She lived in an old row house in Dongbigo-dong.

I looked around, taking in the shabby exterior that belied a tidy interior. Or more precisely, the space went beyond "tidy" into being eerily spotless.

In the dim living room, four computer monitors emitted a bluish glow. The light faintly outlined the cardboard boxes scattered around—boxes of canned food, jugs of water. With all of them bathed in the monitor's blue light, they almost appeared to be submerged in water.

Along the walls were large steel bookshelves. However, only a few books dotted the shelves, which were instead filled with 15- and 20-cube aquariums. Dozens of these water-filled glass tanks packed the space in dense formations.

Aquarium after aquarium.

The room was surrounded on all sides by walls of water, making it look like an underwater temple.

"You seem to have been preparing for this situation for a long time," I commented.

"Yeah."

The Saintess seated me on a sofa, then pulled up a computer chair for herself. "Should I call you 'Regressor'?"

"Call me whatever is comfortable for you. My alias is Undertaker."

"All right, Mr. Undertaker. How many times have we met?"

"This is the second time."

"The second time," the Saintess muttered softly. "So, this is practically our first meeting. I wouldn't have explained anything

during the previous cycle, right?"

"That's correct."

"There seems to be a lot I need to clarify. Where should I start?"

"I'd like to ask about the Constellations first. What exactly are the Constellations? Are they truly transcendental beings? Are you an agent of the Constellations?"

The Saintess licked her lips, not from hesitation but as if she were choosing her words carefully. Finally, she spoke.

"The Constellations... do not exist."

"They don't exist?"

"Yes. The Saintess of National Salvation, the Conqueror of the Alps —they are all characters I created myself."

That was somewhat surprising.

I had considered the hypothesis that the Constellations might be fictitious entities. However, I hadn't anticipated that the person before me was single-handedly staging them all. I would have thought it'd require a team of at least five or six.

"Why would you do such a thing?"

"....."

The blue light of the monitors diffused hazily around the living room. Fish fluttered in the small aquariums.

"I Awakened about 20 days ago. Since then, my hair changed color, and I began having nightmares about monsters, dreams vivid enough that they couldn't be dismissed as mere fantasies."

I nodded.

It was a common experience for many who Awakened just before the Gates burst open across the world—a kind of precognitive

dream.

"For some reason, I was convinced that these events would actually happen. So I pondered what I could do—beyond buying canned food and collecting water bottles. Something that only I could do."

The Saintess looked directly at me.

"Mr. Undertaker, will Awakeners really maintain social order after they gain their powers?"

"What?"

"Awakeners possess incredible abilities. Even I have gained two, no, three abilities that defy common sense. Can people who receive such powers really unite, act virtuously, and at the very least, restrain themselves from committing crimes?"

Shadows of fish flowed across the living room floor. Her voice seeped into their shadows.

For a moment, I was caught in a feeling similar to those careless dives during childhood baths. Her gaze seemed to lower the depth of this place.

"I decided not."

"....."

"If a powerful person appeared and could unite the Awakeners, that would be one thing, but that involves countless trials and time. Until then, Awakeners would form disparate factions, and civilians would be caught in the crossfire and sacrificed without a second thought. Naturally, as humanity divides, their ability to handle the Gates would diminish."

It was a valid assumption. Indeed, most nations had followed that process and perished. Korea was a rare case of prolonged survival.

"Wait."

At that moment, a certain hypothesis flashed through my mind.

I stared into the Saintess's deep black eyes, taking in pupils that seemed inclined not to blink even if submerged in water.

"Could it be?"

She was silent for a long moment, then nodded slightly. "Mr. Undertaker. When do people hesitate to commit evil acts? It's when they think someone is watching."

"The Constellations."

"Yes."

I was stunned.

The Saintess continued, "People easily violate order if they are confident they can hide or mitigate their crimes. However, if they believe a transcendental being is always watching them, even someone who has Awakened would hesitate to commit evil acts."

"Holy...."

"That's why I created the Constellations."

I felt like I'd just taken a series of mental punches. It was surprising enough that the Saintess of National Salvation who had watched me all this time was a fabrication, but that all of it was born from one person's meticulous planning was utterly shocking.

"But how did you even create the Constellations?"

"It's thanks to my abilities. I can use Clairvoyance and Telepathy."

She outlined her abilities:

1. Clairvoyance: Observe any Awakeners within a radius of 1,000 km at will. Observation may include listening to their voices.

2. Telepathy or Text Transmission: Can transmit one's voice to any perceived target. Texting is also possible but limited to 140 characters.

Both abilities had endless applications.

I looked at the human before me with new eyes. If conditions were right, she could lead a guild like Samcheon or Baekhwa, becoming one of Korea's top leaders.

"Remarkable. With abilities like that, you could have taken a more prominent role in organizing the Awakeners."

"I thought about that... But I'm really clumsy when it comes to leading people in person."

"Ah."

"I believe what I did was the best I could do. I'm not sure what will happen in the future... I'll continue as long as I can, as long as I live."

Her words brought back memories from past runs.

Even as the world was on the brink of ending, the Constellations had not stopped sending messages to the Awakeners in Korea. Whether it was 4, 7, or 10 years in any run, the Constellations remained active.

I thought about the hardships the Awakeners before me must have faced to maintain that facade. Many challenges, no doubt. Clairvoyance and Telepathy were great abilities, but they weren't directly helpful in combat. What's more, Yongsan was on the frontlines, an area facing a super-large Gate. Many forces would vie for control here in the future.

"How about it, Mr. Regressor?"

This Awakener, who had overcome countless adversities and survived to the very end, now looked at me with eyes swimming with unease and anxiety.

"Did I fulfill my role to the end?"

I clenched my fist involuntarily, as various thoughts waved over me. After a brief silence, I answered.

"Yes. Perfectly. Even I, a regressor, was completely deceived."

"....."

"Thanks to you, the crime rate among Awakeners in this country was exceptionally low. It was relatively easy for Awakeners to cooperate and respond to the Gates. Your efforts were not in vain."

Although it hadn't prevented the world's ultimate destruction.

Then and now, I never mentioned to the Saintess the hundreds of ways our world could end. At least with the Saintess around, there was no rampant Awakener supremacy, and cults like the New Buddha Cult or the Resurrection Church were relatively rare.

The Saintness took in my answer silently, then finally, she said, "Thank goodness." With a small sigh of relief, she sank back into her chair.

For some reason, that sigh sounded to my ears like a goldfish that had spent a very long time in the depths suddenly coming up to the surface to blow bubbles.

Afterward, we discussed in detail how we would work together.

I think our relationship was essentially established at that point. From the 36th to the 1183th cycle, the Saintess was almost always a reliable ally who had my back.

"What should I call you? If I call you 'Regressor', your identity might be revealed, Mr. Undertaker." The Saintess propped her chin in her hand. "Hero?"

I immediately waved my hands. "No, Hero is a bit... Just call me Undertaker." The title 'Hero' was not just embarrassing but related to a certain psychological disorder, which I preferred to avoid. I'll talk about this strange mental illness later.

"Sure, I'll call you Mr. Undertaker, then."

"Good, I'm glad that works. Just one thing." As we were about to part, I asked, "Isn't it impossible to act as the Constellations with

just Clairvoyance and Telepathy? You'd need to observe multiple people simultaneously and send messages. Don't you have another ability?"

"Ah, well..."

The Saintess hesitated, then smiled faintly.

"That... is a secret. I'll tell you later."

Unfortunately, the 'later' the Saintess mentioned did not mean within the timeline of the 36th cycle.

I still needed many more cycles before I could uncover her last secret.

There is an epilogue to this story.

Starting from my 36th run, forming an alliance with the Saintess immediately upon regression became a standard progression in my tech tree, akin to an opening move in Go.

Aside from for the early stages of a new regression, it had become practically unheard of for the Constellations to send me their innumerable hand-holding requests like they had in the past.

It was on one of those days when I felt slightly disappointed by this fact that a message window popped up before my eyes for the first time in a long while.

[The Administrator of the Infinite Metagame announces the occurrence of a new event.]

I blinked. The name of the Constellation was entirely unfamiliar to me.

An infinite game? Did that mean 'the one who oversees the gameplay of all things'?

'The Saintess must have been bored and decided to play a prank.'

I nonchalantly dismissed the message with the passing thought that I'd triggered a rare event. After all, the message only appeared once and never again.

A few days later, when I met the Saintess in person, I brought it up. I wasn't particularly curious, just using it as an icebreaker during a strategy meeting.

"Oh, by the way, why did you suddenly decide to play that strange Constellation a few days ago?"

"Pardon?"

"A week ago. You sent a message under the name 'Administrator of the Infinite Metagame'. I was a bit surprised to see you make a mistake. Did you perhaps send a message meant for another Awakener to me by accident?"

The Saintess tilted her head in question. "I never sent such a message."

"What?"

"I never created a Constellation called the 'Administrator of the Infinite Metagame' in the first place."

A chilling current trickled down my spine.

Whether she noticed my reaction or not, the Saintess's face remained indifferent. She certainly didn't appear to be lying.

For some reason, I felt a drop in the surrounding temperature, though it might have been an illusion.

"Are you sure you didn't just misread it, Undertaker?"

"....."

Suddenly, it felt as if a deep sea had opened beneath my feet, and a gigantic shadow had just slinked past.

...It seemed there were still many unknown mysteries in this world

that I had yet to uncover.

Footnotes:

1 - Samcheon literally means "Three Thousand" and Baekwha "A Hundred Flowers." Although they work in Korean, they don't in English for guild names, so I'm leaving these as romanizations as it feels appropriate knowing they're both Korean guilds in context.

Chapter 5

The Hero

Sinnoa

There are many mysteries in this world that remain unknown to me, but some I have deliberately left unsolved. Today, I'd like to touch upon one such chapter. Although it might seem abrupt, I want to start with this question: Do you like the fantasy genre?

I do. And while some may disagree, I personally think that if a fantasy story features a 'Saintess', then the 'Hero' profession should also appear. The two are like chocolate and mint—only when observed together at the same time, in the same place, do they make a complete dish.

But what if the proportions of these two ingredients are off? What if the ratio of chocolate to mint collapses from 1:1 to 1:3, or even accelerates to 1:81, or 1:729? Then it's no longer mint chocolate, but merely mint. And though I'm somewhat fond of mint chocolate, I detest mint. In that sense, the world I live in is a kind of failed dish.

What I mean is, there are too many heroes in this world.

"Excuse me? Can you hear me?"

“Uh...”

If you were walking down the street and saw people collapsed everywhere, and instead of stealing their wallets and maybe even their Adam's apples you feel an urge to help them, and if you still have enough goodness left in you to lightly tap them on the shoulder and tell them to wake up, especially if the place had been struck by a 'Gate incident' more than 13 years ago in the middle of

a city on the Korean Peninsula. Then you might have about a 6% gacha chance of encountering this kind of reaction.

"Where am I...?"

"Ah, are you awake? Oh dear. Sir, you shouldn't be lying on the cold ground like this."

"This place... No way, is this Earth?"

Because I've seen it.

Just moments ago, the passerby who had been lying unconscious, completely dead to the world, suddenly sat up and looked around. It was miraculous, the sort of thing you'd see at the end of a subway line—or rather, the plaza outside it.

"Yes?"

"S-sir, do you happen to know what year it is?"

I answered, and then…

"It can't be. Twenty years have passed, and yet it's only been a year in reality...?"

His face lost all expression, and his eyes darted wildly, refusing to settle.

In the man's hand was a smartphone.

Now, if you were a normal person, you'd naturally get the sense that something was very wrong here and run away. Even if you've never encountered a madman in your life, a madman is like cow dung—you see one once, and you automatically go, "That's cow dung."

Unfortunately, having lived as a regressor for too long, my senses were slightly dulled. Instead of inputting "run away now" into my brain, I mistakenly typed "feel curious."

"Will you tell me what's going on?"

“I was just in a place called the Sintra continent, where magic and aura are real."

Those were some of the services newly implemented on the Earth server after the Gate incident, but I didn't make a big deal of that.

"Are you saying you experienced dimensional travel?"

"Yes, exactly. I was summoned there, received the title of Hero, and set out on a campaign to defeat the Demon King with my precious... my truly precious comrades."

The nostalgia and bitterness swirling around his stubble were too profound to dismiss as mere tall tales.

"Did you defeat the Demon King?"

"Ah, yes. Eventually... We had to sacrifice so much along the way, but somehow, we managed to subdue it."

"Huh."

If the person had indeed fallen into another dimension, fought on the battlefields for 20 years, and even coordinated attacks with his party members against formidable enemies, then he was the very definition of a 'veteran'.

And I, the Undertaker, desperately needed such Awakener veterans.

"But when they saw that I was about to die from a fatal injury, one of my team members, a priest and our mage, said, 'You mustn't die here, Hero...'" He sobbed. "Before I took my last breath, they sent me back to my original world."

Tears welled up in the man's eyes.

"I wanted to die with my comrades. How am I supposed to live on in a world without them...?"

His affection for his comrades was palpable.

I felt a faint glimmer of hope in my heart. Perhaps, by some fluke, I

had stumbled upon a candidate for an epic warrior.

"I'm sorry to hear that. If it's not too much to ask, could you demonstrate some aura or magic while you're here?"

"What? Oh, yes, of course. I'm a Swordsman... Ugh?!" Suddenly, the man clutched his forehead, and the smartphone he'd been clutching tightly in his left hand tumbled to the ground. "Ahhh...?"

"Wait a minute. What's wrong? What happened?"

"My mind... My, my memories. I can't remember! The 20 years I spent on the continent of Sintra, the journeys I shared with my comrades, my love, it's all fading... No, nooo!"

For the record, I never mix in hyperbole when telling a story. So when the man with the stubble suddenly grabbed his head with both hands and dramatically reenacted Munch's *The Scream* in 3D right in front of me, it was all part of an emotionally charged documentary.

"Um, sir?"

“.....”

"Hello?"

I waved my hand in front of him, but the man stood there, dazed for a long while.

I picked up the smartphone that had fallen to the ground.

"Hmm?"

The smartphone was still powered on, and it happened to be logged into a community website exclusively for Awakeners.

We'll talk about this community later. What's important now is the content of the post displayed on the man's smartphone screen.

Anonymous: [SYSTEM] Clicking this post will transport you to "Another World."

Hero.

If you are reading this post, you must have safely returned home.

We, no, our world, knew that you would have painful memories, yet you sacrificed yourself to protect us.

Seeing you suffer after losing your comrades in the final battle with the Demon King, we decided to erase your memories and send you back to your original world.

You may curse us for being selfish.

But, we didn't want to see you in pain.

Goodbye.

P.S. Sorry, Hero. Our magic was imperfect, so you might feel as though you have lost some memories.

I felt like a college student who had accidentally left the fridge door open earlier that day and only realized it when I went to microwave some frozen pizza late at night.

At that moment, murmuring came from beside me.

“...Huh?"

The man...

"Why am I crying?"

Despite his efforts to mask it with laughter, his lips twisted oddly as he cried.

"Why are these tears? I hate it. It's like I've lost something precious..."

“……”

Quietly, I handed him the smartphone and walked away silently, not looking back, with the skilled steps of an experienced regressor.

And thus, I safely distanced myself from the madman, but unfortunately, the madmen did not wish to distance themselves from me.

"Huh? This place is...?"

“I'm not Kim Jun-young from Anyang! I am Namgung Muncheong, the foremost disciple of the Namgung clan!"

“Please take me back to that world again... Huh, why am I crying?"

Shit.

This was the first time I witnessed such a phenomenon, in the 118th run.

Since then, whether it was regression, possession, or reincarnation, I often encountered returnees in various cycles, always showing the same reaction. This so-called 'Returnee Syndrome' was a disastrous party short for 'Reincarnation and Regression.'

I, the Undertaker, have seen a lot over the years, but this was a uniquely flavorful scene.

"Goodness."

After dozens of cycles—as in, once enough data had accumulated—I finally realized that this was not just a hidden camera prank by one or two madmen, but a serious societal phenomenon.

It was a 'Hero Syndrome', a type of monster that interferes with the mind.

"A monster?"

Thus, in the 161st run, I immediately set about devising a strategy. After hearing about the 'Hero Syndrome', the Saintess, who had

always been my consultant, asked, "Can a monster exist without a physical body, Mr. Undertaker?"

"It's possible, yes." I nodded the affirmative. "Those not bound by physical laws or material form are even more dangerous. That's why it's more appropriate to call them 'anomalies' rather than monsters."

"Indeed. A 'Hero Syndrome'... A monster, no, an anomaly that exists in the form of a mental illness."

A drop of disquiet bled into her emotionless voice. By the way, this person had strong shut-in tendencies and stayed inside all day. The sound of bubbling water from the living-room aquariums had long since flowed into the ambiance of the Saintess's house. It was a regular, forgettable part of the decor for me now.

"All right, then how should we subdue this anomaly? If it doesn't have a physical body, we can't kill it."

"Well, in such cases, we cannot use orthodox methods and instead must turn to the unorthodox. In short, we game the system."

I wasn't even sure if it needed to be subdued, honestly.

The Saintess tilted her head. "We game what?"

I unlocked the smartphone. "Do you see this post?"

"Yes? Ah, it says clicking on this will... uh huh."

"All the patients with Hero Syndrome we've found so far had collapsed and had this post open. It seems the phenomenon spreads its 'infection' through this viral post."

"An infection that's gone viral? My goodness. Jokes from the COVID era have become reality." The Saintess paused, lost in thought again, then suddenly raised her head. "Does that mean I'm infected now?"

"No, this post is just nonsense I posted anonymously on the community. It's merely an imitation of the real one, rest assured."

"Ah."

Seeing the Saintess's relief, I smiled faintly. "However, this nonsense post actually contains a shortcut to combat the mental type of anomaly."

"...?"

From that day on, posts began popping up incessantly on the Awakener-only community board.

- Anonymous: [SYSTEM] Clicking this post will transport you to "Another World." (Views: 56)

- Anonymous: [SYSTEM] Clicking this post will transport you to "Another World." (Views: 17)

- Anonymous: [SYSTEM] Clicking this post will transport you to "Another World." (Views: 34)

- Anonymous: [SYSTEM] Clicking this post will transport you to "Another World." (Views: 11)

The same nonsensical, incessant posts with the same title kept appearing on loop. Such was the power of macros.

Members of the online community were, of course, baffled.

- Anonymous: What's this?

- [Samcheon] Officer: What's going on?

- Anonymous: damn, what's with this concept?

Initially, members clicked on the posts to see what the fuss was about, which is why some posts got over 50 views.

But the steady stream of posts, each with content that never changed, quickly became something to avoid.

- LiteraryGirl: Seriously, this is so boring. Who keeps posting this crap? It's neither fun nor moving.

- [Baekwha] SixthGrader: hooooh 🤦‍♂️🤦‍♂️

- dolLHoUse: Childish.

- Anonymous: What are the Constellations doing? Why don't they delete these posts?

 [Samcheon] WitchJudge: Maybe the Constellations don't see it as worth deleting. It happens often.

 Anonymous: sigh...

- ZERO_SUGAR: why don't you just set up a keyword block for yourselves...? i blocked it and now i see nothing; it's really nice ^^

- Anonymous: Blocked.

The views dropped to 10, then to 6, and eventually to 3.

Finally, the views on the flood of posts fell to 0.

Occasionally, one of the view counts would show a 1, but with the macros continuously posting, eventually, all community members set "Another World" as a blocked word.

- Anonymous: [SYSTEM] Clicking this post will transport you to "Another World." (Views: 0)

- Anonymous: [SYSTEM] Clicking this post will transport you to "Another World." (Views: 0)

A beautiful array of zeros.

The Saintess, who was observing the community with me, remarked upon the achievement with reluctant admiration.

"Of course. You didn't even need to exterminate the anomaly itself; simply eliminating exposure to it achieves the same effect as a 'subjugation'."

"Correct. A physical-type anomaly can approach us at will, but one without a body loses its power simply because there are no people

aware of it."

"Certainly an effective method. It's simple yet skilled handling, befitting of a regressor."

"Thank you."

Originally, only Awakeners could post in this community. However, we had to consider the possibility that the anomaly could weasel their way into the community and interfere there using some cunning tricks.

But now, no matter how the phenomenon tries to post, it won't affect the members at all.

Well, perhaps a member might unblock it for fun and coincidentally click on one of the hundreds of constant posts, and maybe, just maybe, that post might contain the real 'Hero Syndrome' virus, breaking through the 1/100 odds.

Even if a victim did emerge, though, it would be no different than a tragic plane crash. No matter how many times I regress, I can't control all probabilities.

After all, even if infected, it wouldn't cause widespread harm.

Thus, I, the Undertaker, had safely sealed another anomaly.

"But... Mr. Undertaker."

"Hmm?"

"What if it's not a mental illness, but real? What if those who have seen the post really did move to another dimension, face life-threatening situations, and were then returned to the real world thanks to their comrades?"

"The probability of that is low."

Low, I would say. Practically close to 0%, really.

"Why is that?"

"It’s just a simple deduction. All those people claim they only spent about 20 years journeying, caught the Demon King, saved the world, and all that. I know from experience that saving the world takes far more than 20 years."

"Ah..."

"Besides, even if by the rarest of rare chances another dimension exists, it's not my concern. Shouldn't we focus all our efforts on managing our own world?"

The Saintess seemed convinced by my logic and nodded calmly. "Certainly. You're right."

I sipped my café au lait and turned my attention back to the board.

- Anonymous: [SYSTEM] Clicking this post will transport you to "Another World." (Views: 0)

Even without running macros, the newly generated post displayed zero views.

And probably would forever.

Footnotes:

Chapter 6

The Admin I

Sinnoa

How long I survive during a particular run varies wildly. Sometimes, I enjoy a mayfly life, dying just a day after regressing, and at other times, I struggle for over 20 years only to freeze to death. There are times when I get stabbed by a walloping alien's tentacle in my ninth year, and there are also times when, in my seventh year, I get to experience what it's like to be a dinosaur by dying to a meteor falling to Earth.

Even I, someone gifted with the privileges of regression, have such experiences. How much worse must it be for others?

Most people who had awakened don't even last 10, 5, even 2 years, let alone 20. Some die because they have power, others because they lack it. In a world barreling towards destruction, cause of death was a matter of how one wanted to dress it up it. The reality of the situation was that every day of life was essentially a cause of death. And yet, there was one person who died faster than any other Awakeners.

He went by the name of SG-Man. Well, 'SG-Man' wasn't his real name, of course. It was simply a shorter way of saying 'SuchAFucking Garbage Man', a nickname I had privately given him. I learned his real name during my 50th cycle.

The fastest-to-die in the world.

That was the image I had of SG-Man. To introduce his story, I must first describe the scene I encounter immediately after regressing.

"Wha— What? What is this place?"

"Huh? Busan Station? But I was just in the park a second ago..."

"Sir? Sir, where are you?"

Every time I regress, I wake up in the main concourse of Busan Station.

Apart from myself, 398 ordinary people had been forcibly summoned here. There were even some Japanese people dragged here from as far away as Fukuoka, far away. As hundreds of people began to panic at the sudden turn of events, something appeared in the air with a *pop*.

"Ah, hello there, everyone!"

It was the so-called Tutorial Fairy, a character that looked like it had just leapt out of a 2D world and into reality, caricaturized form and all.

"Oho? The numbers seem a bit low... Anyway, you must have been quite surprised to be summoned here so out of the blue, right? But don't worry! I'm here to be your trusty guide, here from the very start of your journey!"

I felt sorry for the fairy, but I couldn't help but be worried.

After all, she sounded like a dunce. A person's character was like a printer's ink; if the ink came out in a chaotic mess, one could reasonably assume that something was seriously wrong with the printer itself.

More important than that, though, was that the fairy was floating in midair without any device to support her.

As a result, screams of "Kyaa!" erupted across the length of the hall.

"Ah! It's okay, it's okay! There, there. I'm going to explain these things to you! You all got that I'm the homeroom teacher of Busan Station's main concourse, right? I hope you'll all be good and follow my instructions... I will treat you all kindly too. So, from now on—"

"You fucking asshole!"

Everyone froze.

A majestic roar rang out. "What the fuck is this bullshit?!"

He must have been in his early twenties.

The man with a tattoo sleeve on his forearm was pointing accusingly at the fairy while showing off his triceps.

Yes.

He was none other than SG-Man, SuchAFucking Garbage Man.

"Haaaa... Yes?"

"You fucking asshole! If you're going to drag people here out of nowhere, you should start with an apology. Where do you get off, blabbering like that?"

SG-Man had a very resonant voice. The citizens around him involuntarily took a step back because of his incredibly hearty rebuke.

The fairy stammered, "No, haaa. It's not my doing, I'm just merely in charge of—"

"You fucking asshole!"

The fairy flinched.

By now, it should be clear why I started calling him SG-Man.

He was the type of man who couldn't utter a word without first decorating it with 'fucking'. It was the sort of seasoned diction you'd only hear from someone experienced in the field.

"Anyway, you just said you're in charge! Huh? Aren't you going to apologize?"

"No... I've heard from my seniors that people like this one are rare these days. Humans have become cunning in their own way and never get provoked..."

The fairy looked crestfallen.

Suddenly, a notebook appeared in her hand.

"What did they say about how to respond in a situation like this?" the fairy muttered as she flipped through it. "Ah, here it is."

"You fucking asshole! Are you mocking me?"

"Hoi." The fairy gave a casual wave of her wand (which had also appeared out of nowhere), and SG-Man's head exploded with a bang. "Are we all good now? Come on! Everyone, please follow my lead!"

The fairy smiled broadly, as if expecting her prank to have worked perfectly.

What the fairy hadn't considered was the average sensibility of the people gathered there, also known as morals or ethics.

"Hieeeeeek!"

The owner of this amusing scream was Sim Ah-ryeon. (I know the names of all the survivors at Busan Station.) Unfortunately for her, she was right next to SG-Man and thus became the main character covered in bright red blood.

"P-people— People have died...! People have—! Hieeek, he just died!"

She was the quickest to run out of all the people here, bolting as soon as she was drenched in a bucket's worth of blood and then herself spattering blood and intestines all around.

The grotesque scene made people realize the reality of the situation.

"Kyaaaaaaah!"

"It's murder! It's murder!"

"Ruuuuuun!"

The nearly four hundred people followed Sim Ah-ryeon in a mad dash to escape.

The fairy tried to toss out "ah," "there," "that way," "wait," but her gesture only incited more fear. In just a few seconds, only about ten people, including me, remained in the main concourse hall.

"....."

"Uh..."

The fairy looked downcast. "The guidelines were rubbish! It said that if I just removed one person as an example, everyone would calm down!"

The body of SG-Man, whose head had been erased, lay alone on the floor of the hall.

After that, it was my turn to enter the souvenir shop alone and farm my exclusive item, the Silver Bell.

Now you all understand why I didn't know SG-Man's real name.

He was the sterotypical 'extra who rebels against the tutorial fairy and gets executed'.

That was the identity of SG-Man.

Honestly, I never felt any emotion towards SG-Man.

In every cycle, SG-Man would collide with the fairy. As my regresses continued, though the routes of my life became more varied, the original event of 'SG-Man dies to the fairy' always occurred.

'...What would happen if I saved that man?'

It's no wonder, then, that I suddenly felt curious.

'Yeah, let's save him.'

Who knows?

Maybe once revived, he'll turn out to be the teleporter that Old Man Scho so desperately longed for.

For the record, I was the type to indulge my curiosity and had been for a long time. I wasn't always like this, but regression had changed my personality.

During the 50th run, I decided to satisfy said curiosity.

"Ah, hello there, everyone! Oho? The numbers seem a bit low... Anyway, you must have been quite surprised to be summoned here so out of the blue, right? But—"

But the one who was really surprised was the fairy.

The reason was simple. I had leapt from the ground and positioned myself right in front of the fairy in an instant.

"Hoh?"

My shadow loomed over the fairy's stunned face.

I wasn't particularly sorry.

Before the fairy could even fully close her eyelids, my brutish palm had grasped her head. I circulated my inner energy through my hand, and with a playful, little bang, the fairy's tiny head burst. Since it was always the head of another human that exploded due to the fairy, perhaps this was an ironically fitting end for her.

"Huh?"

"What just happened...?"

People began to murmur as they looked at me while I landed back on the ground after what was literally a split-second of conflict.

At this early stage right into a regression, it was doubtful that anyone had managed to visually follow the fight between the fairy and me.

Oh, and by the way, it wasn't just her head. I had shredded the rest of her body too. So the people here probably only perceived it as 'something appeared in the air then suddenly disappeared.'

"Huh?" SG-Man, who had just been about to burst out in a roar, was now just spewing out gibberish with his mouth agape.

I approached him and greeted him politely. "Hello."

"Huh? Oh, yes... Hello?"

For the first time, I heard something other than "Hey, you fucking asshole" from SG-Man.

It was a momentous occasion in its own right.

Indeed, SG-Man was a manly man.

"Who might this guy be?"

He addressed me as 'this guy'. The determination to cling to his pride and guts while not losing his polite tone was palpable.

However, when he saw me slice through a monster at Busan Station with one strike, 'this guy' changed to 'hey you', and when the necks of the monsters I had cut exceeded fifty, it changed to '.....'.

When we finally cleared the gate, his address took on a more dramatic form.

"Um... hyung?"[1]

"Yeah."

SG-Man hesitantly examined my expression. "Seeing how you handled those monsters, you seem like you are a remarkable person, so why did you bother to save someone like me...?"

"There are two answers. One is true but unbelievable, and the other is false but believable. Which one would you like to hear?"

"Huh? Oh... the truth, of course."

"I am a regressor, currently repeating my 50th cycle. Each time, you have died in this hall. I was curious about what kind of person you might be, so this time I decided to save you and work with you for a while."

"Uh...?"

SG-Man's face crumpled with a mix of admiration and fear. It must be how "What the fuck is that, you nerd? looks when expressed with facial muscles.

I felt somewhat disheartened. The 35th cycle, when I met the Saintess, was a kind of turning point, and since then, I occasionally confided the fact that I was a regressor.

Yet, apart from the Saintess, no one had ever believed my story. Why could that be?

"Actually, I am a member of Team 5 of the National Intelligence Service, prepared in advance for such situations. I ask for your cooperation."

"Ah, I see."

"I'm late in introducing myself. My codename is Undertaker. What is your name?"

"Seo Gyu, hyung. Please, feel free to call me by my first name."

"Is that so?"

Seo Gyu. That was SG-Man's real name.

I had realized how important 'comrades' were in the journey to prevent the end of the world. Thus, I actively scouted and assembled prospects who would later grow into A-class Awakeners.

The 50th cycle was no exception. As I traveled with Seo Gyu, I recruited more and more members to our party. How to use their abilities most effectively was something I had already learned

through numerous cycles, and as such, my party members grew stronger every day.

"...It looks like I have no talent, hyung."

Seo Gyu was unable to enjoy the privileges of regression.

It was inevitable, really. This was the first time Seo Gyu had survived the tutorial and formed a party with me, and I didn't even know what ability he might awaken to. I wasn't in a position to offer him one-on-one tutoring.

"Ah, shit. Why is it only me that doesn't grow when the others do...?"

From Seo Gyu's perspective, he must have felt like a tremendously untalented underachiever compared to his peers, who were all A-class prospects and monstrous geniuses.

But I knew exactly how to handle such situations.

"Saintess."

"Yes?"

"Please send a message to Seo Gyu."

The Saintess of National Salvation.

It was time for my legendary Pokémon to take the field.

The Saintess occasionally sent messages to the party members at my request, sometimes chiding them, sometimes encouraging them.

[The Monarch of the Crimson Horse assures you that your talent is real!]

[The Conqueror of the Alps dispels your doubts.]

Of course, I had gathered enough information about my party members to know them inside and out—family background, educational history, past traumas, and more.

All this information was then passed to the Saintess. She provided psychological counseling based on their confidential profiles. Legally, it should be considered a breach of privacy and punishable, but after civilization had collapsed, the effectiveness of such laws had diminished. Even before the collapse, such laws were not exactly well-enforced.

The Saintess's ability of 'Clairvoyance' already made her an S-class Awakener. With my information leak added, the party members believed without a doubt that the Saintess was an omnipresent being who watched their every move.

And if the Constellations themselves vouched for your talents?

"...I will train hard to awaken my abilities!"

Seo Gyu had no choice but to ignite his determination.

My and the Saintess's two-pronged strategy was perfect.

To any accusations of brainwashing or gaslighting, I would exercise my right to remain silent.

Eventually, one late night, Seo Gyu came to find me, with a very serious expression.

"Um, hyung."

"What's the matter?"

"I think I might have awakened last night."

Finally!

I felt a swell of anticipation.

The tutorial's sacrifice. The man who, across fifty cycles, always exited the stage first.

What could his ability be?

Was he a jackpot or a dud? Either way, I was confident I wouldn't

be greatly disappointed, as my curiosity would be satisfied.

I shook hands with Seo Gyu. "Congratulations. I knew you'd make it someday."

"Th-thank you. It's all thanks to you, hyung."

"So what is the ability?"

"Ah. That's... shit, how do I explain this?"

The hand I was holding fell limp, and his expression shuttered. Despite having achieved the awakening he so desperately desired, he didn't seem very happy.

'Is it a dud after all?'

Seeing his face, I also tamped down a layer of expectation in my heart. After all, high-tier abilities weren't that easy to come by.

"What is it?" I prompted. "Don't be shy, just spit it out."

"No, it's not that, it's just a bit awkward to explain with words... Hyung, do you carry a cellphone? Could you please look at it?"

"A cellphone?"

"Yes."

I looked at him with a dubious expression but obediently pulled out my smartphone.

The phone was dead. Half a year had passed since the Gate incident, and most communication devices had broken down. Phones, the internet, radios, radars—they had been contaminated by aberrations of all kinds.

"Could you turn on your wireless and try accessing the address I give you?"

"Um...?"

And then I witnessed something astonishing. The device had

connected to the Internet, which should have been inaccessible.

I felt a rare moment of surprise as I manipulated my smartphone.

The Internet was still displayed as out of service, and other apps didn't work. But somehow, the site Seo Gyu directed me to worked perfectly.

"This is...?"

It was a website in the style of a forum, designed as crudely as the early days of PC communications.

Seo Gyu, blushing as if showing a childhood drawing to someone, said, "That's, uh, this is the ability I've awakened. Website management."

Footnotes:

1 - Hyung is the way Koreans address big brothers.

Chapter 7

The Admin II

Sinnoa

"Website management?"

"Yes."

It was a power I had never heard of before. Given that Seo Gyu's mere survival was unprecedented, it was not surprising, but I had never even heard of a similar ability.

"What exactly is the ability?"

"Um, it's limited to a single domain name, allowing anyone to connect to it."

My eyes widened.

"What? Anyone? From anywhere?"

"Ah, yes."

In contrast to me, Seo Gyu's voice grew fainter. A downtrodden emotion smeared his tone.

It was clear he had no idea of the value his awakened ability held.

"Yesterday, I tried making a website as a test, but the design can only be upgraded as my power improves. Right now, it's like those old websites the elderly used... it's embarrassing to even brag about to my colleagues. It's utterly useless in combat..."

What.

"Do you need your permission for someone to register on this site?"

"Eh? Oh, yes. It only appears to be a website, but it's really

something like a building made by my ability. Um, my will is reflected in real-time. If I were to create a registration system... Uh, probably no one could enter without my permission..."

Impressive.

I inadvertently placed my hand on his shoulder.

Seo Gyu lifted his head back up, and our eyes met.

"Seo Gyu. Remember when I first met you, I told you I was an agent from the National Intelligence Service?"

"Yes..."

"That was a lie."

"What?"

"I lied to make it easier for you to understand. Of course, I gave you the opportunity to select the truth yourself. Let me say it again: I am actually a regressor."

"What?"

"Seo Gyu, why do you think all our party members are geniuses and you're the only late bloomer? It's simple. Because I've regressed about 50 times and only recruited proven geniuses. But you're a first. An unscratched lottery ticket. Somehow, you never managed to survive in the waiting room at Busan Station in all those regressions."

"What?"

"From now on, your ability will be called [Ubiquitous]."

Ubiquitous.

A word derived from Latin, meaning 'to exist everywhere'.

It's commonly used to express that God exists everywhere, but the important thing now was the origin of the term. Latin has the

magical power to make anything sound cool.

"Originally, the power is mostly about the name. Site Operation? Community Manager? Moving Network? You're just Ubiquitous."

"Ubiquitous..."

Sure enough, Seo Gyu's expression began to look intrigued.

I grinned broadly.

"Seo Gyu. Let's work on something together."

We immediately moved to Yongsan.

The Saintess greeted us in what seemed like an aquarium-themed underwater temple, leaving it ambiguous whether it was a place for people or fish.

She listened to my story without a word and then spoke.

"That's incredible."

"Right?"

Typical Saintess. She immediately recognized the value of Seo Gyu's ability.

Meanwhile, Seo Gyu himself seemed bewildered by what he had been hearing and kept staring blankly at the Saintess until she finally averted her gaze.

"Um, uh. What's so great about my power...?"

"Seo Gyu. Just imagine if Awakeners signed up on your site. If they had to enter their personal details, all their information would be fed directly into it. We could know everything they post on the site too."

"Ah... But, hyung. Why would those clever people bother to sign up on my site? Especially with their personal details..."

I nodded.

"They definitely will."

It had been less than a year since the gate crisis began.

So Seo Gyu, other Awakeners, and even ordinary people were still somewhat optimistic or indifferent. Life wasn't ruined just by participating.

"This world is going to become more chaotic."

But after the second year, everything would deteriorate rapidly.

Initially, Korea remained relatively calm thanks to the Saintess' 'Constellation Games', but signs of warlordism were already evident in other countries.

"Seo Gyu, humans begin to lose their sanity the moment they're cut off from external communication. But your site is not just a platform; it's sustained by your awakened ability, Ubiquitous. As long as you're alive, it's a public square accessible to anyone at any time."

"....."

"Large guilds will be the first to recognize the value of this site. It becomes a way to stay connected even after entering a gate."

"That, that's true...", Seo Gyu grimaced as he nodded.

To me, it was a bitter but inevitable response.

In my view, the rank of an awakened being's power is determined by how well it overcomes temporal and spatial constraints. In that sense, Seo Gyu had awakened an S-class ability.

It was ironic— holding a rare treasure sword and yet not realizing its value.

Not just me, but the Saintess too looked on incredulously.

"Ubiquitous..."

"Huh?"

I corrected myself. The Saintess wasn't looking at Seo Gyu but at me.

"What's the matter?"

"No, nothing. I just thought the naming sounded quaintly old-fashioned. It's your taste in names, I see."

"Yes? Isn't it a wonderful name?"

"Indeed."

An odd response.

Anyway, the main point now was Seo Gyu's power. I got to the heart of the matter.

"They say seeing is believing. Now, let's discuss with the Saintess here how to develop this site."

"Ah. Well, I hope for your kind cooperation...?"

"Yes. We hope for your cooperation."

Seo Gyu awkwardly shook hands with the Saintess.

Fortunately, the awkward atmosphere didn't last long. Not only had I revealed that I was a regressor, but the truth that the Saintess was actually the embodiment of the Constellations also came to light.

A scream echoed through the aquarium living room.

"——Ack! So, the Constellations were all fakes?"

Seo Gyu seemed shocked.

Understandably, discovering that the pen pals who had secretly supported him during tough times were all virtual beings would certainly be disorienting.

"No... my god. What exactly are you and the Saintess planning? Are

you seriously aiming for something big?"

"Come now, don't speak as if it's someone else's concern."

You're part of our party now.

"First, Saintess, please disguise this site as if it's under the authority of the Constellations."

"Okay."

"Seo Gyu, you act like an administrator who has taken over the site management from the Constellations."

"Ah, yes, hyung."

The plan was meticulously executed.

We even pushed through the work while sipping on precious coffee. The three of us huddled in front of computers, transforming the mystical underwater temple into what seemed like an actual PC café.

"PC café... Fish café. Indeed."

"…?"

The Saintess turned to look at me upon hearing my murmur.

Her gaze was intense, prompting me to quickly change the subject.

"Saintess, what do you think we should name the site?"

"Are you talking about the name?"

The change of subject was successful.

"...How about [Apocalypse Gallery]?"

"Hmm. It’s a fine name, but the word 'gallery' might remind people too much of a specific type of site. We're planning to operate more like an old membership-based site or café, so it doesn't quite fit. What about you, Seo Gyu?"

"Uh... How about [Viva! The Doomed World!]?"

"It’s a cool name, but remember, the site is supposedly set up by a Constellation. It sounds too cheerful. Might modern people fighting against calamities find it a bit infuriating?"

"It's tricky…"

"Um."

At that moment, a great idea popped into my head.

Finally, after fifteen days, we launched the site to the masses.

-Constellations' Playground!

-The only safe internet community!

-Welcome to SG Net!

The site was named SG Net.

This name carried multiple meanings.

First, SG was a nickname I used for Seo Gyu before I knew his real name. Coincidentally, 'Seo Gyu' could also be abbreviated as SG.

Lastly, as it was a site managed by the Constellations, 'Star’s Ground' shortened to SG again.

A naming sense aiming not just for a double but a triple entendre!

Perhaps I had a hidden talent for naming as well as Ubiquitous. How could one person be so multifaceted? Sometimes, I scared even myself.

"……"

For some reason, the Saintess looked like she had much to say but chose to remain silent. I ignored her.

Beside her, Seo Gyu wore a gloomy expression.

"Hyung, no one else has logged in yet..."

He just stared aimlessly at the monitor.

In those fifteen days, Seo Gyu had become quite familiar with his power, making the site slightly prettier. Still, it barely reached the level of an early Hi-Tel PC communication design.

If no one appreciated it, even a good design would be meaningless, but we had a marketing tool that was almost free.

"Saintess, please blast an advertisement."

The ad agencies known as Constellations!

"Got it."

The Saintess clasped her hands together.

At that moment, every Awakener active in Korea received the same messages.

[An unknown and nameless Constellation manifests its power.]

[An unknown and nameless Constellation invites you!]

The site address was also sent as part of the message.

Seo Gyu silently watched the monitor with a tense face.

Soon, the number of users displayed on the site skyrocketed.

"Ten... ninety... t-two hundred, five hundred? Wow, how many Awakeners are there in Korea...", Seo Gyu muttered.

But his astonishment was nothing compared to the other Awakeners who logged into SG Net.

Even through the monitor, it was palpable how baffled they were by the sudden appearance of this community.

- Anonymous: Why does this connect so well? Is it a bizarre site? (2)

- Anonymous: Came here at the summons of a Constellation. (0)

- Anonymous: Does anyone know who this unknown and nameless Constellation is? (15)

- Anonymous: Oh, so I wasn't the only one who got the message. (1)

Since the site was known to be created by a Constellation, the users' tones were generally mild.

While the Awakeners were confused, they continued to post and comment, observing the situation.

(2), (15) indicated the number of comments.

However, they were still acting as 'anonymous' non-members for the time being.

"Seo Gyu, now's the time."

"Ah, yes, hyung. I'll post it!"

Seo Gyu, under the member nickname 'Administrator', posted an announcement.

The gist of the announcement was simple.

□□□□□□□□□□

1. This site can be accessed anytime, anywhere.

2. An unnamed Constellation whimsically established SG Net. The poster is their representative.

3. The more active the members are, the more SG Net will develop. Members are akin to disciples, and community activity is simple to understand: the stronger your 'faith', the more powerful the descended Constellation becomes on earth.

4. Non-members can use SG Net for only one hour a day, whereas members can use it unlimitedly. Non-believers are non-members,

and members are believers, so please understand this distinction.

5. The 'unknown and nameless Constellation' desires nothing from you beyond community activity.

6. Your personal information is strictly protected.

□□□□□□□□□□

Naturally, aside from point 1, it was all lies.

As soon as the announcement went up, the non-members stirred. Suddenly, the announcement received dozens, hundreds of comments.

-Anonymous: Is the representative of the Constellation for real?

-CookingQueen: Mr. Administrator, how can one become an apostle of the Constellation?

-Anonymous: Smart move.

-OldManGoryeo: why does everyone here talk like assholes???

-Anonymous: How can we believe this is real? This might be a trick by a specter too.

Several Awakeners had already completed their registration.

'CookingQueen' and 'OldManGoryeo' were among the first to register as members, and others followed suit upon seeing this.

"Is this really happening...?", Seo Gyu marveled, dumbfounded.

All the while, his fingers were busy recording the personal information of the members into a text file.

Occasionally, some non-members expressed skepticism about the authenticity of the announcement, but they were met with messages from the Saintess.

[The Chancellor of the Red Cape feels displeased but confirms the truth of these Constellation's words.]

[The Saintess of National Salvation advises several Awakeners that prolonged internet use is detrimental to real life.]

Thus, other Constellations' renown was leveraged to endorse the legitimacy of SG Net.

Even the most doubtful of Awakeners had to relent somewhat under such assertions.

Initially dominated by non-members, the ratio soon started shifting towards members.

As the information of countless Awakeners poured in, Seo Gyu could not contain his excitement.

"Wow, we're done here, hyung."

"Good job."

I patted Seo Gyu's shoulder.

"But it's not over; it’s just the beginning."

"…?"

Seo Gyu seemed not to grasp the meaning of my words.

After all, how could he predict how I intended to use SG Net from here on?

"I'm counting on you moving forward, Seo Gyu."

"What? Oh, hyung, I'm the one who should be saying that!"

Clueless but earnestly following along, my younger brother smiled brightly.

Regrettably, even the 50th cycle couldn't escape destruction.

However, the usefulness of SG Net was proven. That alone made

this cycle significantly meaningful.

Me, the Saintess, Seo Gyu. We three as the site's founders and managers experienced a wide range of incidents. The stories intertwined here are too numerous and varied to mention, but I'll likely bring them up whenever I have the chance.

The immediate significance of the 50th cycle was this: from this point on, the actions I took at the start of each new cycle changed slightly.

"Ah, hello there, everyone! Oho? The numbers seem a bit low... Anyway, you must be quite startled to be summoned here all of a sudden, right? But don't worry! I'll be your friendly guide from the start!"

In the past, when I woke up in Busan Station’s waiting room, all I thought about was how to quickly get to the old man's café.

But not anymore.

There was now one more person I had to save.

"From now on..."

"You fucking asshole! What the hell are you talking about!"

A booming roar echoed.

I smiled at the familiar voice.

It was like my personal alarm sound, reminding me that life had started over once again.

As I started to move, eager for this cycle, I fondly listened to the swearing that I had missed.

"You fucking asshole!”

Footnotes:

Chapter 8

The Determinist I

Sinnoa

When you think of the trio of protagonists in web novels—namely, regressors, possessors, and reincarnators—who do you think is their greatest nemesis?

A powerful monster? The protagonist will win anyway.

Stress? Trauma? Obsessive-compulsive disorder? These are not wrong answers. However, it's hard to say these are unique to regressors. After all, stress is a common weakness of *Homo sapiens*, from your average 35-year-old unemployed person to the 60-year-old President of the United States.

Baldness? How could you say something so harsh.

The correct answer that is both somewhat surprising yet entirely unsurprising... the 'Butterfly Effect' itself.

-Can a butterfly flapping its wings in Beijing cause a tornado on the other side of the Earth?

The Butterfly Effect. A theory that states that small difference in initial conditions lead to increasingly drastic changes over time.

I can confidently say that this very Butterfly Effect is indeed the villain among villains for regressors—an unavoidable archenemy on a single-log bridge, and the sworn enemy of the universe.

Oh, the sheer audacity!

How many regressors have perished due to this Butterfly Effect in their creations?

-I am a reader well-versed in all kinds of web novels, and in the current world I've entered, no one can match my expertise. By working first to save a maid who was absurdly killed early on, I then, according to my interpretion, prevent the first button of tragedy from being set off... Huh? Why does saving the maid lead to a demon king invading?

-Beneath the palace walls, I was kind to a starving child, and 10 years later, the prince proposes to me? I just wanted to live a peaceful life, but what should I do now?

-Why, after I've completed all the quests the original protagonist was supposed to solve and even recruited allies meant for the protagonist's party, taking all the items and opportunities meant for the protagonist, has the protagonist become so weak? Oh dear, do I have to step in?

In the latter case, it's more a matter of conscience and intelligence than the Butterfly Effect.

For the trio of regression, possession, and reincarnation, no situation is as terrifying as the Butterfly Effect, regardless of whether the backdrop is fantasy, modern fantasy, romance fantasy, or alternate history.

So today, as a highly skilled regressor, I, the Undertaker, will tell the story of slaying the Butterfly Effect.

The first time I sensed something was off was around the 30th run.

"Hmm?"

It was just a slight sense of discomfort at first.

'Was this cafe... ever open?'

After the tutorial ended, I went to the building that was once Baekje Hospital, where the body of Old Man Scho had been turned into an interior decoration. I often reminisce about this place and spend

time here.

But why was a man running a business in a cafe that should have had a sign up declaring the shop closed?

I couldn't hide my confusion at this first-in-a-regressor's-lifetime experience.

"Excuse me..."

"Yes, sir. Welcome." The man smiled. He was the type to invest 80 percent of his fashion and styling efforts into his beard.

"Is it really okay for you to be operating like this? The world just went to hell."

"Ah... Right. I was planning to flee to Japan, but just the other day a huge typhoon blew through the South Sea, and all the evacuation ships sank." The man sighed.

For me, who had just come down from Seoul to Busan, this was completely new. "A typhoon blew through?"

"Yes. I don't know if you've heard yourself, but thousands must have died. It's mayhem down at Busan Port right now. I was considering paying a handsome sum to board a ship, but the shipowner told me he's setting sail in a week, and if I don't like it, I should leave. Well, what can I do? I have nothing else to do, so I might as well operate for this week. It's meaningless now, though, haha."

The manager laughed. I couldn't.

'I don't remember a typhoon at this time?'

I had [Complete Memory], which was the ability to retain all past memories.

In fact, it was thanks to acquiring this skill during my 5th run that I could spin these tales for you all. I can recall every event and thought I had at the time.

Therefore, I could assert this with 100 percent certainty.

'...This is an anomaly.'

Again, it was at the 'point six months after the tutorial ended' that I arrived at the cafe during the 30th run.

This was what you would call the very early stages of the very beginning.

My actions in the very early stages were always similar. I had barely changed a thing about them compared to the 29th or even 28th run.

It couldn't be my actions.

Yet despite this, in the world of that run, a 'typhoon' had blown through the South Sea.

'What's going on? What's causing this?'

Everything has a cause.

For someone like me, who strictly rejected esoteric concepts like the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics and adhered solely to causal determinism, this was an utterly baffling situation.

"Excuse me, sir."

"Yes?"

"I'm really sorry to say this, but if you're not going to order anything..."

"Oh. Sorry. I got lost in thought for a moment. Um, could I have a café au lait, please?"

"Of course. That'll be 59,500 won*."

*About $43.

"....."

The café au lait, hit hard by apocalypse-induced inflation, was terribly tasteless.

But the event that drove me even crazier occurred in the next run, the 31st.

[We are temporarily closed due to personal reasons.]

When I went to the cafe again around the same time, the closed sign was just hanging there as usual.

"Good grief."

What now?

It was too early to panic, as apart from whether the café was operating or not, numerous variables occurred independently in various runs.

"Huh? Saintess, did you move?"

"Huh?"

"In previous runs, you always lived in your home in Yongsan."

"Ah... It's been a bit hard to gather food for the fish. There's someone in the nearby guild who also has a hobby aquarium. So I moved closer."

"....."

The address where the Saintess lived had subtly changed by the 47th run.

"Ladies and gentlemen! I hereby declare the new capital of the Republic of Korea is now Busan Metropolitan City!"

"Wow!"

"Normal nation! Normal nation!"

During the 71st run, the mayor of Busan had taken control of the peninsula's political scene. I was stunned. That mayor, originally, was supposed to flee to Fukuoka, Japan, to form a second temporary government. (He even took meticulous care of his second

family during the escape.)

Other instances included a mid-boss-level monster that should have crossed into North Korea suddenly falling in love with democracy and defecting again, or a meteor shower that should have fallen in Gyeongsangnam-do landing in Jeollanam-do instead, among a parade of other bizarre events.

'No.'

I was feeling rather perplexed.

'This makes predicting the future problematic, doesn't it?'

Although in the majority of runs, the causality proceeded 'normally' without any anomalies, occasionally—and quite abruptly—chaos would erupt.

Well, occasionally experiencing pineapple on pizza might not be a big deal.

However, as a classical determinist, it was imperative that I uncover the cause of these anomalous phenomena.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

And so, on the 82nd run, a clue finally presented itself.

[A typhoon has been observed off the coast of Incheon. It's a massive tornado.]

"What? A tornado in the Yellow Sea? But that area is too shallow for that to be feasible."

[But it's really happening. I am sharing the view of an Awakener at Incheon Port at this very moment. Please be careful, as we don't know where the tornado will head.]

"Goodness, there are a lot of refugees in Incheon already..."

[Don't worry. I've already sent a message in the name of the Constellations to the other Awakeners. Evacuation is underway.]

I quickly logged onto SG Net. Sure enough, the board was in an uproar.

-Anonymous: Breaking news: tornado sighting in the West Sea lol

-[WitchJudge]: I'd like to help, but it's too far away.

-OldManGoryeo: Come on, let's take the old folks to the coffin~

-dolLHoUse: Dangerous.

-Anonymous: Not joking, it looks serious from the photos. If it's that big on the horizon, it's at least 3km across. Not sure about the strength of it, but definitely don't go near it. Any bad luck, and you might get struck by lightning and die.

In the midst of the chaos, someone uploaded photos and videos of a huge tornado. I had never seen anything like it before.

"....."

Then, a lightning strike of insight struck me.

"Yes! It was the typhoon!"

[What?]

"The typhoon! No, I mean the tornado!"

Now that I think about it, didn't the café owner also mention it?

'Just the other day, a huge typhoon blew through the South Sea, and all the evacuation ships sank.'

I stated with conviction. "Every run where a tornado wreaked havoc, the course of events turned out strangely warped. It's definitely the typhoon... It's the one causing these anomalies."

[I'm sorry, Mr. Undertaker. I'm not quite sure what you mean...]

"I'll explain later. Saintess, could you possibly track the path of the typhoon off the coast of Incheon and trace its origin as closely as possible?"

[It might be a bit difficult, but I'll give it a try. I'll check the areas that have been affected by the typhoon.]

Just a moment, whispered the Saintess, likely pulling up a map. Soon after, she had scanned the cities adjacent to the Yellow Sea and reported back.

[Um... The range is too broad to be certain, Mr. Undertaker. Please bear in mind that this is merely a conjecture.]

"That's fine. Where is it?"

[China. Beijing.]

China. Beijing. Tornado.

"Ah."

At that moment, I somehow felt I knew the identity of this tornado.

-Can a butterfly in Beijing flap its wings and cause a tornado on the other side of the Earth?

A phrase succinctly describing the Butterfly Effect.

The original phrase did not mention 'Beijing' but instead 'Brazil'. Interestingly, the original itself was merely a slogan that was invented after the fact.

When a meteorologist first presented the Butterfly Effect at a conference, it wasn't a butterfly but a seagull that was mentioned. Naturally, there was no mention of Brazil or typhoons either.

This alone should clearly illustrate how much these anomalies, these grotesqueries, disregard human history. They possess a humanities-esque sensibility that doesn't concern itself with factual precision.

Of course, someone like me who viewed the world from a strict scientific-causal deterministic perspective might in turn ask this:

-Why did the Butterfly Effect originate in Beijing instead of Brazil?

-The Butterfly Effect theory initially posits that small initial changes lead to vastly different outcomes over time, so why does it immediately send wind blasts in all directions?

I don't know.

Really, I don't.

Anomalies fundamentally have zero interest in our human curiosity and counterarguments. To the sensibility of anomalies, such questions are simply 'not sexy'.

Having lived as a regressor for a long time, let me share an insight of mine...

These bastards are essentially no different from 'AI-generated images'.

To anomalies, our long human history and common pool of knowledge are nothing more than 'prompt inputs'. Just as AI might consider any number of human legs, whether two or three, to be normal for *Homo sapiens*, these anomalies make no racial distinction between Chinese and Brazilians.

The concept of the Butterfly Effect, which belonged to past human scholarship, has been aggressively reinterpreted by the end of the century.

'An entity that indiscriminately creates storms without being fixed to the flow of causality!'

If I had to describe it, it would be akin to a tornado launcher.

As a result, the 'Butterfly Effect' took on an identity similar to North Korea's missiles. We could be certain that it would launch missiles whenever it got bored, but where the missiles would land was always a matter of whim.

In the 30th cycle, it turned southwards towards Japan, sinking ships meant for evacuation. In the 82nd cycle, it likewise baptized the

refugees with a deluge off the coast of Incheon.

Was that all? From the 83rd to the 85th cycles, it drifted elsewhere, toward Mongolia, India, and Siberia. If Major League scouts had seen it, they would have been head over heels, ready to chuck it a contract for its diverse change-ups.

Ultimately, it's rare for tornadoes to strike the mainland Korean peninsula, which made it hard for me, a born and 100 percent bred Korean, to notice the thing in the first place.

"...This is indeed a dangerous existence."

Crunch. The Saintess crushed a potato chip.

Surprisingly, the Saintess was eating chips not from a bag but from a Lock & Lock plastic lunch box. Even her snacks were stored in a vault, confirming that she was not in her right mind.

Furthermore, she picked up the chips with chopsticks, not fingers. Was she truly human at all?

The shut-in, germophobic Saintess said, "It's called the Butterfly Effect, but in reality, it's an unpredictable variable, a random number. Doesn't that overshadow what should be its greatest advantage?"

"You are correct. A bigger problem is that it's difficult to pinpoint the location of this anomaly."

"What?"

"Think about it, Saintess. If the direction of the tornado varies with each cycle, it means its point of origin could also change. Anyway, we're certain it's Beijing, but is Beijing not vast in and of itself?"

"Ah..." The Saintess finally nodded in understanding. "I can see why it's difficult."

"Yeah. Unless the anomaly is as large as Cthulhu, it's not surprising that it hasn't been caught in my information network. We have to find this anomaly within Beijing each cycle, which is as hard as

finding a scale in the sea."

"You're right. That makes sense."

"It does. It's nearly impossible for me to handle alone unless there's someone who can share the vision of all the Awakeners."

"....."

"....."

"......?"

"....."

"...I'll accompany you. To Beijing."

"Oh my. There's no need for you to go to such lengths. Whew, but if the Saintess helps, it would *indeed* be like gaining an army."

"....."

Shut-in Saintess's heart-pounding overseas mission, confirmed!

Footnotes:

Chapter 9

The Determinist II

Sinnoa

I had visited China numerous times in past cycles. It was closeby and featured an inspirational locale for the martial arts-obsessed Old Man Scho, who had once taken me to Mount Hwa.

The destination for this trip was Beijing, a city just outside my usual stomping grounds. But who was I, really? To an infinite regressor, few things were truly impossible. After a thorough, on-site investigation spanning the 82nd through the 85th cycles, I finally completed the 'Hitchhiker's Guide to Beijing'.

"First, we acquire a boat in Incheon and head to Tianjin Port."

"Um, Mr. Undertaker, it’s my first time on a boat, so I feel a bit, oh, that's dangerous, ah—"

First thing's first, I turned on the sound of the refreshing waves of the sea off Incheon as ASMR (with some additional background noise for ambiance), and we crossed the Yellow Sea just like that.

"Next, we shouldn't move above ground. There are too many anomalies. We could break through, but that would draw too much attention, so it's better to move underground."

"Wait a minute. Underground...?"

"Yes. The Awakeners in China have set up a base in the Beijing subway system. What are you doing? Why not come this way?"

"Um, actually, I'm a bit claustrophobic, Mr. Undertaker, uh, um, oh, danger—"

The Awakeners who hadn’t yet escaped the anomaly-ravaged Beijing had formed what’s called the 'Beijing Liberation Assault

Team'.

Among the stations they controlled, the one I took special note of was Ciqu Station.

The stationmaster there, who also served as the 17th commander of the assault team, was a character with whom I got along well.

They were considerably fond of a foreigner who could speak the Beijing dialect with such proficiency.

By this point, I had already been upgraded from 'this bastard' to 'you'.

And once an anomaly that had been troubling him was sliced into several pieces like serving a rolled omelet by the stroke of my sword, my title was promoted to 'Doc'.

Finally, when I presented a top-grade Pu-erh tea as a gift, the stationmaster finally remembered that we were brothers of faith, who had once served the way of Gong-Meng together in ancient times.

"Brother Undertaker!"

"Bro!"

The identification card issued to me by the 17th commander was as good as a free pass. We immediately entered Beijing.

"...Isn't that just a bribe?"

"Oh my."

A bribe? Who would call a gift exchanged among brothers a bribe?

I had merely gifted a small tea leaf out of goodwill, and the other party had rightly accepted it with grace.

Some complain that China's guanxi culture is practically its own league, but this is simply because they have forgotten the fine traditions of East Asia.

Having gobbled up plenty of regressor experience, I possessed not only expertise in tea ceremony but also numerous other virtues.

First off, the traditional East Asian game of Go could not be ignored. The commander of the liberation team, who preferred Go to three meals a day, shook my hand after a game and exclaimed, "I now know that a master has come from the East!"

Next was calligraphy. The 1st commander, who believed a person's handwriting revealed their true character, performed a deep bow on the spot after seeing my calligraphy of '有朋自遠方來 ("friends come from afar")'.

"Behold this dignified yet immaculate script! You truly are the reincarnation of Yan Zhenqing!"[1]

Of course, I knew the ways of propriety. How could I act arrogantly after receiving such high praise?

At each of these events, we would modestly sip Pu-erh tea and exchange pleasantries.

Exactly 48 hours after arriving in Beijing, I could freely access the information network held by the Liberation Assault Team.

The Saintess, who had observed this whole process by my side, muttered incredulously, "Mr. Undertaker, you seem to have a knack for befriending anyone within ten minutes of meeting them."

She looked at me with eyes that seemed to ask, "Is this the life of a social butterfly?"

"Ah, this isn't my first time. I created this shortest route after four cycles of exploration."

"Indeed. Then, this isn't really my first trip abroad, is it? I must have traveled with Mr. Undertaker in previous cycles."

"No? It's your first time."

"Really?"

"You've crossed into North Korea by yourself before, but this is your first time traveling across the sea. Why else would I invest so much to find the shortest route? I wanted to make your first journey as comfortable as possible."

"....."

"Well, with the world in such a state, this is about as comfortable as it gets. So, Saintess, how do you find it? Any anomalies in sight?"

"...Just a moment, please." The Saintess took a deep breath. "Only a moment."

Then she closed her eyes.

Her role here was singular: a radar.

Despite the Assault Team members hiding underground in Beijing, surveillance personnel were scattered everywhere above ground.

The 17th commander was on brotherly terms with the 1st and 10th commanders, and the 10th commander was close with the 6th, 8th, and 9th commanders, and the 1st commander was well-acquainted with the 2nd, 4th, and 5th commanders.

Their 'favor' and my 'goodwill' combined to manifest this moment, emphasizing the importance of surface surveillance that the assault team members usually neglected.

And the Saintess's ability was [Clairvoyance].

Exactly ten minutes from now, the Saintess would be able to observe all of Beijing without missing a spot.

"..."

One minute.

"..."

Two minutes.

"..."

Three minutes.

"I've found it."

The Saintess opened her eyes.

It hadn’t even taken ten minutes. The remaining seven minutes of spare time were a testament to our duo’s competence, marked by the measure of time.

"Where is it?"

"The Temple of Heaven Park."

We were in luck. It was close.

"Understood. Then, Saintess, please stay here underground and keep sending me messages while I quickly finish this off and return—"

"Please take me with you." The Saintess grabbed my forearm firmly. "I want to see Mr. Undertaker fight with my own eyes, not just through Clairvoyance."

"...Hmm. It might be dangerous."

"You said it was the most comfortable, safest, and shortest route. I trust you. And..." The Saintess exhaled faintly. That was her way of smiling. "If my first trip abroad ends up being just seawater sightseeing and underground views, even the me of future cycles might feel a bit aggrieved, don’t you think?"

It was a rationale I couldn't refute.

As we ran up the stairs of the Temple of Heaven East Gate station, a thunderstorm raged above ground.

The noise battered our ears.

The thunderstorm did not discriminate. Whirlwinds blew across all of Beijing.

"We're in for a rough welcome, Saintess. Hold on tight."

[Okay.]

Perhaps because of the storm's din, the Saintess used telepathy to speak instead of her voice.

I ran towards the Temple of Heaven, cradling the Saintess. Her arms, hanging around my neck like a swing, tightened.

The world was shrouded under a cover of dark clouds.

The once neatly maintained main avenue of the park was now infiltrated by the green of pine and Chinese parasol trees from the forests on either side. It looked as though rust had formed on an old iron sword.

I sprinted down the blade's edge.

~~Do you like crosswords?~~

~~What do you like the most?~~

I had to, as many the trees themselves were anomalies.

Lightning struck. The forest cast shadows.

Now on Earth, they were the lords of all.

These beings trampled on tree roots, hung from branches, coiled in nests, and looked down arrogantly at an old race that had dared to leap into their domain without fear.

That angle of view didn’t last long.

"It’s going to get a bit shaky."

[Okay.]

A flash. I slashed through the cumbersome trees in one stroke.

A dark aura, my inner self made manifest, swept down the avenue like a tidal wave. Anomalies parasitizing the trees were instantly uprooted.

As expected of anomalies that had occupied one of humanity's major cities, they didn’t lose their balance upon landing, but they didn't fare all that well either.

One strike. I sliced the necks of anomalies whose eye levels had now matched mine.

It took just two cuts for humanity’s main avenue to become a path again.

[Amazing,] the Saintess murmured softly. [Really, it’s different from watching with Clairvoyance. You are incredible.]

"You flatter me. Despite appearances, I’ve often been criticized for my lack of talent in martial arts."

[That can’t be true. Mr. Undertaker, you must be joking.]

I smiled wryly. "Truly."

In reality, I had no talent for martial arts.

My lack of talent was not limited to my relative martial prowess. I couldn't tell the difference between Pu-erh and green tea without looking at their colors, nor did I know the opening strategies of Go, or even the proper technique for grinding ink and holding a brush.

And I was still lacking in many ways. I had neither the skill to borrow the vision of others nor would I ever have it. That was always why I needed companions.

My companion whispered to me.

[Ah, turn left there—]

[To the right, yes, more to the right.]

[Yes, just go straight ahead, and you’ll make it.]

Guided by the Saintess through forest paths and slicing through anomalies, we arrived at a tower in the north of the Temple of Heaven—the Memorial Hall, towering above.

Lightning poured down, illuminating the ramshackle building. Yet the pillars still stood, however precarious their stance, reaching towards the sky like hands in prayer.

At the very center, a dragon was surging higher and ascending.

[That's the place, Mr. Undertaker. All the other tornadoes covering the city originate from that tornado.]

“Yes, it seems so.”

The Temple of Heaven.

Since ancient times, humanity has proven its power by being the ones to offer sacrifices and prayers to the heavens. Thus, the tornado spiraling skyward from that very spot was akin to the anomalies proclaiming their victory.

I enhanced my vision with my aura and looked toward the presence detected at the center of the storm, and I couldn’t help but smile faintly. “Of course.”

[Why are you smiling?]

“No reason. Just thinking about how fittingly bizarre these anomalies are.”

In the heart of the tornado was... a small sapphire-colored 'butterfly' flapping its wings.

Blue wings. A morpho butterfly.

This was indeed the identity of the dragon's ascension. An anomaly that proclaimed itself as the current Son of Heaven.

Perhaps on stormy days like this, some of the tornadoes spawned by this 'butterfly' might have traveled beyond Beijing to the opposite side of the Earth.

‘...Literally the Butterfly Effect.’

I gripped my cane-sword.

Normally used as a walking stick, it could convert into a sword by twisting the handle—my weapon of choice.

How I came to use such a peculiar weapon is a story for another time.

For now, I'll just briefly mention the target my sword was slicing through.

Noticing my presence, the butterfly tilted its head, fluttering its wings.

-Can a single blow from the regression demon cut it?-

The wind howled.

I swung my sword.

Amidst the booming thunder, a dark blade streaked silently across the world.

The blade tore through a butterfly that claimed to be the new lord of the Earth.

-The unfairness of being cut down by a regressor, perhaps?-

But tasting the bitterness of a celestial revolution was also the natural course of history for one claiming to be an emperor. I only wished to hasten their liberation from Earth.

Amidst the storm and thunder, the dragon's ascension cried out, and then, as if always a lie, the noise of the world quieted.

[...Ah.]

As the clouds parted, a final shower poured down. The raindrops cast transparent shadows like sunlight.

[It’s beautiful.]

My aura unfurled, detecting the presence of still countless numbers of anomalies. Surely after realizing their leader had been defeated, they would swarm this place.

But they wouldn't be faster than sunlight.

During our brief respite, the Saintess stepped down from my arms to look around.

“I’m glad we came on this trip.”

The sound of water trickled beneath the Saintess's shoes, akin to a small fish escaping from an aquarium to a stream.

The Saintess turned and moved her lips. Then, in a whisper audible only to me—

[The Saintess of National Salvation praises your achievements.]

I stood there, dumbfounded for a moment, before bursting into laughter.

Surprisingly, this was the first joke I had heard from the Saintess during our 86 cycles together.

There’s an epilogue to this.

As a determinist, the Butterfly Effect was an anomaly I could never accept. Yet I, too, am human. Occasionally, I grow weary of the repetitive cycle of life.

At such times, even the Butterfly Effect, twisting the flow of causality to create random variables, didn’t seem too bad.

After all, anomalies are also what you make of them.

In each cycle, I typically quelled the anomalies of Beijing within six months before the Butterfly Effect fully stretched its wings, but sometimes I deliberately let them be.

…It was during the 173rd cycle that my complacent attitude finally led to an irreversible 'Butterfly Effect'.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

“Yes.”

[Perhaps I have been acting with a preconceived notion of the Constellations until now. Maybe we need to refurbish the image of the Constellations in a more familiar and friendly way?]

“Ah, yes. As you wish.”

[I had a great idea last night.]

“It must be a wonderful idea.”

Although it was the first time I heard such a proposal, I fundamentally trusted the Saintess and approved without much thought.

The next day.

[Hello, hello! Grrreetings to all the Awakeners of the Korean Peninsula! Nice to meet you, meow!]

[Frrrom now on, I will be the Constellation watching over you, the Saintess of National Salvation, meow!]

[Meow! I look forrrward to our future, meow!]

“…….”

Oh my God.

I accidentally dropped my coffee cup.

…Indeed, anomalies and humanity simply cannot coexist under the same sky.

Footnotes:

1 - Yan Zhenqing was a Chinese calligrapher, military general, and politician. He was a leading Chinese calligrapher and a loyal governor of the Tang dynasty.

Chapter 10
The Troublemaker I

Sinnoa

Today, Old Man Scho's coffee was delicious as ever. In that vein, like the chapter before last, I think I'll unravel another tale from the 50th cycle.

The 50th cycle marked the first creation of SG Net by our SG-Man, Seo Gyu. SG Net represented a turning point in the Awakener community. Until then, the Awakeners had formed their own guilds and operated independently. Although they occasionally united for major Gate conquests, the guilds were essentially exclusive to each other.

But SG Net offered them a new horizon.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Seeking peace of mind? Join the Satisfaction Guild! Our main base is in Daejeon!

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Busan City. Prefer Awakener under 40 with levitation skills. Magic users also preferred. Contact via whisper. Whispers not checked between 11 PM and 9 AM.

-[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: ★Looking for new friends to join the Baekhwa camaraderie club★ >_<)!

SG Net was exclusively for the Awakeners. Guilds, desperate to recruit as many high-quality Awakeners as possible, were naturally turned upside down. They actively promoted their guilds, and soon, guild members began to denote their affiliations in [brackets] before their nicknames, a practice that was solidified on SG Net.

We appreciated the ease of accessing information about other

Awakeners, and they were pleased to have a means of freely promoting their guilds.

However, SG Net's influence wasn't entirely positive.

-OldManGoryeo: Idiots flock together.

OldManGoryeo, also known as the villain, was among the first to join SG Net as a full-fledged member. He also hadn't joined any guilds. In reality, he might very well have been affiliated with a guild, but his display name at least didn't include any mention of a guild.

Over time, more 'lone wolves' who insisted on solo-playing emerged alongside this villain. They typically kept to themselves and stayed out of the spotlight and, on SG Net, mostly participated as non-members.

-OldManGoryeo: Heard a Gate opened in Chungju yesterday? If people die, gettin' food's going to be easy, sweet.

The standout feature of OldManGoryeo's history was his blatant refusal to conceal himself. He not only donned his nickname without shame but also blatantly spewed profanities.

By virtue of being a site created by a transcendent Constellation, SG Net had very few trolls on its site. Even if someone wanted to curse, they'd do it as a non-member, anonymously.

With an ecosystem like that, OldManGoryeo, who behaved as if he didn't give a damn about Constellations or anything, inevitably drew people's ire.

-OldManGoryeo: Baekhwa? A camaraderie club? The world is in chaos, and you talk about camaraderie. Fuck camaraderie. Those hairless kids should just hurry up and flee abroad. This country is doomed.

□[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: Huuu, that's too harsh (ㅠ_ㅠ).....

□[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Words are a reflection of thoughts, and thoughts are like mist on a cloudy day, concealing oneself. Why

not try using clearer and brighter language?

OldManGoryeo actively picked fights not just with individuals but with entire guilds.

He didn't discriminate between the weak and the strong, most particularly targeting the Baekhwa Guild, which would later become one of South Korea's most infamous mega-guilds.

But that was something only I as a regressor knew for now.

Understandably, the other members were less than pleased.

-Anonymous: Crazy bastard.

-[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquess: Can't we just block that kid?

-Anonymous: just ignore him, he's not worth the engagement

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Honestly, he's disgusting.

-ZERO_SUGAR: Dear member, you're going to get yourself hurt.

Yet the more attention OldManGoryeo received, the more he seemed to enjoy it.

-OldManGoryeo: fuck off lmfao

As the world began to collapse, the big communities withered away. The internet reverted to a state reminiscent of decades past, fragmented into small, insular communities. The water had risen, and the troll fishermen were unhappy.

For them, SG Net must have seemed like a paradise built anew.

-OldManGoryeo: Honestly, if they have even a crumb of conscience, all the old people should just kill themselves.

-Yeah, the government has already run out of the food reserves, and they're pushing the kids to the front lines with guns.

-In times like these, what use are useless old folks who only leech off the young, sucking their marrow dry? If you think you're a

burden to your children, please just die already.

OldManGoryeo seemed to harbor a particularly intense hatred for the elderly. He made it a point to post daily about how all the elderly should end their lives. These were his so-called steady stream of posts.

A few Awakeners agreed with him.

-Anonymous: Hmm

-Anonymous: This guy's an idiot but he's right about the old being disgusting

Most members, however, detested OldManGoryeo's posts.

-Son'sLove: You seem young, but your words are too harsh...

OldManGoryeo: Are you old? Look at your disgusting nickname. Why don't you just die? It must be nice leeching off your son's spine.

-[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquess: These youngsters are insane.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Brother, if you ever have a secret you can't tell anyone, feel free to consult me anytime. People are killed by their fellow man, but people also live by them.

OldManGoryeo: Please just fuck off.

Anonymous: This bastard is being rude even to CookingQueen. Sigh.

-Anonymous: These guys act like they have no parents.

-[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: Huu, guys, don't fight (ㅠ_ㅠ).....

-ZERO_SUGAR: Dear member, you're going to get yourself hurt.

OldManGoryeo: fuck off lmfao

As one anonymous non-member pointed out, the only solution to dealing with attention-seekers like him was to pointedly ignore

them. However, it seemed that for many Awakeners, this was their first experience with internet communities.

“Wow, this guy is really disgusting...”

Among them was Seo Gyu, the site administrator.

“Hyung, can’t I just block this guy?”

“No.”

My immediate response made Seo Gyu furrow his brow. “Why not?”

“Because you can't appear human.”

“Excuse me?”

“.....”

I took a moment to formulate my thoughts.

As the cycles of regression prolonged my life, my words became increasingly succinct, so I made a conscious effort to try to speak at greater lengths.

“The administrators of this site are the agents of the Constellations, the apostles of the only-just-revealed Constellation in Korea. If you, as one of them, succumb to human displays of anger, sadness, or outrage, you might gain immediate sympathy, but ultimately, it would undermine your authority.”

“Ah...”

“Seo Gyu, you must appear to be from another dimension. The only time you should step forward is if an 'unknown nameless Constellation' is insulted. OldManGoryeo has never insulted the Constellation, so leave him be.”

Seo Gyu looked puzzled, probably not fully understanding.

Nevertheless, that was irrelevant. The fact that he hadn’t blasted OldManGoryeo with a retaliatory notice post was evidence enough

that he was fulfilling his role.

“So what do we do? Just leave it as it is?”

“No. It just means you shouldn’t intervene,” I murmured as I poured the coffee. “Things in the world remain unknown until you look into them.”

“.....?”

Then one day.

-iJoinedToday: Fuck, my father just died.

Several years after SG Net was established, a lengthy post appeared on the board.

The content was as follows:

-I usually post anonymously but joined to post this.

-I went out to hunt monsters and bought glutinous rice blood sausages on my way back to where I'm staying, only to find my father gone and a letter left behind. The letter asked me not to look for him, but how could I not?

-So, I spent the last four days frantically searching our neighborhood. Finally, I found him by a stream in the outskirts of the next town over. How a man with a bad back and legs managed to get there, I have no idea.

(Image attached)

-Since everyone here has likely seen the end of a person’s life, I didn’t blur the images.

-In the old days, there were a few crematories, but nowadays, they are gone. Now when people die, they just toss the bodies in the fields for the monsters to devour. Fucking great, huh? Haha.

-I begged someone I know who uses fire magic to help me because she always complained that she cremated more bodies than she

burned monsters. She said people treated her like a human crematory, and I never thought I'd be asking her for this kind of favor.

-My father was also an Awakener, F-rank. His ability wasn't useful for anything, but at least he could spend his time chatting on SG Net. His nickname was 'Son'sLove,' not sure if anyone knows him.

-Coming back from meeting my acquaintance yesterday, I read every post and comment my father wrote, and fuck, OldManGoryeo's posts really got to me. He practically made a ritual out of hoping for my father's suicide?

(Image attached)

-I know you didn't kill my father, but just the fact that someone like you exists disgusts me.

-I will give everything I own to anyone who can kill OldManGoryeo or tell me where he is. No joke. Send me a whisper.

-I see you're confident enough to run your mouth on SG Net as a registered member, let's see if you can keep talking when your face meets an axe.

The post by 'iJoinedToday' caused a stir on SG Net.

-Anonymous: Oh dear...

-[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquess: May the deceased rest in peace.

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: I pray for the departed soul.

-Anonymous: This can't be true.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: I can't imagine your grief. I don't know what to say to comfort you in your loss, but I'm sure your father has moved on to a happier place.

-[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: Huhu (ㅠ_ㅠ).....

-Anonymous: Is this for real?

-dolLHoUse: Condolences.

The post quickly became popular. It surpassed 300 upvotes and garnered hundreds of comments.

99% of the comments mourned the poster's father.

This meant there was 1% that did not.

-OldManGoryeo: Idiot. I'm an expat in Canada, how are you going to kill me? Come if you dare. Just another old fart to cut down hahaha.

Anonymous: Seriously, disgusting to the end.

This shameless response incited widespread outrage among the members.

“Hyung, do you think he's really an expat in Canada?”

“I highly doubt it.” I shook my head. “Of course he's lying. He joined SG Net as soon as it was launched, right after receiving the Constellation’s message, and the Constellations don't send messages to Canada.”

“Ah.”

“It’s not impossible that he moved to Canada afterward... But judging by his login times, it doesn’t seem likely.”

My guess was spot on.

“He’s still living in Korea,” the Saintess confirmed her eyes closed.

It was easy to tell which ability she was using. If her hands were together, it was Telepathy, and if her eyes were closed, it was Clairvoyance.

Even S-rank abilities came with certain restrictions to their use.

“I will guide you directly via Telepathy.”

“Thank you. Also, could you locate where ‘iJoinedToday’ is living?”

“Just a moment... Yes, I’ve pinpointed it.”

“Hmm.”

The usefulness of the Saintess and Seo Gyu spoke for itself once again. Without them, even gathering such minor information would have required considerable effort.

The Saintess murmured, “But this OldManGoryeo...”

“Hmm? What about him?”

“...His identity is multi-faceted. He’s a bit of an unusual person.” She sipped her coffee expressionlessly.

I shrugged and then logged onto SG Net with my official member ID to post a final piece of advice to OldManGoryeo.

-ZERO_SUGAR: Dear member, you're really going to get yourself hurt.

Ding.

The response was immediate, as if he had been waiting.

-OldManGoryeo: fuck off lmfao

I nodded.

That figures. The young these days really lack netiquette. Managing such troublemakers swiftly was the right thing to do, especially to protect the ambitious SG Net project.

I was potentially the oldest human alive if all the regressions were added up, so it wasn’t because such remarks grated on me.

Absolutely not.

Footnotes:

Chapter 11
The Troublemaker II

Sinnoa

Thanks to the Saintess, I was able to pinpoint the location of OldManGoryeo.

I would like to write that I immediately moved to defeat OldManGoryeo, but in reality, it took a bit more time.

A regressor's schedule is as tight as that of an A-list actor who just started being hailed as a national treasure.

No matter how dastardly OldManGoryeo was, I had much more urgent matters at hand. I had to upload the 'Aura Demonstration Video (Advanced)' under an alt-account on SG Net, reorganize the Korean Awakeners' Federation, tour famous eateries in Busan, and prepare for the meteor shower, among other things...

It's no joke. My calendar was jam-packed until the seventh year, if we counted from the regressor starting point.

It was nearly fifteen days later when I eventually managed to find some time to meet with iJoinedToday, and even that was a tight squeeze into into my schedule.

I had the Saintess—or more precisely, the Constellation she was enacting, 'The Saintess of National Salvation'—arrange the meeting place and time.

When I arrived at our designated location, there stood a muscular young man with broad shoulders.

“Mr. iJoinedToday?”

“Oh, ah, are you Mr. ZERO_SUGAR?”

“Yes. Nice to meet you. Please feel free to call me Undertaker.”

“Pleased to meet you. I am Lee Ju-ho.”

We shook hands.

A strong grip. I could feel the all-muscle, no-fat physique of someone who forged their path through this harsh world.

As an aside, I personally believe that one can tell more about a person from their hands than their face.

“Are you perhaps a teacher by any chance?” I asked, sneaking a glance over his shoulder.

“Ah—” Lee Ju-ho laughed awkwardly.

Our meeting place was an elementary school playground. Though the more accurate description would be a split-in-half elementary school.

Peekaboo.

Tiny children were stealthily keeping tabs on us. If a used car dealer had seen the junk those kids were playing spy in, they would have already issued a junkyard disposal for the whole pile. When our eyes met, they scurried off to hide like squirrels.

How adorable.

Lee Ju-ho scratched his head. “Yes, well... These elementary students are currently under my care.”

“How commendable, especially in these times. May I call you a teacher?”

“Oh, no need for formalities. Please, just call me however you see fit. I wasn’t originally a teacher.”

Lee Ju-ho gave a wry smile.

“I was just a math tutor getting paid at a tutoring academy...

Somehow, there wasn't anyone left to take up the podium. In the mornings, I finish guild tasks, and in the afternoon I juggle teaching. Another member takes care of being the nurse and art teacher, as well as managing the library."

"Oh..."

Let me just say that by this point, my fondness for Lee Ju-ho had already surpassed Lv. 5.

What was this young man? An angel?

"Ah. By the way, Mr. ZERO_SUGAR, sir, it must have been hard traveling in this hot weather. Would you like something to drink...?" Lee Ju-ho complemented his statement by offering a ZERO Coke beverage.

Since the Gate incident, that sort of commercial product had been elevated to a precious treat. Yet he had deliberately prepared a zero-calorie drink for me, probably because my ID was 'ZERO_SUGAR'.

"Oh..."

Fondness Lv. 6: surpassed.

"What a thought... But I would never refuse. I'll gladly drink it."

"Haha, I'm glad. I thought you'd like it."

"Indeed. It's even more of a treat since it's been a while. And I apologize for being late to say this, but I offer my condolences."

"Thank you."

We then sat side by side on a bench in the half-destroyed elementary school playground.

Once again, the young man's name was Lee Ju-ho.

He was active around Pocheon-Cheorwon. We happened to be meeting in Pocheon as well.

The guild to which Lee Ju-ho belonged could not compare to AAA-class guilds like Samcheon or Baekhwa, but it was solid in its own right. However, as I recall, it was one of those mid-size guilds that later mysteriously disappeared. In this day and age, his guild wasn't the only one.

"So, Mr. Undertaker..."

After some initial chitchat, Lee Ju-ho looked at me.

"You mentioned that you had information about OldManGoryeo."

"Yes, that's correct."

Lee Ju-ho's black eyes darkened, a burning anger for the father he loved. He licked his lips, then asked, "Will you help me kill that bastard?"

Hmm.

I set down the aluminum can. "Whether to kill him is your decision, Mr. Lee Ju-ho. My role is to guide you to your destination."

"By destination, you mean...?"

"Of course, the place where OldManGoryeo lives."

Lee Ju-ho's eyes widened. "You know where that bastard lives?!"

"Yes."

"How on earth— Ah. Perhaps...?"

The words Lee Ju-ho swallowed must have been asking if I was an acquaintance of OldManGoryeo.

"Do not worry," I assured, shaking my head. "I have never even met the man, let alone made his acquaintance."

"Ah."

Though it would later turn out that I had inadvertently lied.

“Forgive me. I didn’t mean to doubt you, ZERO_SUGAR, sir. But how did you manage to locate him…?”

That was, of course, thanks to the Saintess and her clairvoyant ability. If you keep listening to my story, you’ll gradually realize that the Saintess is truly a cheat-level Awakener.

“I cannot tell you, but let me hint that it was thanks to my awakening ability and the Constellation I personally serve.”

“Ah…”

“Will you follow me?”

As I stood from the bench, Lee Ju-ho also got to his feet, albeit hesitantly. He reflexively looked towards the direction of the abandoned school, where the children were hiding.

“Ah, um, I didn’t know it would come to this… I didn’t settle things before coming. I have guild tasks and school tasks to handle. I’m really sorry, but could you possibly wait just a little longer?”

“No, there’s no need for that.”

“No?”

I smiled brightly. “It’s not far at all from here.”

I had specifically adjusted my busy regressor-schedule to give myself some leeway in intervening in this case.

“If it’s close, how close is it?”

“Pocheon. Mr. Lee Ju-ho, you and OldManGoryeo are actually from the same neighborhood.”

Lee Ju-ho went silent as his jaw dropped.

Why hide it?

This case was a simple quest that could be solved with just one proper attempt.

[Turn right into the alley.]

[Then it's left into the next alley.]

[Keep going straight.]

The performance of the 'Saintess', a limited edition navigation product that I alone could use in the whole world, allowed me to find my way even with my eyes closed.

“.....”

Meanwhile, Lee Ju-ho, who was following me, never stopped expressing his open confusion.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“Ah, yes. It's just... This information was so unexpected...”

He was understandably shocked.

Connecting to SG Net meant OldManGoryeo was also an Awakener. And though Pocheon was not a major city, all the Awakeners there would know each other.

“Oh! Team Leader Ju-ho!”

Sure enough, as we walked down the street, village patrol members who recognized Lee Ju-ho approached us.

Nowadays, a patrol team was a must-have in every village. In keeping with the latest trends, the patrol members looked at me, a stranger, with particular suspicion.

“Excuse me, but what brings you to this neighborhood?”

Lee Ju-ho stepped forward. “Oh, about that... Just taking a walk with an old hometown friend.”

“Your hometown friend? Wow. Friendships like that are rare these days.” The patrol member opened the road barrier. “Well, if he’s an

associate of Team Leader Ju-ho, it should be fine. Please go ahead.”

After we passed through the security checkpoint, the streets became noticeably tidier. This must be the affluent area of Pocheon, akin to Gangnam Cheongdam-dong. Although, the original Cheongdam-dong had been turned into ruins.

“Excuse me, Mr. ZERO_SUGAR, sir. Is this really the place?” Lee Ju-ho's voice, which had already been hesitant before we entered this neighborhood, began to tremble even more.

“Why? Are you feeling uneasy?”

“To be honest... Yes. This area is primarily where our guild's Awakeners live. There isn’t a single member from another guild here.”

“Is that so? Then you should brace yourself.”

“.....”

Frankly, whether Lee Ju-ho was prepared or not didn’t matter much to me. After all, I had come all this way just to see how impressively the facial muscles of OldManGoryeo could be re-arranged.

Unlike Lee Ju-ho, I didn't particularly intend to kill OldManGoryeo. A good beating and a warning to 'never troll on the internet again' would suffice.

“This is the place.”

We soon arrived in front of a house. Red bricks. A small front yard. It wasn’t particularly luxurious, but living in a detached house rather than a communal residence in these times was a sign of privileged status.

Lee Ju-ho's eyes flickered over the building restlessly. It seemed it was indeed the house of an acquaintance.

“Good heavens.”

“This is the location given by my Constellation. You know of her, The Saintess of National Salvation, right? Among the Constellations, she is the most trustworthy. Let’s go take a look at his face now.”

“ZERO_SUGAR, sir, just a moment...!”

Lee Ju-ho tried to grab my shoulder, but by then, I had already stormed into the mansion.

Fitting for an Awakener’s hideout, the mansion was equipped with various security devices. However, I infiltrated them as easily as a summer mosquito.

Why? Because I, the regressor, was the very person who initially proposed and implemented these security designs.

Passwords? Traps? Puppeteer’s special spider webs? They all crumbled before me, the copyright holder, in less than a second.

“No, what—”

The sound of Lee Ju-ho's astonishment echoed behind me, but I ignored it. These kinds of infiltration operations needed to be quick and decisive, and once initiated, it was best to see them through without looking back.

If this were a game, my profile would probably read [First Profession: Regressor], [Second Profession: Assassin (Thief)].

I reached the heart of OldManGoryeo’s hideout in an instant.

“Heh... Here's blue, heehee...”

OldManGoryeo was busy painting on a canvas, so completely absorbed in his art, that he hadn’t noticed my intrusion at all.

Only once I stepped up right behind him did his ears finally twitch to attention.

“Huh? Who...?”

A critical hit to the nape. With an optional aura boost.

“Eeek.”

Thump.

A woman in a white doctor’s coat went limp. Steering her clear of the paint cans so that she crumbled to the floor was my final act of consideration.

OldManGoryeo was, in fact, a woman.

Target secured, mission accomplished.

That was easy.

“Hmm?”

The real problem started then.

Knocking OldManGoryeo out was fine, but taking in her face came with a surprise.

What in the world—

“Surely not...?”

OldManGoryeo, who was now lying on the floor with dancing eyes, was one of the 399 survivors who had been summoned to the Busan Station concourse.

‘What a coincidence.’

Given that 399 isn't an especially small number, such a coincidence was certainly statistically possible. However, the real surprise lay in the fact that OldManGoryeo was not just familiar to me, but to all of you readers from a previous chapter.

Our fiery SG-man, Seo Gyu, who was prettily decapitated by the Tutorial Fairy, remember?

"Hieeeeeek!"

There was someone who was drenched in Seo Gyu’s blood back then.

"P-people— People have died...! People have—! Aiiieee, he just died!"

Someone who, while running away, scattered Seo Gyu's innards and blood across the Busan Station main concourse, causing a scene reminiscent of Moses parting the Red Sea (though with a bit more crimson).

That person was Sim Ah-ryeon.

'...Why is she here?'

Isn't the world unexpectedly small?

Footnotes:

Chapter 12

The Troublemaker III

Sinnoa

“Saintess, is she really the right person?”

[Yes, Mr. Undertaker. It's her.] The Saintess's response came immediately, like she was watching my movements in real-time through her Clairvoyance. [This person uses the nickname 'OldManGoryeo' on SG Net.]

“Huh.”

I stroked my chin.

‘Well, these things happen.’

My surprise wasn't long-lived. It was mainly because the person in question wasn't all that important to me. After all, Sim Ah-ryeon and I were not entirely unconnected, but our relationship wasn't so deep that I'd call it 'significant'.

To briefly describe how the Busan station main concourse reflects in my eyes, it would be something like this:

[ExtraA]

[Seo Gyu←Important!]

[Tutorial Fairy]

[Vending Machine]

[ExtraB]

[ExtraC]

[Go Yuri←※Danger※]

[Souvenir Shop (Silver Bells to be farmed)]

[ExtraD]

[ExtraE]

[Uehara Shino]

[ExtraF]

[ExtraG]

...

That's about it.

And in that list, Sim Ah-ryeon fulfilled her role of [ExtraB] perfectly.

She was the type of character who, unless specifically pointed out with an arrow, would never catch any reader's eye.

To indulge in a bit of hyperbole, whenever Seo Gyu died, she would then let out her scream of "Hieeek!" and that was the essence of Sim Ah-ryeon's existence.

‘Her awakening ability was... healing, right?’

Of course, as a regressor, I had kept track of the abilities of all the extras.

‘I remember her not being particularly skilled as a healer...’

In gaming terms, a 2-star healer.

It might be a harsh analogy, but she was like a healer who's tossed in for free just because you logged into the game—initially useful, but eventually dropped from the party as the stages get harder. 'You're expelled from the party. You're just not good enough to keep up with us,' she was told as she was recommended for dismissal.

And my story's genre wasn't tagged with #regret #obsession #misery. What does that mean? Just kick her out and be done with

it.

In the first, second, and third runs, I relied on Sim Ah-ryeon, but that was when I was still a novice.

After that... Well. Not particularly?

There were certain events, like the joint funeral in the 10th run, or building the impregnable fortress in the 24th run. But other than those, I didn't have many significant memories with her.

‘As a third-rate Awakener, she's lucky she survived in Busan and somehow made it all the way to Pocheon.’

Thinking about it, she had traveled almost from the southern end of Korea to the northern tip.

Somehow, that made me feel a bit sad.

My trivial annoyance over OldManGoryeo's personality was gradually overshadowed by a budding curiosity about Sim Ah-ryeon's life.

‘I should hear her out.’

In the end, it was good that I indulged my curiosity.

As soon as I knocked Sim Ah-ryeon unconscious and dragged her to the living room, Lee Ju-ho followed me inside and touched a hand to his brow. "...Oh my," he exclaimed. "To think that a fellow guild member, that the 'Healing Angel' herself, would write such trash and stir up trouble."

"I take it you two knew each other... right?"

Just then, I thought I heard a strange sound, or rather, a somewhat eerie and ashamed sound.

"Healing Angel?" I pressed.

"She's famous around here," Lee Ju-ho replied, his face a mix of confusion and distress. "And she's also a school nurse, art teacher,

and librarian at the elementary school where we first met."

"What?"

"It's, well, I mentioned it before. That there was another guild member who looked after the kids... She's the one."

???

I turned my head and looked up at the ceiling.

[It's really OldManGoryeo, Mr. Undertaker. Please don't doubt it.]

I quickly brought my gaze back down to Lee Ju-ho. "Are you saying she's your colleague?"

"Yes, in the guild and at school... After the world fell apart and all medical infrastructure collapsed, people started dying from minor colds or small wounds that led to tetanus... More people died from illness than from monsters."

That was also something I knew well, having seen it countless times during my previous regressions.

Without antibiotics, modern people were quick to die. The reason cremation quickly became the standard method of funerals in the ruined world, and why Lee Ju-ho's fire-mage acquaintance was always busy, was precisely to prevent the spread of disease by burning the bodies.

"But in this area, such needless deaths have ceased," Lee Ju-ho continued, looking at OldManGoryeo. "This person... Healing Angel has been curing everything from minor illnesses to serious cancers with her ability for about a year now."

"Really?"

Her?

A 2-star healer?

"She's well-known for treating patients and students without asking

for any compensation. Even my father. Whenever he was ill, she would take care of him... If it weren't for her, he wouldn't have been able to get out of bed..."

Lee Ju-ho's eyebrows pulled into a frown.

"So, Mr. Undertaker, is this person really OldManGoryeo? Could there be a misunderstanding or mistake?"

"No, that part is certain. There's no room for doubt. Ask her yourself when she regains consciousness."

Lee Ju-ho eventually fell silent.

Truthfully, I was more confused than anyone.

‘Sim Ah-ryeon demonstrated a level of healing capable of curing cancer...?’

She had never shown such capability in any of my previous regression lives. At most, she had been able to slightly alleviate the pain from scraped knees, or help recover from a cold within a week —abilities akin to Panpyrin.[1]

How could this be possible?

"I'll wake her up."

Lee Ju-ho nodded in agreement.

I threw an empty soda can at OldManGoryeo.

The aluminum can, thrown with a bit of aura, must have felt like a shock of electricity when it hit OldManGoryeo in the head.

"Ugh... Eurgh! Uhhh...?"

OldManGoryeo, also known as Healing Angel, groaned as she slowly blinked her eyes open.

"Are you up?"

"Huh... Ugh, what... Yes...?"

We waited until she fully regained consciousness, then I explained everything from the beginning.

Understandably, she was shocked. "Hieeek...! How, how did you even know I was here? And to come all this way...?"

"The Constellations are rather taken with me." I lied as easily as breathing, then stared at her. "But why did you do it?"

She hesitated in response to my direct question.

An awkward silence fell over the living room.

"Um, the thing is... Well, um..."

However, that very awkward silence spoke volumes.

“Huh.”

Lee Ju-ho looked desolate as he realized that his acquaintance was indeed an internet troll.

He said softly, "...Dr. Sim. Was taking care of patients stressful for you?"

OldManGoryeo blinked rapidly. "Hiek. Yes... Yes...?"

"So, you didn't *really* want to take care of patients. No, it was so annoying, yet you couldn't refuse because of your ability... Elementary school kids are always causing trouble. Is that what it was? Did you wear an internet mask to blow off some steam?"

"Wow."

I was impressed. A neat guess, fitting for a refined young man.

The mismatch between ability and personality was a scenario I had often seen.

In this world, having healing powers was a double-edged sword. 'I am a noble because I am a healer, and you are commoners' was a mentality very few were self-possessed enough to admit to.

Quiet, introverted, unable to refuse others' requests—people like that just end up being dragged around.

Until one day, they would snap and cause trouble.

However, in response to this logical and credible hypothesis, OldManGoryeo—Sim Ah-ryeon—whipped her head from side to side in disagreement.

"N-no, *no*! It's not like that! It's because of my skill—"

"That's right, your skill. Ms. Ah-ryeon, you don't actually want to use the skill [Mobile Hospital], but you have to because of the patients—"

“No, it’s a different skill! My second ability!”

Sim Ah-ryeon began to explain her second ability, flapping her arms about.

“Just wait a minute. It was tough to figure out this ability because...”

Since abilities don't appear in neat little skill cards (if they did, I could have easily announced my regressor status), we'll have to rely on Ah-ryeon's voluntary disclosure here. Sim Ah-ryeon’s second ability was as follows:

———————————

[Grudge Orb]

It is said that those who are cursed will live long and healthy lives.

You are an enhanced version of this. The more you are cursed and hated, the more you will not only live a long and healthy by yourself but also be capable of sharing that longevity and health with others.

* This effect strengthens as the hatred and spite against you grow stronger and more numerous.

* If you possess medical and healing skills, those skills will also be enhanced in kind.

———————————

Lee Ju-ho gaped in astonishment as he read the notes about OldManGoryeo's powers.

For the record, I was gaping too.

“What the hell kind of stupid skill is that...?”

It was shocking enough that she had such an ability, but even more astonishing was that she had managed to document it in such detail.

Again, aside from very abnormal cases, Awakeners don’t receive a status screen or anything like that. Discovering one’s abilities normally requires an endless grind.

What kind of digging did Sim Ah-ryeon have to do to uncover this ‘Grudge Orb’?

It seemed I wasn’t the only one engulfed in shock and awe.

[The mysteries of awakening abilities are always fascinating to behold.]

It was the Saintess speaking. Apparently, she had been secretly observing, curious about the true nature of the situation.

I looked into the air and articulated clearly, ‘Saintess, you didn’t know either?’

[What... How would I? Yes, I can observe Awakeners whenever I want, but I can't read their minds. I, too, assumed like Mr. Ju-ho that she was just stressed from caring for patients.]

Indeed.

Shock shared is shock halved. Talking with the Saintess helped steady my emotions, and suddenly, a new perspective dawned on

me.

The ‘OldManGoryeo Situation’. That’s what this series of events unfolding before my eyes seemed to be.

‘Indeed. There was a reason she started being called 'Healing Angel' this cycle.’

The world had fallen.

Internet infrastructure had collapsed.

People had to interact face-to-face, just like before the internet existed.

In this lonely world, even receiving ‘hatred’ was not easy, especially for someone with a gentle disposition like Sim Ah-ryeon. That's why her second skill hadn’t stood out in previous cycles, and her first skill had only amounted to a health supplement.

But now, in the 50th cycle, something that never existed before had appeared: SG Net.

In an ideal world for drawing aggro, Sim Ah-ryeon finally awakened. She transformed into OldManGoryeo, becoming a top-tier aggravator. Since SG Net was full of Awakeners, some of them would even kill OldManGoryeo and do so gladly if they got the chance. The overflowing aggro then gathered into the ‘Grudge Orb’.

It was more than enough to earn her the nickname ‘Healing Angel’.

‘Hm? But didn’t the Saintess say something unusual when I asked her to locate OldManGoryeo?’

[Yes? Yes, I did say that.]

‘Did you realize then that OldManGoryeo was also Healing Angel, like a person with a dual personality?’

[Oh. Uh, no. It was... I’ll tell you about it later.]

Then, Sim Ah-ryeon bowed her head to us. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know

Mr. Ju-ho's father would get hurt..."

Lee Ju-ho sighed.

"I know it's bad to curse others... It's a thorn in my conscience... But"—*hic*—"still, I need to be resented, to gain strength, to help one more patient..."

She sat curled up with her knees to her chest, scuttling to a corner of the room and muttering to herself.

Lee Ju-ho could only watch silently. After a long while, he asked, "What should we do, Mr. Undertaker...?"

"What can I do? It's your decision that matters, Mr. Ju-ho."

"Uh..." Lee Ju-ho scratched his head, seeming to realize that he was the one who stormed in out of righteous anger. It didn't take long for him to make a decision. "So then—"

It wasn't a difficult decision.

The friends on SG Net who were curious about the outcome of the real-life confrontation would probably be sticking out their tongues. After that day, 'iJoinedToday' vanished, and OldManGoryeo continued to be active.

-OldManGoryeo: Treated the son of a bitch who showed up for the fight well lol

Even the posts became more venomous.

OldManGoryeo, not only adept at stirring aggro but also an excellent artist, even started drawing comics for his posts.

In the comics, a child and an old man appeared. The drawings were unnecessarily dramatic. The content went like this:

-Old Man: Huh? Who's that?

-Old Man: (frowning)

-Old Man: Isn’t that our son?

-Child: Daddy, where are you going?

-Child: I wanna go too!

-Child: (smiling brightly)

(A cheerful comic-style picture of the father and son crossing a river)

Lastly, a photo that looked like a family tomb was attached. There was even a Post-it note with OldManGoryeo's nickname on the tombstone.

Needless to say, the conscientious members of SG Net were grinding their teeth.

-Anonymous: Oh my.

-[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquess: I’ll take care of this one, just give me the address, kiddo.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: The curses you pour onto others will eventually return unto you. Why not take some time to reflect on yourself? Trust that there is good within you, brother.

OldManGoryeo: Just fuck off, you crazy fuck

-Anonymous: Didn’t he say he lives in Canada? The photo is totally Korean.

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Contact me if you come to Busan.

-dolLHoUse: im angy

-Anonymous: But why does he draw so well? He’s really talented...

Not all members were conscientious. Some were thrilled by the troll.

-Anonymous: Lol double kill lololol OldManGoryeoHam is the real deal lmao

-LiteraryGirl: Thought OldManGoryeo was just good at online arguments, but he’s really something in a real fight too lmao

They say a true star drives both fans and haters crazy.

While Lee Ju-ho and I remained silent about the whole affair, OldManGoryeo was going to work drawing all of SG Net's aggro to himself.

At least there wouldn’t be anyone around Lee Ju-ho’s guild dying untimely deaths from lack of healing.

One more thing.

“Wow, how can an ability like that exist...?”

For the record, Seo Gyu was deeply shocked after hearing the whole story from me.

“It’s funny to think that I’m not the only one with a weird ability... What a strange feeling.”

It seemed he had managed to shed some of his complexes about his own skills.

Thus, it was a win-win happy ending for everyone. But there was one bit of unforeseen collateral damage.

-Anonymous: Didn’t ZERO_SUGAR brag about putting OldManGoryeoHam in his place?

-Anonymous: Talks big then shuts up lol why is ignoring him so pathetic lol

-Anonymous: Nosy lol actually, it was ZERO_SUGAR who got his nose broken lol

-LiteraryGirl: This ZERO_SUGAR person... such a nosy brat.

[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: To speak ill of others is actually to lower oneself. Every human is a mirror to me, and I am a mirror of all humans. Let us respect and be considerate of one another.

“…?”

I stared at the posts for a moment.

With a *hmph*, I stood up, went to the kitchen to brew an espresso, and sat back down.

The fact that I had espresso instead of café au lait was a sign that the work I was about to dive into required high concentration.

First, I logged into SG Net with a secondary account, without any particular intention or purpose.

Then, it happened just as I was about to send a message in the administrator-only chat room asking 'Seo Gyu, it’s nothing big, but can you find out some personal info about these guys?'

[Mr. Undertaker.]

“Hmm.”

[Please don’t do that. Really.]

I put down my phone.

Let's just end this chapter with a little bit of dislike for OldManGoryeo.

Footnotes:

1 - A Korean medicine which is used for common cold.

Chapter 13

The Unidentified One I

Sinnoa

Regressors are also people. Human beings.

I was far from an all-powerful deity.

Take Sim Ah-ryeon's case for instance. Who would have thought that the title of a Japanese web novel like '【Manga Serialization Soon】 I Thought I Was a Mere Pathetic Awakener, But This Time, I Turn Out to Be a Legendary Healer ~Saving Patients from the Brink of Death, They Call Me an Angel~【Releases 11/11】' would unfold.

Once again, being a regressor doesn't mean knowing every secret.

Every so often, there are unsolvable riddles or events that might as well be called urban legends that find their way to me.

They're the events I reflect upon while sipping Old Man Scho's café au lait, those 'What on earth was that?' kind of events.

Today, I'll introduce you to such a mystery.

Do you believe that there is balance in the world?

For instance, if there are scumbags among humans, there are also angels.

On internet forums where villains emerge, so too do popular stars whom people want to befriend.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Do you seek peace of mind? Join the Satisfaction Guild! Our main hub is in Daejeon!

On SG Net, CookingQueen has always been one such popular figure.

I myself only have good memories of this person.

"CookingQueen? I haven't observed her for long, but she's not a bad person. She takes good care of her guild members and even volunteers on Sundays. Personally, I believe there's no one as trustworthy among the Awakeners as CookingQueen."

Witness 1: Saintess.

"Oh, you're asking if I know CookingQueen? She's a really good member. I've seen all sorts of things managing SG Net, but I've never seen CookingQueen cause trouble. Boring? Not at all. She writes plenty of funny posts and doesn't act all high and mighty. Ugh. If all members were like CookingQueen, I wouldn't have to suffer like this..."

Witness 2: Seo Gyu.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: OldManGoryeo, I believe in the goodness planted deep within your heart. Why do you keep repeating these self-harming actions? If you have any concerns, please consult me.

-OldManGoryeo: Please... Stop... It's my fault. I'm a son of a bitch and a bad guy, so don't talk to me like that…

Witness 3: Sim Ah-ryeon.

All the Awakeners, each with their unique personality, unanimously testified that CookingQueen was a rare find in this day and age.

Even the Saintess, known for her stringent standards, did not skimp on the praise. Her testimony held extra credibility, as she could observe other Awakeners with her [Clairvoyance].

I, the one and only infinite regressor (since the other one went on long-term leave), had a good impression of CookingQueen as well.

-LiteraryGirl: This ZERO_SUGAR person... such a nosy brat.

[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: To speak ill of others is actually to lower oneself. Every human is a mirror to me, and I am a mirror of all humans. Let us respect and be considerate of one another.

There are those who hide in the shadows and slander me, yet CookingQueen stands against them.

I know best how difficult a task it is to stand alone and fight for good while everyone around you does evil.

And so it was in the 89th run. Invigorated by ‘the unscratched lottery ticket’ Seo Gyu hitting the jackpot, I had since taken to recruiting new companions in each run. Having proven her integrity and steadfastness over past runs, CookingQueen was also one of my targets.

It wasn't because she personally took my side that I approached her.

“Greetings.”

“Hello.”

And enlisting CookingQueen was not a hard thing to do. Like Seo Gyu, she was popular for a reason.

At the starting point of my regression in Busan Station's main concourse, 399 individuals were summoned there, and among them was CookingQueen's main form.

“I would say it's safer to move together with others. Would you perhaps accompany me, at least until we leave Busan Station?”

“Oh. Yes, I would like that.”

The woman had rosy-hued hair. Her hair might have been dyed a flashy color, but her demeanor was calm. Hers was the sort of peace found and kept despite going through numerous trials in life.

There was an imbalance between her vivid hair color and mode of expression, but that awkwardness was not out of place but instead lent itself to a rather unique charm.

“Thank you. You can call me ‘Doc’ or just ‘Undertaker’ if you prefer. And what is your name?”

“Go Yuri.”

The woman who had been active on SG Net under the name CookingQueen in past runs, now smiled gently and calmly.

“Please, just call me Yuri, Doc.”

To get straight to the point, Go Yuri had absolutely zero combat-related abilities to speak of. Not just combat, either. The ability she had awakened, [Stealth], could barely be called useful. If Go Yuri had the talent of a sniper or assassin, then [Stealth] might have been put to good use, but as it was, Go Yuri truly had no talent for fighting.

“Ugh. Ah! Agh! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

She was getting pummeled by slimes, which were considered the weakest monsters.

Sim Ah-ryeon (who had also been recruited into my party around the 51st run) aggressively ripped the slimes apart.

“Oh, noona... You're pretty bad at this...”[1]

“Yes, it seems I have no talent.”

“It’s okay, I’ll protect you!”

“Thank you, Ah-ryeon.”

It was a beautiful display of camaraderie between party members, despite Sim Ah-ryeon being one of the weakest in combat herself.

Still, we did not expel Go Yuri from the party.

It wasn’t because we feared the story would turn into a genre of #regret #obsession #misery, but for purely rational reasons.

“Oh, Guild Leader.”

At 5 AM, a time of serene blue before the day begins, I was drinking café au lait in the guild house kitchen when Go Yuri hurried down from upstairs.

Having lived as a regressor for a long time, I still found it hard to get used to being called ‘Guild Leader’. The title was a bit special to me.

But I accepted the greeting without letting that show. “You’re up early.”

“Yeah, I wake up automatically around this time,” Go Yuri said, sheepishly scratching her cheek.

Plus 10 points.

Indeed, a sound and healthy lifestyle fundamentally involves going to bed early and waking up early. This belief hasn’t changed through my 100th or even 1000th runs.

Go Yuri peeked into the kitchen. “Guild Leader, you always seem to brew coffee in the morning, and our guild has ‘café’ in the name. Is it a hobby of yours?”

“It is. It wasn’t always, but an old friend was deeply knowledgeable about the subject. Somehow, I ended up getting into it as well.”

“That’s cool!” Go Yuri clasped her hands together to form a triangle, then tilted her head while grinning. “I think following a set pattern early in the morning is itself proof of diligence. It’s like a declaration, a refusal to let time simply pass one by. And yet, you’re relaxing with a coffee, which eases mental and physical tension. It's a wonderful habit, truly!”

A smile spread across my face. I had my own reasons for loving the dawn, but Go Yuri wasn't wrong either.

“We really connect in conversation," I commented. "Heading to water the flowerbed now?”

“Yes, the hydrangeas are blooming beautifully! I was worried whether the soil would take well, but I'm happy to see the blue come out so bright!”

Plus 30 points.

Indeed, lazy people spread the virus of indolence while diligent people emit the radiation of effort. The mere act of caring for a flowerbed unasked was commendable in and of itself. Watching her speak so logically and with such precision was simply heartwarming.

Whenever I spoke like that in front of the other party members, their responses were always lukewarm, somehow.

“Say, hyung.”

“What is it, Seo Gyu?”

“Hyung, you’re not that much older than me, but hearing you speak feels like I’m listening to a company manager...”

Uh-oh.

I frowned, and Seo Gyu quickly averted his gaze.

I handed a cup of coffee (brewed to taste as close as possible to bagged coffee) to the Saintess, and she was touched.

“I think Mr. Undertaker’s view is correct. All virtue originates from habit, and habit begins with diligence. Virtue without diligence creates a dilettante, a mere show-off.”

“That’s right, isn’t it? Indeed. Seo Gyu, you should also learn from Yuri and the Saintess.”

Seo Gyu made a puzzled expression. “…It’s strange. Our guild's average age is almost the youngest in the industry, but why does it feel like…?”

He mumbled in complaint, but fondness for Go Yuri was not unique to me but shared by all party members.

“Yuri! Let’s grab a beer after training! Our usual place is well-stocked this week!”

“Hey, Go Yuri. About managing SG Net...”

“Go Yuri, would you like to have lunch with me today...?”

Even the most wild and difficult members of the party turned as tame as donkeys in Go Yuri's presence.

In fact, that was precisely why I decided to keep Go Yuri around.

While we're on the subject, I should explain that Awakeners generally have bad temperaments. It’s not an absolute rule, but those with particularly twisted natures often have stronger abilities.

Our guild, for example, was made up of S- and A-class prospects. Emotional instability was rampant. Even Seo Gyu, seemingly docile in my presence, once went nuts at the Tutorial Fairy, shouting, “You fucking asshole!”

The Saintess... I trust her with my life, but it's hard to say she has a normal personality. She only occasionally discusses SG Net operations with Seo Gyu. Despite sending out more messages than anyone else, paradoxically, she disliked interacting with people.

In a guild filled with troublemakers, being friendly with everyone was no small feat.

‘The mental stability of the party members has greatly improved compared to previous runs.’

Plus 200 points.

Affinity Level 7 achieved.

Even if Go Yuri only mastered [Stealth] and was nothing more than a normal person with a single hair out of place, it didn't matter.

As I often say, mental stability is crucial for humans. What’s the use of having the strongest combat abilities without it? Take Old Man Scho—a broken mind merely turns one from ‘showing up' to a 'no-

scho'.

“Yes, everyone. Let’s have lunch together.”

Go Yuri served as a bridge connecting all of the guild members.

Even Awakeners who normally growled at each other in previous runs were now tempered by her presence, which significantly reduced my burden.

“Go Yuri is really like a hearty Korean soup. Managing the organization has become unbelievably easier,” I whispered to the Saintess while observing the scene from a distance. “You know Hayul, right? The quiet one. Even they follow Go Yuri. At this rate, we might even be able to increase our member count to 20 or 30 without any issues.”

“……”

“Hmm?” I turned around at her silence, only to find the Saintess looking a bit dazed. Her usually clear eyes were slightly clouded. “Saintess?”

“Oh. Yes. Sorry, what did you just say?”

“It wasn’t anything important. Maybe you’re feeling the heat? Shall I get you some cold water?”

“...No, it’s fine,” the Saintess murmured. “It's just, I’m amazed by how someone can be so close with everyone. You know I'm quite the opposite.”

“Each personality has its strengths and weaknesses, doesn’t it? Maybe Go Yuri also has her struggles that she doesn’t talk about with others.”

“That’s a fair point.”

The 89th run felt good in many ways.

SG Net operations were all smooth sailing. The villainous OldManGoryeo, Sim Ah-ryeon, had successfully rebranded from an

attention-seeker to an A-class healer.

With the Saintess's flawless support and Go Yuri's maxed-out charm and affability, our guild was more cohesive than ever before. We even captured all the fairies to garner nationwide support from the Awakeners.

It was a run where our power solidified both overtly and covertly.

'Maybe… Maybe this time, we might actually prevent the end of the world?'

Looking back on it now, I realize that sentiment must seem like nonsensical rambling, but at the time, I sincerely believed it might actually happen.

That was how I ended my satisfying day and went to bed.

The next day, I awoke and made to get up.

My rule was to rise immediately after waking without lazing around in bed.

"……?"

But on this day, for the first time in a very long while, I struggled to get out of bed.

It wasn't because I suddenly learned the value of laziness.

I just stared blankly up at the ceiling.

The ceiling that had been spotless as ever before I went to sleep.

[Do not trust the one with pink hair.]

That familiar ceiling now bore an unfamiliar sentence.

Infinite regression has taught me many lessons.

One of those lessons was named ‘doubt’.

Old Man Scho, a fellow regressor, had said the same.

“Do not trust these Constellation things too much.”

Everyone believed in the existence of the Constellations without question. However, Old Man Scho pointed out their bias towards Koreans and never let go of his skepticism.

In the end, Old Man Scho was right. The Constellations were just a masquerade played by the Saintess for the entire nation.

‘German.’

I thought about the sentence I saw in my room while having breakfast with the guild members.

‘It wasn’t written with a writing tool but carved with the tip of a knife. Then…’

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a dagger, the self-defense weapon I never parted with, even in sleep.

Inspecting the blade, I noticed a fine layer of dust and debris stuck to it. I would need to consult Uehara Shino for a detailed composition analysis, but at a glance, it seemed the same as the ceiling material.

Meaning…

‘Someone took the dagger from my possession and carved the sentence into the ceiling in German, a language only I would recognize. They did this without my noticing and bypassed all the security in my bedroom.’

Was that even possible?

‘Impossible.’

Even the headquarters of our guild, thanks to 'Puppeteer', a specialist in fortifications, were laced with fine 'cobwebs' across the

ceilings.

Aside from Dang Seo-rin's guild train, there were no other headquarters with such a high level of security. At the very least, no one in our guild was capable of bypassing security and pulling off such a feat.

Maybe Old Man Scho could... No, even then. I had already identified his corpse at the start of the 89th run.

Ultimately, there was only one suspect.

'Myself.'

I stared at my own reflection in the glass of water.

If I were the culprit, then I could easily ignore any and all adversities and commit the crime.

The problem was... no matter how much I racked my brain, I had no memory of carving that sentence into the ceiling.

'Brainwashing? Sleepwalking? Split personality? Memory loss? Hypnosis?'

Countless possibilities surfaced.

Either way, it was one of two things.

'Either someone is trying to sow discord between me and Go Yuri, or they are genuinely warning me about Go Yuri.'

Suddenly…

I turned my head, and my eyes met with Go Yuri, who was munching on a sandwich.

"……?"

Go Yuri smiled and continued eating her sandwich.

...My heart settled.

I followed her example and ate my own meal as if nothing had happened.

‘Never thought the near-legendary 89th run would have such a screwed-up event.’

In such a crisis, the only person I could consult was the Saintess. Not only did she know that I was a regressor, she also knew how to assess any situation with objective eyes.

“By the way, haven’t the Constellations been quiet lately?”

“Huh? You too? I haven’t gotten any messages since yesterday.”

“It feels a bit unnerving when they normally talk a lot and then suddenly go quiet, doesn’t it?”

I paused.

The casual chatter from the guild members at the table drifted my way, and I absentmindedly looked over at them. “The messages from the Constellations aren’t coming through?” I asked.

“Ah, yes, Guild Leader.”

“Isn’t there some talk about it on SG Net right now?”

A foreboding feeling washed over me.

Footnotes:

1 - Noona is the way Koreans address big sisters.

Chapter 14
The Unidentified One II

Sinnoa

Sure enough, there was indeed commotion on SG Net.

-Anonymous: The Constellations have gone silent out of nowhere. Am I cut off?

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: I asked my guild members, and they confirmed that they haven't received any messages from the Constellations since yesterday. The last contact anyone had was 28 hours ago. I hope other guilds will speak to their situations as well.

-dolLHoUse: oh no.

-Anonymous: Guys, I'm scared. What's happening...?

-OldManGoryeo: Idiots. Always singing their praises to the Constellations, and now they whine like babies who lost their mother because there hasn't been contact for two days. What are you even keeping your balls for? To make egg soup? These guys probably don't even have yolks in their balls LOL.

Anonymous: Fuck, this crazy bastard gets more annoying every day. Where the hell do you live?

[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquess: My sword cries out.

Sim Ah-ryeon was being typical Sim Ah-ryeon like any other day, but the Awakeners were unusually restless.

I tried knocking on the door, but there was no response.

"Stay here and shout if you sense anyone spying or approaching."

"Yes, hyung."

I stepped into the townhouse, trying to hide my anxiety. I had known the front door's passcode for dozens of cycles.

The living room was dark.

The Saintess lay dead in her sanctuary, surrounded by four monitors casting a bluish glow like a carpet of water and dozens of aquariums like walls of a fortress.

"....."

My mind went cold.

'Strangled.'

The Saintess always had towels on hand to tend to her aquariums, with a stocked towel rack in the living room. She had hanged herself with one.

'Suicide.'

There were no signs of struggle, but I knew that no matter what happened, the Saintess would never have died by suicide. It was not simply because "it wasn't in her character." It was the truth discovered through observing dozens of cycles.

'It’s murder disguised as suicide.'

The Saintess was central to my goal.

In an instant, the Constellations had vanished. The force that held the Awakeners together through external connections and boundaries, and not from within, had snapped.

And it wasn't just that. The ever-present network of communications between guilds that used the Constellations as messengers had also disappeared.

When someone needed to gain another's trust, saying 'the Constellation vouches for our identity' would now be impossible.

'No sign of the security devices being activated.'

I had always taken extreme care to ensure the Saintess's safety.

The security measures that had been so meticulously prepared had all been disabled at once.

'Without even a moment to send me a message?'

I approached one of the aquariums. When I pushed the fish tank aside, there was a hidden compartment beneath the steel bookshelf with a USB inside.

It was a contingency plan we had agreed upon.

I plugged the USB into the computer and opened Notepad.

□□□□□□□□□□

Hello, Mr. Z.

If you are reading this, I must be dead.

My death came without any forewarning. From all the observations I've made as [CLA], there were no factors that could have led to my death.

There might be something on the CCTV, but it is hard to imagine that someone who killed me this stealthily would leave meaningful evidence behind.

As you know, the most pressing issue now is the disappearance of the Transcendents, which has unleashed the intangible reins that were held on the Awakeners.

The only Transcendent we can currently mobilize is the anonymous one known as the creator of N.

Using this name, we must post a notice on N and claim, "An entity obstructing the activities of the Transcendents has been born," adding a scene where N is attacked and temporarily goes offline to increase credibility.

But containing the chaos among the Awakeners is impossible.

I am truly sorry that my power was insufficient.

I hope you will find strength again.

- S.

□□□□□□□□□□

It was the Saintess's will.

To avoid detection by others, she had referred to me not as 'Undertaker' but as 'Mr. Z'. Clairvoyance was abbreviated as 'CLA', and SG Net as 'N'. Instead of Constellation, she used the term Transcendent.

The 'again' in "I hope you will find strength again" undoubtedly meant 'the next cycle'.

It couldn't be anything but the Saintess's style of a will.

The creation date of the Notepad file was one year and six months ago.

'It was indeed a sudden attack that led to her death.'

If it had been suicide, she would have revised the will.

And if it wasn't suicide, there were only two suspects.

The first suspect was me.

"Ah, hyung. Is the Saintess doing well?"

And then there was Seo Gyu.

After leaving the townhouse, I quietly observed Seo Gyu.

"Seo Gyu."

"Yes."

"Did you ever tell anyone where the Saintess lives?"

He was startled. "Excuse me? No, I wouldn't! You told me never to tell anyone!"

Could he really be trusted?

Although Seo Gyu and I had been allies for quite some time, if I were asked whether I could trust him with my life like the Saintess, I would feel it more appropriate to describe our relationship as too light for that.

"Two days ago, you went out briefly after filing an outing report, yes?"

"Y-yes... But why...?"

"Go Yuri spent the whole day back at the dorm that day."

"Did she?"

"But using [Stealth], someone could sneak out without the other party members knowing. And if they had followed you out, the risk of being detected would have been much less."

"Hyung, what are you trying to say—?"

"There are countless security measures unknown to you spread throughout the Saintess's residence. One of them scans and saves the shoe prints of anyone who enters her home. This data is refreshed weekly."

It was a lie.

But my expression and tone did not waver.

"Why are your shoe prints in the Saintess's residence?"

"....."

Silence.

"That's strange?"

A strange voice came from Seo Gyu's mouth.

"I didn't know anything about that."

A gunshot rang out.

Seo Gyu's body fell like a reed.

He had quickly drawn a pistol and aimed it at his palate, firing instantly.

Red blood seeped out onto the asphalt road, cracked as if suffering from untreated atopic dermatitis.

"....."

I clenched my fist.

After calming my heart again, I tried to connect to SG Net.

[Unable to connect to the site.]

The Seo Gyu who died in front of me was the real Seo Gyu.

The possibility that he was a marionette controlled by the Puppeteer, an apostle of an Outer God, or another entity had drastically reduced.

The two pillars that could influence the nation's Awakeners—the Saintess and Seo Gyu—had collapsed in an instant.

At that moment, my mindset had already shifted to gathering as much information as possible for the next cycle.

It was an all-too-familiar task to me.

I drew my sword and headed to the guild's lodging.

The duo that should always be on guard was nowhere to be seen.

"....."

It was quiet.

The training ground, where members should have been, was empty.

Instead, Sim Ah-ryeon lay dead.

In the dining hall, meals were left untouched. The wheelchair that a beloved guild member usually rode was rolling around alone, lost without its owner.

There was no sign of life in the hallways or dormitories. In its place was only German phrases scrawled here and there along the pillars and walls.

[Do not trust the one with pink hair.]

I walked out to the training ground and sank into a bench.

It was summer. The sirens of cicadas screamed their fierce alarm.

Before I knew it, Go Yuri was sitting politely next to me on the bench.

"Have you returned, Guild Leader?"

"....."

"Whew. It's really hot this summer."

Go Yuri flapped her outerwear to create a breeze. Behind her, the sound of cicadas faded out like a whiteout.

"Your ability, it wasn't [Stealth]."

"Yeah," she affirmed simply.

"[Stealth] was just the surface," I muttered in thought. "When your ability activates, it essentially just dulls others' awareness of you. Considering the current situation... your true ability must be [Perception Inhibition]. No, perhaps [Perception Manipulation]?"

"Ah— That's right." Go Yuri smiled broadly. "Guild Leader, you are really amazing! I thought so the first time I met you, but you are truly impressive."

"...I should have realized something was off sooner."

I thought back again to the last cycle, what evaluations Go Yuri, that is, CookingQueen, had received from those around her.

"CookingQueen? I haven't observed her for long, but she's not a bad person. She takes good care of her guild members and even volunteers on Sundays. Personally, I believe there's no one as trustworthy among the Awakeners as CookingQueen."

Witness 1: the Saintess.

The mere fact that she left her will on a secret USB reveals how cautious the Saintess was. She was the one who arranged our first meeting, thinking, 'Perhaps there might be a regressor in this world.'

That such a person would dub someone she admitted she "hadn't observed for long" as "the most trustworthy"?

It was suspicious from the start.

"Oh, you're asking if I know CookingQueen? She's a really good member. I've seen all sorts of things managing SG Net, but I've never seen CookingQueen cause trouble. Boring? Not at all. She writes a lot of funny posts and doesn't act all high and mighty. Ugh. If all members were like CookingQueen, I wouldn't have to suffer like this..."

Witness 2: Seo Gyu.

Seo Gyu testified that Go Yuri wrote "a lot of funny posts."

But wasn't that strange?

I have never once witnessed CookingQueen writing anything amusing.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Seeking peace of mind? Join the Satisfaction Guild! Our main base is in Seoul!

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Words are a reflection of thoughts, and thoughts are like mist on a cloudy day, concealing oneself. Why not try using clearer and brighter language?

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Brother, if you ever have a secret you can't tell anyone, feel free to consult me anytime. People are killed by their fellow man, but people also live by them.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: The curses you pour onto others will eventually return unto you. Why not take some time to reflect on yourself? Trust that there is good within you, brother.

Hers was a style devoid of any fun—only steadfast, correct, and upstanding.

In other words, it was the typical 'type of human' that I, the Undertaker, would like.

"Go Yuri."

"Yes?"

"Do you possess the ability to show someone 'the best version' of a person?"

"....."

To the ethically-minded Saintess, a moral human.

To Seo Gyu, who likes a bit of fun, a humorous human.

And ultimately, in front of me, who believes that a person's life depends on their mentality and attitude, an upright and steadfast human.

Appearing as a different person to different people.

Like a magic mirror.

This was Go Yuri's true identity.

The reason she was loved by all these twisted Awakeners was hidden in this truth.

"...As expected, Guild Leader. This time, I'm really surprised!"

Go Yuri clasped her hands and tilted her head.

But did she really take such a pose?

Was Go Yuri smiling when she smiled? Was she using formal language when she spoke? Did she have pink hair, and maintain a garden in the morning, and stick to a sincere attitude?

Everything about her could have been a lie.

Now that I could no longer trust my perception, I had no choice but to discard all the information I thought I knew about Go Yuri.

"But you don't just have the ability to manipulate perception," I said. "You made Seo Gyu commit suicide."

"Yes. I am a multi-ability user, you see."

"...I now understand why the fairies avoided you. How exactly did you wind up at the Busan Station concourse? The place has so many of these supposedly rare multi-ability users stockpiled there that you could practically trip over them."

"Ahaha, that's true. Sometimes, strange coincidences do happen."

"Why did you do this?"

"Um, I could tell you, but would you trust me if I did, Guild Leader?"

I wouldn't.

At that moment, a loud noise came from the direction of the guild dormitory. With a crash, the concrete outer walls shattered, and the building immediately crumbled to the ground.

Above the rubble, a massive fleshy body expanded to the height of the building in the blink of an eye.

Red and blue veins quivered with an incessant pulse, and the muscles, like tentacles or tails, lashed out into the air.

-Giiielduh leeeedaaarrrr.

-Hyeeeunnnggg.

-..... .....

-Duuuoooc.

Each wriggle of the tentacles ripped through the air, producing eerie noises.

Those noises resembled the voices of the guild members.

The surface of the tentacles was etched with black stripes. As the voices of the guild members rang out, the black patterns undulated in endless ripples.

"....."

A phenomenon that had never appeared in the previous 88 cycles.

I stared at the being that had caused this difference.

"I'm sorry, Guild Leader."

Go Yuri stood up from the bench with an *eutcha* and dusted off her skirt, walked a few steps forward, and then, with her hands behind her back, turned to look at me.

Her pink hair slipped sideways.

"I think everyone being happy is better. I didn't want to make you sad, Guild Leader. Nor anyone else. So I tried very hard... But unlike the others, your mind is too strong. So you see, my ability was momentarily released."

"Let me ask you one thing."

I looked up at Go Yuri.

"Did I kill the guild members? Was I manipulated by you?"

Go Yuri stared back at me. "...No."

"That's a lie."

"Yes."

My sword drawn from its sheath slashed Go Yuri's neck.

A slash appeared. The pink hair fell down first. Shortly after, Go Yuri's head slid off.

Before her head completely slid off, her lips moved.

"Let's become one, Guild Leader."

Behind Go Yuri, the red flesh flexed and stretched until it covered the sky.

That's the last thing I remember from the 89th cycle.

After that day, I did not contact Go Yuri.

The number of times we met directly could be counted on one hand. We only interacted three, maybe four times over hundreds of cycles.

Go Yuri's ability remains unidentified. If I were to become stronger than I was in the 89th cycle, I might one day be capable of subduing her—that was the conclusion I reached.

Whether that conclusion was correct, I don't know.

One thing I do know is that, excluding the 89th cycle, there was never another cycle where the 'red flesh' appeared.

In the cycles where Go Yuri did not interact with me, she always managed not to cause any major issues until suddenly being killed by a monster or disappearing into thin air, an endlessly harmless Awakener.

"Let's become one, Guild Leader."

What did those words mean?

Was the red flesh a monster? Or a form of contamination? Perhaps the product of a corrupted Awakener, but there was a crucial

difference that made the possibility unlikely. Then was the red flesh also a unique ability of Go Yuri?

What was the true appearance of Go Yuri, undistorted by the filter of [Perception Manipulation]?

On the odd occasion, curiosity welled within me. However, I felt no urgency to delve into this mystery.

I had no intention of approaching Go Yuri, at least not until I found a way to completely nullify [Perception Manipulation].

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Seeking peace of mind? Join the Satisfaction Guild! Our main base is now in Daejeon!

From time to time, I would stealthily leave a comment when I saw the nickname CookingQueen on SG Net.

-ZERO_SUGAR: Your diligent attitude is always nice to see ^^...

Soon after, a notification appeared that a comment had been made.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Thank you! Although this is the world we must live in, if we live without losing faith in ourselves and our hope in others, good things are sure to happen. I hope today is a happy day for you, ZeroSugar!

"....."

Hmm.

I nodded to myself in secret.

Indeed, that was an excellent attitude.

Footnotes:

Chapter 15

The Internationalist I

Sinnoa

There is hardly anything as crucial as one's mental state.

This has already been emphasized in the anecdotes of Old Man Scho. Even if one knows how to slice the heavens with a single sword, once one's mental state collapses, there are no answers.

I, the Undertaker, have also poured my heart into mental management.

My unique method of management goes as follows:

For about 100 years, or roughly five to seven cycles, I work diligently. I rush about to prevent the destruction of the world.

Then, for the next cycle, I enjoy life.

'World destruction? Why should I care?' I simply abandon such thoughts.

I turn away from the lives I could save. I don't step into the fates I could change. I prioritize only my life, my peace, and my fun.

For about 20 years in one cycle, I focus entirely on healing my mental state and enjoy a pleasant vacation.

It's a brief deviation from the main storyline. A sort of side story, if you will.

Even if I'm accused of being a coward, there is no helping it. The human mind has its limits. If I hadn't employed such a method, I wouldn't have been able to endure the long life of a regressor who reached his 1183rd cycle.

It just so happened that the 90th cycle was one of these 'vacation cycles'.

It was truly good timing. Even if it was only to ascertain where I was mentally, meaning blown away to Mars by Go Yuri, a break was absolutely necessary.

"So I wanted to ask your opinion. How should I take a break if I'm looking to earn lavish praise for resting spectacularly well?"

"Why are you asking this fairy that...?"

The fairy trembled in my grasp.

It was the Tutorial Fairy.

If it had been a normal cycle, she might have quickly dispatched Seo Gyu before he could decimate her. But this 90th cycle was a sabbatical, so to speak, and I could act however I pleased and go wherever my heart's compass pointed.

Well, since I had confined all of the fairies together during the previous 89th cycle and made them participate in a hellish survival program, some long-held grudges of mine had been somewhat washed away... Anyway.

I captured the Tutorial Fairy and dragged her to one side of the hall.

At first, the fairy resisted, but after folding her elf ears twice to make them half-elf ears, she quieted down quite a bit.

"Well, I'm just asking to ask," I answered. "I've barely ever conversed with you seriously before."

"Eurgh, why is there such a lunatic in this assigned area...? Fairy Number 264 is the most unfortunate fairy in the universe..."

"Now now, someone who tries to blow up civilian heads without hesitation could hardly call themselves misfortunate."

"But, *but*, if we can't make people understand that this is no joke, it

will lead to much greater harm and tragedy, you know? From a utilitarian perspective, this fairy's way of handling the situation is not wrong."

"So you were a utilitarian."

I realized something new.

This, too, was the charm of regression.

"Anyway, tell me about your idea of a holiday. You fairies all mortgaged your lives to the Fairy King, correct? You all must spend your days thinking how little you would desire if only you just got to take a holiday."

"Eeep, c-could it be?!" The fairy was startled in my grasp. "Hey! Surely you're not talking about the notorious RePoRe?"[1]

"RePoRe?"

"Regression, possession, reincarnation! Damned protagonists! Them and those blasted prophets throwing a wrench in such a straightforward exam! In our literature, we fairies are treated like early-stage mobs!"

"Oh, do RePoRe people actually exist in the fairy realm?"

"No? They just frequently appear in classic fairy literature."

So it was something special between Old Man Scho and me.

I felt a bit deflated, my hope that there might be others squashed.

"I see. Anyway, don't worry about it. You're not really antagonizing the Fairy King. You just need to give me some advice on my 20-year vacation plan. And if I don't find it satisfactory, I'll turn your head into fairy juice."

"Hiiieeek! What a horrible thing to say! This fairy is confident enough to file with the Fairy Rights Commission and win!"

"There's no such thing on Earth."

"What a barbaric civilization..."

In the end, Fairy Number 264 raised a white flag.

"Um, ummm. So anyway, you're saying you've been given 20 years of free time? And you're feeling like going a bit wild during that period?"

"Yes."

Then the fairy's expression turned determined. "If Number 264 were given freedom and as much power as you, she'd like to plunge a spear of revolution into the belly of the Fairy King!"

"....."

A utilitarian *and* a revolutionary fighter, I realized.

Whether that, too, was another charm of regression... I'm not quite sure.

I'll mention it later, but the fairies were, in fact, divided into republicans and royalists.

Well, that wasn't important right now.

"Plunge a spear through him? How? Isn't your heart rigged with an explosion engraving? If you rebel against the Fairy King, your heart will burst immediately and your body will melt."

"Uh, how did you know that...? Um, no. Since you already know, that will make the conversation easier. Anyway! The Fairy King is much more terrible than the bourgeoisie! Even if it costs Fairy Number 264 her heart bursting, the Fairy King must be overthrown for the progress of history and the innovation of civilization!"

The fairy flapped her arms.

"Human! Although physically primitive and weak, your kind has made commendable linear progress spiritually! When we learned your histories of beheading absolute monarchs hundreds of years ago, Number 264, no, all of us in the [Fairy Revolution Club] were

deeply impressed!"

That club did actually exist.

"Unfortunately, our fairy society is facing desperate times and is unlikely to recover... But if you help us, strong human that you are, salvation through external force might be possible! Human! Join us and lend us your support until the flag is fluttering in the Fairy King's navel!"

If this had been a game, a *ding* notification would have sounded, and the message "A new route has been unlocked. Will you help the fairies achieve revolution?" would have appeared.

"Hmm."

I was intrigued.

I had once fought against the Fairy King. This time, I could recreate that episode—not alone, but with a fairy coalition.

But I shook my head. "Sorry, but I must decline that offer."

"What...? Why, human?!"

"Right now, I'm a bit worn out, so combat routes aren't appealing. I'm feeling drawn to support routes. What I need is a warm cup of coffee as a lonely, urban man, not the tears and blood of a revolutionary waving a red flag and charging towards victory."

"What a petit-bourgeois thought! Even now, fairies are killing humans under the evil orders of the King, despite not wanting to! Do you not see them? Do you not *feel* the blood, sweat, and tears of your kin? Are you not afraid of Marx's rebuke?"

"I'm sorry, but my country is fundamentally anti-communist in its national spirit..."

"Capitalist dog! Traitor of the people! This fairy shall curse you!"

"However, I might consider hiring just you separately."

"Fairy Number 264 swears her undying loyalty, master."

Of course, around cycle 210, I actually did become a guest member of the [Fairy Revolution Club] and sparked the beginning of the revolution, but that's another cycle's story.

I succeeded in employing the Tutorial Fairy.

“Uh, excuse me… hyung?”

Ah. Right.

By the way, Seo Gyu had been eavesdropping on our conversation the whole time. After all, I had saved him from getting his head almost blown off by the fairy.

For some reason, Seo Gyu stared at me as if he were looking at a madman.

“What should I do from now on…?”

“Your ability is to operate an internet community, and anyone who is an Awakener can access this community even without a network.”

“Huh?”

“I think 'SG Net' would be a good name for the community. Good luck.”

“Huh?”

I parted ways with Seo Gyu.

I then farmed some Silver Bells at a souvenir shop and piggybacked the fairy. I could feel the fairy tilting her head in confusion behind me.

“But what are you planning to use Number 264 for after hiring her, human master? World domination? Revolution? Dictatorship? Are you planning to ‘ice pick’ this fairy? After successfully revolutionizing your own country, do you plan to export the overly

credited second-in-command under the pretext of internationalism?”

I have no idea what kind of distorted research on Earth Fairy Number 264 had read to have such skewed prejudices.

But as the fairy said, I am indeed a dog of capitalism.

I was thinking of dipping my toes into the forefront of modern consumer culture.

“No.”

“Then?”

“We're going to open a convenience store.”

24-hour convenience store.

Before the Gate catastrophe, these small shops were easy to find across Korea.

Though it didn't evoke as much nostalgia as the neighborhood corner stores, in a world accelerating toward destruction, convenience stores fell proudly under the list of ‘items of nostalgia’.

-Newbie, go to the convenience store and buy some Dunhill.

-Huh?

It was a common joke among Awakeners used to tease the youngest.

Based on my regression experiences, there were a surprising number of Awakeners who did not discard their wallets even when the value of currency collapsed. Paradoxically, people who used to only use debit cards found themselves carrying cash after civilization went to ruin—partly because the cards had stopped working, but also because to them, money was like a talisman.

A stubborn belief that the world hadn’t yet ended. Or a hope that it wouldn't.

It was quite the strange thing, but when multinational Awakeners gathered to carry out operations, there was even a custom of exchanging currencies from their respective countries. Koreans exchanged won, and Americans exchanged dollars, like soccer players swapping jerseys after a match.

Thus, at one point in time, more than 30 types of bills had been collected in my wallet.

Why am I saying this all of a sudden?

To emphasize the point that in a world bound for destruction, people not only hold on to money but also assign tremendous value to ‘memories’.

“We are going to create the only convenience store in the world that operates normally.”

“Hoeh.”

An ambition full of grandeur!

So I proclaimed as I forcibly occupied a convenience store in Seoul (the owner had fled anyway), the very same convenience store where I first met the Saintess.

Fairy Number 264, no— Our Store Employee Number 1 blinked upon hearing my plan, one as heart-stirring as conquering the world itself.

“What kind of dog-grass-eating talk is that?”

“What’s dog-grass?”

“If this fairy had to choose the most appropriate term on Earth, it would be ‘puppy’.”

Ah, it was total nonsense.

But I was someone who has lived life nearly 100 times. I had become skilled at persuading others.

“264, there is a major flaw in your world revolution theory.”

“Gah?”

“The world is wide and filled with many people. Going to each person and asking them to join the cause of revolution is what novices do.” I declared solemnly, “A true master doesn't seek out people. He makes them come to him.”

“...!”

“We will create a convenience store that the workers of all nations will visit on their own. This place will be the revolutionary base of the Sixth International! You are the first flag of this avant-garde, and our proud store clerk. The rise and fall of our International depends on how earnestly you serve the customers.”

“Comrade Manager...!”

The fairy lay on the floor of the store, which had yet to be fully cleaned, and wept great, big tears. Her tears smelled of flowers, making the store suddenly fragrantly sweet.

We'd save on air fresheners.

“This fairy had greatly misunderstood you, Comrade Manager! She swears eternal loyalty!”

“Good. As this is a business for the revolution, I hope you’ll commit to 365 days of unpaid work managing customer service at the headquarters.”

“Yes! Unpaid!”

Though Fairy Number 264 had merely switched from being a slave of the Fairy King to my slave, she seemed happy.

Isn’t that what matters?

I stole a political banner from a nearby intersection, flipped the banner upside down, and, with calligraphic painting skills, wrote the proper letters.

Then I hung it in front of the store.

[Our store is open for regular business.]

It was a historic moment when The Sixth International, humanity's last convenience store, opened at the Jamsu Bridge in Seoul.

Footnotes:

1 - A play on words using the letters used in regressor, possessor and reincarnator since these genres are so oversaturated in Korea.

Chapter 16

The Internationalist II

Sinnoa

First, I made light work of plundering the logistics centers of convenience stores across the nation.

Not to say it was a simple task that could be summed up in that single line. With the National Assembly having been blown away, the political scene was practically paralyzed, so the quick-witted survivors had already sought refuge in these centers.

“Who's there?!”

“Stop! Do not approach!”

Who am I, they ask? At that point, a regressor who had lived through 90 cycles.

Screams erupted from the entrance barricade of the logistics center. Before long, I had established friendly relations with the center's managers.

“Understand this,” I said pleasantly. “If the trucks don't arrive by this Friday, your time here will be a story for the ages.”

“Y-yes, sir! Understood!”

Soon after, a parade of trucks were pouring out of logistics centers in the northern and eastern parts of Gyeonggi Province. Their destination was, of course, our store—The Sixth International Convenience Store.

There was interference from the military and the police along the way, but I easily brushed them aside. I had experience collaborating with the National Intelligence Service and the government in previous cycles. The very first thing Old Man Scho and I did together was to collect the personal weaknesses of government

officials.

Ultimately, our store became a black hole that sucked in convenience store-related goods and logistics in no time.

“*Huff*... Comrade Manager! The boxes are piled up like a mountain! Thinking about how this is all the product of the blood and sweat of the workers makes this fairy so sad!”

“Now, it's ours.”

“The laughter! This fairy just cannot help it...!”

The typical signs of a revolutionary falling into corruption were beginning to show.

A massive warehouse was constructed underground at the convenience store. It would have been impossible to promise a completion date if we relied on manual labor, but the power of fairies made many things possible.

After completing our gigantic, underground facilities, the fairies neatly arranged the goods.

“Hmm?”

Yes, not one fairy, but several fairies.

Before I knew it, three fairies were buzzing around, moving products.

“Fairy Number 264,” I called.

The fairy snapped to attention. “Yes, Comrade Manager!”

“Answer me. Why have the fairies suddenly multiplied?”

“Sir! Number 264 requested support from the [Fairy Revolution Club]! Club comrades inspired by your great revolutionary legacy are joining our cause one after another!”

What.

“Are you telling me that the number of fairies here will grow even more?”

“Possibly? The cause of the revolution swells like a river flowing downstream, except for the filthy reactionaries!”

“Hmm…”

This was an unforeseen situation. Originally, it was supposed to be just one capable yet unpaid slave that I was carting around with Fairy Number 264.

But I had no problem with it. Actually, it was even better.

As is customary in a 'vacation cycle', the more unplanned events, the merrier.

“Hoh, has this fairy's unilateral decision led to overly adventurous consequences?”

“No, you did well.”

I looked around. Anything else?

Just then, a pile of green Saemaul hats heaped in a logistics box caught my eye. I tore open the plastic and put a Saemaul hat on the Tutorial Fairy.

The fairy tilted her head in confusion under the hat much larger than her head. “What is this?”

“All fairies are equal, but some fairies are more equal than others! Comrade Number 264, your fervent passion has moved me. From now on, you will command all fairies participating in The Sixth International.”

“...! Comrade Manager...!”

Staff secured.

The fairies knew how to use magic and even had the ability to separate certain areas from reality. This ability meant that the

underground warehouse was isolated from the outside world.

“Deploy the territory in the underground warehouse.”

“Yes, sir!”

Using this ability and ice magic, they indefinitely extended the shelf life of the stored products.

After procuring some generators, the wiring and installation work was completed, and the convenience store was up and running 24 hours a day.

Now, there was nothing left to do at all but receive customers.

On the sixth day since the grand opening, the first customer visited.

“Welcome!”

“……”

A tinkle later, the glass door was open, and in walked a woman with heavy clothes and a ponytail.

There was nothing to hide. Our illustrious first customer was none other than the Saintess. She lived nearby and had probably spied on my antics through her Clairvoyance.

She glanced at me where I stood at the cash register. “...Are you open for business?”

“Yes. Our store operates 24 hours a day.”

“What is that?” The Saintess pointed behind me.

Hanging there was a poster that read "Store Rules."

□□□□□□□□□

1. Please be kind to our employees here at the head office. Despite looking different from us, all of them are valuable humanoid capital and the private property of us here.

2. The head office handles not only Korean won but also Japanese yen, US dollars, and other foreign currencies.

3. Smoking inside and under the parasols of the store is strictly prohibited.

4. There is a limit on the number of purchases permissible at the head office. The number of items each customer can purchase is limited to what they can "reasonably" consume in a day. The standard of reasonableness is at the discretion of the store manager. (Example: You cannot buy 100 sandwiches at once)

5. No physical disputes of any kind are allowed within 300 meters of the store.

6. Failure to comply with these rules will result in unlimited sanctions. We appreciate your understanding.

7. Happy shopping!

□□□□□□□□□□

I flashed a business smile. “Exactly as written, dear customer. Just follow the rules, and the head office will always sincerely welcome you.”

“……”

The expression on the Saintess's face was hard to describe.

She wandered around the store like a highly cautious cat, and when she reached a certain corner, she paused.

It was the pet products corner.

“Oh. Fish food...”

“We maintain a special corner for pets even as the world comes to an end, for customers who refuse to give up on their pets.”

“...Aquariums with driftwood, filter media, soil, adhesive, aquatic plants, oil film removers, and filters...” the Saintess mumbled

absently. “Professional... This would make managing the aquariums much...”

“Do you like it, dear customer?”

“...Just a moment, please.”

The Saintess left the convenience store.

A short while later, she re-entered with a wad of 50,000-won bills clutched in hand and hurriedly began to stuff aquarium management supplies into her bag.

At the counter, I faced the Saintess, whose eyes glowed with the light of a shopping spree. “All of this, please...” she mumbled.

“Thank you, dear customer! This coffee is on the house to celebrate our store just opened. Please tell others in your area to come by.”

“...Alright. I'll stop by often.”

Regular customer acquired.

With all the proper marketing tools now completely gone, ensnaring the Saintess as a regular customer was a point in my favor. The Constellations would do the advertising agent's job anyway.

Sure enough, not long after, the number of customers visiting the convenience store began to increase substantially.

“Can't I buy a carton of cigarettes? Please!”

“I came all the way from Chungju to get to this store.”

“Sir, I'll give you as much money as you want. Just cooperate with our unit...”

It was a grand success.

As the number of customers increased, so did the number of troublemakers. The balance of the world was always exacting.

“Fuck, come out here, you bastard owner!”

“Yes. I'm here, you bastard customer.”

“Huh?”

Every one of the troublemakers got beaten like a dog by me.

A guy who got greedy and tried to buy too much at once, someone who smoked while sitting under a parasol, and even those who were okay with drinking soju but went a step further and started brawling…

They all received their punishment.

“Spies planted by imperialists to destroy the International! There's not a shred of mercy for you guys! It's the gulag for everyone!”

“Fuck... Why are the fairies...?”

“Shut up! Reactionaries!”

Under the supervision of Fairy Number 264, the troublemakers were put to work cleaning up along the Han River. Thanks to that, the area around our convenience store was as clean as if it had sidestepped the end of the world.

By then, the internet was also abuzz.

-xx: Seriously, why is the International store owner so strong?

-xx: I saw yesterday that even six Awakeners attacking at once couldn't last a few seconds. Even the guild leader got wiped out in one hit. Is this a convenience store owner or a swordmaster? Isn't this guy just the strongest?

-xx: That guy is really strong.

-xx: There are still people making a fuss at the International? Crazy.

-xx: It's a fairy den there...

-xx: But why are the fairies there wearing Che Guevara t-shirts?

-xx: I don't know.

-xx: I asked last time, and they said it's their uniform.

-xx: Seriously, why are fairies wearing Che Guevara t-shirts as uniforms?

-xx: I really don't know.

Ah, right. This site wasn't SG Net. Originally, the name SG Net was my idea anyway.

When Seo Gyu acted alone, it was called 'Hunter Community', abbreviated as HunCo. It wasn't a membership-based site, meaning anyone could freely access it and write anonymously.

Given my reputation, occasionally Awakeners came to the convenience store not to buy anything but to see me.

“I am known as the Sword of the Mount Hwa Sect. I have often heard rumors of the International store owner's formidable martial prowess. May I request a lesson?”

“……”

Reading too many martial arts novels had gone to his head, to the point where he called monsters 'demons' and Awakeners 'martial artists', and referred to employees as 'store warriors', like a certain crazy 60-year-old with a bizarre concept.

I'll have another opportunity to talk about this old man later. He was a fellow I wandered around with during another vacation cycle, not the 90th.

Anyway, the Sixth International was a success.

A gate had burst open, turning the once-desolate Han River area into a gathering place for minor guilds and even lone Awakeners who stubbornly played the lone wolf game without joining a guild.

This so-called 'convenience store zone' had formed.

Before the world ended, it might have been one thing, but currently in Korea, this was the only convenience store zone. It might have

been the only one on Earth.

And so it was one day, when 12 years had passed.

“You are quite something, Mr. Manager.”

The one who spoke was a guild leader who had brought her entire guild for a party in the convenience store's front yard. She was from Samcheon, one of the two major guilds in Korea.

The guild leader grinned, wearing a cone-shaped hat that sat atop her head—the signature style of the Samcheon guild.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Whenever I come here, it feels like the world is the same as it's always been. You know, today, I was startled when I saw the price of potato chips was over 3,500 won. I wondered if the price was correct.”

She looked very happy.

“The fact that I can still worry about such things isn't so bad,” she concluded. “You are a good person. Though I don't know exactly how you pulled it off.”

“Thank you, dear customer.”

“And, thanks to your store, sir, this area is relatively safe, you know. Do you know what we call your store in our group?”

“The convenience store?”

“No, the police station. No matter what dispute arises, if you just come to this store, it will be resolved with an even hand. Even if you're seeing red with rage, seeing fairies wearing T-shirts and Saemaul hats can't help but calm you down just purely for the sheer absurdity of it.”

“Hmm.”

Seo Gyu probably wouldn't agree considering how he always started

with the words "this fucking asshole" even at the Busan Station terminal.

“Anyway... our guild is going to deploy to seal a gate that opened yesterday. The execution day is the day after tomorrow at 1100 hours. If you're interested, let me know. I'll even give you the position of Vice-Guild Leader. Our guild is a bit closed off to outsiders, but you're always welcome.”

“Thank you for the kind words, but I have no intention of getting directly involved in the fighting.”

“Is that so? I figured.”

“Don't push yourself too hard in the fighting, dear customer.”

“What are you talking about?”

The Samcheon guild leader chuckled as she placed a bag of money on the counter, presumably for the party expenses. She then pulled out an additional thousand-won bill and handed it to Fairy Number 264.

Surprisingly, it wasn't the blue thousand-won bill but a rare red one. Nowadays, it's something you can't find anywhere.

“Dear customer, this is...?”

“A tip.” The Samcheon guild leader chuckled. “I wrote my signature on the back.”

I flipped the bill over.

This coffee shop has great coffee.

—Samcheon, Dang Seo-rin

The handwriting, appearing to have been written with a brush pen, was very elegant. It was clear she had formally studied calligraphy.

She must have been in a very good mood to write something with a brush pen.

“What a precious item.”

“Why, they hang up celebrities' autographs at popular places, right? Mr. Manager, if you feel like it, you might as well act like I'm a celebrity... It's embarrassing, but... Anyway, there aren't many Awakeners left in Korea. That should make me qualified, right?”

The Samcheon guild leader walked away.

Then, tossing a lighthearted wave back to me, she said, “Bye-bye! I'll come visit again after closing the gate. Please make me an affogato when I do, Mr. Manager.”

A few days later, the coffee beans and vanilla ice cream I had prepared in advance went unused. The Samcheon guild failed in their gate raid, and all 301 guild members died.

Footnotes:

Chapter 17
The Internationalist III

Sinnoa

The heart is often likened to fire, burning with passion. But in my case, 'water' was more often a suitable metaphor. Ever since the 89th cycle was severed by the red flash caused by Go Yuri, my inner well had dried up. This is commonly referred to as burnout—a slump invariably faced by every regressor at some point.

"Annihilation, huh..."

"If Samcheon is gone, doesn't that leave only Baekhwa as the top guild in Korea?"

"No, those body stackers are a bit... Well, it's even questionable whether they are a guild."

"After all, the void suppression failed. I looked up at the night sky yesterday, and it was chilling."

Upon collecting and cremating Dang Seo-rin's remains and scattering them at the beach, I returned to find Awakeners whispering under the parasols outside the convenience store. For some reason, their murmuring sounded to me like the trickling of water.

The sound of water led to one object.

This coffee shop has great coffee.

—Samcheon, Dang Seo-rin

A wine-colored thousand-won bill.

I transferred the bill signed by the Samcheon guild leader into an acrylic case and displayed it at the convenience store counter,

where the cigarettes were usually displayed. Our underground warehouse had recently started bottoming out on its supplies. Alcohol and cigarettes were the first resources to become scarce, so there was plenty of space to display the bill.

Naturally, customers could view the exhibit each time they passed the counter.

One day, the Mount Hwa old man pointed out, "Sir, what in the world is that ominous item? I can feel an unusual energy from it."

"Oh, that? It's a signature left by the Samcheon guild leader before she went off to strike down a meteor shower."

"Hmm..."

The old man grunted and left the convenience store.

The next day, he placed a ten-thousand-won bill on the counter to buy his usual bottle of green makgeolli.

"Sir, this is an orchid I drew myself."

"Orchid? What about an orchid?"

"Look closely at the drawing."

I did.

Beyond King Sejong's sturdy shoulders, an actual orchid was depicted.

"...?"

Frankly, the drawing was terrible. If Heungseon Daewongun had seen it, he might have mistaken it for pineapple leaves.

However, the old man had put some effort into it, as a tiny signature that read 'Sword Marquess of Yuldoguk' was squeezed into a corner of a cabbage leaf. Sword Marquess seemed quite proud of his work, *hmph*-ing out of his nose. The only feature of his that was worthy of commendation was his fluttering mustache.

"Please, hang it in your store like a banner."

"....."

Well, it didn't really matter.

I displayed Sword Marquess's bill alongside the other without much thought, but that, apparently, set a precedent.

Visitors to my convenience store began indiscriminately offering bills with their signatures scribbled across them.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm heading out with the raid team, if it's not too much trouble, could you...?"

"I'll come again next time! Please give a 2+1 discount then!"

"Really, c'mon, can't I buy a carton of cigarettes? *Please?*"

When all I had was the relic of the Samcheon guild leader, it had been handled with the utmost care, but with the addition of Sword Marquess's bill, the display suddenly felt more casual.

The currencies left by Awakeners varied widely. Old five-thousand-won bills, two-dollar bills, East German marks (these were the most fascinating), yen, euros, pounds, Mongolian tugrik, Hong Kong dollars, Vietnamese dong, Philippine pesos, North Korean won, Indian and Nepalese rupees...

Before I knew it, the area behind my counter was filled with bills.

Occasionally, when I had time, I would quietly observe the exhibition.

Every time a bill filled the gaping holes in the cigarette display like new bricks in a crumbling wall, I felt as if my inner well was slightly replenishing.

If life is ultimately a journey to leave behind a single photograph, perhaps my 90th portrait would look like that sight.

"Comrade Manager..."

"Hm?"

Fairy Number 264 set down a box of Zero Drinks. Under the Saemaul hat, her expression looked utterly deflated. "This is the last box of Zero Drinks," she said with a huff.

"I see. What about the alcohol?"

"Beer, soju, whiskey, wine, makgeolli, sake... After scraping everything we have together, there are only 50 bottles left, and that's not accounting for the scarcity of type. This fairy is ashamed to say that the funding for alcohol has dried up..."

It wasn't just alcohol; the supply of nearly all of our stocked items had been depleted. There was no such thing as an eternally flowing oasis, after all. But what of it? Have you ever seen a tree that refuses to cast shade because it fears the day it will rot?

"Here." I took out a Heaven's Champion sausage, causing Fairy Number 264's ears to perk up at the sight. For some reason unknown to me, fairies swooned over this particular sausage.

"Ah! This fairy thought all the sausages were gone!"

"Eat it away from the others where they can't see."

"You're the only one who thinks of Number 264...!"

I patted Fairy Number 264 on the head. "Call everyone together and let's clear out all the remaining alcohol."

"Yes, comrade!"

I gathered the customers.

I could have easily invited Awakeners through an internet community, but unfortunately, that was no longer possible.

[Unable to connect to the site.]

Seo Gyu's 'Hunter Community' had been shut down some time ago. He had likely died somewhere unknown to me.

Go Yuri probably died as well. After all, she was an entity that couldn't survive without mimicking others.

The fairies walked door to door gathering people, and still, only about a hundred participants turned up for the party. Not quite satisfying, but enough people to enjoy the 50 bottles of alcohol.

'Isn't the Saintess coming?'

Awakeners laughed, chatted, sang, and enjoyed themselves.

They also had their own stashes of supplies, so the party wasn't a dud. Surprisingly, an Awakener who brought 11 bottles of Château d'Yquem from 1990 became an instant hero in human history.

The mood reached its peak.

"I say we form a guild with everyone gathered here!"

"Oh!"

"The Last Guild! To commemorate its formation, let's set off for the meteor shower gate after tonight's party!"

"This isn't a guild, it’s a final gathering..."

The Awakeners who had survived without dying or being kicked out of their guilds were either stubborn loners or outcasts with social issues. However, as the final moments approached, they united for the party. Well, the influence of 11 bottles of Château d'Yquem might have played a significant role.

"Manager! Aren't you coming with us?"

I shook my head. "There's still one customer I haven't said goodbye to. I'll hang around here for a bit after you all leave."

"Ah, if only you were there, we could last another 30 seconds."

"Maybe even three minutes?"

"Come on, let's sign up quickly!"

People chuckled.

The high ceiling of the sky seemed to echo even louder than usual that night.

Using my many long years of experience living through regressions, I sensed that the apocalypse was now upon us.

Thus, the day after the Last Supper, I called all the fairy clerks together, until forty little ones wearing Che Guevara T-shirts were crowded into a room.

I stood in front of them and declared, "Today is a holiday."

There was a gasp.

The fairies blinked.

"Does a holiday mean no work?"

"Work reflects human value, but a holiday is an act of abandoning one's value. It's an utterly foreign concept."

"Excuse this fairy for saying, but doesn't it depend on whether it’s a paid or unpaid holiday?"

I chuckled and handed each fairy a fifty-thousand-won bill. "Don't worry. It's a paid holiday."

The bills all bore my signature.

Secretary-General and Chairman and Manager of the Sixth International.

The fairies' eyes sparkled.

"Wow! Comrade Manager's handwritten signature!"

"How deeply moving!"

"This should be legislated to hang in frames in every public office!"

"Sure, do as you like," I said. "Anyway, I'll be watching the store

alone today, so take a good rest and come back."

"Yes!"

The fairies, raising their red flags, scurried off somewhere. And so, I was left alone.

As I was mopping the floor in the now-quiet store, the glass door opened with a tinkle.

"Welcome, dear customer."

"....."

It was the Saintess, the last customer I had been waiting for.

She quietly looked around the store. Several shelves were empty, as if teeth had been plucked out. Signs reading "Temporarily out of stock—Please wait for a restock" were attached to those shelves.

The Saintess murmured, "Restocking is taking a long time."

"Yes. I've been pressing the headquarters continuously, but it seems to be a difficult ask."

"...I see." The Saintess did not argue with my words and simply nodded.

The apocalypse had surged right up to us, and yet, the Saintess had not died. Not just this cycle. She had almost 'always' survived until the last day.

Her attachment to life was a bit different. She had imposed a duty on herself to live.

"Could you make me a cup of coffee?" she asked.

"Understood."

I took the last remaining coffee beans, milk, and sugar and then made a coffee as close to filter coffee as possible.

This was how we at the Sixth International treated our regular

customers.

Naturally, I could afford to offer such a service to our very first regular customer.

"....."

"....."

As she drank the coffee, the Saintess said nothing. She just looked with her deep, black eyes at the counter behind me, the shelves inside the store, and outside the window.

Her gaze lingered especially long on the cases of bills.

"Thank you for the coffee, it was delicious. Here, the bill." The Saintess offered a fifty-thousand-won bill. "No need for change. I'll come again."

The back of the bill read, *Your first customer*.

That day was the last time an Awakener visited the convenience store.

In the middle of the night, I locked up the store and went out to the Han River.

The expanse of the night sky was filled to the brim with the Milky Way. Red light. Green light. Purple light. The Milky Way seemed like a long-torn lip, and within its gaping maw, countless stars twinkled as if they would pour down at any moment.

And then, they did.

The gate that Samcheon and the guild coalition had tried to seal at the cost of their lives had now completely opened, releasing a disaster made of starlight onto the earth.

It was a guaranteed event in Gyeongsangnam-do during the 7th year of regression, and in Seoul during the 12th year.

It was known as the Meteor Stream.

"So this cycle ends with the Meteor Ending."

I sat on the riverbank, gazing up at the sky. Someone could survive if they avoided it. Still, there was nothing left to do in this cycle if they did.

But there were countless things to do in the next cycle.

'Not a bad vacation.'

I opened my smartphone.

While waiting for the stars to fall, I flipped through the photos saved on my phone.

Originally, I wasn't in the habit of taking pictures. More precisely, as a regressor, I had lost that habit. Although photos were items meant for preservation, they had failed to serve that role for me. However, even knowing they would disappear, I couldn't help but take these photos.

This coffee shop has great coffee. —Samcheon, Dang Seo-rin

Sword Marquess of Yuldoguk.

Thanks for the fun. Lee Ju-ho.

My sincere gratitude. But no matter how I think about it, the store's name and the clerks' shirts are strange. Are you a member of the Red Army? Posted by Uehara Shino.

Visiting on a school trip! Baekhwa Girls' High♡ May our love last a thousand miles forever — by 天寥化.

The way here is too inconvenient. Thought I'd die carrying wine bottles. —NDH

Go Sixth International, fight on! —Sim Ah-ryeon

If you had just sold one carton of cigarettes, it would have been the GOAT... Y

.....

Your first customer.

Unbeknownst to me, the corners of my mouth lifted.

Why I had accepted the life of a regressor, who I wanted to help, why I wanted to help them—the reasons now came flooding back to me more clearly than ever before.

Twelve years had been enough to supply the water necessary for a regressor's life. Even if in a hundred years' time, I'd have to take another vacation.

'Hold on. Isn't the Meteor Ending a bit old-fashioned?'

The whole world was flooded with starlight.

It was time to regress.

That day, I retired as the 12-year convenience store manager and rejoined the fray as a regressor.

Footnotes:

Chapter 18

The Companion I

Sinnoa

Let's talk about Dang Seo-rin, the guild leader of Samcheon World.

“There’s venom in those eyes.”

“……”

“So you’re the one, right? The lone survivor of Busan Station. You’re that weirdo who goes around asking people strange questions all the time.”

I first met Dang Seo-rin in my fourth run.

Regrettably, I had not yet acquired the [Complete Memory] ability —that came in the fifth run. Thus, there might be some inaccuracies in my recollection of our first meeting.

No. I’d rather not admit it, but there are absolutely errors. It’s a past that's already more than a millennium old, after all.

“Your name?”

“...Undertaker. It’s an alias.”

“You bury people? Not bad. The depth of a person is determined by how many corpses they have buried in their heart.”

Perhaps Dang Seo-rin didn’t say "venom in those eyes" but "fire in those eyes." She might have used "your" instead of "those." It might have rained that day, or not. I think I heard the sound of water, but perhaps it was just the sound flowing from my heart. Nevertheless, I can vividly recall the atmosphere from that time, and the contours of its air.

To live, one must breathe not only the oxygen drifting before one's eyes but also the air from the past that has already flowed by.

“How about it? Won’t you join our guild?”

“What’s the guild's name?”

“Samcheon World, or just Samcheon for short. It’s my personal ambition to someday recruit three thousand Awakeners.[1] Undertaker, I need your strength to subdue the Ten Legs.”

The person who made up a fair share of my breaths smiled and extended their hand.

At that time, I had no reason or leeway not to take it.

“Oh, by the way, everyone in our guild must wear a cone hat wherever they go.”

“...A cone hat?”

“Yeah, you know, the hats witches wear in fairy tales? That’s our guild symbol. You have to carry a broomstick too. You haven’t eaten lunch yet, right? I know a great place. I’ll take you there to celebrate you joining us.”

“I withdraw my application.”

It was irrevocable.

Exchanging the broomstick for a sword later on was the best I could do.

Dang Seo-rin was cunning and stubborn, and she knew the local eateries well. People called her the Witch of the Train Station and the Witch of the Cursed Song.

…Though in hindsight, maybe I was the only one who called her by that last name.

Of course, there was another nickname that I used more often for her.

Why hide it?

She was once the guild leader to me.

Looking back now, it might seem like a bit of an outdated joke, but in the very early days of my regressor life—say, around the 10th run—there was a boss monster that stood like the Wailing Wall, blocking the path of all Korean Awakeners.

“Wait. What is that?”

“Oh, oh no... it's coming this way!”

Ten Legs.

According to the classification system established by a wiki group called the Library Association, this monster was a polis-class hazard. Its identifier was ‘Crawling Cthulhu’.

“Crazy! How can it move so fast?”

“It’s Cthulhu! It’s Cthulhu!”

“What the fuck...? Sound the alarm! Sound the alarm, dammit!”

Opinions were divided on how Ten Legs came to be known as such. Where there should have been legs, there weren’t any, and instead, hundreds of tentacles waved like human arms—hence the name. Personally, though, I subscribe to the theory that ‘those fucking pieces of shit’ somehow morphed into 'Ten Legs'.

That first boss monster of the Korean peninsula brought us great despair.

“We need to capture it to reclaim everything south of the Han River and push the two-front battle into a ceasefire.”

Dang Seo-rin, however, did not despair. Not only that, she also rallied the despairing Awakeners into a guild alliance and was promoted to its leader.

Let’s call it the Anti-Ten Legs Coalition.

What made it different from the Anti-Dong Zhuo Coalition in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was that unlike Yuan Shao, Dang Seo-rin was exceedingly competent.

“Undertaker, you will lead the elite of other guilds at the front and stall Ten Legs as long as possible.”

“Understood.”

After I learned about Old Man Scho, he took over leading the vanguard, but until then, I was regrettably the best we had. That should give you a sense of how lackluster the Awakeners were at the time.

Ah, by the way. When I was a member of Samcheon, I naturally spoke very respectfully to Dang Seo-rin.

“My deputy died yesterday, so I am a bit under the weather... But I will try. How many minutes should I hold out?”

“Hold out for just 30 minutes. I will set up an archmagic spell to back up the suicide squad.”

“Understood,” I said, nodding. “That sounds easy.”

It was not.

-Grooouuuurgh!

The Ten Legs roared.

Within exactly two minutes of the combat starting, one of its tentacles had bored another hole in my head. What's there to do? If an expressway is laid right through the middle of the brain, even a regressor has to die gracefully.

I did well to last those two minutes. Other Awakeners were harvested almost instantaneously. Had any autumn farmers seen it, they would have drooled over its scythe skills. I managed to hold out until the end with Dang Seo-rin until I ultimately became just another head of grain.

Fourth run over.

Fifth run start.

“Undertaker, you will lead the elite of other guilds at the front and stall Ten Legs as long as possible.”

“It’s going to be damn difficult.”

This time, instead of putting on bravado in front of my guild leader, I decided to be more honest.

Dang Seo-rin's eyes widened. “Difficult?”

“Yes.”

“I thought with the combined forces we currently have, plus you, we could manage to delay it. Is there something wrong with the data we collected?”

“The data isn’t wrong. Ten Legs, that bastard, is hiding its strength.”

It was disheartening to see how the world was turning out. The meta of power-hoarding should be my role as a regressor, but a damn boss mob was doing it.

“The legs it usually shows aren’t all it has," I continued. "It can sprout more anytime from inside its body like tentacles. Honestly, even 5 minutes is tough, let alone 30.”

“...Vice guild leader, if that’s true, we might have to abandon the campaign entirely.”

“Yes. Let’s give up.”

“Yeah. Let’s do that. Should we run away to Busan?”

“Sounds good. It’s a place of tradition and trust, isn’t it?”

“With lots of good food?”

We retreated to Busan. It was a region that could sufficiently satisfy Dang Seo-rin's palette, which always sought out local eateries first.

It was originally our guild's home base anyway.

The problem was that Ten Legs wasn't just stuck to a Gate but roamed freely, a truly liberated spirit. Not unlike Dang Seo-rin, it toured various regions seeking out local flavors. Its menu consisted of one particular item: human meat.

After laying waste to Seoul, it zigzagged across the country, proving itself to be a solo-travel foodie who could have appeared on a culinary show.

This creature originally targeted areas densely packed with humans. Apparently, it could sense human life. Thanks to that, the cities of the Korean peninsula were devastated, and Ten Legs achieved a feat no politician had ever accomplished.

It took just five years.

-Grooouuuugh!-

The Ten Legs roared.

"Fuck this."

We built our final line of defense at the Nakdong River, and in harmony, became Awakeners roasted on skewers. Even if we had given up on subduing it, as long as Ten Legs was alive, we were all merely living on borrowed time.

Fifth run over.

Sixth run start.

"Is there… really no answer to this?"

The fifth run ended in annihilation by Ten Legs, but looking at my entire life as a regressor, the run was tremendously significant. It was the one in which I acquired the [Complete Memory] ability. From that point on, I knew exactly what I had been thinking then, who I had met, and what conversations we'd had.

"Vice guild leader, do you have a moment?"

“Hm? What is it?”

Just as I was brooding over how the world was messing with humanity, the breakthrough came from an unexpected corner.

A guild member with pretty silver hair opened the sliding door of the KTX train and said, “A guest from outside has come to see you, vice guild leader.”[2] It was Yu Ji-won, a talent I had scouted from the fifth run to serve as my deputy. She had quite a crazy psychopath streak.

But let's get into that later.

“An outsider guest? Where are they?”

“He's come all the way to our train platform.”

“What? What’s the security team doing?”

“They tried to stop him, but the guest was too strong for them. Keeping him waiting at the platform was the best they could manage.”

“Hmm.”

Why were we discussing this on a KTX train, you ask? Well... Samcheon World’s base of operations was always on a train.

It wasn’t because the members of Samcheon, including myself, found metaphysical beauty in a heap of immovable scrap metal. We were not railroad otakus.

No, it was entirely due to our boss, Her Highness Dang Seo-rin, and her taste. Dang Seo-rin had a peculiar habit of taking the most-intact luxury train and making it her base every time she moved the guild to a different region. In her own words, "Doesn’t it have a certain charm, staying on a train as a witch?"

As you can tell from her wearing a cone hat, her mind was not exactly normal.

Anyway, back to the main story.

“So, what’s the guest's name?”

“Yes, his name is... Emit... Schopenhawer? Ah, Schopenhauer.”

Crackle.

My deputy tilted her head at the noise from the radio.

“He sounds like he's German?”

Emit Schopenhauer.

Swordmaster. Sword Star.

A man cloaked in many a nickname and who had sliced more monster heads still.

But to me, he was simply known as Old Man Scho.

“*Um... hello?*” I greeted in English before returning to Korean. “What brings you here?”

Old Man Scho looked at me in silence.

Honestly, my first impression was, *He seems like a nasty character*. It was still only the sixth run.

A German old man who had followed his wife to Korea only to get caught up in the Gate crisis. He hadn’t learned Korean, so he tried to communicate using a mix of English, body language, and a smartphone translator.

If I had only been good at English, communication wouldn’t have been an issue, but unfortunately, I had no talent for languages.

“*Fucking monster.*”

“*Fucking monster...* You mean Ten Legs? The Lurker? Tentacles, flapping around?”

“*Yes.*”

“Oh. *Sorry, I can't speak English.*”

Old Man Scho grimaced, open frustration marring his expression as he let out a halting Korean. “Strategy. Different.”

“……?”

“You died in past. Here.”

In that KTX dining car, used as our guild's reception room, a map of South Korea was spread out on the table.

Thud. Old Man Scho pointed his finger at the center of that map.

The line from Seoul to Gwacheon. It was the place where I tried to beat Ten Legs without knowing anything but got beaten instead back in the fourth run.

“But you not die.”

Fwish. Old Man Scho’s finger pointed downwards, precisely indicating the Nakdong River.

“……!”

“Five years. Too big a difference.”

Old Man Scho’s grey gaze was directed straight at me.

Perhaps... No, surely not?

My heart thudded in my chest. We looked into each other’s eyes across the table for a long time and realized that the flow of time was the same for both of us.

Old Man Scho’s mouth slowly opened. “*Return?*”

Even though I could barely understand what he said, there was no way I could mistake the intent behind that question.

Wordlessly, I drew a number on the table with my finger.

Old Man Scho's expression finally relaxed and he smiled. It was the number of times he too had repeated his life.

Perhaps in consideration of my inability to understand English, Old Man Scho kept his sentences short. The old German swordsman knew how to convey emotions succinctly.

"*My friend.*"

With Old Man Scho's joining, the dynamics on the battlefield changed.

If you asked me to name the most powerful Awakener among all I knew, every time, I invoke Old Man Scho. He was not merely a rocket of power, for even to this day, after more than 1000 runs, I would evaluate Old Man Scho's potential as insane.

"Are you sure we should put this man on the front line?"

"Yes, guild leader. I'm certain."

"Hmm. Doesn't look that reliable just from his appearance, but if my vice guild leader insists so strongly... Guess we should test his skills, right?"

"Certainly."

Fifty minutes later.

"Make this man a key player in this campaign immediately."

Again, Dang Seo-rin was a competent leader.

Even amidst the chaos of notable Awakeners being carried out on stretchers, she was completely unperturbed. She even went as far as to hire an interpreter to stick by Old Man Scho's side.

"Interpreter, could you ask him what he thinks about cone hats?"

It wasn't long before the interpreter's expression darkened. "I'm very sorry, ma'am, but he says he has no interest in joining the guild. He prefers to travel alone."

"Really? That's a shame. But did he just say 'Alohomora?' Did I hear that wrong?"

“Oh, I think he might have made a joke there, but I didn’t catch it. Sorry, haha.”

“That happens. Vice guild leader, isn’t there a good pork soup place nearby? Germans like soup, right?”

“As long as it doesn't have turnips in it, he’d probably eat it.”

I saw it. The interpreter beside me definitely cracked a smile.

He was indeed a wise man.

Back then, I didn’t understand German, so I just let it go, but actually, Old Man Scho's remark was, “What kind of stupid shit is that? You mean that Harry Potter knock-off hat you wear? If I stay any longer, you'll probably start keeping owls too, huh? Alohomora, you moron![3] Even my dog wouldn’t wear that.”

And for the record, I agreed with him.

From the seventh run, I decided not to join the Samcheon Guild and instead began moving around with Old Man Scho, primarily because of those ridiculous cone hats. That fashion sense... Well, it wasn’t even fashion. The only person who could pull off a witch cosplay was Dang Seo-rin.

It was as natural as natural could be.

Dang Seo-rin wasn’t just playing witch; she was a grand sorceress and a multi-talented Awakener who genuinely claimed to be a witch.

“Undertaker, Sword Star. I need you to hold out for 25 minutes… No, make it 30.”

South of the Han River was a cursed land where countless civilians evaporated in an instant, unaware of their fate.

There, a total of fifteen hundred Awakeners assembled, including Old Man Scho and guild leader Dang Seo-rin. If you included the military units and civilian volunteers, the number was even larger.

We stood on the front line, where almost all available forces in Korea were concentrated.

The familiar roar rang out.

In the distance, the massive body of Ten Legs began to reveal itself. The horizon trembled. Buildings turned to ruins, unable to withstand the creature's thrashing and crumbling like dry reeds.

"Twenty-five minutes. Can you hold out?"

"It will be difficult," I said on behalf of the strike team. However, there was a key difference from previous cycles. Now, I could add something more to my statement. "But we can manage it."

Dang Seo-rin nodded. "After this, let's go find some good places to eat. By the way, what's the signature dish of Seoul, anyway?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure there's anything particularly famous."

"Really?" Dang Seo-rin hummed, staring at the horizon. Tentacles resembling human arms writhed in abundance. "After today, it'll probably be octopus sashimi."

"Ah, marinated octopus isn't bad."

"Right? All troops, to your battle stations. Today, we reclaim Seoul."

Battle commencing.

Footnotes:

1 - Samcheon means 'Three Thousand' in Korean.

2 - KTX trains are the subway trains of Korea.

3 - Alohomora, or the Unlocking Charm, is one of the most widely used spells in the fantasy series *Harry Potter*.

Chapter 19

The Companion II

Sinnoa

-Groooooouuuuugh!

The Ten Legs monster advanced toward us ferociously. Each step it took with its countless tentacle-like legs sent a trembling shockwave through the ground, making Old Man Scho and I bounce up and down in continuous waves.

Technically, the Ten Legs wasn't really stepping. Upon enhancing my sight and looking closely, the creature was actually walking on numerous hands.

Or something resembling human arms with hands.

With each step taken by its thousands—if not tens of thousands—of arms, chunks of red flesh and blood splattered everywhere. Bones snapped and joints broke, but it seemed to make no difference to the creature, as new arms regenerated incessantly where old ones were severed.

A long trail lay behind the Ten Legs in a red carpet of bloodstained handprints as it approached. This giant red carpet was symbolic of the Ten Legs. That's why it was referred to as the Red Carpet even abroad as well.

I muttered, “This one's a real superstar.”

“Ready?” Old Man Scho asked in his awkward Korean. By then, everyone in the vanguard, including me, had already drawn their weapons.

I glanced at my adjutant, Yu Ji-won, who nodded while studying a map spread out on the table. It was a signal that all preparations were complete.

I nodded back. “Yes. Let's finish this quickly and go eat.”

I was the first to step forward.

Six hundred of our squadron followed.

While not as imposing as the crawling steps of the Ten Legs, the six hundred footsteps laden with the weight of life and death vibrated the earth with considerable force.

At that moment.

“——*Ah*——”

A song erupted from behind us.

It came from Dang Seo-rin, the guild leader of Samcheon, the leader of the Korean guild alliance, and the one commonly known as the Witch of the Train Station due to her peculiar taste for her ceaseless roaming around train stations. And yet, beyond her role as leader, Dang Seo-rin's true nature as an Awakener on the battlefield was something else.

“——*Ah*——*Ah*—”

She was a witch who cast powerful spells by singing and reciting poems.

Cursed Song Incantation, the art of invoking spells through songs, was pioneered and solely utilized by her. She became a myth among those who had awakened magical abilities. Such was the battlefield Dang Seo-rin.

Despite her humility in claiming to be merely an imitator rather than a creator, her power was anything but modest.

“*Ah*———*Ah*———*Ah*”

Initially, Dang Seo-rin’s voice began as a single thread but soon split into two, three, four strands, embroidering the devastated skies above Seoul in an a capella fugue, composed solely of her voice.

The principle behind the Cursed Song magic developed by Dang Seo-rin was simple. It began with repetition magic, which functioned like a recorder. The spell itself was basic, merely repeating and replaying the spellcaster's incantations on loop, yet it was in this unremarkable magic that Dang Seo-rin saw potential.

First, she allowed the repetition magic to resonate in echoing swells through the air. At the core of this, she would overlay a completely new enchantment. The repetition magic would then start to play black the new part as well.

First melody, repetition.

Second melody, amplification.

Third melody, reflex enhancement.

As the battle reached its sixth minute, the third melody began to envelop hundreds of our fighters.

Even those who were nearly dismembered or beheaded by the monster's tentacles managed to block them once, twice, even ten times.

“—*Ah*——*Ah*——”

“*Ah*———*Ah*———*Ah*”

“——*Ah*——”

Dang Seo-rin’s melodies had no intention of ending there.

Just as the fourth melody was about to begin and charge the air, the Ten Legs, sensing something amiss, turned around. Realizing it had been deliberately lured here, it attempted to flee without hesitation. Its massive body twisted instantly, flinging nearby Awakeners in all directions.

“Emit!”

“O-nya!”

Old Man Scho, who had learned *o-nya* before any other Korean phrase, drew his sword and charged. Seeing him in action truly put the heart at ease—even I felt an involuntary sense of relief.

But it was a feint. That damn clever monster had planned ahead and planted six of its tentacles underground. As Old Man Scho charged, spikes sprouted from the ground, puncturing his body with tidy holes.

A cloud of blood poured down. Instant death.

“Damn it!”

Dang Seo-rin’s magical incantation ended abruptly before reaching the fifth melody. Our squad was breached, our defensive line collapsed, and the core of our operation—Dang Seo-rin—fell to her knees, her body riddled with holes.

The last thing I saw was the Ten Legs setting up a skewer grill shop across the plain. The Red Carpet was merely a decorative piece inviting guests into its establishment.

Sixth run over.

Seventh run start. Again.

“Emit!”

“O-nya!”

O-nya was truly a mysterious Korean word. It could mean "yes," "I know, you bastard," and "stop nagging me" all at once. Old Man Scho, Swordmaster that he was, swept the ground with his sword energy while embedding all these meanings into that one word.

-Groooouuuugh!-

The spikes lurking underground were severed in an instant.

The false retreat was seen through. The Ten Legs, enraged, harvested the lives of humans with its limbs that resembled human arms with hands.

The songs in the air, however, could not be harvested.

“*Ah*——*Ah*——*Ah*———*Ah*”

The melody continued. It layered. It resonated.

Every time her a capella symphony embraced another note, we had to sacrifice another life.

Seventh run over. Eighth run start. Eighth run over. Ninth run start.

Forever repeating this neverending *da capo*, Old Man Scho and I charged. We rushed in, and the Ten Legs countered our sword strikes.

In an instant, the bulk of the Ten Legs swelled up like a balloon. The tentacles it had revealed so far were merely a taste of what this monster harbored within, as thousands of spikes burst forth from its body.

The ninth run, over.

“——*Ah*——”

The tenth run, start.

Forever repeating this neverending *da capo*, Old Man Scho and I charged. We rushed in, and the Ten Legs countered our sword strikes. Before it could swell up again, we dove into the midst of the Ten Legs.

-Grooooouuuugh!

Old Man Scho from the left, and I from the right.

Within the repeating spiral of cycles, I lived not as the vice-guild leader of Samcheon but as a direct disciple of Old Man Scho. What might have been the repeated section for the monster was not the same for me. Every time our story advanced by a beat, so too did the series of Dang Seo-rin's song length by another novel.

First melody, repetition.

Second melody, amplification.

Third melody, reflex enhancement.

Fourth melody, weapon strength enhancement.

Fifth melody, stamina recovery.

Sixth melody, mental awakening.

An aria of soul consolation was chanted to the grey skies.

The 1st squadron swapped places with the 2nd squadron, and the injured continuously retreated. Nevertheless, neither Dang Seo-rin nor I took a single step back from the front line.

We were all sacrificing our lives.

By the time the sixth melody was repeating, her song had changed. Until then, it had been protecting us. Now, the melody suddenly sprang forward, attacking the Ten Legs.

Like red spikes.

Seventh melody, weakening curse.

Eighth melody, darkness curse.

Ninth melody, sensory inhibition curse.

The massive body of the Ten Legs numbed. As the monster swung its arms, felled buildings tumbled down. Perhaps it was a mere flinch.

“Old Man!”

“I know, damn it!”

We clung to it relentlessly.

My term of address for Old Man Scho changed, and so did the flavor of his responses in Korean. Now, without saying a word, Old Man Scho and I perfectly timed our slashes to sever the tentacles of

the Ten Legs.

The Ten Legs fought back against our sword strikes, but to no avail. New tentacles sprouted more slowly, and our blades cut through the arms of the Ten Legs more swiftly.

Though the creature stepped forward with thousands of arms, it was but a single step. We always ran two steps for every one of its.

And so.

"*Ah*———*Ah*———*Ah*"

"*Ah*——*Ah*——*Ah*———*Ah*"

"—*Ah*——*Ah*——"

"——*Ah*——"

Tenth melody, petrification curse.

The curse would be rendered pointless in the face of constantly regenerating tentacles, but against a Ten Legs with so few spikes remaining, it was a lethal blow.

Dozens of spikes aiming for Old Man Scho and me turned to stone all at once. Of course, it was just a momentary pause. If even three seconds, no, just five seconds passed, new tentacles would sprout and attempt to impale us.

To give us those three seconds, Dang Seo-rin kept singing.

We swung our swords.

Where all the tentacles had vanished appeared to us the Ten Legs' two eyeballs, which also served as its hearts. Destroying one heart was pointless as the other would immediately regenerate it, bestowing the Ten Legs with virtually eternal life.

"Arrrrgh!"

Old Man Scho and I screamed as we charged.

Our cries were not bizarre like the roars of the Ten Legs, nor were they as beautiful as Dang Seo-rin's chanting. The duet of the two regressors was discordant. If it were a song, it would be off-key to the extreme.

Yet somehow—and perhaps it was just a feeling—it seemed like our hoarse screams momentarily matched the aria of Dang Seo-rin.

A mere coincidence of harmonizing discord.

-Gyoooooouuuuugh!-

Until there was only one source of dissonance left in this world.

That noise, the heartbeat of the monster, the source of the vibration—we both thrust our swords toward it simultaneously.

Blood splattered.

Old Man Scho's sword tip pierced the left eyeball-heart, and my blade slashed the right eyeball-heart.

-————————!!

A scream erupted.

Blood spurted as countless tentacles began to stretch out from the Ten Legs' body. The tips of the tentacles loomed right in front of us. Yet, I did not fear being pierced. Instead, I thrust the tip of my sword even deeper into the eye-heart.

For a beat, the world was silent.

The tentacle paused just before it reached us. The human-ish arm spread its five fingers to their limits, as if seized by a convulsion.

One second passed, then two seconds.

As the music dwindled and the last lingering notes seemed to extend indefinitely, we too stood silently, swords embedded in the monster's heart as we watched the creature.

Then suddenly, I felt an irresistible urge to utter these words.

"Did we get it?"

Old Man Scho blanched. "Hey, you fool! If you say that now—!”

The five fingers of the Ten Legs exploded. Flesh tore, bursting open to spill forth red blood. Finger after finger, arm after arm, tentacle after countless tentacles burst and oozed.

There was no turning back.

The monster that had wandered the red paths of this world for so long drowned itself in a pool of red.

“……”

Old Man Scho, newly drenched in blood, looked at the ground with a dazed stare, then at me, before finally turning to look behind us.

The moment we turned around, a roar louder than any earthquake created by the Ten Legs shook the heavens.

Hundreds had died, but still, thousands survived. With fists clenched and arms clutching the people around them in a hug, they ran toward us. They grabbed my head and tore my shirt. Laughter mingled with cries.

“We did it! We actually did it!”

Even Old Man Scho, who had never spoken such words before, threw his arms around me, sobbing.

"Ah, doc! Thank you! It’s all thanks to you! I couldn’t have made it this far alone!"

It was something Old Man Scho would normally never say.

I, too, was moved and blurted out something similar, but I won’t describe precisely what—it’s not my hobby to document my own cringey moments.

[The Saintess of National Salvation blesses your victory.]

[The Monarch of the Crimson Horse shows interest in your bravery.]

[The Conqueror of the Alps marvels at your feat.]

At that time, the identity of the Saintess was still unknown in the cycles. Just like others, I was able to receive the Constellations' congratulations with naivety.

After a round of frenzy had passed, the leading commander of this operation, Dang Seo-rin, slowly approached me at last.

“Can’t believe I pulled off the tenth melody.”

Perhaps because she sang too passionately, her voice was hoarse. She looked happy yet somewhat embarrassed as she smiled.

“Amazing,” she marveled. “I never thought we’d actually win.”

“How long did we hold out?”

“Forty-one minutes.”

Dang Seo-rin’s forehead was drenched with sweat. Her hair was disheveled, sticking to her face, yet it was relatively tame compared to what could have happened.

Especially considering the endings she faced in the fourth to the ninth cycles.

“We finally reclaimed Seoul.”

“Well, south of the Han River, to be precise.”

“Always used to be the most expensive part of town, right? Good for us. Now we’re land-rich.”

Despite achieving a colossal feat just then, Dang Seo-rin’s tone was as casual as if she were just on a stroll. Her cheekiness made me chuckle.

“Now it’s the worst land in Korea, though,” I teased.

“Hmm. You hungry? Any injuries? If not, let's go grab some food.”

That’s when Old Man Scho chimed in.

“What’s on the menu? Octopus sashimi? I can’t eat that.”

The embarrassed old man who had blurted out cheesy lines earlier was nowhere to be seen now, replaced once again by the grumpy German curmudgeon he usually was.

“Geez. I just don’t get why you guys boil that horrific-looking Cthulhu kraken.”

“It’s okay. I was just saying, I don’t really like octopus sashimi that much either.”

I was surprised. “Really? Is that so?”

“Yeah.” Dang Seo-rin smiled brightly. “Actually, I prefer tacos with wasabi and a highball.”

Aliases: Red Carpet. The Crimson Foodie.

A monster active south of the Han River. Solitary. Atypical behavior.

Civilian and military casualties estimated to be approximately 436,000. Estimated 950 Awakeners dead. Number of injured and missing unknown.

Official designation: Ten Legs.

Subjugation complete.

By the way, the menu for that day’s celebration was pork belly with soju.

There were no Japanese restaurants nearby.

Footnotes:

Chapter 20

The Companion III

Sinnoa

There is an epilogue to Dang Seo-rin's story.

No, actually, all of my stories are epilogues. At least until we reach the 1183rd cycle.

So, strictly speaking, Dang Seo-rin's story had many epilogues, and I'll mention just a few of them.

"Ah, Undertaker, you're awake?"

The day after the post-Ten Legs subjugation celebration.

Everyone was passed out drunk. Those who could handle their liquor were as drunk as they could handle, and those who couldn't were equally intoxicated. The Ten Legs's head was a fine accompaniment for such revelry.

The remnants of the night, unwilling to forget, lingered even as dawn peeked over the horizon. In that pale light, Dang Seo-rin stood alone under the white pine. Her posture suggested she was bidding farewell to the night past rather than awaiting the sunrise.

"Yes, I'm awake."

"Does your head not hurt? You and Sword Star were downing those drinks."

"I'm quick to get drunk and quick to sober. And I'm not much for sleeping in, anyway. How about you, Alliance Leader? Are you feeling alright?"

"Of course. I'm always fine."

Yet, Dang Seo-rin's voice still sounded hoarse. No surprise there,

given she had been chanting spells continuously for 41 minutes on the battlefield and sang heartily at the celebration. Even a singer with vocal cords of steel would have been strained.

"It seems like I'll soon stop hearing you call me Alliance Leader. A bit sad, isn't it?"

"Well, the Ten Legs is dead, but who knows what kind of monsters might pop up next? There's a high chance the guild alliance will need to be formed again. You'll have to be the leader then as well."

"That so?"

Dang Seo-rin quietly looked up at the dawn sky.

"That so..."

I, still not entirely sober, joined her side, half-hoping the blue sky would nullify the remaining effects of alcohol.

Though it seemed unlikely the sky had such properties, what did it matter?

The day sky takes in people's sweat, and the night sky collects their dreams, while the thoughts they haven't managed to express are taken in by the dawn.

"Look."

The wind beside me spoke.

"Wanna hear what my dream is?"

"I already know. It's to conquer every famous eatery in the world."

"Ah, that's right. Can't give up on that." Dang Seo-rin nodded seriously. "But the dream I'm talking about now is a different one."

A different dream?

I tilted my head, puzzled. Did she have another dream? I had served as the vice-guild leader for Dang Seo-rin from the fourth to the sixth

cycles, but had never heard of another dream.

"Ah," I realized, "are you perhaps talking about raising three thousand elite guild members to live up to the name of the Samcheon World?"

"Oh. There was that too. What's with you, Undertaker?" Dang Seo-rin looked at me as if surprised as she said, "You always seem so disinterested in others, yet you know so much about me? Are you a fan? Sorry to say it, but there's another dream I'm talking about."

"Then I honestly don't know. What is it?"

"Traveling."

Dang Seo-rin perched up on her heels slightly and reached out toward the dawn.

Her fingers grasped sharply at the sky.

"I want to travel this ruined world by train."

"By train?"

"Yes. It doesn't have to be a grand train. Just a junky, single-carriage train that I've customized myself."

She hummed as if singing.

"A thing that won't move unless I take care of it, where I can eat, sleep, travel, and even hang laundry. Like a camper van or a yacht."

"I'm not sure if the rails are still intact. Even the KTX trains we're using as temporary lodgings in the Samcheon Guild aren't running, are they? The one-lane roads are still managed by the Busan workshops."

"That's okay. Somehow with the mysterious power of magic..." With a *yap-yap* sound, Dang Seo-rin mimed boxing. "I'll fix the world's destroyed railways one by one, continuing on. From station to station, always laying pretty rails behind wherever I've passed."

"Hmm."

"That’s how it will go, and go, and go… until it can't go even a little bit more. When it ends at some dilapidated train station at a beach, where only a single station attendant stands alone."

"....."

Dang Seo-rin said no more.

Without really knowing why, a sudden, creeping doubt struck me, and I turned to look at her face. I found it strange to think at the time, but somehow, she looked as if she might collapse at any moment.

"Alliance Leader?"

"Hmm."

Dang Seo-rin blinked. She leaned against her broom, which she claimed was a necessity for any witch.

Her complexion was the same as usual.

"Undertaker, why not join my guild and become a vice-guild leader? You know our guild does well. You won’t get another chance like this. You’ll regret it later if you don’t."

"…Are we back to that? I won’t wear the pointy hat."

"Really? Then, it can’t be helped."

Dang Seo-rin walked away, sending me off with a light wave.

"Bye-bye! I’ll go for a walk and then head back. Don’t follow me—I’ll enjoy some solitude."

"When will you return?"

"Who knows? Maybe in about an hour?"

An hour passed, then two, and Dang Seo-rin did not return.

A search party was dispatched by the guild alliance.

Three hours after her disappearance, Dang Seo-rin was found collapsed on a forest trail.

After that day, Dang Seo-rin never got up again.

"The guild leader of Samcheon—how is she?"

"It is... an unusual case."

The medical team looked somber.

"Overall, her bodily functions are deteriorating. We thought it might be a curse, but it’s not that. I can only say it’s truly baffling… I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but it wouldn’t be surprising if she were to close her eyes and find rest at any moment."

"I see."

I braced myself and entered the hospital room, one of the few still functioning normally in Korea.

Dang Seo-rin caught my eye from where she sat by the window. She was reading a novel, relying on the wheels of a wheelchair instead of the trains she loved so much.

"....."

"....."

Silence hung in the air.

After about 30 seconds, Dang Seo-rin slammed the novel shut and placed it on her lap.

"Lifespan."

That was the first thing she said after seeing my face in two weeks.

"Lifespan?"

"Yes. That's really the heart of it, isn't it? I hate when the mood gets like this. Let's get it over with and talk about something else," she said, shrugging.

Her expression and gestures were so like the usual Dang Seo-rin that you wouldn't believe anything was wrong with her if it weren't for the wheelchair.

No.

It wasn't just the wheelchair. Her pointed hat hung on a coat rack, and her broom—which wasn't a witch's must-have but a cleaning tool—leaned against the wall.

That hospital room felt like an insult to the person that was Dang Seo-rin.

"My magic becomes stronger the more of my lifespan I burn. It's not just magic, but a power I've awakened. Cleverly named [Equivalent Exchange]. It's not all that foreign of a concept for an ability, is it?"

"Then…"

"Yeah. Wow, the Ten Legs was really tough. How could a monster like that exist, seriously? I thought it would die right then and there when I chanted the tenth melody, but here I am, still surviving. Anyway, it's not like I'm sick."

The words on the tip of my tongue wouldn't leave me.

It wasn't because I couldn't think of anything comforting to say. It was just, the shock I felt in that moment overwhelmed me.

'She never told me before.'

The fact that Dang Seo-rin was a multi-ability Awakener.

In addition to her magical abilities, she had the power to temporarily boost her firepower by burning her lifespan. Even when I had been her second-in-command in the Samcheon Guild, Dang

Seo-rin had kept her secret weapon hidden.

Because…

“…Were you planning to die in battle to defeat the Ten Legs?”

"You’re so smart, Undertaker."

Dang Seo-rin nodded crisply.

"To win against such an opponent, one must risk their life. Isn’t that right? You, Sword Star, everyone who participated in the battle, the soldiers and civilian volunteers who supported us. Everyone."

I couldn’t refute her.

Hadn’t I too gambled with my life seven times?

Suddenly, the conversations we had during those cycles came to mind. With the Ten Legs subjugation right before us, she had recited:

-30 minutes. Just hold on for 30 minutes. I’ll set up an archmagic spell to blow the Ten Legs’ head off.

-Undertaker, Sword Star. Whatever it takes, just hold out for 25… no, 30 minutes.

By then, Dang Seo-rin must have been prepared for her own death. Thus, what she really was asking for was this:

-Just hold on for 30 minutes until I die.

But the subjugation of the Ten Legs took 41 minutes. The lifespan consumed in that time must have been far beyond her limits.

"....."

I found it hard to calm my roiling heart.

For me, regression was also a tool to test the potential of others. Most people’s actions and outcomes changed with each cycle. However, some things did not change no matter how many times I

regressed.

The strength of mind and the firmness of conviction.

Dang Seo-rin had always discussed subjugating the Ten Legs and mentioned 30 minutes without exception in every cycle. In every cycle, her principle of action to 'sacrifice her own life to annihilate humanity's enemy' remained unchanged.

"How exactly does Equivalent Exchange work?" I asked finally.

"Ah. When I awakened the ability, it told me that my natural lifespan was 85 years. So now, I just think in my mind, 'I'll use up a few years from the remaining 60 years,' and my firepower automatically enhances."

"So, did you use up over 60 years in the Ten Legs battle?"

"Uh, well, um…" Dang Seo-rin furrowed her brow. "That's the really strange part."

"What is?"

"Did I tell you? I didn't expect to last over 30 minutes while chanting Cursed Song Incantation. If my calculations were correct, even reaching the sixth melody would've been a close call."

She rested her chin on her hand.

"The thing with Cursed Song Incantation is, the more melodies that overlap, the more the required magic power increases exponentially. And I do mean exponentially. Even if I had used up 60 years of lifespan, reaching the tenth melody should have been impossible."

"But you chanted it just fine."

"Right? Isn't it strange? Even while I was chanting behind you guys, I was actually thinking, 'Why is this working? How is this working?' and had lots of question marks floating around."

"....."

"I was sweating bullets."

That’s when it happened.

An odd premonition, different from anxiety or foreboding but similar in sensation, ran down my spine.

"Alliance Leader. In that case, exactly how many years of lifespan did you use up during the Ten Legs battle?"

"Huh? I was too out of it to count every year. Let’s see…"

"…Perhaps about 250 years?"

"Oh," Dang Seo-rin gasped, then nodded. "Right. Not exactly sure, but definitely more than 200 years and certainly less than 300. Roughly 250 years. How did you know?"

An electric current surged through me, a realization dawning.

If we were just talking about examples... Suppose, hypothetically, that the lifespan Dang Seo-rin hadn’t used then ‘carries over to the next cycle’?

I don’t know how Dang Seo-rin met her end from the first to the third cycles. She probably fought against the Ten Legs then, too, but without Old Man Scho and me, even if she entered the battle, the squad would have been annihilated within five minutes. She would have died before she could even start her Cursed Song Incantation.

Dang Seo-rin’s natural lifespan was 85 years. Removing her current age from that, and excluding the lifespan she spent here and there outside of the Ten Legs battle, she would have had about 45 years left.

In other words, from the first to the fifth cycles, when the Ten Legs battle hadn’t properly taken place, Dang Seo-rin inadvertently left about 40~45 years per cycle.

Starting in the sixth cycle when Old Man Scho joined, the pace of the Ten Legs battles picked up. That allowed Dang Seo-rin to leisurely use up her lifespan.

An extra 10 years, 15 years, 20 years.

Dang Seo-rin's lifespans gradually 'accumulated'.

Thus, by the tenth cycle, she had unwittingly saved up 250 years in an account called Lifespan.

'If this hypothesis is true...'

During the past cycles, the lifespans Dang Seo-rin had saved up were unfortunately all used up in this tenth cycle.

But my regression didn't end with the tenth cycle. It would continue on, and depending on the circumstances, she might be able to save more of her lifespan.

'If the savings reach 500 years? What about 1000, 2000 years?'

I couldn't contain my tremors. "Guild Leader."

"Yes?"

I inadvertently called Dang Seo-rin 'Guild Leader' as I used to. She didn't seem to notice anything peculiar about it, tilting her head as usual.

"What is it?" she prompted.

"I have something important to tell you."

I'm a regressor.

Your lifespan might accumulate with each cycle.

"That's amazing!"

Dang Seo-rin's eyes sparkled with surprise and intrigue as she listened to my theory.

"Undertaker, were you actually my lackey?"

"Is that what you're surprised about…?"

"Of course! What else should I be shocked by? Wow, I was amazing in other cycles too. My eyes didn't deceive me. The pointed hat would really suit you. Look here, Undertaker. Won't you be my witchy friend?"

What on earth is a witchy friend?

"Didn't you consider the possibility that I might be lying to you?"

"Huh? Why would I think of that? We're comrades, you and I. If you say you're a regressor, then you must be."

Dang Seo-rin chuckled lightly while coughing. The sound of her cough spread thin puffs of her remaining lifespan into the air.

"Anyway, you have dreams similar to mine."

"Really?"

"You're also moving forward like me, repairing the tracks in this broken world, one by one. The tracks the Ten Legs destroyed, the abandoned lines that other monsters left broken and torn. If we keep fixing them step by step, then eventually, the tracks will connect from one station to another, and then other people can walk along those tracks too."

"....."

"Not bad."

Even if I didn't have Complete Memory, I will never forget the words I heard that day.

She grinned. "And it's ironic. I can't walk the rails with you, but at least my lifespan will follow you at the same pace. I can't be with you in life, but in death, we are companions."

Dang Seo-rin kept a smile to the end as she reached out her hand.

The novel on her lap slid off. The white pages, stitched to the spine

and unable to grow into wings, unfurled partially on the floor.

Her eyes were shining brightly. Her five fingers gripped my forearm. The person who lost her parents and siblings to a monster, the one who couldn't stop loving trains, held onto my arm.

Clutching at it.

"Don't waste my lifespan. Use it well, Undertaker."

"....."

"It took up to the tenth melody to defeat the Ten Legs. That's too much of a waste. You need to become stronger."

So I did.

"I shouldn't burn away my lifespan with Cursed Song Incantation. It's just a hunch, but I feel like it won't be enough. Those creatures might be stronger. Not 250 years, but 500 years or even 1000 years might be necessary. You need to make sure my lifespan accumulates as many years as possible to prepare for the monsters that will appear after the Ten Legs."

So I did.

"And if possible, don't reveal to the next cycle's me that you're a regressor. I'm too greedy, too selfish. I can never think in terms of 'sacrificing this cycle for the next one.' If I knew that lifespans could be saved up for hundreds of years, I would definitely use it all up right away. Until the very, very last moment, try to guide things so that my lifespan continues to accumulate."

So I did.

"And in other cycles, always try to become my vice-guild leader."

That, I did not do.

Her laughter was bright as she said, "I'm looking forward to it, my companion in time."

That night, Dang Seo-rin died.

Her remains were scattered at the beach.

It wasn’t easy to fulfill her will. I grew stronger, and the Ten Legs no longer forced me to struggle. The need for Dang Seo-rin to chant during battles against the Ten Legs disappeared. Yet even after the Ten Legs vanished, formidable enemies continued to appear, and Dang Seo-rin always stood at the forefront.

She was always at the forefront. The ends of the damaged tracks were always her destination.

Supporting her, who frequently sought to use up her lifespan, was more difficult than anticipated.

Once, a disaster occurred where all of her lifespans were reset. That, of course, was just a one-off mistake. Now, over 1000 cycles later, by my calculations, Dang Seo-rin's lifespan has accumulated tens of thousands of years. A lifetime supply spanning at least 30,000 years.

‘How long could she sing if she started now?’

Sometimes, while drinking coffee, I get lost in such fantasies, envisioning Dang Seo-rin singing on some battlefield. The first melody, the second, the third... No matter how long it goes on and overlaps, her song never ends and eventually spreads beyond the horizon, reaching all the beaches where the world’s tracks connect.

Eventually, Dang Seo-rin would arrive at some coast she had longed for. Wearing a pointed hat, holding a staff, aboard a single-carriage train.

While I hope to hear that song someday, I also secretly wish that day never comes.

In recent cycles, whenever Dang Seo-rin happens to meet me, she asks, just like when we first met in the fourth cycle, in exactly the same way:

"Undertaker. Don’t you want to join my guild? I can offer you the

position of vice-guild leader."

Then I smile lightly and respond, "I won’t join."

It can’t be helped.

The pointed hat doesn’t suit me, does it, Guild Leader?

Footnotes:

Chapter 21

The Reader I

Sinnoa

After that rather serious discussion, it's time to lighten the mood again.

In the very early stages of my regression, that is, before the 20th cycle, I had been overly serious. I had believed that if I could just stay focused and put in enough effort, I could surely save the world.

I don't intend to disparage that effort, but it was somewhat arrogant of me. Who was I to treat the world's weight as equal to my own?

Infinite regression? It’s just an awakened ability.

People should know how to let go of themselves. The weight released leaves room for others.

In any case, my way of letting go was through hobbies.

I guarantee that there are no other regressors with as many diverse hobbies as I have.

Managing mental health is the most important thing in a regressor's life, and hobbies are like housekeepers that keep one's mental home clean.

A regressor's mental landscape is an extravagant palace spanning thousands of square feet. Naturally, the number of maids needed for this metaphorical *cleaning* must also be considerable. If I were to list the maids I’ve hired, or rather, my hobbies, they would be as follows:

[Games, exploring SG Net, barista work, weightlifting, bullying fairies, harassing Seo Gyu, cooking, walking, listening to music, playing music, stealing Dang Seo-rin's pointed hat and hiding it

under the bed, guitar, harassing Seo Gyu, violin, piano, painting, sculpting, ceramics, collecting radios, stealing and listening to Old Man Scho's phone recordings, managing a ranch, harassing Seo Gyu, choosing any job and living it up...]

But I won't mention all those maids one by one. There's nothing as tedious as babbling about a hobby that others can't relate to.

So, today's chosen maid is 'reading'.

More specifically, 'reading web novels'.

I originally didn't know about web novels.

As a child, I only read a few martial arts novels, and so it wasn't until about halfway into my regressions that I came to know of this form of fiction.

It was through a person I met in the 555th cycle that I was introduced to web novels. This person was an Awakener named Oh Dok-seo, but I'll have the chance to talk more about her in the next episode.

For now, it's only important that I found a new hobby and was happier because of it.

The best part about web novels is that each work has a lot of content. They say reading nourishes the mind, and I'm someone who values quantity over quality when eating. At least in the restaurant of web novels, I didn't have to worry about running out of food.

That, of course, was a damned illusion.

"No more novels… to read?"

I was shocked.

I had only managed to enjoy this feast until the 556th cycle. In just one or two cycles, all the fodder available to me was depleted. In

reality, web novels were a relatively new phenomenon and had a surprisingly limited number of works.

"Uh, hmm. Should I start diving into other genres…?"

A thirsty person doesn't choose their well.

Though I only started with fantasy novels, I quickly consumed academy novels, horror stories, romance fantasy, martial arts, isekai, professional stories, parodies, TS (gender-swap), yuri, and more. If it was written in King Sejong's invented script, I devoured it.[1] Eventually, even English and Japanese novels weren't off limits.

A whole new world opened up.

I was happy.

The 558th cycle ended.

The new world was destroyed.

"No more novels… to read?"

I was once again shocked.

I had thoroughly scraped the bottom of the barrel, leaving nothing left to consume.

I wasn't picky.

I gladly consumed postmodernist novels that daringly replaced double quotes (“”) with reverse-double quotes (”“).

I enjoyed minimalist masterpieces that omitted periods inside quotation marks and classics by new-generation phonologists who tried to express character voices with tildes (~) or silence with ellipses (...).

I even read satires where an original character not in the source material appeared, hoarded all the protagonist's fortuitous encounters for themselves, and then sneered at the protagonist, criticizing their weakness compared to the original. It was a biting

critique of modern selfishness.

I also read the work of a plague researcher where every character laughed in 'Ho-ho,' so they all contracted 'Ho-ho Syndrome.'

In other words,

"Hum~ How strange.. was the protagonist always this weak? Ho! Ho! Ho!"

Even bizarre scriptures like that became my daily bread.

Alas——

From now on, call me the Diver of the Web Novel World, not the Undertaker. Because it is the truth. This was my bottom, my abyss, my Mariana Trench. If I went any deeper, I couldn't even breathe, let alone find anything to eat.

Even as a regressor with a lot of experience, this was a hellscape where survival wasn't guaranteed!

So I could confidently say,

"No more novels… exist."

Many readers like myself will eventually face this same situation. When this happens, there are usually two paths a reader can take: decide to take a break from web novels or become an author and make the content themselves.

I just so happened not to be an 'ordinary' reader.

I was an infinite regressor, and regressors have a third path.

"I'll have to kidnap all the writers and turn them into machines that spit out stories."

I puffed out my chest.

A path no one had taken. But a path every reader has dreamt of.

Toward that path, I, the Undertaker, stepped forward with

confidence.

Over one cycle, I gathered personal information and profiles of web novel authors, and at the start of the next cycle, I traveled the country, collecting authors.

Of course, since authors aren’t fantastical creatures that could be captured by throwing red-and-white balls at them, it required painstaking effort to add them to the collection.

Those sensitive to the author's sensibilities might object, “Isn’t that kidnapping, not collecting?”

But around the 560th cycle, I was quite strong. Compared to surviving in this harsh world, wouldn’t they live a happier life being bred under my protection as a regressor?

I eventually succeeded in gathering over 300 authors, becoming a master of writer-mon. The authors probably had no idea who brought them here, why, or where they had been taken.

"Where is this place?"

"Hey... maybe..."

"Aren't you PenmanshipBully? Isn't that you?"

"Oh, I knew it. You're WritingSlave. We met briefly at that wedding, right?"

"YuriMeddler! You're here too!"

"Gasp, HaremRomance Bro!"

When hundreds of authors were gathered in a hotel lobby, some would begin to recognize each other. They couldn’t hide their murmuring fear but tried to make sense of the situation.

"Why were we brought here?"

"Did anyone hear an explanation?"

"Sorry, I just fainted, and when I woke up, I was here… I've been here for three days already."

"Three days?"

"Oh, I've been here for four."

"Wow, that must have been tough."

"Huh? No, they served us nutritious meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, the accommodations were comfortable, and I didn't have to write daily, so it was great."

"…?"

"…?"

It was about time I explained.

"Check, check. Can you hear me?" I grabbed the microphone and stood atop the check-in counter. Hundreds of eyes turned towards me.

In truth, I only used amplification magic to project my voice, and the microphone was just decoration. Still, I felt it necessary to show courtesy in front of the esteemed authors.

These 335 people, confined in this hotel, were carefully and meticulously selected talents. Regardless of genre, age, or gender, only the writers who had made my heart race even once were brought here.

"Greetings. I am an Awakener known as the Undertaker. As some of you might have guessed, all of you gathered here are authors in the web novel industry."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

"Only authors?"

"Where is this place?"

"If it's only authors here, this must be hell."

"Who's that person holding the mic?"

I spoke in a serious tone. "As I said, I am the Undertaker. This place is a hotel near Incheon. All the staff fled after trouble erupted in Seoul, but don't worry. I have already hired new staff, and they are all highly trained professionals."

I pointed to the other side of the lobby, and twenty fairies wearing Che Guevara T-shirts saluted. I returned the salute.

At one point, I had been hostile towards fairies, but by the 560th cycle, I had established an amicable relationship with the [Fairy Revolution Club]. I knew their true identity well.

"So," I concluded, "please rest assured that you are in good hands."

"What the hell! Fairies?!"

"Kyaaaah! Help!"

The authors weren't particularly reassured.

A bit of commotion ensued, but it was subdued without issue. Ninety-nine percent of the authors were far too insignificant in the physical world to cause a stir.

I took up the microphone again.

"Check, check. Mic test. Unfortunately, you cannot escape. The main entrance of the hotel is sealed. The windows of each room allow a view but can't be crossed. Just like our lives."

"Let us go!"

"You cannot escape. Highly trained fairy revolutionaries will monitor you 24/7."

"Crazy..."

"Who is this person? I'm scared..."

"Everyone, let me ask you this first. Even if you could escape, do you really intend to leave this place?"

A question mark seemed to hover over the authors' heads. I would clear their doubts right away.

"You may have heard from the news, but the world is well and truly collapsing. Monsters have appeared worldwide, and Gates are opening. That's right. You're completely fucked."

"Uh…"

"Even your livelihoods, the web novel platforms, are hard to access now. And even if you could access them, your readers can't buy your stories because the banking system is collapsing. Soon, the internet network will also start cutting out, and then your writing skills will be useless."

The truth has a way of resonating.

The authors' faces visibly paled. Many of them had started writing with the mindset of "What? I can just write alone and make money? Sweet." That sweetness was now gone.

"And even if you keep writing, it's still a problem. From now on, readers of your stories have a 0.06% chance of encountering the Isekai Truck. In this era, your novels are as good as weapons."

"Isekai Truck…?"

"Is he a lunatic or something?"

The authors murmured amongst themselves, thinking I was spouting crap.

Well, no, the Isekai Truck was very real. It was an anomaly first discovered in the 119th cycle, and its sightings rapidly increased from then on. Still, no matter how many trucks came barreling towards us, the protective barrier I set around this hotel would hold strong, so it wasn't a concern.

"Then… why did you bring us here?"

"Because I'm a passionate fan of yours. Of all of you." I pointed to an author sitting in the front row. "You there."

"Y-yes?"

"You're BadEndingLover, aren't you? Always writing yuri novels on NovelCampus."

The author I singled out looked stunned. "H-how do you… know me?"

"Didn't I just say I'm a fan?"

"Well, uh, I appreciate the compliment, but… you couldn't possibly have read my work… My most popular novel only has 2,000 favorites, and the latest chapter barely gets 100 views…"

"In your first work, the protagonist faced all sorts of misfortunes, a truly tragic story. But from your next piece onward, you started to incorporate elements of no-romance, eventually mastering the balance between tragedy and no-romance. Granted, in the later stages of your stories, secondary characters suddenly overtake the plot and pair up with the protagonist, giving the story a pure love ending, but even that ruggedness is part of your charm, BadEndingLover."

"You really did read my stuff…?"

The authors were astonished.

I proceeded to call out more.

"RighteousHeavenlyDemonMartial. In an age where the term 'Heavenly Demon' has been trivialized into a joke, your tales of righteousness and honor in traditional martial arts always stir my heart."

"NureongiBapsang. You're always trying new things in a romance fantasy market that's been running dry."

"MarlovHorseLover. I know how much you contributed to expanding the 'stand-in' genre, which was considered niche. Your story about a protagonist born as a Hungarian noble during World War I, becoming the last cavalry commander and being hailed as a loyal servant of the House of Habsburg is exceptionally rare, and yet it doesn't sacrifice entertainment."

After listing about thirty authors, the ones I mentioned looked deeply moved, though their faces also flushed slightly each time their pen names were called. At any rate, no one in the hotel lobby doubted my sincerity anymore.

"Wait a minute."

But the suspicions started to take a different direction.

The authors whispered amongst themselves. Their voices were as faint as mosquitoes, but my enhanced hearing caught every word.

"So this reader reads yuri, TS, pure love, harem, traditional martial arts, fusion martial arts, tragedy, light tragedy, and even those genres we can't mention for various reasons…?"

"Eek, a monster…!"

"Oh my gosh, what a glutton!"

"He's not Kim Dokja but Kim Nureongi..."[2]

Hah, these authors are slandering a valuable reader.

As a regressor, I just avoided snacking for my mental health. My tastes were quite healthy.

"I'd like to express how appreciative I am of all of you, but due to time constraints, I'll skip it today."

"'Today'…?"

"Moreover, I'm sure some of you don't want your genre publicly revealed."

Several authors flinched.

"I'll reach out to you privately sometime. Anyway, authors, please think carefully. Yes, I did kidnap you and imprison you here, but the world outside is dangerous. Can you survive out there in a world that's falling apart?"

The lobby fell silent.

In cycles where I hadn't brought them, half of these authors didn't last six months. The rest didn't survive past a year. Only two managed to live relatively long.

"Here, you won't have to worry about survival. I'll provide everything you need—food, clothing, and shelter. Even those fairies you fear are just employees at this hotel. Your only job is to write novels."

"....."

"You can continue your current series or start a new one. Just write. In return, I'll give you everything else."

The authors murmured at that.

"He's not wrong. It really seems like the country is doomed."

"I was planning to flee abroad, but hearing it's no different there, I gave up. Besides, communication would be difficult…"

"They serve buffet meals here every day. It's not bad."

"If you think about the people who couldn't come here, maybe we're the lucky ones…"

"Right. What happened to the other authors?"

The atmosphere took a positive turn.

Then, someone muttered to themselves, "Isn't this just a damn canning factory…?"

Well, some were quick-witted, but the majority had already made up their minds.

That day marked the beginning of filming for this group stay-misery with 335 authors.

Footnotes:

1 - Sejong the Great, the fourth monarch of the Joseon dynasty of Korea, was the inventor of Hangul, the Korean alphabet.

2 - Kim Dokja is the protagonist of *Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint* and is well-known for being a hardcore reader of web fiction, while nureongi is the primary dog breed raised in Korea for meat. Essentially, the Undertaker is not the consumer but the consumed.

Chapter 22

The Reader II

Sinnoa

I was quite satisfied with the 'Canned Hotel' I had built.

Guilt? I felt none. After all, without my intervention, these writers would meet their untimely end just like they had in other cycles. Even the Saintess, the embodiment of morality, would give me a thumbs up.

[…Mr. Undertaker.]

"Yes? What is it, Saintess?"

[…No, nothing.]

More importantly, I was genuinely saving the authors' lives.

Remember how I mentioned the "Isekai Truck" earlier?

The Isekai Truck is a mysterious monster that can appear to readers of web novels, promising to transport them to a world where their favorite novel's setting is fully realized, but it does so by crashing into the reader.

No joke—it’s a real monster.

If you're an avid web novel reader, one day, as you’re walking down the street, you might suddenly hear a *hooonk!* and if you turn to look, you'll see an 11-ton truck charging straight at you. Its unique feature is that instead of a license plate number, the truck has a novel title engraved on it.

Some people might be thrilled and attempt to kiss the truck's hood, thinking, "Finally, I can escape this monster-filled apocalypse on the Korean Peninsula!" But don't bother. I tried getting hit three times

as a test, and that thing about transmigration? A total farce. It's a lying monster just like the Hero Syndrome.

Anyway, this Isekai Truck targets not only readers but also writers, as they are the first to read their own stories.

In other words?

Hooonk!

Beep! Honk! Hooonk!

Hooonk! Honk!

One by one, cargo trucks lined up in front of the Canned Hotel I had built.

"Eyaaah— Strange trucks have gathered outside our revolutionary hideout!"

Even the fairies, who were used to all sorts of monsters, were puzzled and tilted their heads at the sight.

Those trucks weren’t to be taken lightly. The Isekai Truck could teleport wherever the protagonist was and would always catch up, hit-and-run, and then vanish without a trace.

It had racked up a history that earned it the moniker of 'God Slayer', given how many protagonists it had taken down, be they world saviors, heroes, harbingers of doom, masterminds, gods, or even mere extra characters who claim they're the strongest.

No one but the Tutorial Fairy, who had butchered many protagonists, could handle this terrifying anomaly.

"Is the barrier holding up?"

"Yes, Comrade Manager! No matter how those reactionaries struggle to turn back time, the dialectical progress of the revolution is a supreme truth! The evolutionary turn of history cannot be reversed by the futile efforts of those bourgeois thugs!"

Boom!

As if to prove the point, one of the 11-ton trucks (which had suddenly appeared on the horizon) came barreling toward the hotel entrance and crashed into it.

However, the hotel's main entrance, which I had barricaded with the fairies, remained intact. Only the truck was crumpled like an aluminum can.

Honnnk...

Honnnk! Honk...

The Isekai Trucks in the parking lot honked, as if mourning their comrade's valiant death.

Meanwhile, the fairies on the balcony waved red flags printed with portraits of Che Guevara and wept in defiance, some even shedding tears.

"Ah, revolution! Revolution!"

"Drop dead, you imperialist fucks! Petit bourgeois!"

"Commune of the fairies of all nations! May it last forever!"

I nodded with satisfaction. "Hmm, good. Revolution vanguard, continue defending the barricades. The success of the revolution hinges on this mission. Everyone, good job."

"Yes, Comrade Manager!"

"Viva la Revolution!"

"Our dreams will never die!"

The fairies saluted with the kind of spirit that would have garnered a standing ovation from the citizens of Paris in 1871.

See? I truly cared about the authors' safety and well-being.

If not for the Canned Hotel, where would those trucks be heading? I

wasn't just saving the authors' lives but also their readers'. The entire web novel industry of the Korean Peninsula owed its survival to me.

In return for this dedication, I didn't ask much from the authors. *Just keep writing.* If they filled my empty bowl with new fodder, I'd provide them with food, clothing, shelter, and protection from the Isekai Trucks for at least ten years.

After patrolling the guards, I headed to the Secretariat (Editorial Department), where fairies with a more intellectual vibe greeted me.

"Ah, Comrade Manager. Please, come in."

"Good. You're all doing well. Since it’s been a month since the canning began, the authors must have stocked up on enough chapters."

I cast a meaningful gaze at Secretary Agent No. 264.

"Comrade Secretary 264. Bring me the accumulated manuscripts."

"Yes, sir!"

In this cycle, Secretary Fairy 264, who managed to secure a high-ranking position, brought in the printed manuscripts.

I waited eagerly, filled with anticipation, and took the new works in my hands...

Only to find myself doubting my eyes.

"What is this?"

The stack of A4 papers looked too thin, hardly fitting for an entire month's work by hundreds of authors. It was less than even a well-filled joint fanzine.

"Why is there so little?"

"But this really is all there is!"

This couldn’t be. The authors I asked to write in exchange for food, shelter, and protection from the Isekai Trucks hadn’t even written!

After finishing my regressor duties (awakening Seo Gyu, cooperating with the Saintess, closing Gates, training promising talents, collaborating with guild leaders, etc.) and finally returning to the hotel today, I was in utter disbelief.

I had waited all month for this day.

"You mean I brought in 335 authors, and there aren’t even 100 manuscripts...?"

The pile of manuscripts in my hand quivered. My anger and disappointment translated into a magnitude 7 on the seismometer.

Authors who don't write? How are they any different from bums? At least bums feel a twinge of guilt when they waste time watching movies and TV shows. But these so-called authors simply pat themselves on the back, calling it "experience" and "learning" and "getting inspiration from movies and shows."

If there's no difference between the two groups (or non-groups), why should I, as a regressor, waste valuable resources supporting bums?

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I said, disgusted.

"Shall we send them all to the gulag?"

"This is already the gulag... But where could we send our precious writing slaves?"

I slammed the table.

"Gather all the authors in the lobby right now!"

A little later, the summoned authors wobbled into the lobby.

Wait, what?

'Have the authors put on some weight?'

Even when I first locked them in the Canned Hotel, they weren't in the best health on average, and now, after a month of who-knows-what diet, they were bloated with chubby cheeks. If they stayed like this any longer, their faces would shine like waxed fruit.

"...Authors. I am deeply disappointed in you." Overcome with fury, I addressed them. "If each of you wrote just one chapter a day, that would be 335 chapters. Over a month, that's over 10,000 chapters. Do you understand? 10,000 chapters! But now, look at the manuscripts I'm holding."

"……."

"91 chapters! 91! Does that make any sense? And those 91 chapters were written by only 12 of you! Out of 335, only 12 wrote anything!"

Whoosh! I scattered the A4 papers from the platform. They weren't actual manuscripts but just blank sheets—a kind of performance. I couldn't actually throw away the writing of these talented authors.

But my performance worked. The authors' faces paled.

"Even now, I'm running around day and night to ensure your safety and comfort! And this is what you give me in return? If you have any excuses, speak up!"

"Um..."

"Uhhh..."

The authors glanced away.

"Well, you see… Mr. Reader, uh, we're sorry, but a new story doesn't just pop into existence so easily..."

"Yeah, we tried brainstorming, walking, and sleeping, but nothing solid came to mind."

"Mr. Reader! A story takes longer to plan than to write! Especially for new projects."

"I hate to say this since we're freeloading, but honestly, demanding new ideas in just a month is unreasonable."

"Right!"

"We really tried writing, but we couldn't. We want to write, but nothing comes out. It's driving us crazy!"

The authors continued to chorus their explanations like a seasoned *a cappella* choir, passing the tune back and forth.

Hearing their reasoning made me pause.

'That's plausible.'

Indeed, they say creation is a constant struggle.

After finishing one work, some authors take three to four years to start another.

Perhaps my demand for a new project in a month was too much... Hmm?

"Wait a moment. Only 126 of you should be working on a new project. The rest were already serializing existing works, weren't they?"

The authors flinched.

"So why couldn't you write? You didn't miss any deadlines before checking in."

"Adaptation!"

The authors sang in unison.

"Serializing requires a delicate balance of environment. Some authors write only at home, others only in cafés, and some need their own studio."

"But no one writes in hotels..."

"It's a totally different story."

"My sinuses were so bad yesterday, I couldn't sleep. My head felt foggy, and I didn’t want to touch the keyboard."

"Oh, I know that feeling too!"

"I had so much free time that I got stuck editing endlessly, like an infinite loop."

"In an unfamiliar environment, you have to rebuild your writing habits from scratch. Serialization is all about routine."

"Good to hear that we writers really do understand each other. This is a subtle but crucial issue that outsiders who have never serialized a work wouldn’t understand."

"Exactly. It’s not easy."

Is that so?

Indeed, they say creation demands a certain sensibility.

To provide a comfortable, collective living environment, I had taken over a luxury hotel in Incheon. I even gave them a weekly allowance. Even in this collapsed world, with no way to leave and no use for currency, it still served a purpose.

'Because there’s a casino in the hotel's basement.'

It was originally a foreigner-only casino, but now it was a paradise just for the authors. They could use their monthly stipend as game money and indulge to their heart’s content. The luxury shopping mall in the hotel was also open for business.

According to Secretary Fairy No. 264, the authors were highly satisfied with this setup and frequented the casino.

It was a near-perfect welfare system!

'But it's an unfamiliar environment.'

I nodded.

How could I, just a mere reader, meddle in the writers' deep anguish and delicate sensibilities?

I could use Mind Reading to read their thoughts, but it felt disrespectful to the authors I cherished.

"Alright. Then I'll give you one more month," I acquiesced.

"A month is too short... At least three months..."

"Well, no matter how difficult the job, every profession requires discipline. I trust in your diligence."

"Yes..."

"We will do our best..."

Another month passed.

This time, I received only 75 chapters.

"Why is it even less?"

I was appalled. How could this happen?

The fairy grinned brightly. "But this really is all there is!"

"No… Secretary, does this make sense? There are 335 authors. If each wrote one chapter a week, that's over a thousand chapters. But not even 750, just 75?"

I reconvened the authors and grilled them again, but their answers remained the same. And if people give the same answer twice after being given two chances, that's an excuse.

Unfortunately, I couldn't trust the authors any longer. In hindsight, I must have seen them through rose-colored glasses.

An expert. I needed an expert who could analyze why this was happening.

After consulting one, I got my answer immediately.

"Are you stupid? The environment's too good, old man."

Footnotes:

Chapter 23

The Reader III

Sinnoa

“Too good of an environment?” I echoed.

What was wrong with that?

“Hah. I think you’ve got some fantasies about what it means to be a writer. Writers are laborers, plain and simple. They write to earn money and gain attention.”

Oh Dok-seo, the self-proclaimed web novel expert, said this. As mentioned earlier, we'll delve deeper into who this Oh Dok-seo is at another time.

For now, it’s enough to know that Oh Dok-seo was a nerd-fashion trendsetter, always sporting a red bob haircut, a cap, a band-aid on her nose, and her favorite hoodie.

She sent me a sidelong glance. “Just making sure, you're not using Mind Reading right now?”

“I’ve turned it off.”

“Good. Now, have you ever seen a construction worker swinging a hammer purely for self-fulfillment? Someone who says, ‘I love unloading crates so much that I want to do it for the rest of my life’?”

“Well… not often.”

“That’s exactly it.”

Oh Dok-seo chewed her gum then blew a bubble.

By the way, it wasn’t bubble gum, just regular chewing gum.

Naturally, it didn’t inflate properly, making a faint hissing noise before bursting and sticking to her lips.

She wiped her mouth nonchalantly, fully embodying her nerd-fashionista, edgy, chuunibyou persona.

“Remember, writing comes from a place of scarcity.”

Her expression was serious. No, not just that—she was *deadly* serious.

I don’t usually use that phrase, but in this case, it was warranted. If I didn’t use "deadly" to describe Oh Dok-seo’s face, it would be disrespecting the word’s very existence.

“Why give them an allowance? Take it away. Throw them into the depths of despair. Make them watch people being slaughtered by monsters. You’re strong, right? You can do it, so why aren’t you?”

“Hmm…”

“Just don’t kill them. Oh, and keep their hands and backs intact. You just need to make sure they're not crippled. Writers actually produce better work when exploited.”

Oh Dok-seo spoke with the confidence of someone who believed truth should serve them, not the other way around.

“Weren’t they all doomed to die if not for you? So if they stay alive, you’ve done your job, haven’t you?”

Is that how it was? Really?

‘That makes sense.’

It was worth testing.

Assuming the Canned Hotel was doomed to fail in the 560th cycle, I trained the writers according to Oh Dok-seo’s advice in the next cycle.

Instead of heaven, I gave them a taste of a milder hell.

“Kyaaaah!”

“Somebody help! Help me!”

I took the writers for a little walk beyond their accommodations.

Hooonk! Beep!

Honk! Honk! Honk!

Hooooooonk! Beep Beep!

The Isekai Trucks exceeded a thousand in number.

The parking lot and even the road leading to the accommodations were jam-packed with 11-ton trucks, replicating the traffic jams of Chuseok holidays. Trucks collided, overturned, and crashed as they pursued the writers in a surreal scene.

And that wasn’t all.

“Ugh, it’s cold…”

“I’m hungry… I want yukgaejang…”

“Moooom…”

The environment had changed too.

Instead of a luxury hotel, I set up a shabby refugee camp for the writers. No chef fairies cooking gourmet meals. No casino dealer fairies. None of that.

Even the equipment provided was cheap.

Watching the writers sit on the dirt floor, staring blankly at the ceiling or crying their eyes out, pained me. But shock therapy exists for a reason.

I spoke.

“Ahem, mic check,” I said. “Writers, from now on, you’ll be living in this village. I will try to protect you from most dangers, but I

can’t guarantee your safety. The harder you write, and the more entertaining your stories are, the more resources you’ll have.”

“……”

“I love you, dear writers. I wish you the best.”

Then something miraculous happened.

This extreme treatment actually worked! The writers were driven to write as if possessed. Out of 335, not one was idle. Their writing speed was incomparable to the last cycle!

I couldn’t help but be moved.

“These are true writers, and this is how much they should write.”

Looking at the pile of manuscripts brought a smile to my face, and yet, as I eagerly flipped through the pages—

“…Hmm?”

Something felt off.

Like a dog startled by unfamiliar food, I instinctively paused while holding the manuscript.

“Why… why does this taste spoiled?”

It was different.

The flavor of the writing had changed.

The fantasy writer who once sang about the triumphs of humanity was now writing a story about the demon king's army butchering everything. A yuri author, known for heartwarming characters, had monsters tearing couples apart. Zombies appeared in martial arts stories and destroyed the Martial Realm. Across all genres, characters were in despair, and the world was falling apart.

And then I realized.

“This isn’t genre fiction!”

Pure literature!

The flavor was unmistakably pure literature, and that particular kind that screams, *"Everything's screwed, so screw it all!"*

The familiar scent of the web novel authors I loved was gone, replaced by a stranger's fragrance. It felt like catching my partner cheating.

'It's well-written. Very well-written, but…'

This wasn't the kind of food I wanted!

If I wanted despair, I could just reflect on my life as a regressor. Why should I read despair fiction in my free time? Was I a masochist?

No matter how much effort the authors put in, they couldn't compete with my firsthand knowledge of how terrible monsters could be or how far humanity could fall. Their attention to detail didn't measure up to mine.

'What have I done to my authors?'

This couldn't stand.

I immediately sought out Oh Dok-seo to complain. But even considering the different cycle, she remained uninterested.

"Not fun? So what?" Oh Dok-seo dismissed as she casually filed her nails. "A creative work just needs to have the author's spirit, right? Why should they sell their soul just for your amusement?"

"……"

"You said you love these authors. Shouldn't you love them no matter what they write? What's wrong? Has your love changed? Wow. I didn't think you'd be so harsh."

"……"

"Then again, maybe it's my fault for expecting anything from

humans again. Can love change? Can people truly shift in their beliefs? Oh, and by ‘shift,’ I mean ‘shit.’ Catchy rhyme, right?”

I couldn’t reason with this edgy, chuunibyou poser!

Thus, the 561st cycle’s Canned Hotel was also a complete failure.

Back to square one, I pondered.

Too much comfort was no good because it took away the motivation to write. Too much suffering was also no good because it bled into the writing itself.

‘This is a tough nut to crack. How can I cultivate tasty web novels? Are authors inherently doomed from the start?’

I mulled it over again and again until finally, I reached a conclusion.

In the next cycle, SG Net, which had only a community function, got a new board.

A novel serialization board.

The announcement posted on the board read as follows:

□□□□□□□□□□

[Novel Serialization Board Usage Guide]

1. All registered SG Net members receive novel points daily upon logging in.

2. Novel points can be used to purchase new chapters of novels or donate to your favorite author.

3. Points used by readers will be transferred to the authors. Authors can use these points to purchase desired items, a list of which will be announced to authors separately.

4. At 24:00 every day, the board will display the rankings of all novels based on how many readers purchased them.

5. For un-Awakened authors who cannot access SG Net, a manager service is available. The manager will upload the un-Awakened author's work to the board. Members can also upload on behalf of un-Awakened authors they know.

6. Let’s create a healthy competitive culture!

□□□□□□□□□□

In other words, I had created a platform for serializing novels.

Members’ initial reactions were lukewarm.

-Anonymous: Can anyone post a novel?

-[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquess: It’s time to unveil my profound prose to the world.

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: I was a bit bored since there wasn't much to do besides community stuff, so this is nice.

-Anonymous: What items can you buy with points?

-OldManGoryeo: Probably only shitty stuff will be uploaded. Any author wannabes thinking of serializing better watch out. I’ll comment on every chapter.

-dolLHoUse: hype

-[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: Hngh... (>_<);

There weren’t many Awakener authors. And even if there were, most were too busy navigating the apocalypse to have time to serialize. But leisure wasn’t just for those who had it; it was for those who made it. A few Awakeners found time to serialize novels.

-OldManGoryeo: ? What’s with this point purchase list?

An official post on SG Net one day caused a stir.

-One-month accommodation ticket (5-star hotel)

-Fairy bodyguard: Unable to hunt in Gates, only provides defense. Misuse of this bodyguard will be punished.

-Real-time chat fan meeting with desired Constellation: Meeting may be denied based on the Constellation's preference. If denied, points will be refunded.

-Consultation on one's awakening ability tech tree: Constellation provides direct guidance on maximizing the efficiency of one's ability. Will not be responsible for training, only gives guidelines.

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-OldManGoryeo: Seriously, just look at these point items. Anyway, I bought the awakening ability tech tree. Are the dumb SG Net people not serializing yet? lol

The comment section exploded.

-Anonymous: ?? Is that for real?

-Anonymous: Who gave points to buy that guy's novel? Idiots?

-LiteraryGirl: OldManGoryeo actually writes pretty well… He was a web novel otaku before the gates opened, and there aren't many who write like him.

-Anonymous: What's that psycho's novel about?

LiteraryGirl: An incredibly kind protagonist uses their healing ability to help those in need and eventually saves a small kingdom in a tribute to humanity. A rare type of protagonist these days. I cried at the scene where they almost get hunted as a witch but still treats the inquisitors, saying, "A doctor doesn't choose their patients."

Anonymous: ?

[Samcheon] Lieutenant: ?

-Anonymous: Fuck, are these items real? Classic SG Net W. It's on a different level with the Constellations directly managing it.

-dolLHoUse: hypeeee

-[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquess: Why doesn't anyone read my prose?

The message was a shock, but so was the messenger, a notorious SG Net troll. Members' responses grew heated.

That official post marked the beginning of the "Great Serial Age" on SG Net.

Some people who had awakened started serializing their novels directly. Guilds also began hiring skilled authors and uploading their work on their behalf.

In a world that had collapsed, the once-useless writer profession became a kind of support member.

-The Protagonist Doesn't Return as the Blossoming Blade (★9.9)

-The Reasons Why She Ended Up a Count's Munchkin (★9.9)

-Comedy Club [19+ Uncensored Edition] (★9.9)

-Hiding Reinforced Steel in the Apartment (★5.7)[1]

Unsurprisingly, the serialized works on SG Net showcased a level of quality unmatched by the 560th and 561st cycles. The despair and emotions that writers experienced during the apocalypse added depth to their work while maintaining the fun of web novels.

"What's the difference? What do you think changed?"

After hearing about my journey since the 560th cycle, Oh Dok-seo asked me that question.

I poured her an espresso since that's all she drinks.

“The number of readers,” I answered. “And competition.”

“Hmm? What are you talking about?”

“Most writers are attention-seekers. As you said, they lack something in their lives. But that emptiness isn’t filled by experience, only by others’ attention, love, and passion.”

Because what they lack isn’t themselves but others. Writers have too much of themselves in their hearts.

“That’s why they need as many people around them as possible, like celebrities. Like Roman gladiators in the colosseum.”

“Hmm.”

“But that’s secondary. The real key is competition between writers.”

I logged into SG Net's novel serialization board and pulled up the novel rankings. The ranking section prominently displayed the most popular novels, listed from first place down.

“Endless competition among writers, judged solely by purchase numbers. It’s pure meritocracy. Writers can’t help but be drawn to the radiant mirage of ‘proving their worth through pure writing skill,’ like the bright lights of New York’s skyscrapers.”

It reminded me of ancient Greek tragedy writers. They held contests and ranked each other, and crowds gathered to follow the writers’ works in real time, cheering them on. Back when Athens was the world's leading city and dominating the Mediterranean world, winning the crowd’s favor meant being recognized as the world’s best writer.

Competition, enthusiasm, and a certificate proclaiming you the best in the world.

That system allowed Greek tragedies to burn in a brilliant, if brief, burst.

It’s no wonder Nietzsche described competition as the essence of the Greek people.

“This is my— *humanity’s* last Dionysian theater.”

But I was a consummate glutton. While I enjoyed popular works that appealed to the masses, I also devoured niche genres that appealed to only a few yet satisfied their creators' desires.

Before and after the world began collapsing, these works often went unnoticed.

I scrolled down the rankings and clicked on a particular novel.

-Title: 101 Ways She Accepts Death (★7.7)

-Pen name: BadEndingLover

A writer who always pursued the niche.

After reading the latest chapter, I pressed the [Support Author] button.

-Donated 2,000 points.

-ZERO_SUGAR: Your writing is always... wonderful ^^. I thoroughly enjoyed this chapter. Please watch out for trucks~

Hmm.

Something seemed missing, so I tilted my head.

“Oh.”

That’s right. I forgot to write this.

-ZERO_SUGAR: But there’s a spelling error. The correct expression is "an incident occurred" not "an insident occurred". This is the third time you’ve made this mistake in this work. Are you the type who doesn’t run a spell checker~? lol. Best wishes, and stay healthy. Write well ^^

I nodded.

Still a perfect donation message.

Though this whole ridiculous act proved unexpectedly useful later on.

Hooooooonk!

But that's a story for another day.

Right now, I had to deal with the Isekai Truck parked in front of my place.

Footnotes:

1 - These are spoofs of popular titles such as *Return of the Blossoming Blade*, *The Reason Why Raeliana Ended up at the Duke's Mansion*, and *Hiding a House in the Apocalypse*.

Chapter 24

The Prophet I

Sinnoa

Let's talk about Oh Dok-seo, a web novel otaku, leader of nerd fashion, and a hipster with a case of *chuunibyou* syndrome.

As I mentioned before, I first met this character in the 555th run. Actually, we knew each other well before that, but we only forged a real bond in that cycle.

At the time, I regressed to the waiting area of Busan Station, as usual.

'I'm bored.'

Back then, I hadn't even acquired my web novel hobby.

Even someone like me, an optimist who could rank in the [Life's Most Optimistic Infinite Regressor] competition across all fiction, would get a little tired of reaching the 555th starting point. Wouldn't you get sick of even the world's most fun theme park after visiting 555 times?

Moreover, the waiting area of Busan Station was far from an exciting theme park. The best you could hope for was Seo Gyu yelling, "You fucking asshole!" loudly enough to ring through the hall.

There *was* one hidden secret in the waiting area, but that's for later.

'...Should I try Mind Reading?'

This time, I decided to spice things up a bit.

[Mind Reading] was an ability I acquired in the 554th run. I could listen in on the thoughts of beings less capable than me. The criteria

for 'capability' were extremely vague, and the ability itself wasn't all that powerful, but it was worth using just for fun.

[Lee Jae-hee: My phone's not working?]

[Uehara Shino: Too many people. Can't breathe.]

The moment I activated Mind Reading, the collective thoughts of the people gathered at the Busan Station waiting area flooded my ears. Some voices were familiar, while others were relatively new.

[Seo Gyu: Fuck, what's going on? This is bullshit.]

[Park Ye-dam: I should report to my boss...]

[Lee Baek: What the hell? Where's everyone else?]

[Go Yuri: Uh-oh-uh.]

[Jung So-hee: Leader? Leader, where have you gone?]

[Sim Ah-ryeon: Where am I? Who am I?]

[Kim Si-woon: Mom.]

For a moment, I felt dizzy.

Mind Reading didn't let me focus on a specific target. When I activated it, I heard all the surface-level thoughts of those around me. Still, I could bear wading through them, and my first impression of using [Mind Reading] at the Busan Station waiting area was…

'Not much.'

All I could hear were the same mundane thoughts.

'Well, I'm familiar with all these faces.'

I had already figured out nearly everything about the original members of the Busan Station waiting area. Their names, appearance, origins, and even the abilities they'd awaken later.

So no matter what these people did or thought, nothing surprised me. I could predict their thoughts just by looking at their faces, so Mind Reading was practically meaningless.

'Of course, I can't read Go Yuri, as expected.'

I should never get involved with that child.

I walked away from Go Yuri and headed to a vending machine on the other side of the waiting area to leisurely grab a drink.

People around me gave me the stink eye, thinking, *"What kind of person is so relaxed in this dire situation?"* but I didn't care.

Later on, even these drinks would become rare. From their perspective, they'd just been summoned to the waiting area, but I'd returned to a world that was still relatively intact after 20 years of struggle.

"Ahhh."

After having gone without for so long, the Ceylon Tea tasted heavenly. It was so good that I quickly downed a can and bought another. After gulping down four in a row, people stared at me in disbelief.

[Lee Jae-hee: ...What's up with this guy? He's drinking it like it's the best thing he's ever had.]

[Jung So-hee: Ceylon Tea? Such sacrilege!]

[Park Ye-dam: The kid knows how to drink.]

[Sim Ah-ryeon: Where am I? Who am I?]

[Lee Baek: What's with this geezer's taste?]

Hmm. Lee Baek hasn't changed since the first run.

Even after listening again, nothing stood out.

Mind Reading was a double-edged sword in that way. Right before

using it, I would feel a rush of excitement, wondering what fascinating thoughts people might be hiding. But after listening, I'd be disappointed, thinking, *That's it?* Hence, ironically, Mind Reading was the most fun right before activation.

There was nothing I could do about it. At this point, asking the original members to have a fresh mindset was unreasonably greedy of me—

[Oh Dok-seo: Wow. The Busan Station waiting area. I've seen this in a novel! Soon, the Tutorial Fairy will appear and blow off the head of the guy who swears.]

I guess not.

"*Puha!*"

I spat out my fifth Ceylon Tea. The drink, glowing like the sunset, splashed across the air, painting the world with its golden hue, and the people caught off guard gasped as they witnessed the setting sun race past seven hours ahead of schedule.

[Lee Jae-hee: Ack! Gross!]

[Jung So-hee: Disgusting. Horrible.]

[Park Ye-dam: Ugh, filthy guy.]

[Sim Ah-ryeon: Where am I? Who am I?]

[Lee Baek: Fucking hell, what a pig.]

The original members—who were always at odds over personality, origin, ideology, and beliefs—had finally come to an agreement. They accomplished the impossible, but at this moment, that didn't matter.

I whipped my head around.

[Oh Dok-seo: Let's see. The novel didn't have many illustrations, so it's hard to recognize people... Oh, but I can tell that guy is Lee Baek! Kim Tae-yang! Wow. That guy made the waiting area stage a

nightmare...]

There she was.

Oh Dok-seo. A person who always wore a cynical expression and seemed aloof and detached throughout the 555 cycles. Her distinctive features included lifeless eyes, a hoodie, and a cap.

A frequent victim who often died in the Busan Station waiting area unless I intervened. For some reason, she was checking out her surroundings with an almost lively glimmer in her usually dead eyes.

[Oh Dok-seo: Well, no doubt about it. This is the prologue stage from the story I binged last night, *Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint*.]

Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint? Prologue?

[Oh Dok-seo: So, what's my ability? Status Window. Hey, Status Window. ...Status? Open? Ability Window? Skill Window? Wow. Not even a hologram pop-up when it's the latest trend? This is straight-up Status Window discrimination.]

Latest trend? What was she rambling about?

"You fucking asshole! What the hell are you talking about?"

"Ho-ho."

Whoops. I'd focused so much on Oh Dok-seo's thoughts that I couldn't stop Seo Gyu's head from being blown off.

'Sorry, Seo Gyu!'

Fairy Number 264 scored a kill for the first time in ages. As blood splattered everywhere, Sim Ah-ryeon and many others screamed.

Of course, all I felt was, *"Wow, how long has it been?"* rather than shock.

[Oh Dok-seo: Oh. The Tutorial Head-Blowing Man cliché, huh? They do all these old tropes but no Status Window?]

Oh Dok-seo wasn't fazed either.

She didn't seem shocked at all. I thought calling Seo Gyu the "Head-Blowing Man" was harsh, but oh well.

[Oh Dok-seo: Anyway. The only important thing in the Busan Station waiting area is how early you can grab the elixir hidden in Haeundae.]

How did she know there was an elixir in Haeundae?

[Oh Dok-seo: And the only Awakeners worth paying attention to in the waiting area is Uehara Shino. She's treated like garbage now, but she'll later awaken as a high-level alchemist...]

How did she know that?

[Oh Dok-seo: Uehara's the opposite of Sim Ah-ryeon. She's only useful until the prologue stage, but she'll be handy as a healer until then... Oh, there she goes. Right, she's a coward.]

How did she… Wait, Sim Ah-ryeon became useless later?

She was actually at her lowest now, but once SG Net was established, she'd rise like a phoenix to greet the vast expanse of the NET world.

There wasn't any time to nitpick the details. Oh Dok-seo kept spilling one fascinating thought after another like golden honey dripping from a Himalayan beehive.

[Oh Dok-seo: I should start buttering up Uehara Shino. Tsk. Breaking canon and creating an unstoppable original character isn't my style... but since I don't even have a Status Window, can't be picky, right?]

Breaking canon? Unstoppable original character?

As I said before, at this point, I had no knowledge of web novels. It was Oh Dok-seo over there who preached this hobby to me, so it was only natural that her thoughts sounded like a foreign language to me.

[Oh Dok-seo: But even Uehara Shino is only my second priority.]

[Oh Dok-seo: If there's one person to focus on here, it's definitely that man.]

At that moment, Oh Dok-seo turned to me. Sensing her gaze, I quickly looked away, and unaware that I was watching, she stared directly at me.

[Oh Dok-seo: There he is.]

[Oh Dok-seo: The protagonist of this world. Codename: Undertaker.]

?

[Oh Dok-seo: He's better-looking than I expected… wait, maybe the cover art was better? Hmm. Is he better in person? Hard to say. He resembles the cover a bit.]

??

[Oh Dok-seo: But don't be fooled by his looks. The Undertaker has experienced regression multiple times. He has no mercy or empathy.]

[Oh Dok-seo: He lives only for revenge against monsters, a typical regressor with nothing but hatred, and he's probably furious right now because he lost Dang Seo-rin to the Ten Legs in the last cycle.]

[Oh Dok-seo: He's just a madman. If he senses anything off, he might kill me on the spot. Better be careful around him.]

???

No empathy... hatred... fury? What?

Excuse me, but who is this person?

Dang Seo-rin hadn't died to the Ten Legs in the previous cycle. It was a formidable wall at first, but after around 20 runs, I could beat it in five minutes.

Could this person be…?

'Does she know the past me?'

That's when it happened.

[Oh Dok-seo: Hey, mister.]

"Hey, mister."

The telepathic and actual voices overlapped.

Oh Dok-seo's finger pointed at me. There were only about ten people left in the Busan Station waiting area, and except for me, everyone had huddled together.

"Mister, come over here. The fairy's made a fountain of blood, and everyone's bailed. We'd better stick together at least. Don't you agree?"

"Fairy Number 264 did nothing wrong! The seniors gave the wrong guidelines! In fact, Fairy Number 264 is a victim..."

"Oh, shut up. The adults are talking. Why are you interrupting?"

"Eek."

At the center of the survivors, Oh Dok-seo stood boldly with her chest puffed out like a leader.

Her audacity in challenging the Tutorial Fairy, whom everyone else feared, must have made a strong impression. In reality, Fairy Number 264 was just following the guidelines and felt no malice toward humans (except the bourgeoisie), and so the fairy quickly retreated.

"So? Are you coming over here or not, mister?"

"....."

Oh Dok-seo mumbled to me internally.

[Oh Dok-seo: Come on. Please, come over here. Without you, we're

all dead! I know you lost your first love and the only guild leader you ever followed, Dang Seo-rin, and I know you hate monsters and the world sucks, but please save us!]

Honestly, I didn't fully understand half of what this kid was saying, and I had no idea what she had gotten wrong.

But one thing was clear.

'If I follow her around, this run is going to be a blast.'

There was another reason too—not just for the thrill but also because I might be able to use her to hunt down a certain bizarre sort of creature. But that's a story for another time.

Anyway.

I called up my memory of my ancient self from ages past, more than a thousand years ago. What expressions, glances, and tone had I used back then?

"...I won't follow you."

Was it something like that? Should be. Probably.

Even in my long regressor life, it was my first time acting the role of myself. It felt quite unusual, to say the least.

"I'll simply observe you."

"Ah. Well, do whatever you want." Oh Dok-seo snickered dismissively.

After looting a Silver Bell from the souvenir shop, I read her thoughts again.

[Oh Dok-seo: Wow, his voice is terrifying. Gives me chills... But escaping the Busan Station waiting area is nearly impossible without the protagonist. I'll have to butter him up somehow.]

Hmm.

She was certainly an interesting character.

Footnotes:

Chapter 25

The Prophet II

Sinnoa

Following Oh Dok-seo brought with it a minor problem.

No, it wasn't so minor. It caused a significant issue. And it wasn't because of me.

[Oh Dok-seo: Alright! Cleared the Tutorial!]

It wasn't a problem with Oh Dok-seo either.

She wasn't bad for a novice, despite my modest assistance (of course, I'm just being humble here, it was hardly modest). She broke through the Busan Station Gate in just 48 hours.

For context, I first cleared Busan Station in my third run. To put it differently, I had lived and died in Busan during my first and second runs. I could proudly say I was more of a Busan local than most, and if my hometown weren't actually Seoul, I could've earned the "True Busan Man" badge.

Even on my third run, it took me a whole week to clear it. So for Oh Dok-seo to cut it down to 48 hours proved she had great potential.

[Oh Dok-seo: Even if the protagonist helped, I still finished this in two days? Oh Dok-seo, who are you? I can handle fashion, hip-hop, and slaying monsters, so is there anything I can't do? I’m starting to scare myself...]

Let's just let her youthful bravado slide.

By now, the Busan Station waiting area was a mysterious place. It wasn't just teeming with talent, it was overflowing.

‘An unknown entity like Go Yuri with the potential to destroy the

world, the enigmatic Seo Gyu with his community-managing skills, the trouble-seeking Sim Ah-ryeon, the MacGuffin Uehara Shino, me, the Undertaker who regresses infinitely, and now even Oh Dok-seo?'

It was truly fearsome. A treasure trove of talent ripe for the taking.

The ancient city of Peixian from the Chu-Han Contention, where Liu Bang recruited farmers and Xiao He was sorting bureaucratic paperwork while Fan Kuai butchered pigs, wasn't worth envying. But I digress…

Anyway, Oh Dok-seo's adventure itself went smoothly.

But if it wasn't my problem or hers, it meant a third-party intruder had intervened in this lighthearted party.

"…?"

This mysterious entity walked briskly, glancing back at me occasionally. Every time she did, she would tilt her head and smile sweetly.

I almost fell for her. If I hadn't learned that this entity would smile just like that even while destroying the world, I might have confessed my love to her like a true man.

This entity was Go Yuri.

'I'm going crazy.'

The one who wielded the red flash. If you tagged her, she'd fall under #brainwash, #cognitionmanipulation, #affectioncontrol, and #CthulhuMythos.

That's right. Go Yuri had also joined Oh Dok-seo's party. All of us were OG members who started in the Busan Station waiting area, so this was bound to happen eventually.

In just one early-stage party, we had both a being who would make my life amusing and one who could utterly destroy it. Was this even possible? Of course it was— Busan Station waiting area, what a

crazy starting point.

At that moment, pink hair fluttered right in front of me.

“Undertaker, right?”

My heart skipped a beat.

For reference, Go Yuri was still actively using [Perception Manipulation], [Affection Control], and [Impression Brainwashing]. All kinds of people had already gathered around her, vying for her favor. But she pushed away all those sycophants and approached me directly.

A chill ran down my spine. “ ...What do you want?”

One thing that was lucky for me was that I was playing the 'coolest regressor in the world.' Time to keep up the poker face.

I tried to think of all the despair I felt as the world ended, the betrayal I felt when Old Man Scho ran off alone, and the sadness I felt when losing Dang Seo-rin for the first time… Anything that would help me summon negative emotions.

Thanks to that, my face was convincingly unpleasant. Unpleasant Level 5.

“Ah, no, it's nothing important.”

Go Yuri wasn't fazed.

“I was just curious about what kind of person you are. You were calm when people died and monsters appeared in the waiting area.”

She had been spying on me?

If my heart had sweat glands, I'd have been dripping with cold sweat. Like the martial arts saying to beware the elderly and children, my life motto was always to be wary of pink hair.

I decided to up my unpleasantness. Unpleasant Level 6.

“I'm not interested in you. So don't concern yourself with me.”

“Do you like Ceylon Tea? It's my favorite drink.”

“……”

This was underhanded.

Was this the power of [Perception Manipulation]? She naturally tried to raise my affection level like it was nothing.

But I, the Undertaker, was no pushover. Honestly, my heart did skip a beat, but I interpreted that as a sign of a heart attack. In other words, I'd die if I let this slide.

No choice. Unpleasant Level 7!

“You're annoying. Get lost.”

“Hyaaah.”

Hyah? Hee-yaaah?

Did she just smile at me with her eyes?

“Do you realize that while talking to me, you've never even looked in my direction?”

“Shut up. Do you not understand the meaning of ‘get lost’? Either you're ignorant or you're dismissing me. If it's the former, you're foolish. If it's the latter, you're oblivious.”

“Mr. Undertaker, you're an interesting person.”

“……”

“Let's get along from now on. My name is Go Yuri. Just call me Yuri.”

After saying this, Go Yuri walked off first. Her shadow, with her hands clasped behind her back, was humming a tune.

It seemed like she had taken an interest in me. My intentions had

yielded the opposite result.

‘Next time I encounter Go Yuri, instead of being unpleasant, I should act like a drunk gambler.’

To give a little spoiler: even changing my strategy was useless.

“Forgetting your sorrows with alcohol and letting go through gambling—you're someone who knows what it means to live life to the fullest!”

That was the crazy response she gave.

There was only one way to handle Go Yuri. Don't let her notice you in the first place.

Someone might wonder why an infinite regressor was so afraid of Go Yuri. But for regressors, death isn't the scariest thing. Ignorance is.

Think about it. The opponent is an S-class cognition manipulator, the final boss of mental viruses. Could you trust any knowledge gained from approaching Go Yuri? What if that knowledge was already tainted by brainwashing and manipulation? And what would Go Yuri do if she discovered I was a regressor?

For instance:

“Then let me ask you this. Did you think I wasn't brainwashing you from the start...? Oh ho ho. You’re simply hypnotized into believing you've regressed when you're actually under my control. From now on, I'll reign supreme.”

What if something like that happened?

Among all the Awakeners I knew, the one with the strongest mental fortitude was the Saintess. Even she was defeated by Go Yuri. Until I obtained the 'shield' to resist cognition manipulation, the mental firewall, it would be wise not to associate with Go Yuri.

But apparently, I wasn't the only one who knew little about her.

[Oh Dok-seo: Hmm. Who's she? Pink hair?]

Oh Dok-seo glanced this way. She probably thought she was sneaky, but my senses picked it up.

[Oh Dok-seo: Was there a character like her in the previous cycle? Her hair color stands out for an extra. But I can't help but feel like she leaves a really good impression. Probably older than me. Maybe I could befriend her.]

Even Oh Dok-seo didn't know about Go Yuri.

This fact held a significant hint.

By observing Oh Dok-seo, it became clear to me that she'd read "a certain novel." Surprisingly, the protagonist of that novel was me, the Undertaker.

What wasn't clear was whether it should even be called a novel. It was more like my documentary or biography. Oh Dok-seo knew too much for it to be anything else.

And yet...

'She only knows the really old stuff.'

It was like reading a novel that updated at a snail's pace.

For instance:

[Oh Dok-seo: Okay, got the elixir from Haeundae! Wow, getting the elixir right after clearing the Busan Station Gate. This is super fast progress. Maybe I've got some talent.]

[Oh Dok-seo: With this, it'll be possible to defeat the terrifying final boss... Ten Legs.]

Ten Legs wasn't the final boss. In fact, it wasn't even a mid-game boss. Its time of freely exploring restaurants across the Korean Peninsula lasted until around the 20th run at most. After that, it

became a delicacy itself.

[Oh Dok-seo: I need to join up with Dang Seo-rin somehow. She's the most reliable guild leader among those bastards. If her Cursed Song Incantation activates properly, she's the strongest DPS.]

Dang Seo-rin wasn't the strongest DPS. At the very beginning, she might've looked like one, but her true strength emerged in the role of a supporter. As Old Man Scho and I became stronger with each passing run, Dang Seo-rin gradually withdrew from the front lines to support us.

In short:

[Oh Dok-seo: The protagonist has to withstand the Ten Legs assault, but it'll be tough alone. Should I help him out after all?]

Oh Dok-seo didn't even know Old Man Scho existed.

The conclusion was simple.

‘The novel Oh Dok-seo read only explored my life up to the 4th run.’

In other words, it was an unfinished autobiography. A half-written novel. A story where not all chapters were serialized yet. An ongoing series by a slow author.

It was truly a unique ability.

If it had a name, it would be... [Author's Nudge].

But assuming Oh Dok-seo's novel only summarized the first four runs of my life explained everything. It also clarified why she treated me like a psychopath.

‘Well, I guess I was a little edgy back then before I met Old Man Scho.’

Of course, I wasn't as much of a psychopath as she believed. I simply preemptively separated the heads from the bodies of troublemakers, threatened to kill everyone if things didn't go my

way, and wouldn't be satisfied unless I profited the most from any event... just your standard web novel regressor personality?

[Oh Dok-seo: Wow. Look at that terrifying expression when I said I'd join Dang Seo-rin. This madman, once he chooses to trust someone, he treats them like a real person while seeing others like me as less than human. It's heartbreaking!]

Hmm. A conversation was clearly needed.

I quietly observed Oh Dok-seo for about four months. In the end, I decided she was trustworthy enough.

“Oh Dok-seo.”

“Huh? What's up, all of a sudden? I'm surprised you spoke to me first.”

“I'd like to talk. Somewhere quiet, just the two of us.”

I approached Oh Dok-seo while the party members were away. I double-checked to make sure Go Yuri was gone, so now it was safe.

[Oh Dok-seo: Eek! Shit, he's going to bury me without anyone knowing!]

Apparently, Oh Dok-seo didn't feel safe at all.

“Yeah? Sure. A good party leader should listen to their members.”

Well, I wasn't sure about that, but at least she was good at schooling her expression. Despite freaking out internally, she chewed her gum with a poker face.

We went into a local café with a sign reading “Closed until August 20.” Today was October 25. The interior was neat and tidy. I cautiously sat down, thinking of the owner who couldn't organize their heart even after arranging their belongings.

“Alright... what's this about?” Oh Dok-seo looked at me with a calm face, determined eyes, and a fearful heart.

I disabled [Mind Reading] for a moment. It wasn't suitable for serious conversations between people. “First, I'd advise you not to be too shocked.”

“Huh? What are you going to say?”

“Let's get straight to the point. Oh Dok-seo, I know you read a novel you believe to be this world's original work.”

“……”

Tick, tick.

The wall clock, still working because the battery hadn't died yet, diligently ticked away. Unfortunately, it wasn't one of those cuckoo clocks.

Oh Dok-seo's jaw dropped. “What?”

“By the way, the way I'm speaking now is to match your expectations. I'd prefer to return to my normal tone, if you don't mind. This is out of my comfort zone.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Hold on! Hold on!” Oh Dok-seo practically screamed. “A novel? What novel? I have no idea what you're talking about!”

“Of course, it's the *Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint* that you claim to have read. You might not know, but I have an ability called [Mind Reading]. It converts surface-level thoughts into language and lets the user hear them.”

“Huh? That's a lie, there's no such ability in the original work... Ah.” Oh Dok-seo blinked. “Was that some kind of leading question?”

“No, it's true. I also know you think I'm half-psychopath.”

“I-I never said that!” she denied with a trembling voice, yet still firmly maintaining her innocence. She had the brazenness of a politician.

After ten minutes of conversation later, we cleared up our misunderstandings—or rather, her one-sided misconceptions. Her expressions varied wildly as we spoke.

She muttered in disbelief, “What? This is a scam.”

“A scam?”

“In novels, regressors never reveal their secrets to the protagonist... Uh, I'm the protagonist in this case. Anyway, they usually hide it. But it was obvious from the moment we were summoned to the Busan Station. This doesn't follow novel logic!”

“Sorry, but the world isn't a novel.”

“It was until just now!” She slammed her hand down on the table. “And what's with your tone! Where's the Undertaker who would kill his companions at the drop of a hat?”

“Honestly, that was so long ago for me. Imagine hearing, ‘You were such a good kid when you were five,’ when you're fifty. Would you relate?”

“Huh? That long?”

“That long.”

“How many runs have you had, from your perspective?”

“Five hundred fifty-five runs.”

“Five hundred fifty-five?” Oh Dok-seo screeched like a cuckoo clock. “What's up with that number?! Not fifty-five, but five hundred fifty-five? Even if the Ten Legs is tough, couldn't you have killed it by then? What are you, neglecting your duties?”

“Ah, the Ten Legs isn’t the final boss. It's actually the weakest.”

She went pale. “The Ten Legs who turned Dang Seo-rin, the Great Witch and Guild Leader, into fried chicken is the weakest?”

“I've been grilling them on skewers lately.”

“Bullshit... Wait a second. Undertaker, how old are you?”

Hmm.

I cautiously answered, “Kid, age is meaningless for a regressor.”

“No, no, no. It’s not meaningless. Let's see, even if we assume ten years per run... 5,550 years old?”

“.....”

I pled the fifth.

Not because I didn't have anything to say, but because saying it would only worsen my case. Like the fact that the average duration of each run was longer than ten years.

She studied my expression with open horror. “What?! You're an old geezer!”

“.....”

“No way, the protagonist I thought was so cool is actually an old man!”

And thus, "Old Man" became the way Oh Dok-seo referred to me.

I felt a little down.

Such cruelty.

Kid, I hope you live to my age too.

Footnotes:

Chapter 26

The Prophet III

Sinnoa

From the day I came out as a regressor, my relationship with Oh Dok-seo rapidly improved.

I also became more comfortable because I stopped pretending to be an insufferable cool guy (which was fun, but ridiculous), and Dok-seo, no longer feeling the need to guard against a ticking time bomb psychopath who could snap at any moment, also felt more at ease.

“Kid, let's go.”

“Hmm? Where all of a sudden?”

“Gangnam.”

A little later, I went out to Seoul with Dok-seo, just the two of us. Originally, there were few parks south of the Han River, making the neighborhood a rather poor place for walks. However, since the residents had relocated to the afterlife, it had become quite pleasant.

-Gik?-

Ten Legs stood dumbfounded amidst the empty, abandoned buildings. Even after the residents disappeared, it remained like a true caretaker, guarding the apartments.

-Giiii!-

In the eyes of this caretaker, we must have looked suspicious. It immediately lashed out its tentacles, charging toward us. Given how suspicious the times had become, this excessive response was inevitable.

In fact, its judgment wasn't wrong. What else could one call someone who had gone through hundreds of regressions and a person who had read this world like a novel, other than suspicious?

Dok-seo screamed and hid behind me. “Are you crazy? That’s Ten Legs! You need to gather every Awakener in Korea to deal with it, so why are you alone...?!”

“Secret Technique, Octopus Sashimi.”

I swung my sword.

Ten Legs was difficult to subjugate due to its terrifying regenerative powers. No matter how many tentacles were cut, they quickly grew back. The condition that both hearts had to be destroyed simultaneously wasn't easy either.

In other words, from the moment I mastered sashimi cuts faster than its could regenerate, Ten Legs was nothing more than live octopus on a chopping board.

After my half-dozen strikes, Ten Legs and the abandoned buildings around it collapsed. Its screams were buried beneath the rumble of crumbling structures.

When all the buildings had fallen, everything went quiet.

“Oh...” Dok-seo mumbled blankly. “What, is it over? Is that really it?”

“Yeah, the final boss you talked about is dead, so now the world is at peace. Go celebrate.”

“Damn... You really got strong, huh?” she looked back at me with a hint of admiration. “But even with that power, you can't stop the apocalypse?”

“I can’t. Ten Legs is only strong in terms of regeneration. It doesn't have annoying traits like immunity to physical attacks or magical attacks. It's really the weakest.”

“No way...” her expression hardened.

While she had already believed me, this incident made her completely trust me.

Oh Dok-seo disbanded the party she had carefully nurtured. It seemed unnecessary, but she was firm.

“No matter how much power I gathered, I wouldn't have been able to fight Ten Legs, but you destroyed it on your own. My party is meaningless then, right? I should switch strategies to support you as much as possible.”

Whether her rationale was right or wrong was a secondary matter. Thanks to her, I found a good reason to part ways with Go Yuri.

Upon hearing the party disbandment order, Go Yuri looked incredibly disappointed (at least, that’s how it seemed to me).

“I wanted to be with you and Undertaker... Do we really have to part like this?”

“Oh, Yuri unnie could still... Gaaagh!”[1]

I pinched Dok-seo’s arm as she was about to mutter something out of line. I had repeatedly explained to her how scary Go Yuri was when alone, but when the time to break up finally arrived, she got brainwashed all over again. Only then did she snap out of it.

“Huh. S-sorry, Yuri unnie! I’ve agreed to become his disciple for a while! This old man insists on only taking one disciple, so I won’t be able to go with you!”

“Hmm.”

Dok-seo bowed her head deeply as if she felt truly sorry.

Go Yuri calmly studied her. Then she turned to look at me. Was I overreacting to think I glimpsed the shadow of red flesh in her bright red eyes?

“It can't be helped. The master-disciple relationship is as important as that of parent and child. It's not something outsiders should interfere with.”

Go Yuri spoke in a way that appealed to me while staring directly at my face without a single twitch.

“I’ll take my leave, then.”

“Are you really...?”

“Yes, even if we part now, I feel like our connection won't be severed. We’ll surely meet again someday. Despite the state of the world, I hope you both find happiness.”

Go Yuri took two steps back and bowed gracefully like a noblewoman. Then, without adding another word, she walked down the hill alone. Soon, her figure disappeared down the slope.

“Haaaah—”

Dok-seo slumped, her whole body melting as the tension left her. Even her cap, which was practically her main body, slid halfway off.

“So, you were telling the truth...” she mumbled. “What the hell was that? I didn’t think much of it before we talked, but then when we got going, I suddenly thought, ‘Why am I being so cold to Yuri unnie?’”

“She’s always like that, but it's a relief she acknowledged the importance of a master-disciple relationship.”

“Hmm? What are you saying? She told me that even if it's a master-disciple relationship, it's dangerous for a man and woman to wander around alone together and that I should be careful.”

“...?”

“...?”

We looked at each other, then quickly turned our heads to the hill Go Yuri had descended. Since we saw her going down, she should have been climbing up the opposite slope by now.

Cicadas chirped.

No matter how long we waited, Go Yuri's figure didn't appear.

We wandered through the crumbling world.

I didn't want to describe that collapse in detail. Some astute readers might have already noticed that I intentionally avoided such descriptions.

Thanks to the Saintess's efforts, South Korea was relatively secure. However, her reach only extended to the Awakeners. She couldn't control the majority of ordinary people.

Looting, arson, violence... People who had lost their loved ones to violence filled the emptiness by adopting abandoned pets. Political factions became military fiefdoms, and the military became political. The fingers of the impoverished, the first carrier of an unprecedented epidemic—misfortune piled up endlessly.

I only handled the misfortunes I could manage.

Unbearable misfortunes were transferred to others' hearts. I'm not playing the regressor just to spread epidemics.

"One of the novels I read—the one where you're the main character, *Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint*—had just about 30 chapters released."

One day, Oh Dok-seo said this while casually wiping what looked like blood from her face. Actually, it wasn't blood but a petal from the red-flowered Udumbara, a parasitic organism of a vicious epidemic. There will be an opportunity to mention it in detail in the next episode.

"Thirty chapters?"

"Yeah. I never read any novel shorter than that, no matter how interesting it looks. You never know when an author might stop writing. I think I started reading it maybe two or three days before the Seoul Gate broke?"

Oh Dok-seo was similar to me in nature. We often talked more about our hobbies than about misfortune.

“Where did you find that novel?”

“Just from my usual web novel platform. I noticed it was already favorited. It’s like adding something to your bookmarks.”

“...So there's an author writing *Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint*?”

“I don’t know about that,” Dok-seo said, chewing her gum. “To be honest, I don’t remember adding it, but my favorites list easily exceeds 200, so I just thought I’d forgotten about it. But now that I think about it, maybe it was favorited without me knowing... Ah.”

While walking through Onyang, a large stray dog approached us. Dok-seo embraced it. Our two-person party had gained a new member.

“I think it's your ability.”

“Ability?”

A few days later, as we secretly stocked up on dog food in a department store taken over by a guild (luckily, the pet corner had little security), I spoke.

“There’s someone named Seo Gyu. His ability is creating and running an online community. Since Awakeners' abilities vary widely, it wouldn’t be strange if yours manifests in the form of ‘reading novels.’”

“But I already know my ability. It’s Shield Generation.”

“You're a multi-ability user.”

“Huh? Really? Isn't that super rare?”

“It is. But in life, you realize that a 1 percent chance isn't as unlikely as it seems.”

“Oh, I see... Hmm, so I actually have another ability that takes the

form of reading novels...”

“For convenience, I’ve named it Publication Demanding.”

“Publication Demanding...”

Woof, Darkness (the dog's name) barked. Its sound resonated through the darkened department store.

“Oh, shush!” Dok-seo tried to quiet it, but we had already been noticed by a patroller.

“Oh no, danger...”

“Let's run.”

Wiping out the guild occupying the department store would've been easy, but they would later become a valuable ally in fighting for humanity. We quickly fled.

Woof! Woof!

Darkness, cradled in Dok-seo's arms, barked happily.

A few months later, on the way back from a guild coalition meeting, Dok-seo asked me, “Isn't my ability more like Prophecy than Publication Demanding?”

“Prophecy?”

“Yeah, knowing your life story is practically the same as foretelling the future. You know how prophets in novels see the future as vivid images like in movies? In my case, it's manifested in the form of web novels, which I'm most familiar with. Doesn't that make sense?”

“Hmm.”

That certainly made sense. But if Oh Dok-seo's ability was Prophecy, that left some questions still yet to be answered.

“Then why was there no sign of anything strange until the 555th

cycle?”

“Hmm?”

“You wouldn’t know, Dok-seo, but from my perspective, this cycle is highly unusual. In your terms, it's like an extra character suddenly awakened to the Prophecy ability.”

“Your delivery’s a bit off, but still, it’s strange.” Oh Dok-seo stroked her chin. “Maybe it’s just that 555 is a special number. It's my name after all.”

“Regressions aren’t a numbers game. That can’t be the reason.”

“Hmm. What could it be, really? Why didn’t I approach you until the 555th cycle…?” Oh Dok-seo tilted her head.

Our questions were finally answered on a day both distant and near, when the 555th cycle ended in failure and became the 556th.

[Oh Dok-seo: Wow, the Busan Station waiting room. I read this in the novel! Soon, the Tutorial Fairy will appear and blow the head off that man who says ‘You fucking asshole’... Huh? *Huh?!* Why’s the protagonist suddenly coming toward me?]

This time, I approached Oh Dok-seo first. This was, of course, to completely stonewall Go Yuri against interfering.

The unexpected event startled Dok-seo. But just like in the previous cycle, she quickly trusted me after seeing how easily I cut down Ten Legs. She also revealed something surprising.

“But old man, is it okay for you to be hanging out with me like this?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“That, um... What’s his name…? Schopenhauer? Anyway, shouldn’t you team up with that Swordmaster old man?”

My eyes widened. “You know Old Man Scho? How?”

“Yeah? Of course. He’s in the novel.”

In the previous cycle, Oh Dok-seo hadn’t mentioned Old Man Scho. Though I had told her there was another regressor, it was just a side story for her, having only read up to the fourth cycle in the novel. I met Old Man Scho for the first time in the sixth cycle. Yet now, Oh Dok-seo brought him up first.

This was clear evidence.

‘The novel that Oh Dok-seo read... had more chapters?’

I looked at her intently. “Dok-seo, how many chapters were released in the *Omniscient Regressor’s Viewpoint* that you read?”

“Oh? Uh, maybe... Thirty-two? Thirty-three? Something like that.”

“...!”

That confirmed it.

As the cycles progressed, the ‘novel’ that Oh Dok-seo read gained more chapters. While it had only reached up to 30 chapters in the previous cycle, this time, at least two more had been added.

The standard for this ‘increasing serialization’ was as arbitrary as a peddler's whim. Sometimes, a single chapter would be added over 60 cycles, while other times, two chapters were added after only one. It was completely random.

Further exploration was needed to determine the exact criteria for adding chapters, but there was one thing I was sure of.

‘This kid is following my life’s track.’

A shiver ran through me.

With a slightly slower step, at a pace slightly behind mine, yet still at a consistent speed, Oh Dok-seo was following me.

Before reaching 30 chapters, Oh Dok-seo wouldn't have read the novel. She had said she never read novels shorter than that. So she only read the novel for the 'first time' when it reached 30 chapters. That was during the 555th cycle.

Dok-seo's guess was right. Her ability was Prophecy. She just hadn't realized it and had wasted it through 555 cycles.

'But it's not a perfect prophecy.'

According to Greek mythology, the god and prophet Prometheus had a younger brother, Epimetheus. Unlike Prometheus, whose name meant "forethought," his brother Epimetheus meant "afterthought." The brothers became the origins of 'prologue' and 'epilogue.'

Oh Dok-seo was Epimetheus, who had awakened to the prophecy.

Her prophecy wasn't quick. She was slower than any other prophet, following the tracks I had set long before, with a time lag of about 5,000 years.

Yet, despite this, Oh Dok-seo was steadily following my every step.

When I crossed the 555th cycle, she reached her fifth.

When I crossed the 560th cycle, she would be at her eleventh.

'So someday—really far in the future, Oh Dok-seo will also reach the 555th cycle, won't she?'

That the story wasn't fiction.

That what seemed like tales from another world were actually stories from her own.

That she would meet me, the protagonist, travel the world with me, deal with warlords, and adopt a dog.

All this would someday be serialized in Oh Dok-seo's novel, and she would read it.

I realized this future and trembled slightly. It felt like a ray of light had pierced the world, where destruction seemed inevitable.

"...Old man, what's going on?" Dok-seo tilted her head at my reaction.

Suddenly, my right forearm itched.

Dang Seo-rin's last words echoed in my head.

"You have dreams similar to mine."

"You're also moving forward like me, repairing the tracks in this broken world, one by one. The tracks the Ten Legs destroyed, the abandoned lines that other monsters left broken and torn. If we keep fixing them step by step, then eventually, the tracks will connect from one station to another."

"Then other people can walk along those tracks too."

Yes, in the end, Dang Seo-rin was right. What she had muttered then was just a hope, and I had accepted her last words because I, too, shared that same hope. But now, after more than 5,000 years had passed, reality had finally caught up to our hopes.

'In that case.'

I stilled the trembling in my heart.

'I'll wait for this kid to catch up to me.'

Until when? Well, until Oh Dok-seo arrives at the station named the 555th cycle.

That cycle was like Pandora's box. When Oh Dok-seo realizes that the 'novel' she read is actually the tracks laid out in reality, this world would fundamentally change.

As a regressor, a new joy, the joy of waiting, had been added to my life.

And so, I waited.

The 556th cycle ended, then the 557th.

“Hey! Old man! You can’t abandon Old Man Scho like that!” Oh Dok-seo shouted when we reached the 581st cycle.

She must have read the latest chapters where Old Man Scho had left on an indefinite ‘vacation.’

I smirked. “Who did I abandon?”

Nothing could have been more unfair. I abandon Old Man Scho? No, he had abandoned me while I never once gave up on him. She was confusing the sequence of events, the perpetrator and the victim.

But interpreting a novel and commenting on its contents is always up to the reader.

As new chapters were added and the cycles progressed, Oh Dok-seo kept leaving me ‘comments.’

“Wow. How do you take down the Udumbara boss?”

“No way! All the Constellations were lying?”

“Community-building ability? What kind of trash ability is that...?”

“Sim Ah-ryeon is a complete troll... I could never get along with someone like that.”

“Online game weirdness? Wow, seriously. There was such a gimmick? It was never mentioned in the original.”

“...What’s up with Go Yuri? Is she even human? Isn’t she a monster?”

Like a reader leaving comments for the author, Oh Dok-seo screamed and complained. Not that I was the author or anything, but I generously accepted her comments. Even if I was still childish at over 5,000 years old, at least I knew how to let others step within my boundaries.

‘Keep following, Dok-seo.’

Hurry up.

You may be slower than me, but your steps are quicker than anyone else's.

Tread my failures, my guidebooks, and my life story. Though my life was originally for others, it’s now also for you.

Of course, not all this waiting was fun.

Finally, Oh Dok-seo read up to the 52nd cycle, when I founded the Sixth International Convenience Store with the fairies. From then on, the way she looked at me fundamentally changed.

“Old man.”

“What is it?”

“You know, you’re a total psycho.”

“……”

“And could you cut down on the SG Net talk? And take it easy on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms.”

“Dok-seo, I have my reasons for bringing up the Three Kingdoms threads. If I don’t, a certain anomaly…”

“Enough. The way you talk doesn’t match your age. Or maybe it does? How old are you, anyway?”

“……”

I invoked my right to remain silent and quietly drank my coffee. There was no point trying to salvage my tarnished image when I knew better than anyone that it was beyond saving.

That’s right.

This might sound ridiculous, but sometimes, just sometimes, I missed the days when Oh Dok-seo shivered, mistaking me for a

cold-hearted regressor.

That brat.

You should try growing old like me someday, brat.

Footnotes:

1 - Unnie is a word used by younger women to refer to older sister figures.

Chapter 27

The New Buddha I

Sinnoa

As I mentioned before, there were numerous boss-level monsters that emerged around the globe besides Ten Legs. One such example was the Meteor Shower, which rained down an endless storm of meteors from the night sky when I ran a convenience store.

Early on, "monster" was the most common term for them. However, just like the Meteor Shower, many monsters were more phenomena than living beings. As the story progressed, Awakeners began branching out into using other terms as well, like "anomaly," "fiend," "yokai," and "the lost."

In Japan, boss-level monsters were referred to as "angels." Quite the odd choice of terminology, considering they were called “demons” in the West. Later, the Puppeteer, an Awakener who had lived in Japan, explained that the term originated from a classic Japanese anime.

The Gates were similarly convoluted. Many of them didn't resemble "doors," so terms like "void," "abyss," "inferno," and "hell" were used more frequently. (In fact, distinguishing between "anomalies" and "voids" was difficult.)

Today, let's discuss one of the primary culprits behind these linguistic changes—namely, the "New Buddha.”

“Uh? Hey...”

“Huh?”

“What’s that on your head?”

That monster wasn't a living creature. More precisely, opinions were divided on whether it was living or non-living.

“That thing growing by your ear… a leaf?”

Such is the nature of viruses.

Where the virus originated remained unknown for a long time. It mostly likely stemmed from North or South Korea. Just as Busan Station’s waiting room had become a hotbed for Awakeners, the Korean Peninsula was a paradise for monsters. It’s like the world itself was balancing things out.

“Z-zombie virus!”

People panicked and flew into an uproar. Zombies are a staple of any apocalypse, after all.

When infected with the virus, the human body begins to sprout leaves or flowers. There were even cases of weeds growing on bald heads. Yet despite this peculiar occurrence, the initial response to the virus was surprisingly lukewarm.

There was a reason for that.

“No! I’m not a zombie!”

“…Huh?”

“See, I’m speaking normally! My memory’s fine, and my head’s clear! Damn, having a maple leaf under my arm does feel weird, but I don’t want to die because of it!”

Simply put, the people infected by the virus were surprisingly functional. While it turned the human body into a bizarre-looking flower pot in the blink of an eye, the virus appeared to be harmless if one could ignore its appearance.

In fact, it even came with significant benefits.

“That damn monster! It killed my mother!”

“Ah…”

“I’ll kill it, no matter what! Even if I die, I will end that monster!”

“Son...”

“Please watch over me from heaven, mother. Your unfilial son will soon follow.”

“Son!”

“Huh?”

“I'm not dead, you fool! How many times do I have to call out to you?!”

“M-mother? But your stomach is torn open...”

“Don’t know why, but I’m fine. Maybe because I had a tonic yesterday?”

People infected with the virus were hard to kill. As long as the brain wasn’t destroyed, even severed limbs and damaged organs couldn't cause death. Even if the body’s vital functions shut down, if one soaked up enough sunlight during the day and drank plenty of water, they could survive serious injuries.

With the medical system as it was, how did ordinary people react?

“God has blessed us!”

“Me too... I want to be infected too!”

People clamored to get infected. Awakeners with healing abilities were rare, and the skilled healers were busy assisting on the frontlines. In this era of uncertainty, where death was always one move away, gaining an extra "life point" for free was a godsend. It was like finding a lifeboat on the sinking Titanic.

“A zombie virus? No, it’s the blessing of life.”

“Become a plant too! You won't need to scavenge for food anymore. With sunlight and water, you can live without a care in the world.”

“This is the greatness of the New Buddha. Believe in the New Buddha, and you will be free from suffering and gain a body

capable of living in a new world."

Even cult doctrines began to sprout. The zombie virus came to be worshiped as the New Buddha. Although not related to Buddhism, its slogan "Eternal liberation from the harm of needing life in meat or grain to sustain life" resonated with people.[1]

Followers of the New Buddha shaved their heads. Unlike Buddhists, however, what grew back was not new hair for these New Buddhists but instead weeds and flowers.

They claimed that shedding human skin was part of accepting a New Buddha.

"Oh my, Lady Yellow Rose. I hope you slept well?"

"Yes, thanks to your care, Lady White Rose, I slept peacefully."

The New Buddhists adopted new dharma names, similar to Christian baptismal names. They called each other by the names of trees and flowers that grew from their heads.

They named their group Hwadan, meaning a Flower Garden of a million blooms, and called their ideology Huayan, or Flower Garland.[2] It was fitting, given their penchant for living with flowers on their heads.

"...These flower-heads are going to kill us."

Dang Seo-rin once muttered this, probably in the fifth cycle.

As the vice guild leader of the Samcheon Guild, I shrugged. "Well, in a world this chaotic, it's no wonder people want to rely on cults. Why else would the Yellow Turban Rebellion have occurred?"[3]

"So the vice guild leader continues his use of *Three Kingdoms* metaphors. It makes you sound old, so please stop."

What's wrong with *The Three Kingdoms*? All the kids love Liu Bei. Filial kids admire Cao Cao. Sun Quan is... well, liked by psychos.

Seeing my expression, Dang Seo-rin chuckled. "I get why they do it,

but these people are poison to us.”

She was right.

The New Buddha had its drawbacks. It had no ill effects on ordinary people, but about two weeks after being infected, once the flower fully bloomed, Awakeners “couldn’t use their powers.”

A deadly poison, indeed.

“Be careful too, Guild Leader. Nowadays, any criticism against them is met with accusations of ‘plant hate.’”

“But they hate Awakeners.”

Another valid point.

In the early stages of the Gate crisis, Awakeners were highly respected. But backlash against their superiority grew, and the New Buddha systematically incorporated this into their teachings.

“Awakeners are no different from monsters, as shown by how their powers vanish once they receive the New Buddha’s blessing.”

“All Awakeners should join the New Buddha faith and quickly free themselves from the sin of killing! Those who don’t oppose Huayan’s will! They shatter the peace of all life!”

“Non-killing eternal life! Eternal Huayan! Endless stability!”

A truly troublesome bunch of cultists they were.

But Dang Seo-rin was a capable guild leader. She hadn’t formed a multinational guild in Korea for nothing.

She casually solved the issue by donating a large amount of goods to the New Buddhist flower bed.

“Haha! Although Dang Seo-rin has yet to receive the Buddha’s blessing, how could we flowers mistreat one who devotes herself to the greater good?”

“Thanks.”

“Amitabha, Amitabha...”

Amitabha, my foot. If Siddhartha had seen that fake monk with the tiger lillies growing from his head, he would’ve shaved it clean with clippers.

Korea was still a relatively nice place to live. On the peninsula existed a phenomenon called the "Constellation." This phenomenon kept Awakeners relatively grounded, so their superiority couldn’t flourish. Consequently, there wasn’t much hatred toward Awakeners among ordinary people.

However, when the New Buddha spread to other countries, things changed.

The New Buddha, along with the virus, became an intellectual infection exported worldwide, and the cult shook the world.

“Everyone! What is faith?”

“Non-killing eternal life! Eternal Huayan! Endless stability!”

“That’s right! Faith is merely a name for flowers!”

“Waaaaaaa—!”

In other countries where constellations didn't exist, Awakeners’ supremacy was rampant. Governments were crippled, the rule of law collapsed, and even those keeping an eye on me were absent. The natural consequence was that Awakeners with any modicum of power wreaked havoc.

Naturally, the common folk who suffered despised the Awakeners, and the New Buddha served to justify that hatred. Thus was born a K-cult that swept the world.

There was another cult in North Korea, but its influence was limited to the northern region, so its impact paled compared to the New Buddha.

“...This is a mess. A total mess. The number of volunteer soldiers we expected from Japan has plummeted.”

Dang Seo-rin rubbed the frayed edge of her cone hat with her fingers. It was her unconscious habit that appeared whenever she was genuinely troubled.

You might’ve forgotten, but in the fifth cycle, we retreated to Busan instead of fighting the Ten Legs directly. Hundreds of Awakeners from Japan had promised to join us, but the number suddenly dwindled to 20.

“Twenty’s too few.”

“The flower-heads have expanded their influence in Japan. They’ve taken over from Kyushu to Kanto, nearly half the country, so it’s been difficult clearing out their base. I've heard that even India, Europe, and America are starting to succumb.”

“Humanity’s future looks bleak.”

The rise of cults and the bleak future were a chicken-and-egg problem.

While the Ten Legs was visible and could be defeated with enough fighting, the New Buddha had no such solution. How could a virus be eradicated? The virus labs were busy researching life-threatening epidemics, so the New Buddha virus wasn’t a priority.

Each cycle brought with it a different set of New Buddha victims. Sometimes Dang Seo-rin was infected, and other times, even the Saintess.

Whenever I suspected I was infected, I'd quickly end my life before the leaves bloomed. If my awakening ability stopped working, what if I lost my ability to regress with it? I had to die before that could happen.

Well, with Old Man Scho around, I probably wouldn’t have trouble, but better safe than sorry.

Here's what happened to the characters when they got infected and

which flowers bloomed:

Saintess: Blue hydrangea, with drops of violet dye.

Dang Seo-rin: Pitch-black violets, like the night sky enveloping a moon halo.

Seo Gyu: Unknown.

Sim Ah-ryeon: White lily of the valley, trembling amusingly.

Lee Ju-ho: Bright yellow sunflower.

Go Yuri: Unknown, presumed to be daffodil.

Old Man Scho: Unknown, presumed to be clover (not four-leaf).

Oh Dok-seo: Red spider lily, also known as "Lycoris radiata" or "higanbana." She was curious what flower would bloom for her and deliberately got infected to find out. Not normal either.

Like Old Man Scho, I didn't know what flower would bloom for me. If I suspected an infection, I'd kill myself before the flower bloomed. I did this twice.

If I had to guess, though, perhaps a pure white lily? Symbolizing innocence and purity seems fitting for me.

Anyway, the New Buddha was more troublesome than Ten Legs.

Letting them be since they didn’t harm civilians was my strategy until the 17th cycle, when it had to be corrected.

“Doc! We’re in trouble!”

Old Man Scho burst through the door. I had just fallen asleep and frowned deeply.

“Ah, what is it? Let me sleep. I’m not old like you. I still need a lot of sleep.”

“What? You damn brat... That’s not it! Outside! Look out the window, you fool!”

“What’s got you freaking out in the middle of the night...?”

I opened the window and looked up at the night sky. Then, I froze, window frame gripped in hand.

“...What the hell is that?”

Yggdrasil.

A massive red tree engulfed the expanse of the night sky.

Footnotes:

1 - The slogan here is a play on *ahimsa*, or the first precept of five in Buddhism that calls for non-harming or abstinence from taking life.

2 - The term "화엄" refers to the "Huayan" school of Buddhism, also known as the Flower Garland School. This tradition is named after the "Avatamsaka Sutra" (Flower Garland Sutra), one of the most influential Mahayana sutras. The Huayan school is known for its intricate and profound philosophy which emphasizes interpenetration and interdependence of all phenomena. In East Asian Buddhism, it has been particularly influential in China, Korea, and Japan.

3 - A peasant revolt led by Zhage Jue, who claimed to be a sorcerer capable of healing and who convinced his followers that a yellow-skied apocalypse was coming for them all. It is also the event that opens the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Chapter 28

The New Buddha II

Sinnoa

In the 17th cycle, Old Man Scho and I were running an academy. He was the principal, and I served as the vice principal. It was a ploy to easily attract and cultivate promising awakeners from various countries.

We managed this academy earnestly for a while, accumulating plenty of data on the awakeners. There will come a time to discuss this academy in more detail later.

“Gather all the graduating class and faculty!”

“I've already done that, you brat! You’re the last one!”

Old Man Scho lied. We had to roam the dormitory in our pajamas, waking up every combat team.

After preparations were complete, we set out for the rendezvous point agreed upon with other guilds for emergencies.

“Samcheon guild leader!”

“Oh, Undertaker. Swordmaster is here too?”

Along the way, other guilds joined us one after another.

Samcheon World, one of the two strongest in Korea, had quickly arrived with their elites. The sight of sixty awakeners in pointed hats, wielding staffs, looked ridiculous, but their combat strength was no joke.

“What kind of mess is this?”

“We’re still figuring out the exact cause. The Constellations are giving me hints, but I need to see it with my own eyes. That giant

tree was first spotted around 2 a.m. today.”

“Did it suddenly bloom?”

“Yeah. It grew that big in less than an hour, and it started glowing red only after it fully grew. So the report was a bit delayed.”

“...Ominous.”

“I agree.”

Then a Samcheon guild member approached Dang Seo-rin and whispered something to her.

All the guild leaders gathered at the rendezvous point looked at Dang Seo-rin. Despite Ten Legs being subjugated, she was still relied on as a leader. She sighed.

“Well, you all should see this. Bring it.”

“Yes.”

The guild members dragged something bound tightly with ropes. It was a human, or to be precise, someone dressed as a New Buddhist.

To be more exact, it was a human gnawing on their forearm and mumbling incessantly.

“Hungry... Hungry... Hungry... Hungry…”

Even tied up, the biting didn’t stop. They bent their head as much as they could and twisted their elbow backward to gnaw at their own flesh.

In the dim night, we couldn’t see it clearly at first, but now we noticed their legs and left arm had already been devoured.

The guild leaders' faces hardened.

“…What's that guy doing? Is he a zombie?”

“At least he’s a polite zombie, eating his own flesh.”

“Or maybe he's just a modest zombie.”

“What’s he mumbling?”

The live sight of someone tearing off their own flesh was grotesque, but the guild leaders who had survived till now were not easily shaken. Their expressions were grim, but their sharp eyes observed the zombie.

“From what we’ve seen so far…”

When Dang Seo-rin spoke, the guild leaders fell silent.

“All New Buddhists show the same symptoms.”

“All of them!”

A murmur of shock spread.

“Every single one?”

“Yes. Ah, I misspoke. You don’t even have to be a New Buddhist; anyone infected with the New Buddha virus, whether ordinary or awakened, is the same.”

“I knew it.”

Old Man Scho grumbled.

“There’s never been anything good that comes from cults. What, you get an extra life point if you get infected? No way such a lucky thing exists. I’ve been suspicious from the start.”

“……”

The guild leaders’ stares bore down on the German’s indiscriminate grumbling. Clearing my throat, I carefully took over the conversation.

“Samcheon Guild Leader, are these the only symptoms? Like Tami, a creature that devours itself? While intriguing, I don’t see the connection between the World Tree and these zombies.”

“What’s Tami? Anyway, watch a bit longer. Something curious will happen.”

Even while we spoke, the zombie didn’t stop feeding.

“Hungry… Hungry… Hungry… Hungry…”

Soon, the last remaining right arm fell off. The zombie stood tall like a Matryoshka doll.

“……”

The zombie raised its head and looked up at the night sky in the direction of the World Tree. Its mouth slowly opened, and a red flower sprouted from within.

The guild leaders collectively held their breath.

“My God.”

“Fuck, what…?”

Someone muttered, “Looks like a cordyceps…”

A fungus that parasitizes its host before blooming into a mushroom.

Except in this case, it wasn’t a mushroom but a brilliantly beautiful red flower.

The red flower used the zombie’s body as a flowerpot, and in the blink of an eye, it grew to the height of a one-story building. It was as if time itself had malfunctioned. We were speechless as we looked up at the crown of the red flower.

Pop, like popcorn bursting, the petals exploded.

The red flower blossomed and withered in ten seconds as if each was its own season. But unlike other trees, it didn’t shed its flowers downward.

The guild leaders were speechless.

“H-Hey. That’s…?”

“They’re floating up?”

Not falling, but ascending.

The red flower’s home was not the ground but the sky. The petals floated upward like lighter winds, fireflies, or cherry blossoms.

And it wasn’t only happening here.

The dark night sky glittered with countless red lights. They were far closer than stars, though much dimmer. Red petals scattered like the Milky Way from abandoned buildings, open fields, and all around, returning to the night sky.

“Beautiful…”

That, too, was someone’s murmur.

With the World Tree reclaiming every speck of red from the ground, it looked more magnificent than ever. Its radiance was so brilliant that both starlight and moonlight were overshadowed.

“Hmm.”

Old Man Scho let out a sigh.

When I turned to look, he wasn’t staring at the night sky but at the zombie.

Its gaunt body looked more like the husk of a long-decayed tree than flesh. The human corpse drained of all its red had been reduced to mere remnants. When Old Man Scho poked it with his sheathed sword, the zombie-pot crumbled.

“Undertaker.”

“…Yes, old man.”

“Looks like we’re fucked, right?”

I nodded. I hated to admit it, but it was an accurate diagnosis.

The boss-level monster that appeared after Ten Legs.

Or rather, the anomaly that had emerged before Ten Legs but hid its power for years, parasitizing hosts until finally revealing itself.

The World Tree— the return of Udumbara.

Udumbara.

A mystical flower revered in Buddhism. A legendary blossom that didn't exist in reality.

But now, it did.

There was no countermeasure against a legend that had descended to Earth. More dangerous than the Ten Legs.

Unlike Ten Legs, Udumbara was cunning. It didn't just parasitize hosts but made them welcome it. It quietly expanded its influence before unleashing its full power at once.

Once Udumbara revealed itself, it was game over. If the World Tree could bloom red, there were already too many hosts infected. From that point, the apocalypse was inevitable.

"Oh no, what do we do…"

"Indeed."

Old Man Scho and I put our heads together, deep in thought.

By the way, it was the 18th cycle. Where did the 17th cycle go, you ask? Uh… weeds sprouted from Old Man Scho's beard, and grass grew from my eyebrows.

We thought it was the last-ditch effort and took the whole Guild Alliance to hack at the tree with axes, but it didn't work. So, Old Man Scho and I downed poison in a glass of soju and toasted.

Even after Old Man Scho went on leave, we couldn't come up with a fundamental countermeasure against Udumbara.

The best we could do was suppress the spread of cults and keep the

awakeners' superiority in check.

But that was just a stopgap measure. While we could control things domestically, how could we manage overseas? Whatever strategy we devised, it would only delay Udumbara's bloom.

Yet time passed, and the 36th cycle came.

"The Constellations don't exist."

"Neither the Saintess of National Salvation nor the Conqueror of the Alps are real. They're just characters I created."

——From the moment I met the Saintess, everything changed quickly.

We finally found a clue to the seemingly hopeless conquest of the World Tree.

After forming a blood pact with the Saintess, I began the full-scale subjugation of Udumbara. The crux of the operation was the request I made to the Saintess.

"Saintess, please use your [Clairvoyance] to monitor the awakeners on Jeju Island for some time."

"Jeju Island?"

The Saintess tilted her head.

"Is there a particular reason?"

"Yes. If left alone, a cult called the New Buddhists will begin to emerge in earnest by year three…"

I explained the zombie virus and the rise of the New Buddhists, the emergence of awakeners' superiority, and the backlash of hatred against them. And, finally, the Red World Tree's full bloom.

The Saintess listened quietly from beginning to end. Then she spoke softly.

“Indeed. So, you intend to find the virus's first patient.”

“Exactly.”

The first patient, whose identity had eluded us in previous cycles, was the first domino that set off the viral outbreak.

It would have been impossible to identify them alone. But using my regression ability and the Saintess’s [Clairvoyance], it was possible.

“In this cycle, we’ll focus on Jeju Island. Next, Gyeongsangnam-do, then Gyeongsangbuk-do, Jeollanam-do, and Jeollabuk-do… Each cycle, we will focus on a region in Korea, moving from the south to the north. That way——”

“We will eventually witness the first patient’s birth.”

The Saintess nodded.

“I understand. I’ve primarily used Clairvoyance to monitor prominent awakeners like you, Undertaker. But if I push myself a little… even if it’s impossible to observe every Awakener in Korea in real time, I can manage at least one region.”

“Do you want me to assign Yu Ji-won to assist you?”

“No, it’s okay.”

The Saintess clasped her hands together and closed her eyes as if praying.

“This is something I can handle alone.”

At the time, I didn’t know the exact method she used to observe so many awakeners. It was one of her “secrets” that she never revealed.

I could only guess she cooperated with awakeners working with the South Korean government (or remnants of it), like Noh Do-hwa, among others.

After assigning the Saintess her quest, I took care of the cult leaders

responsible for founding the New Buddhists. Even if other faiths would eventually arise, eliminating them bought us at least a year or two.

And so, in the 36th cycle:

“It’s not Jeju Island.”

37th cycle:

“No sign of a first patient in Gyeongsangnam-do.”

38th, 39th, 40th cycles.

Finally, in the 41st cycle.

“…Found them.”

The Saintess opened her eyes.

“Chungcheongnam-do. Asan. Onyang.”

More precisely, an old inn in Onyang.

The old commercial district had withered after the city center shifted, leaving the inn to decay precariously beside neglected sidewalks where weeds flourished more than people.

The inn seemed abandoned. Its beige paint had flaked off in patches.

In room 202 on the second floor, where there wasn’t much left to take, a mother and her son lay dead.

“……”

The mother and child looked like they had just closed their eyes.

Finding this place was nearly miraculous. An awakener working at the local community center was patrolling residential areas and lodging facilities, ensuring no residents had been left behind. (Perhaps the Saintess, pretending to be a Constellation, had directed him.)

When the staff member found the bodies, the Saintess witnessed the scene simultaneously.

He moved to his next checkpoint, burdened with caring for the living, but the Saintess's gaze lingered, leading me here today.

There was a reason my alias was the "Undertaker."

"Hmm."

The mother leaned against the wall, holding her child tight. He was an infant, and small, delicate red flowers, like young ferns in spring, bloomed above her shoulders.

Around his wrist hung a prayer bead bracelet that was a bit too large for his tiny wrist. It wasn't hard to imagine whose bracelet it was and who had put it on him. I briefly thought about the mother's feelings when she placed her own bracelet on her child.

When crossing to the afterlife, perhaps she hoped her child wouldn't fall into hell.

I stood still, gazing at the scene before me like a Buddhist staring at a statue.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

The Saintess spoke telepathically. She didn't pretend to be a Constellation with me, using her real voice instead.

I nodded.

"I understand. Don't worry."

I infused my sword with aura and swung it. A few red flowers scattered across the small, one-room world.

Udumbara was a mythical flower.

There isn't much of an epilogue to this story.

But from that day onward, I had one more task to handle at the start of each cycle.

Taking care of Seo Gyu and Sim Ah-ryeon at Busan Station. Drinking Café au Lait with Old Man Scho at Baekje Hospital. Establishing an alliance with the Saintess. And then heading up to Chungcheong-do to see the red flowers.

Later, I learned that no matter how many times I repeated my regressions, it was impossible to save the mother and her child. They were already dead by the time the Gate crisis hit Seoul.

Cause of death: starvation.

Misery is always in season.

"Phew…"

Sometimes, I arrived at the inn a few days late due to a delayed schedule. By then, the Udumbara, once no bigger than a young fern, would have already grown into a small cherry tree.

"Wow, it's so beautiful…"

I brought a companion along to see the flowers every new cycle. In the 96th cycle, my companion was Sim Ah-ryeon.

"Is this really the anomaly you mentioned, guild leader? You said it should be classified at a continental danger level on SG Net…"

"Yes."

"It's such a fascinating sight. Makes me want to paint it."

True to her word, Sim Ah-ryeon had brought an easel here and set it up. As she pulled out her paints, she said, "Ah."

"So, guild leader, what kind of flower is that…?"

A flower that has destroyed the world countless times.

Instead of telling her that, I brushed aside the branches and said,

“It’s a flower that blooms each season I die.”

“Gasp.”

Sim Ah-ryeon marveled at my sophisticated expression.

“Middle school syndrome…”

“……”

“A grown man with middle school syndrome…”

Hmm.

Next time I bring her along, it’ll be to a creepy haunted spot.

Footnotes:

1 - The term "화엄" refers to the "Huayan" school of Buddhism, also known as the Flower Garland School. This tradition is named after the "Avatamsaka Sutra" (Flower Garland Sutra), one of the most influential Mahayana sutras. The Huayan school is known for its intricate and profound philosophy which emphasizes interpenetration and interdependence of all phenomena. In East Asian Buddhism, it has been particularly influential in China, Korea, and Japan.

Chapter 29

The Explorer I

Sinnoa

When the Void erupted in the middle of Seoul, the entire Gangnam area was ravaged.

I've mentioned this in several of my stories, so you should be familiar with it.

Known as the "Gangnam Void Crisis," "Gangnam White Night," or "Summer in Seoul," this incident claimed even Old Man Scho's wife, who fell victim to the "summer."

However, a few buildings remained intact amidst the void-infested Gangnam area.

If "intact" means a building looks neat from the outside.

Here's a question:

Q. How can a building remain as intact as before, on land consumed by the void?

A. It's also void.

Exactly. Eye for an eye, poison for poison.

To resist the void, there was only one solution: overpower it with an even stronger void.

Put differently, if you see a building in Gangnam that's still "intact," that means it managed to shrug off the void that obliterated half of Seoul's population.

These were the highest-level dungeons.

All the sturdiest, scariest, and most brutal voids on the Korean

Peninsula were concentrated in Seoul's Gangnam.

The real estate market in the human world had collapsed, but among anomalies, Gangnam was still the hottest spot.

One of the most notorious dungeons was a hotel in the building nicknamed the "Tower of Sauron."

Since the previous story involved an inn, today, let's talk about a hotel.

The building known as the "Tower of Sauron," as many of you know, is the tallest skyscraper in Seoul.

Initially, it was a nickname with a hint of humor, but when the void devastated Gangnam, the building's residents, office workers, and hotel staff vanished entirely. Thus, the name "Tower of Sauron" became literal.

Right after the void's eruption, people had high hopes for the tower.

"That building looks fine!"

"There must be lots of survivors inside!"

It was already the tallest building on the peninsula. In today's world, where the average height of Seoul's buildings has reverted 50 years, it stood out even more.

"Ah, come to think of it, I heard somewhere that the tower was designed to withstand a magnitude 9 earthquake…"

"Could it really be intact inside?"

"There's supposedly a portal to another world near the top of that building."

"Let's go in! Let's check it out!"

First, residents from north of the Han River entered the tower.

They went missing immediately after entering.

In the initial stages of the apocalypse, a handful of missing people didn't concern anyone. Even adding two zeros to the number wouldn't change the situation.

But after a month or two, strange rumors about the Tower of Sauron started to circulate.

"It's a place where you can't return if you take even a single step inside."

"A reconnaissance team is forming."

At that point, the South Korean military, which had managed to hold on, launched an operation.

With the Ten Legs treating soldiers as delicacies and sweeping through the ranks, any surviving unit had to be elite.

The soldiers decided to borrow the wisdom of their ancestors, but from a much earlier time.

"We will form a single-file line and enter the tower. Every soldier will tie a rope around their waist."

"Rope, sir?"

"Yes. This rope will link all the soldiers together. The operation will be called 'Ariadne.'"

Like Theseus landing on Crete and facing the greatest labyrinth humanity had ever known, the soldiers approached this operation with the same determination.

"The frontmost row will go in first, then walk back outside if nothing happens. If we lose contact with the front row, cut the rope immediately so the others can escape. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Good. Prepare the ropes."

A cautious and effective strategy.

The problem was that the Tower of Sauron wasn't just any dungeon; it was a demonic castle that had survived the "Summer in Seoul."

"We've lost contact with the soldiers who entered the door!"

"Pull the rope!"

"It won't pull. Ugh, it's not moving! It's heavy as a rock!"

"We have no choice. Abort Ariadne. Cut the rope!"

"Yes, sir. Huh? The rope… why? No…?"

"What are you doing, you idiot! Cut the rope!"

"I can't cut it! The rope won't cut!"

"What the hell are you saying…? Whoa, we're being pulled!"

"Aaaaah! Help me! Help me!"

"No! Hold on! If you're dragged in, you'll die…"

Incredibly, the rope seemed to have transformed into titanium. The military knives couldn't even leave a dent.

The glass doors of the Tower of Sauron opened wide and dragged the soldiers in, swallowing them like noodles slurped up in one go.

A perfect feast.

"Aaaah!"

The soldier holding onto the door frame to avoid being pulled in was gone in a flash. His screams lasted only two seconds before fading.

With a squeak, the glass doors gently closed. If the Tower of Sauron could talk, it would probably say "Burp."

The reconnaissance team was wiped out.

After this incident became known, the line of civilians daring enough to challenge the tower dwindled.

That's right. Civilians stopped.

I, the Undertaker, lived by my own rules, far removed from normal sentiments.

What if I died in the tower? I'd just regress.

And so, I sought out a companion to explore the hotel with. It would be boring to go alone.

"Ah-ryeon, how about a hotel staycation this summer?"

"A h-hotel staycation?"

Sim Ah-ryeon's ears perked up. She had the temperament of a loner but harbored an acne-like yearning for the life of an extrovert.

"Sounds nice, but… but, just you and me?"

The yearning spoke.

"No matter what, I mean, that's a little…"

"Relax. It's not that kind of trip. I'm just thinking of spending a few days at the best hotel on the peninsula. If you're interested, come along. If not, I'll ask someone else."

"Uh…"

Sim Ah-ryeon blinked, swayed by my indifferent yet cool response, thinking, "Is he serious?" She had been consistently easy to sway since the first cycle.

"O-Okay… I'll go!"

Two days later.

Sim Ah-ryeon screamed in front of the hotel entrance, carrying her travel backpack.

“You said it was a hotel! You said it was a hotel, guild leader! It’s the Tower of Sauron—here!”

“What are you talking about? There’s a hotel here.”

“Not *is* but *was*! They’re all gone! The buildings are ruined! It’s all ‘Gangnamed!’”

“Enough. Follow me. I need you to come in and sketch the landscapes and maps.”

“Aaaaah! I should’ve known when you said ‘hotel staycation!’ Somebody save me! No! No way am I going to die here where thousands have already died—I don’t care if you’re the guild leader, no means no——”

And so began the Undertaker’s fun exploration of the void.

As soon as we stepped through the glass doors of the Tower of Sauron, a stunning sight greeted us.

“Huh? There’s light…?”

The building that looked pitch-black from outside was brightly lit inside.

Not only that.

There were four perfectly operational elevators, two on each side of the entrance. The chandelier hanging from the ceiling was spotless.

It was as if——

“It’s like time hasn’t moved at all… How is this possible…?”

“Hmm.”

I nodded.

As an experiment, I pressed an elevator button. *Srrr.* The doors slid open without a hitch.

“Gasp. It’s working…?”

“Remarkable. Time hasn’t just stopped; the building is fully functional. Ah-ryeon, did you notice?”

“Huh? What?”

“Look outside.”

Sim Ah-ryeon, who had been captivated by the chandeliers and elevators, finally turned around. With her trademark shriek, she clung to my arm like a caterpillar.

“What’s that? Who’s that?”

Outside the doors—meaning just beyond the glass doors we had entered through—a man in a suit stood politely.

“He’s probably a hotel staff member, a doorman who opens doors for guests.”

“But there wasn’t anyone there earlier…”

“Remember this, Ah-ryeon: In the void, you can’t rely on preconceived notions. The glass doors we saw from outside and the outside we see now are two different spaces. Think of it like a picture in a frame.”

“Oh…”

“The problem is, we’ve stepped inside the frame. If we tried to open those doors now, they wouldn’t budge. Go ahead and try.”

“……”

Sim Ah-ryeon cautiously tried to open the doors, but nothing happened. The hotel staff standing just beyond the glass didn’t even glance at her.

“It’s true…”

“That’s why ‘void’ fits better than ‘gate.’ Things that look like doors

no longer mean anything as entrances or exits. To escape the void, you must follow the proper procedure or subjugate the boss."

"The boss…"

"Of course, many voids don't have bosses, which makes them trickier to clear. Let's see how closely this void imitates a real hotel."

I led Sim Ah-ryeon into the elevator.

Since this was one of the most luxurious hotels in Korea, the elevator itself was lavish.

The building boasted 123 floors, but we chose to enter the void through the hotel's main entrance. So, the elevator only had four buttons.

[81F - Western Restaurant, Korean Restaurant, Bar]

[79F - Lobby, Guest Lounge]

[76F - Grand Banquet Hall, Small Banquet Hall]

[01F – Entrance]

Sim Ah-ryeon shifted nervously, intrigued yet uneasy.

"What if the elevator suddenly falls while going up…?"

"That'd be great."

"W-What? But we'd die."

"Sure, we might die, but the course would be incredibly short. If this void only entertains itself by making humans fall in an elevator, then… the risk level would drop."

In that case, the Tower of Sauron would simply be classified as a void or anomaly called "Hotel Elevator," and that would be the end of it.

Not dangerous, and easy to beat. Just don't get in the elevator.

Done.

As long as you're not some pervert who gets excited by elevator vibrations, you could safely ignore it in future cycles.

"What are you even talking about, guild leader…? We'd die."

"True voids don't kill people. They make you want to live here forever."

"Huh?"

Click. I pressed [79F].

Since we had entered through the hotel entrance, we were likely guests staying at the hotel.

And as guests, our first stop should be the "hotel lobby" to "check-in."

Twitch!

When the elevator began moving, Sim Ah-ryeon's shoulders tightened. I tapped her back gently.

"How long you survive successfully in a void depends on your understanding of its 'personality.'"

"……"

"Remember that staff member standing beyond the glass doors? Even little details like that are important. In the void, no clue is insignificant. If a staff member is outside, it's because 'the void believes it's a hotel.'"

"The void believes it's a hotel…"

"Yeah. Like the saying, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do,' you need to follow the void's rules unless you plan to mess things up right away. In that sense, the soldiers who tried to enter earlier were unlucky."

“W-Why?”

“What guest would enter a luxury hotel in military gear, holding a gun? They were probably mistaken for terrorists and slaughtered.”

“……”

I secretly wished the elevator would fall. By wrapping myself in aura and shielding Sim Ah-ryeon, I’d have a high chance of survival.

But this world was sincere in its desire to screw people over, especially me.

Srrr—

In less than a minute, the elevator reached the 79th floor.

And as the doors elegantly opened, I was sure this void belonged to our proud world.

“My God, guild leader! Look! It’s so luxurious here…”

The perfectly polished marble lobby welcomed me. Even the staff at the check-in counter smiled at us from afar.

“Hmm.”

A big “F-U” indeed.

Footnotes:

Chapter 30

The Explorer II

Sinnoa

“Ah-ryeon, hold the elevator door open for a moment.”

“What?”

“Your guild leader has something to confirm.”

I immediately climbed the elevator wall. Sim Ah-ryeon gasped, looking at me like she was staring at a giant spider, but I paid her no mind.

Channeling aura into my hands, I sliced the ceiling like it was soft tofu. Sparks flew from my hands as if I was welding.

In no time, I had created a neat hole in the ceiling. This was the power of a skilled aura user.

“G-Guild leader, what are you…?”

“Shh. Keep quiet and wait.”

Upsy-daisy —I lifted my upper body through the opening. It felt like a scene from Mission Impossible.

“Hmm.”

The wind outside was biting.

The space beyond the elevator was pitch black. While the lack of lighting contributed to the darkness, it felt excessively gloomy even accounting for that.

More precisely, it felt “crude.”

The elevator car had ropes, but that was about it. I couldn't see the

essential components like governor ropes or door drive units that should be there.

And for an elevator supposedly running in the "Tower of Sauron," the structure seemed flimsy. A high-rise building like this should have streamlined, aerodynamic curves in the elevator capsule.

‘Gotcha.’

The entity that created this anomaly wasn't a professional.

It was just a product of vague preconceptions and images from average Koreans who had a general idea of this hotel.

‘I avoided the worst.’

I smiled faintly.

This would make things easier.

Hup!

With a thump, I climbed back down through the ceiling.

Sim Ah-ryeon, who I'd asked to hold the elevator door open, couldn’t resist her curiosity and had peeked outside.

“Guild leader. There are people here, and they’re all fine… My God, their clothes aren’t wrinkled at all, so neat… Ah! The carpet is all messed up because of our shoe prints…”

At that moment, the “beings” in the hotel lobby all turned their gaze toward her. Their pitch-black pupils stared at Sim Ah-ryeon.

“Eep!”

“Quiet.”

Before she could scream, I immediately covered Sim Ah-ryeon’s mouth. She squirmed and whimpered as I whispered quickly into her ear.

“Don't speak recklessly. Avoid eye contact. The staff and other

guests are all anomalies.”

“Mmph?”

“To be precise, they’re parts of the anomaly. More like its terminals. The entire hotel is likely one single anomaly and void. If you draw too much attention, the ‘whole hotel’ will start watching you.”

“Mm! Mm-mm…?”

“Of course, if you were an awakener who could wield aura as easily as breathing, you could smash them all to bits. But our goal is exploration before subjugation. We need to document how this void works in detail. It might help humanity. Got it?”

“……”

Nodding slowly, Sim Ah-ryeon moved her chin up and down. Her palm felt a bit sweaty, but I tried to ignore it.

“Now, let me show you how a skilled awakener explores the void. As long as these creatures are around, keep quiet and just follow my lead. Can you do that?”

Nod.

“Good.”

I released Sim Ah-ryeon’s mouth and walked with her toward the check-in counter.

Tap. The anomalies, or their terminals, moved their gaze precisely in sync with my steps.

If I were a regular person with little experience dealing with anomalies, this sight would be terrifying.

But who am I? The regressor who’d spent countless cycles tangled up with anomalies, resilient as the Baekdu Mountain and the East Sea.

I approached without blinking.

Creak—

The staff behind the counter parted their lips. Their mouths were as black as an abyss, and their tongues weren't even visible beyond their teeth.

It mimicked a human voice.

-Welcome. Do you have a reservation at our hotel? If so…

"Good morning."

The staff suddenly froze.

Unfazed, I continued fluently.

"I have a reservation at this hotel. I'm a travel YouTuber. Can I check in?"

-Ah, um?

The staff looked visibly confused, understandably so.

I had spoken in German.

Hotel staff at high-end establishments usually speak English and can respond in Japanese or Chinese. But German, French, Spanish, or Russian requires special preparation, and they can't handle them on the spot.

Naturally, Korean anomalies had the same sensitivity toward foreigners as most Koreans. They became utterly weak.

-Ah, uh, sorry, sir. Can you speak English? Reservation? Reservation, please?

"Oh, come on. Relying only on English in today's global era?"

-Sorry?

"I'm sorry. I can't speak English. Deutschland. Germany. Okay?"

-Ah, Germany. What should we do? He seems German. Ah,

apologies. Please wait a moment.

My flawless German pronunciation made the anomalies shrink back and panic.

Sim Ah-ryeon was watching me with wide eyes, like someone seeing a giant hamster perform a headstand.

It might have looked funny, but this “I don't speak Korean, and I don’t know English either” strategy worked well in the void. Especially in voids that imitated real buildings, like the Tower of Sauron.

The anomalies whispered to each other.

-Can’t we reach the person in charge?

-No answer. They’re not picking up.

-Why now, of all times…? We need to ask if he has a reservation, but we can’t communicate…

-Calm down, everyone. Just guide him to the lobby sofa. We can’t keep the guest standing there. Offer him some welcome tea, too.

If this were an actual hotel, they’d have acted swiftly.

But I guarantee it was the first time these anomalies had encountered a German guest.

A foreign liaison? There’s no way they’d have something like that. Calling anyone wouldn’t yield results.

-Excuse me, sir? Please? Can you come this way?

“Hmm? What was that?”

-Ah, uh, please have a seat on this sofa. Yes. The phone, we can’t get through… Yes, sorry.

The staff tried their best to get us to understand using every gesture they could think of. With a mildly displeased expression, I made it

clear I didn’t intend to cause trouble and sat on the sofa.

“Oh my goodness.”

As soon as the staff moved away, Sim Ah-ryeon huddled close and whispered.

“Guild leader… What just happened?”

“This strategy is nearly foolproof when dealing with anomalies trying to imitate humans in Korea.”

Of course, it only worked well in Korea and shouldn't be used in the Netherlands. Too many people there spoke foreign languages.

“Y-You can speak foreign languages?”

“Of course. English, Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, Japanese, French, German, Italian—most major languages. My complete memory isn’t OP for nothing.”

“Wow… I thought you were just someone who liked old Three Kingdoms content, but now you seem different…”

“……”

This brat. If not for me, she would have knocked on the glass doors before even getting on the elevator and would’ve gone straight to the afterlife. She was still a newbie to voids.

No matter how dangerous the dungeon, it’s manageable if you know how to handle it.

I pulled out a Polaroid camera from my travel backpack—a model that printed instant photos.

“Huh? Why a camera now?”

“Ah, relax. This is a valuable item. One of the treasures I got in Japan after helping some magical girls.”

“…?”

It was a Polaroid OneStep (Land Camera 1000), launched in 1977.

It should require an SX-70 Time-Zero film, but the camera itself was an anomaly, so thankfully, film wasn't needed.

Click.

I photographed the hotel lobby. The camera flashed brightly, and soon, a white film was ejected.

“Here, take it. And no screaming.”

“Huh? What…? Eek!”

As expected, the captured image of the lobby was starkly different from what we were seeing.

Dust-covered marble floors, shattered lights, and porcelain pieces scattered everywhere. Even corpses hung from nooses behind the counter.

“Hah, eek… Huff…”

Near the sofa where we sat, a corpse dressed as a soldier had its mouth agape and eyes wide open. Sim Ah-ryeon was practically hyperventilating.

“Fascinating, right? This camera is rare. It’s known as a ‘Spirit Camera’ and is quite a notable anomaly in Japan. I’d been eyeing it for a long time and only got it after taking down the Inunaki Tunnel. I don’t know why those magical girls were so stingy with it when they had two similar Nikon F-series cameras.”

“Guild leader, eek… Guild leadeeer…”

“Don’t be so scared. The fun comes from testing how well these idiots can imitate humans.”

“Nobody else in this world would find anomalies fun except you…”

As I teased Sim Ah-ryeon, the hotel staff brought us some welcome tea.

Afterward, a man who appeared to be the manager came over and used English and body language to communicate.

“I’m really sorry, sir. We have no way to assist you right now.”

“Hm.”

I raised my chin by 20 degrees, and the manager bowed by 20 degrees.

“If you could wait a little longer, we’ll figure something out…”

“Hmph.”

At this point, I pondered whether to subdue or hold off on subduing this anomaly. Most anomalies would have revealed their true nature by now.

But from how things were going, it seemed like these creatures were genuinely dedicated to the hotel business. In other words, as long as we kept up our “guest” act, they wouldn’t drop their “hotel” act.

Pass.

“That’s fine. Okay, okay. I’ll just look around and come back later.”

“Pardon?”

“Here, hold my backpack. This is my phone number. Okay?”

I took out my important items and handed my backpack to the staff. Realizing my intent, the staff smiled and said, “Ah, okay! Thank you so much!”

They kindly guided us to the elevator. Comfortably, we returned to the first floor.

Since seeing the spirit photos, Sim Ah-ryeon had been trembling non-stop.

“Uhm… Guild leader, is it okay for us to leave like this?”

“Probably.”

“B-But earlier, the door wouldn’t open?”

“This time, the hotel allowed us to leave. If I had said I was leaving for good, maybe they would have stopped us. But I implied I’d be back.”

“Oh, that’s why you left your backpack…”

“Right. When exploring voids, you must quickly grasp their nature and adapt. Even in dangerous voids, as long as you follow the rules, they usually won’t attack… Only about 50% of the time.”

“That’s still half!”

Which is why you should always be strong enough to smack them down if they attack. Tsk tsk.

When the elevator reached the first floor, the door opened. As a test, I took a quick photo of the lobby.

“Hmm.”

“What’s in it?”

“I’ll tell you in a bit.”

The photo showed bodies piled high like mountains.

Twenty partially-eaten corpses stood near the glass doors, and a hundred others clung to the glass, scratching it with their palms.

What looked like a pretty chandelier was actually a gruesome collection of hanging corpses.

“Let’s head out.”

“O-Okay…”

As expected, the glass doors opened naturally when I pushed them this time. A gust of fresh air rushed into my nose.

Sim Ah-ryeon plopped to the ground.

“It was so scary! So scary! Guild leader, please! Don’t drag me into this; it’s bad for my heart!”

“Here’s the first-floor photo. A souvenir.”

“A souvenir? What… AHHHHHH!”

Sim Ah-ryeon fainted.

I was satisfied. This is why it’s fun to hang out with her. Her reactions were always great.

Of course, the satisfaction didn’t last long after I read a silly post on SG Net the next day.

-[OldManGoryeo]: Dropped my footprint at ‘that tower’ in Gangnam, Seoul, lol.

-[OldManGoryeo]: Is this dungeon really that famous? I went, and it’s a joke. Those Awakeners always boast, but this crappy dungeon is what kills them?

(79th floor lobby photo)

(1st floor elevator photo)

-[OldManGoryeo]: I’ve got a spirit item, so I took some verification shots. Check if your parents’ faces are here, lol.

Naturally, these so-called verification shots were the instant photos I had given Sim Ah-ryeon.

The response was overwhelming.

-Anonymous: Where is this?

LiteraryGirl: It’s obviously the Tower of Sauron.

Anonymous: ?? This guy raided the Tower of Sauron alone and came back fine?

-[Samcheon] Cadet: What's with this OldManGoryeo villain? Is this unhinged troll actually a reclusive master?

-[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: Hweeeeng. (>_<);;

-Anonymous: Wow, this guy is next-level, lol.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: This is fascinating.

"Hm."

I glanced over at Sim Ah-ryeon, fiddling with her phone in the guild's lounge.

"Heh… hehe…"

She lay sprawled on the couch, looking incredibly happy.

Perhaps that's what a true anomaly looks like.

Epilogue.

In the next cycle, after picking up Seo Gyu from Busan Station, I researched the "Tower of Sauron" online.

With civilization still just beginning to collapse, I easily found image files of hotel vouchers.

And using those files, I forged a reservation.

Why? The barcode was a mess, but there was no way the anomalies could verify it.

So, armed with this voucher (presidential suite, 145 m^2, meals included, priced at 8 million won per night), I revisited the "Tower of Sauron" alone.

The result?

"Yes, your reservation is confirmed, Mr. Undertaker. We'll serve you with the utmost care."

“Oh…”

Surprisingly, the reservation worked!

That night, I not only enjoyed dinner at the finest restaurant but also took a relaxing bath while admiring Seoul’s night view from the window.

Wherever I went, the staff smiled and treated me with the utmost kindness.

“Jackpot.”

The next morning, I took a picture of my breakfast to test.

Click.

I savored my seaweed soup while waiting for the film to develop. When the photo finally emerged, I looked down.

“Hmm…”

I won’t reveal what was captured in the photo here.

But if you’re planning a trip with someone, make sure they have a strong stomach. Very strong.

Ah.

And of course, I’m not bringing Sim Ah-ryeon.

Footnotes:

Chapter 31

The Creator I

Sinnoa

Among those who've heard my story so far, some might be wondering:

"So what is the government doing?"

In this apocalyptic madness, with cultists' antics, Cthulhu tentacles slithering, and World Tree zombies sprouting up, what are the politicians and government doing?

First, let me tell you this:

"Folks, the Korean government has something to say!"

That's right. We should consider the government's standpoint.

You must have heard that right after a Gate opened in Seoul, the National Assembly launched into space.

For reference, the president was in the midst of delivering a policy speech at the National Assembly about the supplementary budget. It was truly a touching moment when South Korea suddenly rose to prominence as a pioneer in space exploration.

The union between the ruling and opposition parties was realized not on this miserable Earth, but in a new colony called "Space."

From a politician's perspective, Korea is just a meager homeland, much like how the Portuguese royal family fled to Brazil to escape Napoleon. Similarly, the Korean government went on a summer vacation.

Q. What's left on the Korean Peninsula now?

A. A handful of National Assembly members and ministers who

didn't attend the policy speech, governors, mayors, county chiefs, and many, many monsters.

When the social infrastructure was not yet fully destroyed, the politicians wasted three days foolishly.

In an apocalyptic situation, three days was more than enough time to drive people insane.

Very few could remain calm after hearing news like, "Monsters are hosting a neighborhood meeting in our apartment park and parking lot!"

Finally, on the third day, the remnants of the government delivered their address to the nation, firing the final fireworks of the grand festival.

-Fellow citizens. South Korea is still safe. For now, remain calm and continue with your livelihoods.

A truly generic speech.

What the politicians overlooked was none other than the DNA of Koreans.

That DNA bore an imprint of unshakable trust in the government. The people of this nation remembered the swift campaign of King Seonjo Lee during the Japanese invasion and the spirit of national defense proclaimed when the army recaptured Uijeongbu from the North Korean invaders and vowed to defend Seoul.

You could blame the scoundrel once for fooling you, but if you were duped twice, it was your fault, and three times? Hand in your Homo sapiens certificate. Koreans weren't yet ready to go extinct.

"Stay calm, my ass!"

"Oh, I knew these bastards would do this!"

"Head south! Just head south!"

The civilians of the Korean Peninsula evacuated with remarkable

order.

"Citizens! The northern side of the Han River is still safe! Please, trust the government and the army, and go ba—"

"Who’s that guy?"

"They say he's the Vice Mayor."

"What’s that even mean, damn it."

"I don't know. Toss him."

"What? Uh, uh, uhhh—"

The Vice Mayor of Seoul (third in line as the acting mayor in emergencies, the only survivor) rushed out to Banpo Bridge to dissuade the citizens, but the citizens of Seoul simply threw him off the bridge and provided him with a practical lesson in water temperature.

It was a clean, bold toss worthy of a standing ovation if the people of Prague had witnessed it.

If only the politicians had admitted bluntly, "We’re completely screwed, but the north side of the Han River seems relatively safe based on monster distribution. To be more accurate, every region in the country is equally dangerous," maybe things would have improved.

But what could you do? You could only blame the ancestors who burned through their citizens' trust twice over.

When the Republic of Seoul went down in flames, the other coalition governments stood no chance. County chiefs and mayors across the nation had already carved the national slogan "Every Man for Himself" deeply into their hearts.

The final touch was the Mayor of Busan, closest to the throne of chaos, who fled to Japan, dealing the decisive blow.

Soon enough, the "Second Provisional Government of the Republic

of Korea," with the Mayor of Busan as its head, was established on the Japanese archipelago.

-Fellow citizens. Rumors are spreading that I've abandoned my duties as mayor and fled. This is untrue.

-I've only moved to the diplomatic stage to secure foreign aid and reclaim Korean territory!

But the fact that the provisional government's capital was in Fukuoka, Japan, had even the staunchest government supporters scratching their heads. "Wait, was that really the original location of the provisional government? I thought it was a bit further west?"

Even the Japanese must have been a bit taken aback.

After all, the Provisional Government of Korea had a penchant for putting bombs instead of food in lunch boxes. How could they trust these lunch box fanatics, not knowing what mischief they'd stir up?

After many twists and turns, the "Second Provisional Government" was eventually shunned by its own citizens and foreigners alike. To me, it looked like a suicide.

For the final touch, a military coup confused the era on the Korean Peninsula by 70 years.

-Fellow citizens. Today, myself and the brave soldiers defending this country's territory have agreed on a grand proposition that we can no longer stand by this political chaos.

-We've risen up to overthrow this corrupt and incompetent government that lost the people's trust, and we soldiers have fully mobilized!

But the coup failed.

Its failure was simple. Unexpectedly, it turned out that the boss monster, the Ten Legs, was an ardent fighter for democracy.

The military units heading toward the Blue House repeatedly missed their targets and ended up inside the Ten Legs' stomachs.

Though the army generals might not have known it, Ten Legs had a quirk of perceiving any group of over 300 people moving as a food truck.

The military unit that attempted to enter the Tower of Sauron last time belonged to the shattered remnants of the national army. Even those remaining forces slowly disappeared for various reasons.

That should summarize the answer to "So, what did the government do?"

Utter chaos. A madhouse. Total devastation.

But if you want a lotus to bloom, you first need a pool of mud.

Even within the Korean government, which fumbled the initial response miserably, a lotus bloomed.

Noh Do-hwa.

A seventh-grade public servant working at a public rehabilitation hospital.

She was the protagonist of this story.

Unlike other public officials, Noh Do-hwa succeeded precisely because she was just a seventh-grade public servant.

From the beginning, Do-hwa never dreamed she could replace the government of South Korea. Tax management? Electing National Assembly members? Universal welfare? Why should she care?

"I probably shouldn't say this, but I don't really think of myself as a public servant..."

Noh Do-hwa often said such things to me, and she would say similar things to others, too. She probably said the same things even when living on the taxpayers' money.

"I probably shouldn't say this, but I don't like the citizens..."

"Now, isn't that really something you shouldn't say?"

"Does it matter? Awakener Undertaker. Do you think more employees love their boss or dislike them? Isn't it the latter? To public officials, citizens are the bosses. So, it's only natural that more public servants dislike citizens."

Do-hwa muttered with slumped shoulders.

She was a person of unusual eccentricity whom I first met in the 11th cycle. I had heard bits about her in passing before, but our first direct meeting was then.

"It's all done."

"Oh."

"Would you like to stand up and walk?"

In the 11th cycle, my left leg was severed, so I had to wear a prosthetic.

I stood up, walked a little, then tried a light jog, even doing small jumps in place. Do-hwa observed all these movements carefully.

"How does it feel? Any discomfort?"

"None at all. Wow, this thing works amazingly. It feels like real muscles and nerves."

"That's good."

Do-hwa smiled faintly.

To some, it may have seemed a shady or insidious smile, but through my long regression experience, I had grown free from such prejudices. So I could confidently assess Do-hwa's smile as "benevolent."

"If something goes wrong, there’s a 5% chance it could sting like nerves are being pierced. Just think of it as a gacha gone wrong and come back to me. I'll make you another one for half price."

Do-hwa was a manufacturer of assistive devices.

Assistive devices referred to auxiliary gadgets used to aid those with mobility issues, like wheelchairs and crutches.

Before the Gate incident, Do-hwa worked at a public hospital, repairing and creating various assistive devices.

Even back then, she was already renowned among war veterans who had lost limbs to landmines. The Veterans Hospital always sought her out, but Do-hwa seemed uninterested.

"I shouldn't say this, but I don't like soldiers."

"Just asking out of curiosity, but do you like any human being at all, Do-hwa?"

"No, I don't."

"....."

It was a miracle she hadn't become a recluse.

Yet even Do-hwa had her concerns. Specifically, her worries lay with the patients, or more precisely, with those who had extreme difficulty moving.

"Some of the patients are struggling to move."

Those with damaged nerves in their spines had to rely on wheelchairs.

It would have been manageable if vehicles equipped with accessible seating for the disabled were still running, but over time, gasoline ran out, and the roads became rugged. Driving cars and even maneuvering wheelchairs was difficult.

Most people would have given up at that point.

After the Gate incident fully took hold, the notion of treating disabled people became increasingly rare. In this era, getting killed by a monster was practically considered a natural death. If not for Noh Do-hwa, I would have casually given up after losing my left leg.

"Even the elderly find it increasingly difficult to come to our workshop because the roads are too rough."

But a person with extraordinary eccentricity sees things differently.

"Shouldn't we make the roads a bit more convenient?"

Dragging her slumped body along, Do-hwa began negotiating.

Even though empathy for the disabled had dwindled, their numbers soared as more people lost limbs fighting monsters. Losing an arm or a leg was no longer a badge of honor.

Do-hwa was an Awakener with the "Assistive Device Creation" ability.

The assistive devices she made, even if constructed from wood or iron, felt like real muscles to the user. Just strap on the prosthetic and go, no rehabilitation or adaptation period needed.

In short, Do-hwa had an enormous number of "regulars" who were Awakeners.

Almost every guild leader was acquainted with Do-hwa. Even if they were unharmed themselves, if a guild member got injured, they'd quickly head to Do-hwa's workshop for assistive devices.

Do-hwa was a model public servant who never refused bribes. Those who hadn't established a rapport would hear, "Oh, you're on the waiting list. Please wait six months." Consider the chances of an Awakener surviving for six months with severed limbs, and even the haughtiest guild leaders would bend a little.

"Oh, Mr. Do-hwa! What brings you here?"

"Ah, well... I was thinking of fixing the road between Haeundae and Bansong-dong."

"Huh? A road? You will? Why?"

"There's a patient in Bansong-dong who complains that the road to our workshop is destroyed. I could always help them find a house in

Haeundae, but I don't feel like being that generous. So I thought I'd just make a road."

In general, building a road would have been a far more significant act of kindness than finding a house, but Do-hwa's eccentric brain didn’t grasp the proper balance.

"But isn't Bansong your territory, guild leader? I was hoping you could lend a hand."

"Hmm. You mean no other guilds are involved, and it's just you?"

"Yes."

"Oh, of course, I'll help! Just tell me what you need!"

And so, a single-lane asphalt road was constructed from Haeundae to Bansong-dong, where Do-hwa's workshop was located.

Since the new road was a clean renovation of an old one, it wasn't a difficult project. Do-hwa's workshop handled everything, from construction to maintenance.

A 71-year-old patient named Lee, who was one of Do-hwa's patients, could now visit safely, even if it took time. The patient was satisfied, Do-hwa was satisfied, and the real estate prices in Bansong-dong were satisfied.

That was the beginning.

Footnotes:

Chapter 32

The Creator II

Sinnoa

Noh Do-hwa's patients never hesitated to heap praise on her when they gathered.

"Hey, that road laid down in Bansong looks great, doesn't it?"

"You're right. Those ugly, cracked asphalt roads are nothing but eyesores. Laying a clean, beautiful one-lane road is much better, isn't it?"

"That's classic Ms. Do-hwa. Where's she from again?"

"I heard she's from Ttangkkeut Village in Haenam."

"Of course! A woman born in a place with good water and air. If only someone like that were born in our town."

At a glance, it sounded like old men chatting while playing Go. But older folks usually prefer detours over straight roads. Their true intentions could be translated as:

"I'm so jealous! Really jealous!"

"Please, lay one down in our town too!"

Noh Do-hwa was someone born with a passive skill of mistrusting and hating people. She instinctively understood that behind every word uttered by humans lay ugly and vile desires.

However, this eccentric was infinitely generous to her patients. You could say her fondness was like a limited edition. Just as a dictator who despises humanity becomes a mere servant to her pets, Noh Do-hwa found a peculiar balance in her mind.

"Sir... Should I lay down a road in your neighborhood too?"

"What? No, no, Ms. Do-hwa! That's not what I meant to say!"

"But that's what you're saying now, isn't it? So, would you like me to lay one down or not?"

"Well... I'd really appreciate it if you could, but I feel bad asking when you're already so busy..."

"Yeah. You should feel sorry. Aren't you a patient whose only possession in this awful world is age? You're clinging to a promising technician like me. I know you're the one who took the lead, so keep apologizing to the other patients too."

"....."

Noh Do-hwa visited the Guild Alliance.

Back then and even now, the leader of the alliance was Dang Seo-rin. As for me, I just felt like a mercenary captain occasionally called in for jobs.

"Welcome, Ms. Noh Do-hwa. I've heard you're working on some projects lately."

"How have you been, Ms. Dang... It's embarrassing to act like I'm doing business in front of Samcheon. All I'm doing is gathering a few guys who used to toil in construction and laying down a few more modest roads than country lanes."

Surprisingly, Do-hwa was respectful toward Dang Seo-rin.

It wasn't because their personalities clicked. Their wallets did. Anyone would grow courteous after seeing the quarterly gifts of assets Dang Seo-rin sent to Do-hwa's workshop.

"Why the humility? So, what brings you here?"

"Well, I'm fixing the existing roads to make it easier for patients to travel. But you know, it's a matter of fairness, and people can get tricky if they feel left out. So, since the work's already in progress..."

"You want to fix the entire road network of Busan?"

"Yes, well... It's neater that way. But it's a massive project, and each district claims its own turf."

"Hmm."

Dang Seo-rin fiddled with the end of her pointed hat.

"You want me to sort out the districts?"

"Yes. If that's too difficult, you can invite me when you hold a guild meeting and just arrange a place for me."

"I see. That's probably better. If I look like I'm exploiting you, some guilds will undoubtedly throw a fit. You should take charge from start to finish so there are no rumors."

"True. Guild leaders have such filthy pride and greed."

"Alright."

Dang Seo-rin smiled brightly.

"I'll arrange a spot for you soon."

"Thank you, Lady Leader."

Noh Do-hwa laughed slyly.

"If you end up crippled later, I'll give you a full-body replacement for real cheap. Just come back with your brain and heart intact."

"....."

The notable part here wasn't the word "crippled" but "real cheap." She never said "free."

Do-hwa gave a nod and left the train car.

Dang Seo-rin looked at the sofa where I was sitting. By coincidence, I was also visiting Samcheon's headquarters.

"What do you think?"

"Noh Do-hwa is a good person."

I buried myself in the sofa. The lounge car, refurbished from a luxurious train, had very cozy chairs.

Dang Seo-rin looked at me sulkily.

"She called me a cripple."

"More precisely, she said, 'if you end up crippled.' Don't get upset. If you weigh every word she says, you'll just get tired. Have you seen Do-hwa treating her patients?"

"No."

"I once had the opportunity to observe her all day."

This wasn't in this cycle but another.

Oh, and let me clarify that although I usually tell stories sequentially, it doesn't mean everything happened in one cycle. More often than not, I weave and edit events from multiple cycles.

For instance, when I described the government's collapse, it wasn't like I stayed glued to the radio 24/7. How could I know what statements the Second Provisional Government and coup soldiers made?

I heard one speech in the 4th cycle and another in the 11th. I saw refugees throwing the Vice Mayor of Seoul off the bridge in the 37th cycle.

My "omniscient narrator" viewpoint came from many cycles and experiences.

And I spent as much time as needed to determine whether someone was trustworthy. In some cycles, I even worked closely alongside Do-hwa, practically as her assistant.

Unfortunately, in previous cycles, I hadn't been present when Do-hwa visited Dang Seo-rin. So her projects were always limited to Busan.

But this time would be different.

Like I said, I "coincidentally" was visiting the Samcheon Guild's headquarters.

"Patients with physical discomfort often struggle mentally as well. And it's not just the patients themselves but also their guardians. Even while listening to their complaints and curses, Do-hwa has never refused a patient."

"Hmm."

"She might seem shady and have an odd manner of speaking, but you won't find anyone like her."

"She always overcharges awakeners."

"But she knows whom to overcharge. As I said, she's never refused a patient. Did only affluent awakeners visit Do-hwa's workshop?"

Dang Seo-rin rested her chin on her hand.

"...Still, she's spent her life caring for patients. Will she be able to take on something this big?"

"She's someone who adjusts herself to the size of her responsibilities, not the other way around. She'll be fine."

"....."

She finally nodded.

"Alright. If that's your assessment, Undertaker, I'll trust her."

Once she trusted someone, Dang Seo-rin was loyal to the end.

Not long after, a national guild meeting was held off the coast of Busan. As "off the coast" suggests, they launched a cruise ship.

With no fuel to sail, it was anchored at the pier, but this was already unimaginable luxury in today's world.

The meeting was strictly for guild leaders. Members of the Second

Provisional Government or the Junior Officers' Corps, who typically wormed their way into official events, were thoroughly excluded.

A few "self-proclaimed bigwigs" sent people to protest, but Dang Seo-rin ignored them. The Second Provisional Government Foreign Minister? What's that? Oh, you're a member of the Fukuoka Korean Association. Sorry, we can't hear you well from here, so try crossing the Korea Strait first.

The meeting was strictly for guild leaders.

The only guest invited was Noh Do-hwa. Excluding the chefs, singers, and jazz band brought in for appearances.

"Uh... Lady Leader?"

"What?"

Looking around the faces of the guild leaders present, Noh Do-hwa looked troubled. A rare sight.

"Maybe it's just me, but it seems like we've got not only Busan guild leaders but also national guild leaders here..."

"Oh."

Dang Seo-rin waved her hand as if it were no big deal.

"Don't worry. I just got a lot of inquiries when I announced the meeting. They haven't seen each other in ages. Isn't it good to renew those connections?"

"Ah..."

It was nonsense.

The event's program was like this: First, the host, Dang Seo-rin, came out to greet the guests, keeping her speech brief to emphasize she wasn't the main star here.

Next, it was my turn.

An enthusiastic cheer erupted.

"Undertaker! How long has it been?"

"Come visit Gangwon-do sometime. Our members really want to see you."

"Is Ms. Sim Ah-ryeon doing well? Thanks to you sending her, we cleared the Gate smoothly last time."

"I'll make sure to organize something and invite you!"

Across the room, the Sword Marquess was sitting with his arms crossed.

This was truly a gathering of Korea's most influential awakeners.

I may have downplayed myself as just a mercenary captain, but did you know even Switzerland, a neutral country, once thrived on mercenary work? Trust earned from mercenary work easily translates into banking, according to historical precedent.

Simply put, few guild leaders here hadn't owed me a favor.

And like any honest debtor, the guild leaders were determined to repay their debt to this bank of mine, in principal and interest. They knew well that delaying repayment could snowball into a much bigger problem later.

"I'm deeply grateful to all of you for coming here across long and difficult roads. If this were a routine statement, it'd just be a standard greeting. But today's topic is encapsulated in that very statement: long and difficult roads. Isn't it time to fix them?"

"Right!"

"Woo-hoo!"

The topic of today's meeting? That was already laid out in detail on the invitation.

The moment the guild leaders opened their letters, the Saintess

fired up the Constellation chat. Something like, [The Saintess of National Salvation is very supportive of this quest.]

Dang Seo-rin's authority, my trust, and the Saintess's guarantee.

It was a literal trinity. Nothing was more powerful on the Korean Peninsula. Perhaps not even in the whole world.

"As many of you know, the eternal supporter of Awakeners is right here! Thanks to this person, losing a limb to monsters isn't a problem. She has made tremendous contributions to maximizing our combat abilities. The owner of the 'Noh Do-hwa Workshop,' who's invaluable to all Awakeners. ...And someone even the most temperamental Awakeners reluctantly respect. Please give a warm round of applause to 'The Limb Creator,' Noh Do-hwa!"

Thunderous applause erupted. No exaggeration. Who cast the lightning spell?

Looking around, I saw Dang Seo-rin, in the front row, leading the applause with a happy smile.

By the way, Dang Seo-rin held a legendary grudge. If anyone called her a cripple, she'd happily prove who the real cripple was.

I've painted her in a good light, but once she kidnapped a rival guild leader who called her a bitch, castrated him, and said, "Well, well, here's a TS girl! So, who's the bitch now?" as she laughed.

That was because she had a long-standing grudge with that guild leader. It's solid proof that she didn't win the leadership of the Korean Awakener Guild Federation by chance.

Have you heard of "birds of a feather flock together"? I might have softened up now, but I was once her second-in-command, climbing to vice guild leader under Dang Seo-rin.

"....."

Receiving the good graces of both Dang Seo-rin and myself, Noh Do-hwa trembled with joy.

After my introduction, Do-hwa walked up the stage, then grabbed the microphone. The expression on her face was, well, likely the one she often had back when she was a seventh-grade public servant.

In simpler terms:

"I'm Noh Do-hwa..."

She was screwed.

Footnotes:

Chapter 33

The Creator III

Sinnoa

“You really set me up..."

After the event wound down, the meeting shifted to the after-party. In fact, this was the main event, since it wasn't often that the leaders of all the nation's guilds gathered together.

As soon as the drinking began, I used the excuse of going to the bathroom to step onto the cruise ship's deck. Noh Do-hwa followed me like a ghost, easily tracking me down.

I feigned ignorance.

"Set you up? Me?"

"You've blown up this road project so much."

"Oh, come on. It wasn't me, it was the alliance leader. Why blame an innocent man?"

"Samcheon World's guild leader, Dang Seo-rin..."

Do-hwa murmured.

"She's certainly an excellent person but has a strong sense of pride. She's good at distinguishing between personal and public feelings, but that means she still holds onto personal grudges even if things proceed publicly. I even used the word 'cripple' to provoke her pride, yet she introduced me to the guild leaders. This isn't possible unless she values me highly enough to treat me like an official."

Do-hwa's eyes narrowed.

"It means she must have asked someone about me, and that someone gave her a glowing recommendation."

"Indeed. Who could that be?"

"It's likely the person who was in the guest lounge when I spoke with Samcheon World's guild leader."

Do-hwa offered me one of the two glass cups she held, a cold lemon tea. I gratefully took it and drank.

Beyond Busan Harbor, where the cruise ship was docked, the city stretched out in the night. The familiar sight of electric lights painting the Milky Way on the ground was gone. There was only a faint glow, a bit of shadow, and lots of moonlight.

The sea breeze brought a tang of salt to the deck.

Noh Do-hwa and I looked at the cityscape, engulfed in the sound of the waves, for a while.

"You really set me up..."

"You just said that. About what?"

"Trying to make me work for free. Don't you think your conscience has gone on a trip?"

"It's not free. Whatever resources, funds, or manpower you need, we'll provide whatever you require."

"Heh."

Do-hwa laughed slyly.

"What I require? Sure, then restore the world to how it was..."

"....."

"When you hear the word 'infinite,' what do you think of? Space? Time? For me, the only infinite thing in this world is human misfortune."

Do-hwa's tone was even darker than the night's view.

"Saving one life? That's possible. I've done it. But does ending one

person's misery solve everything? When misfortune disappears, does happiness come? That's entirely up to that person. No one else can be responsible for it. When will it end?"

These were the words of someone who cared for the disabled, ignored even in this ruined world.

"So the idea of helping others is wrong to begin with. Help has to be limited. Instead of helping a person with their entire life, think about helping them with just their severed arm. Then it's manageable. It's something I can do and do very well... But."

Do-hwa leaned forward to peer at me, like a long-necked snake.

The aroma of freshly brewed lemon tea mingled with the salty scent of the sea.

"You want me to take charge of the national road network, not just Busan?"

Her two eyes, like a full moon split in half, locked onto my face.

"Well, it's possible. And I might do it well. But what next? Roads are infrastructure. Do you know what they call people who handle infrastructure, Undertaker?"

"Government."

"Not too keen on privatization, huh? Correct..."

Do-hwa laughed deeply.

"The whole world? I have no intention of shouldering that..."

"....."

"It's already enough dealing with the broken. No way I'll handle a broken nation. I know. For now, I have to introduce myself and suck up to the guild leaders. But as roads are built, the guild leaders will end up kneeling before me. Oh, yes. A new power player in this broken world. The king of the Korean Peninsula. Sweet, right? But... I don't want it. I don't like it. Why? Did you think I'd be happy if

you handed me power? Go fuck yourself."

"Noh Do-hwa."

"Ah, too ashamed for some self-pleasure? Then ask Samcheon World's guild leader to do it for you. Heh. If you're trying to save the world, the noble ones should save it themselves, not drag in some poor guy..."

"I'm a regressor."

The waves gently lapped against the cruise ship.

Perhaps from the vibration, Do-hwa tilted her head.

The lemon slice, cut like a crescent moon in her glass, slid slightly.

"Uh...?"

"You secretly have a winery in your workshop's basement, where you've stored twenty bottles of Château d'Yquem 1990."

"Uh..."

"I know you opened one of them secretly the day you decided to build the road for the elderly in Bansong. Why Bansong? Because the people living there are in the worst condition. And if you connect with the guild leader holding that territory, you can interfere if necessary."

"Wait...?"

"When you were a civil servant, you won the first prize in the lottery but never revealed it to anyone, right? You used that money to buy wine and also privately collected the equipment needed for making assistive devices."

"....."

Do-hwa touched her lips with her index and middle fingers.

"Hmm. Aha? Ugh. Hmm... Very interesting claim. If it's true..."

Do-hwa gazed at me, scanning my legs, hands, chest, and body.

"That explains why you've always looked like this. Aha, sure. I see. It makes sense. Your movements make sense in many ways."

Silence.

"But even if it's true, if you're an incompetent human being, it's meaningless. Ah, I'm not saying you're actually incompetent. What I mean is, you have to be competent enough to restore the world to how it was. I know you took down the Ten Legs, but that's not enough. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I understand."

"Prove it."

I looked up at the night sky.

"Saintess. Are you watching?"

[Yes.]

"Send a message to Ms. Noh Do-hwa."

The Saintess didn't question my judgment. She knew who I was.

"...!"

Do-hwa, beside me, flinched. Her expression briefly flickered with confusion, curiosity, and a hint of joy.

"Were the Constellations a lie...?"

"Yes. SG Net is run by me."

"Huh? Oh, a site made by the Constellation? Ah, I see."

Silence.

"Not bad..."

Do-hwa's pupils calmed down.

"Monopolizing information doesn't mean controlling its content. You have to secure the very channel it passes through. Hmm. This could all be a scam involving telepathy or manipulation, but if you have the skill to pull that off, then it's as good as having the regression ability."

Do-hwa glanced back at me.

"How many times have you regressed? Is this your second time...?"

"It's my 54th cycle. The first time I met you was in the 11th cycle."

"Wow, that's a hell of a grind..."

Do-hwa seemed slightly horrified.

"Well, the world had to have gone to hell. But weren't there better candidates than me? Aren't there plenty of perverts drooling for power...?"

"I've roughly tested them all."

The Second Provisional Government, the military coup factions. Even the more influential politicians I didn't mention.

Do-hwa furrowed her brows.

"I'm the best among them? Impossible. Wouldn't it be better to give it to the one imitating the Constellations...?"

"Ah, that person is a true shut-in, so it won't work."

[.....]

I felt the silent pressure from the Saintess, but I shrugged.

"If there's one thing I've learned from 54 cycles, it's that if I try to do everything myself, it's endless. It's similar to your theory about infinite misfortune. We need to leave fields we can afford to alone. People will emerge to fill those gaps."

"Is that me...?"

"Even without my intervention, you have a high chance of rebuilding Busan's road network. In the last cycle, you went to see the leader. I wasn't there."

"....."

But that wasn't all.

In the future that hadn't arrived yet, in the 90th cycle, when I coaxed the Tutorial Fairy into running a convenience store.

Noh Do-hwa attended the last supper held in front of that convenience store. She was the one who sprinkled her precious wines to gain the praise of the Awakeners.

And before forming the final raid party with other Awakeners to charge into the meteor shower, Do-hwa left a letter at my store.

[The road here is too rough. Nearly died bringing the wine bottles. - NDH]

I don't think that will was a complaint directed at me.

It was her regret about herself.

If she had pushed herself more to connect city to city with roads before the world completely broke, maybe she could have delayed the world's end even a little.

I think such regret was in her words.

She was someone who always carried those feelings in her heart, both in the past and future.

So, was her behavior and attitude a kind of camouflage?

Everyone knew Noh Do-hwa was significant. Even those in power thought about how to use her more effectively. But hearing her shameless insults, they could only back away, thinking, "She's a defective Homo sapien."

Even so, I was here.

When I first met Noh Do-hwa, I also thought she was someone who couldn't be of much use. What made me different was that I was always given the chance to correct my prejudices.

In the last cycle, I joined her workshop to observe her character from start to finish. Her interactions with patients, negotiations with other guild leaders, even when the apocalypse was imminent, prioritizing her patients…

For over nine years.

The result was a pass.

As I told Dang Seo-rin, Noh Do-hwa was a good person.

"You don't need to worry about failure. Rather, fail in as many ways as possible. The failures you experience this time will be data for the next version of yourself."

"Hah..."

"Lay the roads wherever you want. Start projects wherever your instincts guide you. Eventually, you'll find the optimal route. Try out various people when building your team. In the end, you'll figure out who fits your organization best."

"Regression is certainly a scam. You can seduce people with words like these."

Noh Do-hwa scratched her temple.

"Ugh... I'm sorry for telling you to go fuck yourself, and I apologize to Samcheon World's guild leader too."

"I don't care."

"Do you think you can restore this world to what it was?”

She had asked this earlier too.

I looked directly at her.

"Not on my own."

"....."

"I need your help."

Do-hwa let out a long sigh.

The waves of the night sea seemed to resonate with her sigh, gently lapping against the hull of the cruise ship docked in the harbor, never to sail again.

"This is a disease."

The waves whispered, murmuring in the darkness, and the unmoving cruise ship groaned.

"A truly wretched epidemic. The carriers of this shitty plague speak of their grand ideals and good intentions... I've healed countless cripples, but the biggest cripple of all was me. I can't find a prescription to fix myself, and there won't be one until I die..."

I didn't answer. I figured it was just Do-hwa reflecting on herself. With slumped shoulders, she held out her cup.

"Well, let's do it. This public project..."

Clink.

Our glass cups clinked together in a small toast. The lemon aroma drifted up to my nose.

"Pleased to be working with you."

"So, is this going to repeat forever?"

"If you're competent, Noh Do-hwa, then yes."

"Well, fuck me..."

There's an epilogue.

The next day, an official organization was launched.

National Road Management Corps.

True to its simple name, this organization's purpose was singular: to repair and maintain the rapidly crumbling road network, linking cities and towns that had been isolated and were barely sustaining themselves.

"We don't need a government right now, and it can't even be maintained..."

A week later, Do-hwa gave us a briefing. By "us," I didn't mean the nation's guild leaders.

It was just me and the Saintess.

A private meeting was held with those who almost always knew that I was a regressor. Later, this group would expand to include Oh Dok-seo and others, but for now, it was just a three-person blood pact.

"Let the cities be managed as usual by the influential guild leaders of each region. They're like feudal lords. Think of the National Road Management Corps as the royal family, or rather, an administrative body under the royal family, that simply signs contracts with these feudal lords."

The Saintess raised her hand, as was her habit.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Won't it have too little power?"

"Yes. The less authority it has, the better. The more fields power occupies, the wider it becomes. But the more irreplaceable a field is, the stronger it becomes. And we don't need broad power. It'll just lower efficiency and lead to corruption... In an era of self-sufficiency, when cities can't care for one another, the National Road Management Corps will be responsible for connecting and maintaining the road network."

Do-hwa spoke confidently.

The National Road Management Corps was made up of laborers, construction workers, and combat units. Once a one-lane road was secured, the combat units would regularly "patrol" the roads.

"This regular patrol is critical."

People and merchants traveling to other cities naturally tagged along on patrol days. Do-hwa collected a fixed usage fee from them.

"It's basically a tax, but they'll protest if we call it that. So, we'll insist it's a usage fee."

Cities connected by the road network also had to pay usage fees. They could try using the roads for free, but they'd have to protect themselves from monsters that might attack.

"We must market it as though other choices are available, and they should actually be available. It's crucial for people to believe it's not coercion but their own choice. That's when the importance of the National Road Management Corps will be etched into their minds."

Guilds could form their own groups to use the roads, but if they wanted to reach distant cities, they'd have to pass through intermediate stops. Passing through each city meant paying taxes to that city's guild.

"They'd be pissed off."

It was far more reasonable to pay a small tax to the National Road Management Corps and travel under their protection.

Ordinary people and Awakeners alike relied on the National Road Management Corps for travel, naturally increasing Noh Do-hwa's influence.

The members of the National Road Management Corps, handpicked by Do-hwa, became like "diplomats." Guilds that would have fought each other could communicate better with the National Road Management Corps as a buffer.

Do-hwa utilized the relationships, pride, and competitive spirit of the guild leaders in each city to extract maximum efficiency.

Of course, there was trial and error. Actually, there was a lot.

"These assholes..."

There were many in the National Road Management Corps who lined their pockets instead of negotiating. Some, trusted by Do-hwa, were spies sent by other guilds. Other times, even though they chose the shortest road, it turned out to pass through a monster den.

But gradually, the National Road Management Corps found its footing.

I really have a good eye for people, don't I?

Though for some reason, Do-hwa often looked at me with eyes full of resentment.

"When I get to the next cycle, please make sure to pass on my failures."

"What should I tell you?"

"You having fun reaping the rewards, you son of a bitch?"

I passed on the message.

The response from Noh Do-hwa in the 55th cycle was concise.

"Bullshit.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 34

The Taxpayer I

Sinnoa

Speaking of public servants, it's curious how frequently they appear in Korean contemporary fantasy.

"Hello there! Oh, you're entering the Gate? Could I see your Hunter license?"

"Oh dear, your license has expired. Sir, I can't let you in like this. Please head to the Hunter Management Bureau and renew it."

"What? You're asking for a favor? Hah, what do you think we are?"

Take the "Gate Management Public Servant," for example.

In East Asia, people have loved public servants so much that they've applied a bureaucratic system even to the afterlife, ruled by the King of Hell, making East Asians fanatical civil servants.

A true East Asian should not fear monster waves but rather lament, "These savage monsters are so ignorant and unlucky that they haven't embraced civilization!" The right course would be to impart a bureaucratic system, creating a state system of king monster - middle manager monster - lower manager monster.

How could the sacred national law exempt an apocalyptic mess?

While we didn't have any Gate Managers in our world, other kinds of public servants were still around.

"Awakener Undertaker."

"Yes?"

"It's almost June. Have you filed your comprehensive income tax return with the National Tax Service?"

"Oh."

Noh Do-hwa's words snapped me back to reality.

"You're right. It's that time already. Thanks for the reminder."

"Heh, if you procrastinate, you'll have a headache later. They'll collect as they see fit. You should head to the tax office after work."

"Good point. Not that I can pay any tax... I'll get it sorted."

Yes.

Even in an era where the military's wrath had cooled and politicians' gold badges were buried in sand, where survival was a crude joke—

The National Tax Service still existed.

Today, let's talk about a small anomaly, the "National Tax Service Tax Office," which was the last remnant of the South Korean government.

KakaoTalk!

I first received that familiar yet strange KakaoTalk notification during my 56th cycle, on a spring day, May 4.

"Hmm?"

At first, I thought I had misheard.

After humanity drifted into the apocalypse genre, words like "phone," "message," and "communication" were purged from our vocabulary.

"Was that really a KakaoTalk alert?"

Skeptical, I checked my smartphone.

To my surprise, after nearly a year, there was a proud little 1 icon next to the KakaoTalk app.

Like an excited preschooler seeing their first KakaoTalk message, I hurried to read it.

———————————

[Notification Talk Received]

"The Republic of Korea Falls Again"

"A Nation of Citizens Dying Together"

A digital document from the National Tax Service has arrived.

Greetings from the National Tax Service.

May is the month to file and pay comprehensive income tax each year.

The National Tax Service has pre-calculated your income tax. Please check the notice below and file and pay easily via ARS phone (☎4444-4444).

■ Inquiry: ☎444

———————————

"....."

After reading the message, my mood deflated.

Or, to put it another way, the wind was taken out of my sails.

"Aw, come on. It's a ghost message."

Ghost messages.

After the apocalypse began, such anomalies would appear from time to time. It's one reason electronics were considered dangerous materials.

In this era of cutthroat competition, even anomalies struggled to survive.

To distinguish themselves from others, they diversified their ghost messages with ghost calls, ghost websites, ghost radios, ghost TVs, etc.

In reality, the only safe communication network in Korea was SG Net. Even that had a history of being corrupted by the "Hero Syndrome."

The solution to these ghost messages was surprisingly simple.

"Just ignore it."

Curiosity kills the cat, as they say. These days, curiosity is upgraded enough to hunt not just cats but humanity too.

By this point, there wasn't a government, let alone the National Tax Service. Ignoring texts demanding comprehensive income tax was the correct move.

But the very next day.

"Oh, hyung. Did you get the text?"

"Huh? What text?"

"You know, the one from the National Tax Service asking you to pay tax. It's causing a stir on SG Net."

"...You got it too?"

The situation changed.

"Uh, yeah... I got the letter."

"What? A letter?"

"Y-yeah..."

Sim Ah-ryeon handed me an already-opened envelope. The contents were identical to the KakaoTalk notification.

"This is serious."

An uneasy feeling crept up my spine, like a cold hand brushing my vertebrae.

"R-right? I thought it was a prank by the guild leader, but Seo Gyu got the same message..."

"Where did you find the letter?"

"W-when I woke up, it was next to my pillow..."

No need to mention it, but the guild base's security was airtight. In the 89th cycle, Go Yuri wrecked the guild in one blow, but that was just her being weird.

Even if it wasn't Arsène Lupin but his grandfather, it would be impossible to sneak past my surveillance and leave a letter in Sim Ah-ryeon's bedroom.

Assuming it was a human.

[I've received the same message.]

The Saintess's testimony dealt the final blow.

[This morning, when I opened my front door, a letter was wedged in the door frame.]

"What about the other awakeners?"

[The same thing happened across the country. People with smartphones received KakaoTalk notifications, while the rest got letters.]

The Saintess's usually emotionless voice sounded even colder.

[Mr. Undertaker. No one witnessed "the moment the letter arrived."]

"What?"

[No one saw the postman delivering the letter.]

The Saintess explained what had happened in a guild she was

watching in Incheon.

This guild, while not as strong as mine, had a fairly secure base. It was located underground with several layers of steel doors and numerous guards.

A simple diagram would look like this:

_____

■ ♙ ■ ♙ ■ ♙ ■

Door Guard Door Guard Door Guard Door

_____

The guards took turns staying awake, ensuring there was always a "sleepless presence."

Yet, this morning, every guild member woke up to find a letter.

Under their pillows.

"....."

[The same message was sent to ordinary people, not just Awakeners. Undertaker, I believe the "National Tax Service Comprehensive Income Tax Letter" is...]

"A significant anomaly."

[Yes. At least it's certainly affecting the entire Korean Peninsula.]

I couldn't help but chuckle.

...A mysterious entity was determined to collect taxes, even as a ghost.

-Anonymous: I called the National Tax Service, lol.

If there's one virtue crucial to surviving this harsh apocalypse, it's carefully testing bridges before crossing.

However, some awakeners lived their lives with reckless abandon. These types usually met their end early, but occasionally, some lucky outliers stuck around.

That day's certification post on SG Net was written by one of these rare survivors.

-As the KakaoTalk message said, I called 4444-4444. Everyone told me not to, but I thought, "Hell, what's the worst that could happen?"

-When I dialed the number, it actually connected. *Ring, ring,* and a few seconds later, the call went through. There was an operator? A telephonist? Anyway, a robotic-sounding voice started speaking.

-I don't remember exactly, but it said, "This is the National Tax Service ARS Application Report Center. Please select the service you want."

-Then a weird screen popped up on my smartphone. The background was red with white text, and I took a screenshot.

Attached to the post was an image file.

National Tax Service

National Tax Service ARS Application Report Center.

[1. Comprehensive Income Tax Report]

[2. Additional Corpse Tax Report]

[3. Slave Workshop Unreported Status]

Data charges will apply in 3G/LTE environments.

The image file was grainy, with spots of noise. The red background and white text combination hurt the eyes.

It was far beyond the point of a wobbly bridge, already tap-dancing on the edge, but surprisingly, the author didn't stop.

-I have to admit, "Additional Corpse Tax" and "Slave Workshop" made me nervous, haha. That's the first scare point.

-I clicked the most normal option, "Comprehensive Income Tax Report." After all, the KakaoTalk message was about reporting comprehensive income tax.

-When I clicked, I heard static noise as the robotic voice guided me to enter my social security number. It's been so long since I last entered mine, I almost forgot it, haha.

-It felt like I was really filing my taxes, but at the end, it said I could pay by bank transfer. But hey, how can I transfer money these days when there are no banks?

-Luckily or unluckily, it said I could pay directly at the tax office. It told me to go to the "Pocheon Tax Office."

-That's the second scare point. My region is actually Pocheon, haha. How does this message know where I live?

-But I heard the tax office here was destroyed long ago, so I don't know why it told me to go there. I'll check it out and post an update soon.

The post ended there.

Naturally, the comments exploded in disbelief.

-Anonymous: Are you crazy? Why'd you call?

-OldManGoryeo: Another one's heading up to heaven.

-[NationalRoad] Officer: Make sure you post that update.

-Anonymous: If you're in Pocheon, aren't all Awakeners from the same guild? They'll figure out who you are.

-LiteraryGirl: Can't believe this hero's still alive.

-dolLHoUse: so dumb

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Life is precious. Desires are fleeting. Aren't there more important things than trying to attract attention?

Anonymous: CookingQueen, you're so kind.

-[BaekHwa] SixthGrader: Hoee! (>_<);;

-Anonymous: I'd bet my entire fortune this idiot is 100% dead.

I didn't criticize the poster.

Instead, I decided to use this opportunity.

"Seo Gyu, I'm going up to Pocheon for a bit. Watch the house while I'm gone."

"Huh? Pocheon? Why so suddenly... Wait, are you going because of that SG Net post?"

"Yeah. It's a newly appeared nationwide anomaly, so I need to check it out."

"Wow... You're really diligent."

I packed lightly and headed north. It felt like a leisurely stroll.

In my opinion, Pocheon wasn't too far from Seoul, and it was where Sim Ah-ryeon worked as the "Healing Angel" back in my 50th cycle. I was familiar with the area.

Within hours, I arrived in Pocheon. On my way to the tax office, I ran into a truly unexpected person.

"Oh?"

"Hmm?"

Strong build. Short, cropped hair. Too well-groomed for a post-apocalyptic survivor.

A young man who embodied the notion of a "well-raised youth."

"Ah, um, sorry. You seem to know me, but I'm not good at remembering faces. Where have we met?"

The young man didn't recognize me. Instead, he seemed slightly wary of this unfamiliar face.

But with my [Complete Memory], I could recognize most Awakeners. And this time, his face was particularly familiar.

"That's Lee Ju-ho, isn't it?"

Lee Ju-ho.

Back in the 50th cycle, he was the victim whose father was humiliated by the "OldManGoryeo Villain" Sim Ah-ryeon. Yet, he graciously forgave her.

That magnanimous young man stood at the path leading to the Pocheon Tax Office with a backpack and a smartphone.

Glancing at his screen, I noticed the familiar SG Net homepage.

"Could it be?"

A realization dawned on me.

"…So you were the one who wrote that post?"

It's a small world.

Footnotes:

Chapter 35

The Taxpayer II

Sinnoa

"Ah! It's you, Undertaker! I've heard about you everywhere. Sorry I didn't recognize you sooner."

After introducing ourselves, Lee Ju-ho's wariness melted away like frost under the spring sun.

That's why it's important to spread goodwill and have a positive reputation. When people you meet already have a +20% affinity buff towards you, why wouldn't you try to build rapport?

"Oh, there's no need to apologize. It's just fame. I should be grateful you think so highly of me."

"Hahaha. Our guild was small, so during the Ten Legs Hunt, we were practically in the third line. We only caught glimpses of you from afar. If it's not too much trouble, could you sign this for me?"

"Oh, I'm not a celebrity. I'm embarrassed."

Despite my words, I took out a brush pen and clicked the cap open with a pop. Like Dang Seo-rin, I often receive autograph requests, so I carry a brush pen with me.

With a flourish, I scrawled "Undertaker" in calligraphy.

The strokes contained the experience of a regressor's life. I could see Lee Ju-ho's eyes widen as he marveled at my signature.

"Whoa, your handwriting is... truly superb."

"Thanks. I studied calligraphy like mad just to see that reaction."

"What? Oh, hahaha."

An experienced regressor knows to break the ice based on a person's personality type.

If I put my mind to it, there weren't many people I couldn't befriend in Korea (Noh Do-hwa, who viewed the world with distrust, hatred, malice, and contempt, being a rare exception).

Within five minutes, Lee Ju-ho and I had formed a rapport.

"So, you came all the way here after seeing my post on SG Net?"

"Exactly."

"Wow, this is so embarrassing..."

As expected, the "Anonymous" user who wrote that post was Lee Ju-ho.

Back in the 50th cycle, when his father had been humiliated by Sim Ah-ryeon, Lee Ju-ho used the nickname "iJoinedToday" on SG Net.

In his first post, he'd written:

-Usually, I post anonymously, but I signed up just to write this.

Meaning, in cycles where Sim Ah-ryeon hadn't humiliated his father, Lee Ju-ho remained active as "Anonymous."

"What's there to be embarrassed about? We're uncovering a newly emerged anomaly. If it's okay with you, I'd like to help."

"Of course! With you by my side, we'd be unstoppable!"

Our pleasant atmosphere lasted only until we reached the uphill path where the Pocheon Tax Office towered.

"Hmm."

"Uh..."

I let out a dissatisfied "hmm," while Lee Ju-ho made a perplexed "uh."

To reiterate, the tax office stood tall.

As if the apocalypse had never happened, it was pristine.

[Thank you for your honest tax payments - Pocheon Tax Office]

[May is the period for filing and paying comprehensive income tax. Reporting Period: May 1 - May 31]

[Honest Tax Payments, Fair Taxation! Building a Shared Future]

The surrounding buildings were in ruins, but the tax office had clean gray walls and spotless banners fluttering.

"Lee Ju-ho, was that building always intact?"

"What? No, it's not. There was a massive fire here recently, and all the buildings were destroyed."

Lee Ju-ho looked up at the building uneasily.

"Ha. They were definitely ruined..."

"Then this building must be a Void."

It was a high-level void that altered perception and forcibly changed the environment.

Was it because of last night's rain? The building's wet surface gleamed slickly like a beetle's shell.

Then, suddenly.

"Uaaaagh!"

Someone tumbled out of the building.

Lee Ju-ho and I instinctively drew our weapons, but the person seemed oblivious to our armed state.

"My foot! Aaaagh! Save me!"

He was missing his right leg.

The man collapsed at the entrance, blood splattering around him.

Lee Ju-ho frowned.

"Park Sang-hyun?"

"You know this man?"

"Yeah, well... He's not an awakener, but he goes around bullying the neighborhood elders like a thug. No need to remember him."

Even his tone hinted at how much he disliked the man.

"How is someone like that still alive?"

"He's the son of our late vice guild leader, so it's hard for our guild to treat him like a nobody."

Father-son relationship, huh?

"L-Lee Ju-ho! Ju-ho!"

Noticing us, Park Sang-hyun frantically waved. Since he was missing his legs, he looked like a lower-half Shanks.

"Save me!"

"Sigh. What happened?"

"The building suddenly appeared, so I went inside... It's crazy in there! Ugh, save me first! I'm so dizzy..."

Clang.

A strange noise echoed from the building entrance. Park Sang-hyun flinched, his whole body stiffening.

"It's coming! Hey! Help! Help me!"

The noise was metallic, sounding like "clank" and "clack."

Deep within the tax office, beyond the entrance, the "clank" grew closer and closer.

"Hey, what are you waiting for? Save me! Lee Ju-ho! If I die, do you think Mr. Dong-wook will let you off?"

I glanced at Lee Ju-ho.

"Do you really need to save him?"

"...He was already a troublemaker in the guild. If an anomaly eats him, our guild won't lose face."

At last, the clanking noise reached right behind Park Sang-hyun. He screamed and tried to crawl away.

But before he could move far, something grabbed his ankle with a thud.

"Aaaaagh! No, I don't want this! Save me! Aaagh!"

Park Sang-hyun was swiftly dragged into the building's maw. It happened in a flash.

His screams echoed through the halls for a while, but they didn't last long. After a minute, silence fell.

"Do you still want to go in?"

"Hmm..."

Lee Ju-ho's worry deepened.

But he didn't need to think long.

Shortly after the screaming stopped, someone walked out of the tax office.

-Are you here to file your taxes?

"....."

"....."

We didn't answer the question immediately, for several reasons.

First, no entity emerging from an obviously abnormal void could be trusted.

Second, while the figure looked human and wore a neatly pressed suit like a receptionist, it was blatantly violating dress code.

No exaggeration, its disheveled hair cascaded down to its hips like a wild mane, obscuring not just its face but its entire upper body. A voice emerged through the hair like a whisper.

It was hard for the Confucian uncle inside me to tolerate such blatant disregard for grooming, calling out "Unacceptable!"

Even worse, it constantly shook its head, making the mess of hair sway like a seesaw. These public servants must listen to heavy metal during working hours.

Third, and most importantly, the "public servant-like entity" held a 30 cm-long pair of scissors in its right hand.

Clank, clank, clank.

The mysterious noise from earlier had come from the scissors. Every time the blades clicked, blood splattered.

The visual was shocking.

Even if the "public servant" had a hobby of gardening, bringing scissors to work wouldn't comply with the "Rules on Public Officials' Conduct," which stated: "Article 8-2(1) Public officials shall dress neatly to maintain their dignity while on duty."

-Taxes.

The "public servant" tilted its head, making its oily hair reek of gasoline.

-Are you here to file your taxes?

"Uh, uh..."

"That’s right."

I took charge, speaking up for the stunned Lee Ju-ho.

"I received a notification about filing my comprehensive income tax and was directed to come to the Pocheon Tax Office. Is this the right place?"

-Yes, it is.

The public servant's head swiveled toward me.

-This month is the filing period. Can I see your ID card to confirm your identity, taxpayer?

What should I do?

I could easily draw my blade and sever the anomaly's neck. But "Anomaly Response Manual: Beat It to a Pulp" would only be effective for an awakener like me.

No matter how strong I was, I couldn't handle every anomaly in the world at once.

A "strategy" must be useful to everyone, even weaker awakeners, to have any value, especially for widespread anomalies like the "Comprehensive Income Tax Anomaly."

"Ju-ho, it might be best to play along for now."

"Uh, yeah. Here you go."

Lee Ju-ho produced a worn Hermes wallet and handed over his ID card. He didn't seem like the type to favor luxury brands, so it was likely a family keepsake.

-Thank you. Let me check your ID.

The public servant took the ID card and placed it within the curtain of hair.

Crunch. An abrasive sound emanated from behind the hair, like front teeth grinding against the card.

"My ID card..."

-Identity confirmed. Age 26. Lee Ju-ho. You're a Pocheon citizen with very little income. The total tax due today, including Body Tax and Slave Tax, is 100 grams.

"What? 100 grams?"

Ah, this kind of anomaly.

-We can collect the tax on your behalf, Lee Ju-ho. Would you like us to do that?

"Well... I don't really understand, but..."

"Wait. Hold on."

I grabbed Lee Ju-ho's shoulder.

"What?"

"You shouldn't just nod along when an anomaly proposes a deal. Remember Park Sang-hyun's state?"

"What? Oh, yes."

"That was likely the tax collection."

"...?"

"Your tax is 100 grams, right? What if it were 50 kilograms?"

"...!"

Lee Ju-ho's eyes widened.

"Th-then? Would that mean... me too?"

"Yes. This 'Comprehensive Income Tax Anomaly' probably means body parts must be used as payment. Even if 100 grams sounds small, it makes a huge difference depending on the body part. What if they took an eye?"

"Gasp..."

"I'm an anomaly expert. Leave this to me."

I pulled out a plastic bag and summoned my aura to my fingers.

"Ju-ho, you don't care too much about your hairstyle, do you?"

"...No?"

Soon enough, Lee Ju-ho's already short hair had been reduced to a bald scalp. The plastic bag was filled with black strands.

He was devastated.

"Aaaah..."

"Hmm. This isn't quite 100 grams. Take this and go relieve yourself in the bag."

"Undertaker, you're something else."

Why? What's shame got to do with handling anomalies?

With all his might, Lee Ju-ho managed to fill the bag to 100 grams.

The public servant took the bag from him.

-Tax payment confirmed.

"....."

-Please continue to make your tax payments diligently in the future. Thank you.

The public servant bowed and disappeared back into the tax office.

Lee Ju-ho looked at me as if thinking, "This really worked?"

I smiled warmly.

'If hair and urine hadn't worked, I would have just cut off a few unused fingers.'

But since it worked, wasn't it a happy ending?

There's an epilogue.

-Anonymous: The Comprehensive Income Tax Anomaly is a joke, lol.

By the time I returned to Seoul, Lee Ju-ho had already posted a sequel on SG Net.

-Anonymous: If you try to file your tax return, a ghost with extremely long hair asks for your ID card. Just hand it over, and they'll calculate your taxes for you. I wonder what happens if you've lost your card...

-Anonymous: I owed 100 grams, so I shaved my head and peed in a plastic bag. This dumb ghost accepted it joyfully and left, haha.

-Anonymous: Don't ignore the comprehensive income tax alert. Head to the tax office and ask how much you owe. If it's around 100 grams like mine, pay it right away. If it's 50 kilograms, collect your pee in a trash can until May 31. You'll be able to pass the anomaly easily.

-Anonymous: Don't be scared and pay your taxes, everyone, lol.

"Hmm."

The post contained the strategy to deal with the "Comprehensive Income Tax Anomaly," just as I'd asked.

Other members were shocked.

-Anonymous: Did you seriously survive this...?

Afterward, posts poured into SG Net from people who paid their taxes at their local tax office.

-OldManGoryeo: My tax was 300 kg. Anyone got a higher amount?

-LiteraryGirl: 10 kg is about the SG Net average, right?

-Anonymous: Damn, I owe 500 kg. What do I do?

-[Satisfaction] Cooking Queen: I got a tax refund. The public servant gave me a gift box. What's inside?

A little competition arose, called the "Tax Challenge," to see who owed the most.

This was a rare case where an anomaly had become a sort of plaything.

In the end, the criteria the anomaly used to calculate taxes remained unclear, and while it was funny that people paid taxes to an anomaly instead of a human government...

'It's just the sign of the times.'

With a lighter heart, I headed to the tax office.

After a massive void hit Seoul, every building south of the Han River had vanished. But the tax office building appeared in May and vanished again in June.

Admiring its tenacity to collect taxes, I visited the Banpo Tax Office and found a scissors-wielding long-haired ghost, identical to the one at Pocheon, walking out.

-Hello. May I see your ID to verify your identity, taxpayer?

"Yes, here it is."

-Thank you. Let me check your ID. Age twen...

It paused.

The anomaly stopped grinding my ID with its teeth and froze.

It began to tremble.

"...?"

-Twenty, ten, twenty-six, twenty-seven, eight, nine, sixteen, twenty-four, thousand, hundred, two hundred, seventy-three, seven, seven,

seven...

Pshaa!

The anomaly's body rapidly swelled before bursting, spewing black fluid everywhere. It exploded like a balloon.

"....."

I picked up my ID from the ground and placed it back in my wallet.

When I stood up, the Banpo Tax Office had disappeared like a mirage. Only I remained in the empty field.

"Hmm."

...Looks like the day I'll be paying taxes won't come anytime soon.

Footnotes:

Chapter 36

The Rich Bond I

Sinnoa

Let's dive into the tale of a father and his son.

In this context, "rich" doesn't refer to a wealthy bourgeoisie but to the richness of familial bond between a father and son.

To truly grasp these two characters' story, I had to reluctantly go back to my fourth cycle.

At that point in my life, I was a walking embarrassment. Those first five cycles were my "teen phase" of sorts.

Even now, after living through countless years, I cringed at memories from my first to fifth cycle.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, I only acquired my [Complete Memory] ability in my fifth cycle. Memories from before then were like blurry dreams.

What I'll describe is a mix of reconstruction and fiction.

"Help me..."

"It hurts, it hurts too much..."

The first thing that always came to mind in those shadowy memories was the groaning of people.

Whether it was a "Gah!" or a "Grrr..." the sounds varied in volume, but the quieter they grew, the shorter their lives became.

I walked with bells jingling, asking people:

"Do you want to escape hell?"

"Huh...?"

"Do you want peace forever?"

It might seem like something a cult preacher would say, but those were indeed my words.

Let me offer a brief explanation.

First, I rarely spoke politely at this time. So technically, it should have been written as, "Wanna escape this shitty hell?" and "Need peace?"

But writing that way would make my fingers curl into a black hole of embarrassment. Please forgive me.

Plus, my fourth-cycle memories were vague, so a bit of historical distortion is reasonable, right? Historical distortion is better than cramping fingers.

Second, I never intended to spread a cult.

Those questions were related to why I earned the moniker "Undertaker."

"Screw you! Get lost!"

"Isn't he the Undertaker?"

"Bah! What a bad omen!"

Most people could still manage to survive. Though they claimed they wanted to die, they held onto life. I'd then politely excuse myself.

But there were always those who had given up hope.

"Yes... I don't want to hurt anymore..."

The one bitten by monsters, the diseased, the grieving, the disillusioned, and those who realized peace would never return—these people agreed.

So I asked another question:

"My nickname is Undertaker."

"Yeah, I know..."

"That makes this easier. I can make people sleep forever in their dreams."

"....."

"If you agree, I can help you relive your happiest moments endlessly in a dream."

Time Seal.

It was my unique ability that I hadn't yet revealed.

While I knew the convention of unveiling a protagonist's powers early, I remained silent because I had primarily used [Time Seal] in my first six cycles.

After that, I rarely used it.

Mostly because I hated my own ability.

That's why I considered this episode a shameful part of my past.

"Alright, put me in the dream now..."

"Before you agree, there's something you should know."

I spoke calmly.

"Once you're trapped in a dream by my power, everyone will forget you."

"What?"

"Your family, friends, and anyone you've met won't remember you while you dream. In this world, only I will remember you."

"....."

"You'll be happy in the dream, but you'll be completely forgotten. Do you still want to live in your dream?"

I didn't explain the full power of this forgetfulness, but it was strong.

Even if I regressed and started a new life, the [Time Seal] remained intact.

It became an exception to regression itself. Somehow, the sealed person would remain sealed, forgotten.

It was like they never existed.

"That's... too much..."

Most people hesitated here.

No matter how painful things were, the idea of being erased was unsettling. They often chose suicide instead.

"Whatever, it's fine."

But there were always those who had given up hope.

"Being erased from the world sounds comforting. What do I have to see in this fucked-up world? Please, just erase me."

This is where the "father" in today's story, former pro football player Kim Joo-chul, came in.

Retired.

That's how Kim Joo-chul referred to himself.

"I was a starter in the first league. I was a left back defender, you know? They were throwing money at me!"

He inhaled the oxygen of past glories instead of the current reality.

While many longed for their former jobs after the world fell apart, Kim Joo-chul clung particularly hard to his.

"Hey, kid. Wanna see my highlight reel?"

He went so far as to download his highlights onto his phone.

An ideal talent for today's era, where self-promotion is crucial.

In the six-minute reel, he dashed across the field in a red uniform like a banner. He was a defender, so goals were rare, but the crowd's cheers rang out vividly through the screen with every play.

"Got an offer from Japan. Even sent agents from the Netherlands to scout me. People underestimate the Dutch league, but it's a big deal."

He effortlessly switched between formal and informal speech like dribbling a football ball.

"Damn, I should have gone abroad instead of being loyal to my club. Should've just ditched everything for romance. I wasted my life."

Kim Joo-chul's phone often ran out of battery because he couldn't stop bragging about his highlights.

Unlike others, he didn't try to contact the outside world with his phone. For him, the phone only served as a storage for his highlights.

"A defender is crucial in modern football..."

"Mister! Stop talking and hurry up!"

"Oh, jeez. Kids cussing me out again. You remind me of my son."

Kim Joo-chul grinned and stood up.

"Let's go, you old retired man."

Despite his grand words, his body barely managed to move forward.

Kim Joo-chul's left leg limped constantly.

A world overrun by monsters wasn't kind to humanity, much less a

cripple.

Even those who ran the fastest couldn't guarantee their survival, so Kim Joo-chul was always treated like leftovers.

It didn't matter that he had been a well-known football player back in the day. If not a national World Cup player, most people wouldn't recognize football players' names.

"Being an ex-athlete means shit."

He chuckled.

Maybe his constant self-promotion was a way to raise his value.

But the survivors remained cold. If he had been elderly or infirm, they might have shown pity, but no one cared for a seemingly fit middle-aged man. He struggled in food distribution, night watches, and other chores.

"Well, that's how life is."

Kim Joo-chul wasn't bitter. Not because he was exceptionally kind, but because he was used to being treated this way.

"I have a son. He should be about your age. Or younger?"

"You must not be close to him."

"Don't even talk about it. He ran away with his mom ten years ago."

Kim Joo-chul smirked.

"We got along once. But after some punk shattered my left leg on the field, everything fell apart. Funny enough, it turned out my knee joint was linked to my family's harmony."

"....."

"Well, I'm the asshole, but cut me some slack. A promising player was forced to retire out of nowhere at age 26. You think I'd be okay mentally? My left leg was my damn livelihood."

His voice grew quieter.

He was one of the first people summoned to the transformed Busan Station terminal with me. Resting against a bookshelf in the maze-like station, he rambled.

"When I was in rehab, the jerk who broke my leg had the nerve to visit. I never knew crutches made such good weapons. Beat the crap out of him. But his parents had connections at the football association. The whole thing blew over, and I ended up with no place to go. This is Korea's problem. Assholes always seem to thrive."

"....."

"That bastard couldn't even play."

Though he seemed honest, there were things Kim Joo-chul avoided discussing, like how he indulged in alcohol and gambling after being discharged from rehab.

How he practically lived in Macau and Gangwon, leaving his young son to be raised solely by his wife. How his wife died two years ago. How he wandered around a convenience store near a Gangwon casino just before being summoned to the Busan Station terminal. And how he had bought two packs of cigarettes, which he now stashed in socks.

I knew much about Kim Joo-chul because I was with him through the first four cycles.

"Damn, this world is so harsh..."

From the first to fourth cycles, he never made it out intact.

I didn't remember the exact circumstances of his death.

But as best as I could recall, in my first cycle, he tripped in the transformed Busan Station and got eaten by a monster from his feet up.

In the second, I died first, but his condition must have worsened. In

the third, he likely died from blood loss after covering a glass door with his body to protect others and losing an arm.

Finally, in my fourth cycle.

"Life's a fucking mess..."

Kim Joo-chul and I successfully escaped Busan Station, but shortly after, a hound-like monster bit off his left leg.

Though he passed out instantly, I managed to stop the bleeding and keep him conscious. Once awake, he panted heavily and muttered.

"I dragged this crippled leg around my whole life, but now that it's gone, I feel relieved."

"....."

"Young man, there's a football stadium nearby. Could we stop by there for a bit?"

I carried Kim Joo-chul to what would likely be his final destination in this life.

With one leg gone, his weight was quite light. As he lay on my back, he drifted in and out of consciousness.

"Ahh..."

Carefully, I set him down in the stadium's stands.

The stadium had been partly destroyed, likely due to monsters rampaging through. Debris was scattered across the field and the seats.

"Why does it look so wide now? It used to be much narrower. It was narrower..."

For a while, Kim Joo-chul mumbled, "Wide, so wide."

"Mr. Undertaker."

His face was pale as he spoke. It was the first and last time he

addressed me as "mister," though I was much younger than him.

"Thank you. Thank you so much, but that's enough now. I'm content..."

I understood entirely what he wanted to say.

I took a Silver bell from my pocket and placed it around my wrist. It was my ritual.

"Are you sure? As you know, once you fall under my ability, you'll be forgotten by everyone."

"Forgotten? I don't care. To disappear from this world is comforting. What reason do I have to stay in this fucked-up place? Please, just erase me from the world."

Kim Joo-chul smiled faintly.

"I'm tired now."

"....."

"Oh, right. In that dream or whatever, will I be able to realize that I'm dreaming? I mean..."

"You won't."

I shook my head.

"The person will simply repeat their happiest day forever, without realizing it's repeating."

"That's a relief. If you remember everything, it would be torture, right? Even the happiest moment would become tedious after repeating it... That's good. Do I just close my eyes?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, doc. Really."

In many ways, Kim Joo-chul was an ordinary man.

There was no particular reason to remember him out of all the people I'd laid to rest.

Even so, I remembered Kim Joo-chul for a long time because of his last words.

"Kim Si-eun, Kim Si-eun. My son... Born November 11. My son's name is Si-eun."

Most people who drifted into dreams asked me to remember them, but Kim Joo-chul muttered his son's name until the end.

"My son."

Jingle.

The bell rang as I activated my ability.

That was how Kim Joo-chul said goodbye on my timeline.

It took many long years before I finally met the heir to his last words.

Footnotes:

Chapter 37

The Rich Bond II

Sinnoa

There wasn't anyone who understood the geography of the Korean Peninsula as much as I did.

Even Kim Jeong-ho, the creator of the Daedongyeojido[1] map, would have to concede to me. I'm not kidding; he never traveled all over the country. I even went to an abandoned inn in Onyang to catch an Udumbara.

Since the creation of the National Road Management Corps in the 54th cycle, the navigation app in my head had become increasingly accurate with each update.

No matter how capable Noh Do-hwa was, it was impossible for her to manage every road in the country due to a lack of personnel and resources.

There had to be exactly one road connecting each city to the next, and even then, they could only be restored to a single lane.

Tunnels, in particular, were dangerous.

If they hadn't already collapsed, they were at risk of doing so soon. If they were still intact, they were even more dangerous because dark, pitch-black tunnels were the perfect habitat for monsters that loved them.

The Korean Peninsula, with 70% of its land covered in mountains, had favored tunnels, which made this issue critical.

Ah, but it's not as bad as Japan. Their tunnels are a real nightmare. I'll talk more about that later.

Anyway, the National Road Management Corps had to find routes bypassing every tunnel to connect cities. If that was too difficult,

we'd have to carve out new paths through the mountains.

This project was called the "Road Streamlining Operation".

It was nearly as challenging as a national policy-level project.

"Awakener Undertaker, please handle this."

Naturally, this plan was entrusted entirely to me.

"Understood."

I didn't complain to Noh Do-hwa. I was planning to take on this project from the beginning.

For instance, when considering the most effective way to create a one-lane road from Busan to Daegu, the word "effective" didn't just mean minimizing travel time. Time was relatively low on the list of priorities.

The most important factors were how far the road was from monster lairs and whether it offered guaranteed security and surveillance. Securing as many rest points or "midway stations for the patrols to camp safely" was also essential.

Ideally, it was better to be close to a drinking water source, but not too close to dams, which could collapse at any moment. If you didn't want to end up like Eulji Mundeok2, you needed to avoid dams. Bridges weren't even worth mentioning.

In short?

"There’s too many things to worry about for one project."

Indeed, I was the only one capable of handling this. No matter how smart someone was, drawing a convincing road network while sitting at a desk was useless. What could anyone do about the fact that all available maps were outdated relics from before the Gate incident?

Ultimately, I had no choice but to go on foot. While we had some satellite images, they didn't provide the kind of detailed information

we needed.

But who else could afford to travel all over the country in this ruined world? Only the infinite regressor.

"I look forward to working with you, Saintess."

[Yes, Mr. Undertaker. I'll support you.]

In the 54th to the 56th cycle, I explored every nook and cranny of the country until my feet ached, filming a road movie along the way.

Sometimes, I traveled with patrols, but I mostly traveled alone. I never felt lonely since I could chat with the Saintess via Telepathy.

If I wrote a travel journal based on these three cycles, the title would be something like ‘I'm an Infinite Regressor in This Ruined World, but I'll Enjoy Traveling Alone With the Saintess's Voice’.

It might be boring from a story perspective since there weren't many major incidents, but personally, I loved these three cycles because I met so many ordinary people instead of awakeners. I made many meaningful connections during that time.

"Uh, this road... isn't this the right place?"

Kim Si-eun.

I first met the former football player's son in the 54th cycle.

"Excuse me."

"Whoa! G-gosh!"

A young man dressed for travel leaped in surprise.

He was between being a boy and a young man, but he looked younger because he was quite short. He had been standing in front of the Changwon Tunnel, nearly burying his face in a map that had been unfolded and refolded countless times. He had a backpack that looked a bit too big for his small frame.

In short, he looked like a typical backpacker from head to toe.

"Who are you?"

But instead of a walking stick, he carried a spear.

He aimed the spear at me, but it seemed pretty shabby. He had probably taped a dagger to the end of a stick himself, creating a 100% homemade spear.

To be fair, this style was trendy among backpackers these days. If you didn't want to hear "Traveling without a spear? Is the end of your trip going to be in a monster's stomach?" you'd better follow the latest trend.

"I'm sorry for startling you. I'm an awakener member of the Samcheon World Guild, who took part in the Ten Legs Subjugation."

"Awakener...?"

The young man looked at me warily, but there was also a hint of curiosity.

After the Ten Legs Subjugation, ordinary people became much more welcoming to the awakened, treating them like American war veterans after World War II.

Residents around Seoul treated the awakeners especially well. The young man must have come from that region, as he at least tried to be polite.

"Uh, I'm sorry. I was so surprised..."

"It was my fault for talking to you from behind. Don't worry about it. But this tunnel is collapsed, so it's better not to try passing through."

The young man looked frustrated.

"What? Why?"

"Isn't the entrance already collapsed?"

I pointed to the Changwon Tunnel. The surrounding area was overgrown with bushes and trees, untouched by civilization. Only the cracked asphalt and tunnel entrance barely held onto their past claim.

The young man spoke in a meek voice.

"It seems like at least one person could squeeze through..."

"I wouldn't recommend it."

"Why not?"

"There's a high chance that monsters are living inside."

"Ah."

Even this brave young man, traveling with just a staff and a backpack, was immediately discouraged by the word "monster."

"Then, why are you here, awakener?"

"A missing person's report came in from around here. Many people have been caught trying to pass through, thinking they could make it alone. I'm planning to block it off completely."

"My goodness."

"It's dangerous. Please step back."

I collapsed the tunnel in front of him. A ghostly wail echoed from deep within, but I paid it no mind. The noise was probably just slimes bursting.

"So you really are an awakener!"

The young man, realizing I wasn't a fake, finally let his guard down.

To clarify, he probably didn't believe in the goodness of the awakeners but rather acknowledged that it was pointless to be wary of someone strong enough to collapse the tunnel with a single blow.

In this broken world, having an objective assessment of oneself was

crucial to living without stress. In that sense, this young man was well-adapted.

"Where are you coming from?"

"Oh, I originally lived in Asan."

"You walked all the way from Asan to here? Alone?"

"Haha, yes."

He sheepishly scratched the back of his head.

"My mother is from Daesan-myeon, Changwon. Do you know Daesan-myeon? Anyway, I was going to stop by there before heading down to Busan. I thought using the tunnel would be the fastest route, but I had no idea it was a slime dungeon."

"Is your mother still in her hometown?"

"Oh no, she passed away seven years ago."

A familiar sound rang in my heart. The sound of my affinity for this young man rising.

No need to hide it.

Me, the Undertaker, wasn't necessarily old, but I was the kind of guy who would shed tears at the mere mention of family love. A regressor's weakness was always love.

"Did you decide to travel because you wanted to see your late mother's hometown?"

"Yes!"

"That's admirable. It must have been obvious you'd struggle on this trip."

"Oh, it's nothing compared to how much my mother struggled to raise me."

Affinity +200 points!

By now, I had already decided that I'd ensure this young man made it to Busan safely. I needed to stop by Busan to see Noh Do-hwa anyway. An extra companion wouldn't be a burden.

"I was planning to head to Busan after collapsing this tunnel. If it's okay with you, would you like to travel together?"

"Really?"

His face brightened at my offer.

"Yes. My name is Undertaker. That's not my real name, but a moniker. It may be a short trip, but let's take good care of each other."

"Let's work together! My name's Kim Si-eun. Please feel free to speak casually with me."

"Okay, looking forward to it, Si-eun."

"Yes, hyung!"

We shook hands. I had to bend my back slightly because of our height difference.

Honestly, I didn't realize at the time that the Kim Si-eun in front of me was *that* Kim Si-eun.

There was an understandable reason for this. To explain it in one sentence: I had forgotten the name Kim Si-eun over time.

Sure, I depicted it as if I always remembered the football player Kim Joo-chul's last words in this story. But, as I've emphasized before, that kind of consistency was only possible because I edited the story.

I had met Kim Joo-chul in the 4th cycle and Kim Si-eun in the 54th, with over 500 years between them. How could I possibly remember events from a time when I hadn't yet mastered [Complete Memory].

"What's your father like?"

"Huh? My father?"

I first sensed something odd when we were setting up camp that day.

Kim Si-eun frowned as if I had asked him about a mythical beast.

"Uh... I'm not sure. I don't remember!"

I was mindlessly spreading my sleeping bag when I suddenly became alert.

His attitude while answering my question, the way he dragged out his words, was all too familiar to me.

"Wait a second. This might be a rude question, but I'll ask since I'm also an orphan. Do you not remember anything about your father?"

"Huh? Oh, uh..."

"Has your mother never mentioned him, or have you never asked her about him?"

"...Nope. Why?"

"And you've never thought that was strange?"

Kim Si-eun looked at me with his round, squirrel-like eyes. There wasn't a hint of doubt on his face. He even seemed to find it odd that I cared.

Why?

Because not thinking about something that doesn't exist is the most natural thing in the world.

"Yeah, that's right."

"....."

I sighed and gazed up at the night sky from our campsite for a long time.

Fate is tenacious and terrifying.

"Si-eun."

"Yes?"

"When we get to Busan, let's stop by somewhere with me."

Meeting Kim Si-eun was nothing short of a miracle.

I'm not exaggerating or throwing the word around lightly. Like all miracles, this one wasn't a sudden event out of nowhere; rather, it was the product of many conditions coming together seamlessly.

We could infer these conditions from the personal information Kim Si-eun had shared.

"You worked in Asan before the Gate incident?"

"Yeah. I had a relative running a huge supermarket in Asan. I just did some part-time work there!"

What caught my attention wasn't the work itself but the region of Asan.

Readers who are knowledgeable about Korean geography may already have gotten chills at the mention of Asan.

To explain briefly, Asan in South Chungcheong Province encompasses an area known as Onyang.

Yes, Onyang—the location of the abandoned inn where the Udumbara World Tree first bloomed.

If I hadn't subjugated the Udumbara, the residents of Asan would have inevitably been infected by the virus, given their proximity to the origin. Although I never ran the calculations, when the World Tree had fully bloomed, Asan's civilians would have been 99% annihilated.

——And that death toll would have included Kim Si-eun.

Even if he had miraculously avoided infection, things wouldn't have improved. Ten Legs, the only Michelin Guide inspector on the Korean Peninsula, would have taken care of him.

No matter how much the New Budhha Virus promised humans immortality, if your head was severed and brain destroyed by Ten Legs, that was the end. Until the allied guild forces exterminated Ten Legs, all humans in Korea were no more than a chef's choice on Ten Legs' dining table.

For Kim Si-eun to have survived and embarked on this journey from Asan to Changwon to Busan with his homemade spear, certain conditions needed to be met. These conditions could be laid out like a quest list in an RPG:

□□□□□□□□□□

[Kim Si-eun Survival Route Requirements]

1. Exterminate Ten Legs: If not exterminated, they'll head south from Seoul, and Kim Si-eun will die.

2. Exterminate the Udumbara World Tree: Kim Si-eun was among the early victims of the virus. If not destroyed immediately after the regression, his death can't be prevented.

□□□□□□□□□□

Without me, the regressor, clearing this route would have been impossible.

Was Kim Si-eun the only one in Korea in this position? Many people were in the same boat. Take Dang Seo-rin, for instance. Despite persistently pestering me to be a witch friend, she could only ensure her survival by eliminating Ten Legs.

Defeating boss-level monsters was akin to unlocking previously "locked" regions. Kim Si-eun was like an NPC that could only be freed by eliminating Ten Legs and Udumbara.

Of course, this analogy is only a comparison to a game. In reality, the world wasn't a game, and humans weren't NPCs.

Thus, humans must bear the responsibility appropriate to their kind.

"...So."

After hearing my full explanation, Kim Si-eun furrowed his brow.

"You're saying I had a father named Kim Joo-chul and that because of Undertaker's Time Seal, I've completely forgotten everything about him?"

"Yes. More specifically, not just you but everyone's memory of him has been erased."

"What kind of power is that?"

Kim Si-eun looked incredulous.

To a normal person, his reaction made sense. But [Time Seal] was quite a reasonable power. In this world, there were even powers that grew stronger based on the amount of trolling you did online.

Ordinary people often assumed that awakeners were like RPG characters, but in reality, there were far stranger abilities.

"Anyway, I might be mistaken, but from my perspective, it seems highly likely that you're Kim Joo-chul's son."

"Hmm, I don't really feel..."

"Have you ever shown any interest in football?"

Kim Si-eun hesitated.

"...No, I haven't."

"Kim Joo-chul was a former football player. If you've lost all memory of your father, then it's likely you've lost most memories related to football too."

"But there are a lot of people who aren't interested in football."

"True, but having no memory at all is a different story. Have you

ever watched the World Cup? Not even once? Or come across any videos or articles about Korean players playing abroad?"

Kim Si-eun fell silent.

"Kim Joo-chul is sealed in a stadium in Busan. If this is all just a misunderstanding, I apologize in advance, but I think it would be worth following me to see the truth."

"....."

His hesitation didn't last long.

Footnotes:

1 - Daedongyeojido is a large scale map of Korea produced by Joseon dynasty cartographer and geologist Kim Jeong-ho in 1861. A second edition was printed in 1864. One source describes it as the "oldest map in Korea".

2 - Eulji Mundeok was a military leader of early 7th century Goguryeo, one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, who successfully defended Goguryeo against Sui China. He is often numbered among the greatest heroes in the military history of Korea.

Chapter 38

The Rich Bond III

Sinnoa

"Follow me this way."

"Y-yes..."

We stood in a partially destroyed football stadium in Busan.

The outer walls had collapsed due to monsters, leaving behind a maze of steel frames and debris. After a long time away, I returned to this place.

The first time I visited, I was with someone's father. The second time, I was with his son.

"Wow."

Kim Si-eun looked around in wonder like a crane. It was his first time in such a large stadium.

"It's so big! Do those stands fill up on game days?"

"It's rare for them to be completely full, but on average, around ten thousand people would come."

Despite it being more than 500 years since I'd last been here, finding our destination was surprisingly easy.

On one side of the stands, there was a large crystal protruding like something from the depths of a cave. It was as tall as I was.

Only I could see this marker.

I personally called it a "tombstone" or "gravestone." I could have called it "that thing" since no one but me could perceive it.

Even Kim Si-eun, standing next to me, couldn't recognize the crystal looming right in front of him.

"Take my hand."

"O-Okay."

"I can freely enter the dreams of those I've sealed, but you can't. You can only connect to the dream while holding my hand, so don't let go, no matter what. Got it?"

"Understood, hyung."

Kim Si-eun cautiously took my hand, and I nodded.

"Close your eyes and prepare yourself."

"....."

"Here we go."

I pressed my left palm against the surface of the crystal.

My hand slipped through easily, and the surface that shimmered like a mirror seemed to be made of water, accepting me without resistance.

I stepped forward.

After taking about six steps, everything rapidly turned pitch black. It felt like a mischievous child had smeared black paint everywhere, or as if we had descended into the deepest abyss.

"....."

While this sensation was familiar to me, it was not for Kim Si-eun. His fear and tension transmitted clearly through his grip on my hand.

Moments later.

-Aaaahhhh!

Suddenly, a deafening cheer erupted around us.

"Eek!"

Startled, Kim Si-eun opened his eyes and instinctively looked around, his eyes widening even more than when he heard the cheer.

"Wh-What's going on?"

The cheering was from the supporters.

The previously desolate stadium was now packed with home and away fans.

Where ruins once stood, flags, slogans, balloons, and, above all, people had filled the stands instead.

"Attack! Attack! Hurry up!"

Someone who looked like a coach shouted from the sidelines.

Players dashed wildly across the green field. With every dribble, incredible pass, and corner kick preparation, the stands roared with earth-shaking cheers.

-Oh! Our club! Our eternal home!

The kind of passion that could only be experienced five years ago by others, and over 500 years ago in my own timeline, before the world fell apart.

-My love! My home!

-Today, we will win again!

The club fans waved their smartphones and jumped on the spot. Massive flags fluttered relentlessly at the front of the stands.

Kim Si-eun stood frozen under the red, evening-like waves of flags.

"....."

"Look over there, Si-eun."

I pointed at the field, and Kim Si-eun's gaze followed my finger.

A football bounced off the turf. One of the players deftly trapped it with his chest and sprinted forward.

Kim Joo-chul.

-Ooooh!

The crowd gasped.

Kim Joo-chul, who had been buried under the fog of time in my memory, appeared on the field, looking younger and fitter.

His left foot controlled the ball with ease as he charged ahead.

-Go! Hurry! Counterattack!

-There's no one there!

-Kim Joo-chul!

Although he was a defender, Kim Joo-chul boldly crossed the half-line, with teammates and opponents alike desperately chasing him.

He lobbed the ball with his left foot, and a teammate just barely managed to head it into the net.

-Waaaahhhh!

Kim Joo-chul earned an assist.

His performance didn't end there. In a subsequent corner kick, he leaped and headed the ball directly into the net.

The scoreboard changed from 1-1 to 2-1, a comeback goal.

A defender had managed 1 assist and 1 goal in no time.

-Goaaaal! Goal! Goal!

-Kim Joo-chul! Kim Joo-chul! Kim Joo-chul!

At that moment, Kim Joo-chul skated lightly toward the stands and jumped over the barrier to kiss a woman in the audience.

The woman held a child in her arms, and Kim Joo-chul kissed the top of the child's head as well. The stadium scoreboard captured the scene perfectly.

-Who's that?

-That's Kim Joo-chul's wife!

-Ooooh! Kim Joo-chul! Kim Joo-chul!

Though the excessive celebration earned him a warning from the referee, the players, the crowd, and even Kim Joo-chul himself didn't care.

Next to me, Kim Si-eun murmured softly.

"Mom...?"

He seemed to recognize the woman who kissed the football player. He couldn't close his gaping mouth.

"No way. So that really..."

But Kim Si-eun's muttering couldn't continue as the supporters' song drowned it out.

-Kim Joo-chul! Our iron wall!

-No one can break through Kim Joo-chul!

-Kim Joo-chul! Our iron wall!

Kim Joo-chul, hugging the child, looked incredibly happy. The child in his arms beamed as well.

A past they could never return to.

A glory they could never reclaim.

"....."

"That was your father's happiest moment."

I spoke quietly.

I used aura to create a barrier between us and our surroundings. The cheers of the crowd became a faint echo. As the sound faded, the scene before us shimmered like a dream.

"And he's reliving it over and over again."

"That's strange. He looks so happy. Why would he erase himself from this world? Why would he abandon his family and stay trapped in this dream?"

"....."

Because it wouldn't be long before Kim Joo-chul's left foot would be completely destroyed.

Because he fell into alcohol and gambling, abandoned his family to wallow in Macau and Gangwon-do, and left his wife to die alone while raising their son.

Instead of answering, I asked, "Do you want to ask your father directly?"

"....."

Kim Si-eun bit his lip.

"...Yes."

Although this world had become Kim Joo-chul's domain, I could still influence it as the caster.

After finishing his Man of the Match interview, Kim Joo-chul headed for the locker room. Holding Kim Si-eun's hand, I followed him, unnoticed by anyone.

"Huh?"

Only Kim Joo-chul recognized me. He was hopping with his teammates but turned toward us with a bright smile.

"Who are you? A fan? You're not allowed in here!"

"It's me, Kim Joo-chul."

"Huh? Who are you?"

"Undertaker. I'm the one who trapped you in this time."

I looked him in the eye.

"Don't you recognize me?"

"....."

Kim Joo-chul's smile disappeared.

Simultaneously, the colors of the world around us faded to gray. The singing players, the coaches who were about to enter, and the champagne stopped in midair.

"Ah..."

Only Kim Joo-chul's sigh quietly escaped.

"That's right. This was a dream."

"....."

"This was all a dream..."

Kim Joo-chul looked around, gazing at his former teammates with eyes full of emotion. He sighed heavily.

"This is now a lucid dream, huh? That makes it easier. I might as well go see my wife and son again since I don't have a reason to stay here in this damn locker room."

"That's not necessary."

"Hmm?"

"After this moment ends, you'll forget everything. You'll forget meeting me, this conversation with me. Just as the world has forgotten you, you won't build any more memories of it."

"Huh. That's tough..."

Kim Joo-chul slumped onto a bench. Wiping sweat from his body with a towel, he asked,

"Why did you come to see me, Undertaker? Is this just a regular visit that I can't remember, to watch my amazing highlight reel?"

"It may not mean anything to you, but it could mean something to your family."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"This young man here with me is your son."

"What?"

Kim Joo-chul finally looked at my companion, as if only now realizing another presence.

He blinked.

"Si-eun?"

"....."

"Si-eun? Is that really you? Wow, you've grown so much!"

Kim Joo-chul jumped up and rushed to hug Kim Si-eun. Although startled, Kim Si-eun didn't reject his father's embrace.

"My goodness! You've become a man! The last time I saw you, you were just a little baby! How old are you now? A middle schooler? High schooler?"

"I'm 20."

"What? 20? Why are you so short! What have you been eating to stay that small? My genes are way better than that!"

The tall defender seemed shocked by his son's height.

"Um... Father?"

"Huh? Father? No need to call me that. Just say 'Dad' like usual..."

Kim Joo-chul suddenly fell silent.

He studied Kim Si-eun's face, then looked at me. His face darkened with worry.

"...Wait a second. I'm sorry, but when did my wife... your mother pass away?"

"...Seven years ago."

"....."

A heavy silence fell over the room.

After a long while, Kim Joo-chul muttered softly, "I see."

His gaze briefly turned to me.

"So that's why you warned me. That's why..."

I didn't respond, only gave a slight nod.

I understood the terrible feeling of being forgotten by the most precious person in one's life, but while I always had the chance to start over, Kim Joo-chul never had that opportunity.

Forever.

"....."

"...Si-eun."

A father held his son's shoulders. Kim Joo-chul gently gripped Kim Si-eun's shoulders, not firmly but more like the delicate touch of willow leaves.

"I'm sorry."

"....."

"Your father... your dad was a very weak man. A really weak man. I never expected you'd survive this messed-up world. Even before everything fell apart, I was drinking and gambling, a terrible person. I ignored your mother's calls, just got angry. Truly..."

Kim Si-eun listened to his father's apology with a face that showed he didn't know how to react. It wasn't his fault. To him, Kim Joo-chul was just a stranger he met today.

Seeing his son's face, Kim Joo-chul shuddered.

"This is... this is hell."

"....."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Si-eun. Dad's sorry."

The football player, trapped in his prime, repeatedly muttered "sorry" like a broken music box.

I don't want to elaborate too much on the epilogue of this story but I believe readers now understand why I detested the ability [Time Seal] so much.

Honestly, I never wanted to address [Time Seal]. It was that much of a dark past for me. However, it feels liberating to finally reveal my power to all of you.

Yes, I sealed the time of many people, not just Kim Joo-chul.

At the time, I thought it was the right thing to do.

But, looking back after so many years, both those people and I had given up on the world too quickly and too easily.

[Time Seal] also played a role in my decision to label my life story as a "tale of failure." No matter how many times I regressed, too many people could never find a different ending.

"Something feels strange."

Yet those who survived still had to make a life out of the connections they had left.

After leaving the stadium, Kim Si-eun kept looking back. The stadium stood precariously in the distance, its outer walls destroyed and exposing its innards.

"Do you regret coming?"

"No, definitely not! It's just that a man who says he's my family is crying, yet I can't remember him at all. It's a strange feeling."

Kim Si-eun hoisted his backpack and adjusted it.

"It makes me feel like I just have to live my life to the fullest."

With his spear planted in the ground, he bowed his head toward me.

"Thank you, hyung! Thanks to you, I found my mother's hometown and met my father on this trip. Although I feel a little conflicted, it was meaningful."

"Where are you going next?"

"I'm planning to find a way across to Japan! I've traveled all over Korea already."

"Japan, huh?"

Nowadays, Japan wasn't an easy place to recommend as a travel destination.

If someone asked me to name the two most dangerous places besides the Korean Peninsula, I would say without hesitation that it was the Japanese archipelago and the Indian subcontinent.

This is because the beings that people treated as "gods" there loved humans so much that they decided to care for them directly. For reference, their favorite genres included #confinement

#brainwashing #gore.

Although the world was dangerous everywhere, those two places were dangerous in a different way. Think of it as the difference between apocalyptic and horror genres.

But that was a few years later. For now, the Japanese archipelago was relatively safe.

I didn't stop the young backpacker from pursuing his journey.

Instead, I gave this advice:

"If you hear strange sounds, see strange objects, or feel something off, don't try to investigate. Just put your hands together and greet politely, then continue on your way without looking back. And especially avoid tunnels."

"...?"

"You'll likely pass through Fukuoka. Avoid getting involved with the provisional government people there if you can. Anyway, you'll find this advice useful someday."

"Um, okay! Got it!"

I didn't know what kind of ending awaited Kim Si-eun once he crossed to Japan. There was a high chance it was gruesome.

But I didn't care too much. From the perspective of a regressor like me, life wasn't like a sports match with a whistle blown after 90 minutes. It was more like a journey, stopping briefly at a station before moving on down the tracks.

Unlike his father, he still had the chance to journey to new places.

"See you next time, hyung!"

For the record, I trusted Kim Joo-chul's sincerity.

Even as he faded from the world, I didn't want to distort the intentions of someone who had muttered "our son." The question of

whether he was strong enough to hold onto those feelings until the end could be set aside for now.

If he had genuinely apologized to his son, wouldn't he be glad to see Kim Si-eun moving forward to a new destination without being weighed down by the past?

Wouldn't he bless him?

Turning around one last time, I could still see the stadium with its collapsed walls.

-Goaaaal! Goal! Goal!

-Kim Joo-chul! Kim Joo-chul! Kim Joo-chul!

Inside, an anonymous football player long forgotten by the world was still playing. With an unbroken left leg. Cheered on by the crowd.

And he would keep running forever to celebrate with his family.

Footnotes:

Chapter 39

The One Who was an Observer I

Sinnoa

Some readers might have wondered about the previous story where Kim Si-eun went backpacking to Japan.

It's true; I have been somewhat reluctant to mention overseas topics.

There is a valid reason for this, largely because my main area of activity is the Korean Peninsula.

Although I occasionally venture abroad, I generally prefer not to.

Why? Because the Saintess isn't there.

It's not a joke. Without the constant support of the Saintess, it feels like switching from a third-person top-view strategy simulation to a first-person souls-like action game.

It wasn't for nothing that I took the Saintess with me when I went to China to quell the Butterfly Effect.

The role of the Saintess in my life as a regressor is more significant than it might seem.

While I'm not about to sing praises like some Russian Lolita complex author might—'my light of life, my body's fire, my sin, my soul, Saintess'—I certainly wouldn't plan any hero party without first securing the Saintess. Remember this: Support-Saintess is a fixed pick.

"Mr. Undertaker."

"Yes?"

"Why must we absolutely never observe Mr. Go Yuri of the Satisfaction Guild with Clairvoyance?"

"Um…"

There was a reason why my mind cataloged a [Saintess User Manual].

It's not that I give the Saintess special treatment; I have strategy manuals for all my party members.

Most awakened individuals find my 'strategy manuals' somewhat creepy.

Understandably, from my perspective, these are the fruits of hard labor, but from others', it's like some random guy popping up and shouting, 'Your power actually gets stronger the more you aggro people!'

Honestly, even I would find it hard to believe.

"Go Yuri has a passive ability of mental corruption. It's top-tier. Anyone, no matter how mentally strong, will inevitably be brainwashed if they contact Go Yuri."

"Ah… I see."

The Saintess never doubted my manuals.

Though she couldn't share my memories, we shared records. My claims were readily accepted by her as truth, and she based her strategies on them.

Tap-tap—

The Saintess typed away, organizing information as we talked.

"Was there an instance where I observed Ms. Go Yuri with Clairvoyance and ended up in trouble?"

"Yes, during the 89th cycle."

"How did it unfold?"

"It happened too quickly to know the details, but at the time, Go Yuri was part of our party. Seo Gyu probably got brainwashed first. And Seo Gyu knows about your abilities and home address, doesn't he? Go Yuri must have approached you using that information. By the time I arrived, you were found hanged by a towel rack."

"Was it suicide?"

"Probably. More precisely, it was induced suicide."

"....."

The Saintess pondered.

"Mr. Seo Gyu. Right. It's crucial to ensure he's always a reliable ally. Apart from that, I think it wouldn't be bad to delve into Ms. Go Yuri's true nature in this cycle, even if it means risking the cycle."

She glanced at me and nodded.

"…There's no need to take unnecessary risks. Please inform me about any other precautions I should take."

"There's nothing beyond what I've mentioned."

That was both true and a lie.

"I'll handle all remaining risks."

The typing stopped. The Saintess looked at me, tilting her head.

"Mr. Undertaker."

"Yes."

"What happens to me if you leave the risks unattended?"

There was a brief silence.

There were a few things I intentionally kept silent about. The stories involving time seals were one; overseas mentions were

another. If I were to unravel these stories, a bit of preparation was necessary.

Although rare, there were stories I had not mentioned yet, like how some awakened turn into monsters if they become 'corrupted.'

So, let me tell you about it now.

About the story that unfolds when the Saintess becomes corrupted —the so-called 'Executor Route'.

Since we met at a convenience store along the riverside, I have trusted the Saintess in every cycle, and she has trusted me.

I needed an ally after losing Old Man Scho. The Saintess needed a warrior to compensate for her lack of physical power. Our alliance was inevitable.

[Thank you for your hard work in subjugating Ten Legs, Mr. Undertaker. With that, most threats south of the Han River have been eliminated.]

Initially, there were no problems.

[Udumbara has been… subjugated. If what Mr. Undertaker said is true, the flower that bloomed from that hat would have covered the world. It's a very sad thought. Thank you for your efforts.]

Among those I knew, the Saintess boasted exceptional mental and survival strength.

She always survived until the end of the world. Whether from not interacting with others or not relying on force, the Saintess's heart was strong.

[The Meteor Shower… subjugated. Now, the catastrophe of numerous awakened and civilians being exterminated overnight will not happen again. It would have been impossible without Mr. Undertaker. Thank you for your hard work.]

We safely crossed the critical period of 7 years when the Meteor

Shower was guaranteed to appear.

Changes started to be noticed from the 12th year.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

"Hm? What is it?"

[A massacre of civilians has occurred in Nampo, North Korea.]

The Saintess's Clairvoyance reached most of the Korean Peninsula. We virtually had unlimited visibility limited to the peninsula.

"What? A civilian massacre? Where exactly? I'll go check it out."

[No, I've just found out too. The massacre has almost finished. It is estimated to have occurred from the morning of July 11 to now, July 13.]

However, the Saintess's Clairvoyance was only effective on 'awakened' individuals. She could not observe all the people living on this land.

That is to say, in cases where civilians killed civilians, the Saintess was utterly powerless.

Murder, massacre, any crime among civilians—she always observed 'already finished scenes' a step too late.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

[My abilities seem to be strengthening slightly.]

The situation got a bit worse.

"Ah, really? It's normal for some awakened to grow their abilities while others plateau from the start, but it seems yours were of the former type. How far can your Clairvoyance reach now?"

[It's still a stretch, but based on being in Seoul, I think it can reach the tip of the Shandong Peninsula.]

"Wow. That's impressive. Congratulations."

[Thank you.]

"Why don't you consider taking up martial arts training? It would be good for your health, not just for increasing your power."

[I'll think about it… thank you.]

Originally, the Saintess's powers developed slowly.

When Ten Legs swept through the Korean Peninsula, when the world ended due to Udumbara, when the world fell apart from the Meteor Shower, the Saintess died.

She died before her powers could mature fully.

However, as the cycles progressed, the lifespan of the Saintess also extended.

5 years, 7 years, 12 years, 15 years. As her time stretched longer, so did the breadth of the world she could observe.

Moreover, I was practically funneling all the life elixirs that were of no use to me anymore to her, my most trustworthy ally.

[……]

As a result, the tragedies the Saintess had to handle also increased slightly.

It was fine when limited to Korea.

Even if we couldn't take care of everyone, we had created a societal system with the National Road Management.

Moreover, the existence of the constellations reduced the frequency of severe misbehavior among awakened, and if any occurred, it could quickly be detected through [Clairvoyance].

The major guilds in Korea, like the Samcheon World of Dang Seo-rin, were also cooperative with us.

But beyond the sea was a different story.

We didn't have the capacity to care for those areas. We lacked resources. Before even discussing the lack of materials and manpower, simply the time available to me, a regressor, was absolutely insufficient.

For instance, it took at least a week to travel to and from Tianjin, China. That meant I was absent from the Korean Peninsula for a week, and during that time, situations that only I could handle were missed.

[……]

The Saintess was wise. She deeply agreed with the proposition that all good starts with the efficient allocation of resources.

Rather, she was considerate of me.

Just once, after she mentioned the massacre in Nampo, North Korea, the Saintess never again brought up any tragedies outside the jurisdiction of the National Road Management. She feared it might unnecessarily burden me.

However, her silence didn't stop the killings.

[……]

Thanks to our subjugation of the Milky Way, numerous lives, both domestic and foreign, were saved. However, what to do with those saved lives was up to each individual, and the appropriation of one life by another was commonplace.

I could have ignored it.

If I had cut it off, there would have been no problem.

But the Saintess never stopped 'observing'.

As much as she ignored, the world did not shrink. Such things never happened.

As long as the world existed, and as long as someone died without even screaming, the Saintess wanted to remember those deaths at

the very least.

Poison.

Drops of poison accumulated in her heart.

[……]

The Saintess's heart was strong.

It could handle 16 years of time.

Clang-

A sound like shattering glass echoed through an old playground.

The playground, once set in the middle of an apartment complex, was now surrounded by crumbling buildings that mourned the real estate values of long past. Even with just the half-destroyed remnants, echoes resonated well.

It wasn't actually the sound of breaking glass.

It was the noise of metal clashing against metal, more precisely, aura against aura.

"Wow."

I marveled as I deflected the hand axe thrown by the Saintess with my sword.

"You're impressive. Not just your aura, but you have a natural talent for martial arts."

"…Thank you. I still have much to learn."

"No, no. You're practically flawless compared to me. I've mastered aura training, but without any natural talent. If I had your martial prowess, I would have saved the world and then some."

It wasn't entirely flattery.

In truth, I was practically talentless in martial arts. To use a martial arts analogy, I was someone who just kept accumulating internal energy and clumsily crushed others with my power. Even this had only been achieved after my skills persisted across regressions from the 10th cycle onwards.

"Your aura's also fascinating because it's transparent. Seriously, how do you have transparent-colored aura?"

"……"

Above all, the Saintess's aura was imperceptible.

Literally colorless and odorless. A transparent, clear aura.

When clashing, it made sounds like clang- hiss- as if glass was breaking, suggesting her inner image might be a 'mirror.' It was an aura form that suited her well.

"Let's call it a day. Well done."

"Thank you, Mr. Undertaker."

"If you've achieved this much in just a year, you might as well be running around the battlefield instead of me in three to five years. Why have you avoided training until now?"

"It’s not really a hobby of mine."

"Has that changed now?"

"...Yes."

I felt a sense of pride internally.

'Even the perennial hikikomori Saintess can change.'

It took about 16 years for this change to occur, but what did that matter? Throughout my regressive life, this was the first time the Saintess had taken up martial arts.

I handed her a towel as I spoke.

"Do you have any plans for the rest of the day?"

"……"

"Saintess? Saintess."

"...Ah."

The Saintess blinked.

This had been happening frequently.

Originally, the Saintess had a strong vibe of observing the world from one step behind, but recently that aura seemed a bit denser? Like now, during our conversation, she would suddenly stare blankly into space.

"Are you okay?"

Her absent-minded expression strangely suited her, making it aesthetically unproblematic, but I was worried she might have a health issue.

If the Saintess were to collapse, Noh Do-hwa would probably come twisting my wrist immediately. The Saintess's Clairvoyance was too crucial for managing the National Road.

"Yes, I'm fine… Sorry. What did you just say?"

"Do you have any special plans for today?"

"No."

The Saintess answered immediately.

"I don’t."

"That's good. Safety has been a bit shaky recently, hasn't it? I know you can handle yourself well, but please be careful, especially since you tend to overdo it sometimes, Saintess."

"...Mr. Undertaker, you know me well."

"Of course. I've been observing for years."

The Saintess took the towel from me and wiped her face.

At that moment, I thought she was just bending down to wipe off sweat.

Looking back, perhaps she was using the towel to naturally avoid my gaze.

"Thank you always, Mr. Undertaker."

Footnotes:

Chapter 40

The One Who Was an Observer II

Sinnoa

At this time, I had ample reason to worry about the Saintess's well-being.

As previously mentioned, the public order was not good.

"Another one dead..."

During the regular meeting, Noh Do-hwa muttered. Although a considerable amount of time had passed since she took office as the chief of the National Road Management Corps, her uniquely gloomy eyes, which seemed to hate everything in the world, had not changed.

"Again? Is it that murderer?"

"Yes, the Wheel Murderer. This time the death was reported in Cheongju. It just went up on SG Net. Take a look for yourself..."

It wasn't in my character to fiddle with my smartphone during meetings, but since it was also a break time and Noh Do-hwa had recommended it, there was no helping it.

When I logged into SG Net, sure enough, chaos had ensued.

-Anonymous: December 24th, Cheongju.

The post's title on the bulletin board was nondescript. It was uploaded by an anonymous user, only the date and location were mentioned.

Not only the title but the content of the post was simple as well. A single video was bluntly attached without any adornment.

Upon clicking the video, a man was tied up in an underground parking garage.

-Uh, ahh...

The underground parking garage was already flooded up to the ankles.

Black sewage.

An endlessly murky sludge surrounded a chair placed in the middle, where the man was tightly bound.

-I-I am Lee So-yeol, 29, living in Cheongju. I, until now, have killed six people. The first murder was a year ago... There was a mother and daughter in my neighborhood, they seemed to have plentiful supplies. Originally, I didn’t intend to kill, but during a fight with the father, the daughter stabbed me from behind, so, to survive, I had no choice.

The man, for some reason, droned on about his crimes.

The video did not continue seamlessly. It was unmistakably edited.

For instance, the dialogues he just mentioned were cut off in the middle. There were gaps between 'I have killed six people until now' and 'The first murder was a year ago.'

The reason I could notice this difference was that, previously, there had been no nail in the man's hand.

That is, someone who filmed the video was torturing the man. However, the 'video of being tortured' and 'video of screaming' were thoroughly deleted.

Thus, the man's confession seemed to continue smoothly, as if nothing had happened.

-I was angry. I did it because I was angry. But I just killed them. Without torturing or humiliating...

A nail was embedded in his right hand.

-I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

The man's voice trembled a bit more thinly.

-Actually, I tortured each one in front of the mother until they died. The second murder happened in Go-eun. Go-eun intersection. People often pass by there from Cheongju. Not those moving with the National Road Management Corps, but alone or maybe two or three together... I targeted those people... These days, all travelers keep their belongings in their backpacks... Shit! It's the fault of those fuckers who travel alone!

Nails were embedded in both his forearms.

Where the nails were embedded, blood flowed. However, no matter how much blood dripped, the color of the sewage flooding the parking garage did not change at all. It remained pitch black.

-I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry... I didn’t want to live like this. Isn't it the world's fault? When the Gate burst open in Seoul, I was 12 years old. I was a primary school student then.

-.....

-Life, half of my life, no, just life itself, was completely thrown into a cesspool. Shit. At least you all lived happily for half of your lives. You lived well. You went to school. I didn’t! I couldn’t! It's your fault, shit!

-I didn’t do anything wrong... If I had been an awakener, I wouldn't have done such things. Filthy bastards. You guys don’t even try and just awaken your abilities, huh? Join a guild and live it up. For regular people like me, we’re nothing, right? But what...

A nail was embedded in his shoulder.

-The, the third murder.

-.....

-The third murder was... some bastard tried to rob my house. Me, a man. The money that an adult earned working his bones off, and he

was trying to steal it just like that, isn't his head rotten? I didn’t particularly intend to kill him. Just wanted him to starve. I planned to keep him tied up for three days and then release him, but he died on his own in just two days. Really. I was going to release him. Ah. I'm sorry . I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Please save me! Please! No more. Please...

At that moment, something strange was embedded in the man's head.

It was a wheel from a car.

Since gasoline had become a relic of ancient civilizations, the countless cars scattered around the world were no more meaningful than megaliths. However, the person who filmed the video had seen new possibilities in the remains of these decommissioned cars.

"He's dead."

"Yes. He died cleanly. No, filthy..."

The serial murderer's trademark.

The culprit always nailed his victims to death and then hung a car wheel on the nail.

Known as the 'Wheel Murderer.' Or simply 'Wheel.'

"Already the 16th, isn't it?"

"Roughly around that number. Actually, if we only count the videos, it's 16, but there are many more murders that weren't recorded. Last time we found a corpse with a wheel on its head that hadn't appeared in any video..."

The murderer had stolen 'anonymity' from 'Anonymous.'

In other words, the community had no choice but to acknowledge and name him.

-[Baekwha] SixthGrader: I'm so scared... ㅠ_ㅠ

-Anonymous: Kyaa, as expected from Wheel oppa. Nice shot again today.

-[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquess: Is this an act of righteousness, or is it a vile self-justification of an evil faction? I find it truly difficult to judge.

OldManGoryeo: ew

-Anonymous: A mother-daughter murder in Chungju, and that was from a year ago, right? I think I know what this is about. There were rumors going around inside Chungju because the bodies were brutally mutilated then.

-Anonymous: I'm rooting for you. Kill more.

-dolLHoUse: Neutral.

-[Samcheon] Officer: Who's managing Chungju? If it weren't for Wheel, this bastard wouldn't have been caught until the end. Can't they manage security properly? The awakeners affiliated with that guild should feel ashamed.

Comments were continuously being posted on the bulletin board.

"I'm back... Huh? What's going on? Why the atmosphere?"

Just then, Seo Gyu entered the conference room.

The regular meeting members were Noh Do-hwa, me, and the Saintess, although occasionally Seo Gyu also participated. If Noh Do-hwa controlled the aboveground road network, Seo Gyu managed the underground network.

"Seo Gyu, another post by the Wheel Murderer went up."

"Ah..."

Seo Gyu made a subtle expression. It was a look that seemed to convey both apology and a lack of face.

"Should I delete it?"

"No, the public reaction suggests that arbitrarily deleting it could backfire. More importantly, is this Anonymous really that difficult to track?"

"Yes, for now he's not a regular member... When I checked the access logs, he only logs in to post and doesn't enter SG Net at any other time."

"So, he's not the type who commits crimes for the comments."

"Yep. He might not even be looking at the comments at all. Or maybe he has some kind of unusual stealth ability that my powers can't detect."

"...That's also a possibility."

I nodded.

There really are a variety of abilities in this world.

"Is it about the murderer?"

The Saintess followed Seo Gyu into the room. Both had stepped out of the conference room during the break and had just returned.

"Yes."

"I also just saw the post on SG Net."

The Saintess took her seat, speaking as impassively as usual.

"Even though I keep using my Clairvoyance, somehow I just can’t catch the criminal in my sight."

Then, it must be some kind of stealth ability.

"Truly elusive."

After the meeting ended, Seo Gyu was sent away, and we three entered another strategy meeting.

Of course, the topic was the Wheel Murderer.

"With public authority collapsed, there’s no way to prevent private sanctions. There's neither justification nor reason. The problem is..."

"Really, where's the guarantee that this murderer is truly a benevolent being?"

Noh Do-hwa took over the conversation.

"So far, he's really only targeted clear villains. But with the same ability, he could kill someone else without anyone knowing. Maybe he already has, just without attaching a wheel to the body..."

"....."

"At the very least, we need to understand who this person is from our perspective. Mr. Undertaker, is this the first time such a type of murderer has appeared in your regressions?"

"Yes. This is a first in all my lives. It’s the first time a run has proceeded this smoothly up to the 16th year, so it's not that surprising."

This run had been unusually fortunate.

Normally by this time, beings called the Outer Gods would have interfered in our world, causing utter chaos. However, for some reason, the 107th cycle was quiet.

It was almost like a miracle.

Therefore, it was all the more precious.

"Then, Mr. Undertaker, please try to gather more detailed information on the criminal this cycle... That way, we can plan how to handle this going forward, whether we recruit or eliminate."

"I was planning on that anyway."

"Some guild leaders suspect the Wheel Murderer might be an assassin we're cultivating. Things would have been much easier if we had such an assassin, huh..."

We were doing our best.

By the 16th year, the National Road Management Corps had successfully connected nearly all major cities with primary roads.

Guild leaders holed up in each city like feudal lords, but Noh Do-hwa reigned over these lords as a king. She monopolized the distribution networks from city to city, which was a natural consequence.

Most importantly, Busan, the largest city on the Korean peninsula, had fallen into the hands of Dang Seo-rin of Samcheon. As you know, Dang Seo-rin was one of the key figures behind the establishment of the National Road Management Corps, and she was extremely favorable towards us.

If necessary, Dang Seo-rin could even reign as the supreme leader of the guild leaders, such was the strength of her forces. With such a person's cooperation behind us, no one could ignore the National Road Management Corps. Hmm, it would be like the French royal family securing the loyalty of Burgundy in the Middle Ages.

Despite all this, the limits of the National Road Management Corps were clear.

We could not take responsibility for the security of the entire Korean peninsula. We could not manage the administration. We could not handle the judiciary.

Originally, we couldn't even govern the surface area of the Korean peninsula. At best, we controlled the lines connecting city to city.

In the voids that the spider web could not envelop, monsters and anomalies always lurked.

Whenever these things tried to tear through the spiderweb and invade humanity's lines, I had to respond. The military power of the National Road Management Corps was formidable, but moving as swiftly as me was inevitably difficult.

This was also fundamentally why I lacked time.

"We just don't have the capacity. We don't."

"....."

The meeting adjourned, and we each returned to our respective lodgings.

The reason I turned my steps this way was entirely capricious.

Since the Saintess had ended her reclusive training and started wandering outside, my visits to Yongsan Dongbinggo-dong, which used to be the Saintess's hideout, had become infrequent.

Even though the Saintess herself didn't mind at all, it didn't look good for a man to be frequently visiting the home of a woman living alone. Previously, since the Saintess had been confined at home, it couldn’t be helped, but now the situation had changed.

We could always communicate via [Telepathy].

"But because of the Wheel Murderer, the Saintess must also be feeling uneasy."

No one was more fastidious about ethics than her.

In a situation where public power had crumbled, she still guarded against private sanctions. The reason was simple: without a system, a single deviation could lead to a major error.

The reason judgments were made through three courts—first, second, and third—by different people was not unrelated to this situation. It was unrealistic to expect one person to be absolutely fair and error-free forever.

Because of these various concerns, the Saintess's mind must also be in turmoil.

"I've just gotten a rare fish, too. She'd be happy with a gift."

December 24th. Christmas Eve.

I put the tropical fish in a plastic bag and headed for Dongbinggo-

dong.

Thump, a silent touch settled on my forehead. White snowflakes. Even though the roads had turned into snow paths with last night's heavy snowfall, it seemed they were about to snow again.

"Hmm."

Worried that it might be too cold for the tropical fish, I wrapped the plastic bag with my palms. I also did not forget to skillfully raise an aura to maintain the temperature.

Footprints were double-pressed into the path leading to Dongbinggo-dong. Likely, all of them were the Saintess's footprints.

"Saintess, are you there?"

Knock, knock.

I knocked on the door, but there was no response.

'She should have gone home right after the meeting...'

I tilted my head and turned the doorknob. The shoes the Saintess had worn during the meeting were in the entrance. This meant she had at least stopped by the house once.

"Saintess?"

Still no answer.

"Hmm."

...I decided to enter the house, even at the risk of being rude. The memory of what had happened to the Saintess at the hands of Go Yuri lingered somewhat traumatically.

If the Saintess was alright, I could just apologize immediately. She was someone who knew how to accept an apology.

I stepped into the living room and...

"…?"

Soon, I witnessed an unbelievable scene.

The tanks that had surrounded the Saintess's living room like a fortress.

The tanks that always shimmered a brilliant blue were now completely empty.

"What?"

I opened my mouth unwittingly.

Raising fish was the Saintess's unique hobby. Even until the end of the world, she would never give up on her fish. That had been proven even back during the 90th cycle when I was running a convenience store.

But the tanks were empty.

Well, actually, two tanks were still filled with water. However, it seemed like a long time had passed since the water filter had been working, as the water color was murky.

A few tropical fish lay belly-up in the murky water, transformed into debris.

Coincidentally, all the fish corpses left were the ones I had gifted her before.

"Mr. Undertaker?"

At that moment, a voice came from behind me.

I turned around, and there was the Saintess, just coming through the front door.

I looked at the Saintess, holding the plastic bag with the tropical fish I intended to gift her.

"What happened?"

"...Ah. I'm sorry for entering without permission. Someone gifted me

some tropical fish, and I thought it would be better to give them to you, Saintess, so I came without notifying you first. But... are you not keeping fish anymore?"

The Saintess blinked.

"...Yes."

"Why? You liked them so much..."

"I did, but most of the original fish had died, and maintaining the tanks became increasingly burdensome. I planned to clean up the remaining tanks at some point, but I just haven't got around to it yet."

I looked over the Saintess's attire.

A double coat. Not exactly comfortable attire for moving around. It was different from what she had worn at the meeting.

It wasn’t her usual fashion choice either.

"...I see. Were you coming back from a walk?"

"Yes. If I had known you were coming, Mr. Undertaker, I would have prepared some tea. It seems you visited while I was briefly out."

In other words,

'I had returned home once before going out again, and there’s nothing much I could do in this outfit except for a simple walk.'

Outside, it was snowing. Snow clung to her double coat, but it looked somewhat unnatural. As if, maybe,

if you shook the double coat lightly on snow-covered ground, it would have such snow marks.

"……"

"Undertaker?"

I looked past the Saintess to the snow on the ground outside.

Until I entered, the footprints had only been double-pressed. One set was from my arrival, and the other must have been from when the Saintess returned.

I picked up the shoes the Saintess had just taken off at the entrance, examining the soles.

The pattern of the soles did not match the footprints in the snow.

"Undertaker? What are you doing?"

"Saintess."

It was a kind of intuition.

It was hard to call it deduction, given the lack of evidence. There was no physical proof, but a kind of flash, like a lightning strike, flickered in my mind.

The fish belly-up. The empty tanks. The Saintess occasionally gazing blankly into space. Seo Gyu's apologetic eyes. The double coat. The footprints.

An unlikely possibility, never before considered, suddenly clicked together like a puzzle and slipped out of my mouth.

"Could it be, Saintess, that you are the Wheel Murderer?"

Silence.

A moment that felt like eternity passed.

As if the world had hit the pause button.

When it seemed that impression was about to lift,

"Mr. Undertaker."

The Saintess's lips parted.

"You really know me well."

Footnotes:

Chapter 41

The One Who Was an Observer III

Sinnoa

There was a hypothesis I had long suspected.

——Perhaps certain monsters, certain anomalies, were actually born from humans?

It wasn't a thought I had always held.

The point at which I began to seriously consider this hypothesis was when I unraveled the identity of Udumbara.

As you know, the Udumbara germinated in Asan, South Chungcheong Province. The bodies of a mother and child, presumed to have starved to death. It was a human that had given birth to a virus of unprecedented scale.

Logically, it didn’t make sense that an anomaly could be born from the body of an ordinary human. However, with a slight change in perspective, it was entirely plausible.

If we assume that the mother or child had 'that ability,' everything was clarified.

Which of the mother or child was the awakener, I couldn't tell, as they had already starved to death by the time we found them. But if either or both were awakeners?

If the Udumbara itself was a type of ability?

——If an awakener's ability is, in fact, no different from the abilities of monsters and anomalies when objectively considered.

In theory, all awakeners could potentially degenerate into

anomalies. No, it could not even be called degeneration. From the start, awakeners and anomalies were fundamentally the same.

[The ability to continuously regenerate tentacles and grow two hearts within one’s body].

Thus were born the Ten Legs.

[The ability to freely observe a vast area as large as the Korean Peninsula and telepathically communicate with all awakeners].

Thus claimed herself the Saintess.

If viewed from the perspective of someone entirely unrelated to humanity, say, an alien, which of the two would be considered the more dangerous creature?

Whether they took on 'human form' or not was merely a superficial difference, both were terrifying beings in essence.

“...Saintess.”

“Yes, I killed them.”

An unexpectedly refreshing affirmation.

But considering it came from the Saintess, it was more chilling than refreshing.

“Why…….”

“Mr. Undertaker. That's a strange question. I have always maintained the same stance.”

The Saintess remained expressionless.

“To prevent awakeners from committing crimes rashly, I created the constellations that don’t even exist in this world. I simulated them. The operating principle of the constellation system is the possibility that [someone might be watching every move I make]. Anxiety. Humans restrain themselves when observed by others, and let go of their reason when they are not.”

The Saintess tilted her head.

“Isn't a serial killer no different?”

“…….”

“The constellation system was able to control the rampages of the awakeners. However, it couldn't reach ordinary people, civilians. Sadly, my telepathy only works with awakeners. So, I simply created another possibility for civilians to fear.”

Snow was falling.

Flakes of snow landed on the Saintess's head and double coat, melting as soon as they touched her.

The Saintess's eyes narrowed.

“There are too many pieces of trash in this world. No, that's not quite the right word. There are far too many beasts masquerading as humans.”

“So…….”

“So, I killed them. Are you worried there might have been innocent people? You don't have to worry about that, Mr. Undertaker. I checked several times. I have never once regretted my killings.”

Why?

Despite clearly having a conversation with the Saintess, the presence of the person before me felt unfamiliar. It wasn’t just that she seemed like a different person or had a changed personality.

Her very existence had changed.

Unexplainable sweat formed on the palm of my right hand.

“Mr. Undertaker, you are too kind.”

“...Me? I didn’t expect to hear that from you, Saintess.”

“You always give everyone infinite chances.”

Crunch.

The Saintess took a step forward. The snow beneath her feet crunched. I reflexively stepped back, maintaining a distance from the Saintess.

Even if the Saintess was a murderer, I had no reason to flee from her. We were bound by blood. Even if she were to burn the whole world down, I would stand by her side.

Therefore, the reason I moved wasn't logical but instinctual.

"Infinite chances?"

"Yes. Mr. Undertaker, what do you think about your [regression] ability? Surely, you must believe that you are constantly receiving chances. But from my point of view, observing you from the sidelines, my opinion differs."

"Which is?"

"It's not just you receiving chances. Every time the world regresses, everyone else gets a chance too."

One step.

"In the last cycle, a villain who killed an innocent girl received a chance to change this time around. The evil one who took the last bit of food from a child, tying up the child and watching them starve to death, also had the opportunity to make a different choice. Once. Twice. Ten times. Twenty times. Thirty times. Forty times. Fifty times."

"……."

"But how many really hesitated before their wicked deeds? How many have killed and tortured the same person over and over again, forty, fifty times?"

"...Those people do not know that the world is regressing."

"That's right. Ignorance. Not knowing is always a good excuse. Even

when it comes to killing people, they always hide behind ignorance. I understand. I will understand. But what about the people who were killed?”

“…….”

“Why must they endure countless wrongful deaths and wrongful suffering?”

One step.

“Someday, Mr. Undertaker, you will succeed in saving the world. Yes, definitely. In that future world, even the villains will be granted the chance to live a new life. Perhaps in a more relaxed, more peaceful era, they might not feel the need to commit crimes. I think, that is very… wrong.”

Another step.

“Mr. Undertaker. If someone kills, they should be punished.”

The Saintess spoke quietly.

“They shouldn't just get another chance.”

From some point on.

Without me noticing, a small, sleek hand axe had appeared in the Saintess's grasp. That she had armed herself at a speed beyond my perception indicated this.

Sweat dripped more freely from my neck.

“No matter how many times you regress, Mr. Undertaker, and no matter how much you strive to save this world, the sins committed by the villains will not disappear. No. I will make sure they don’t disappear.”

“What do you mean……?”

“I will eternally inflict pain on the sinners.”

Vapor rose from the Saintess's mouth.

It was a white smoke rising towards the endless sky.

"Feel free to regress anytime, Mr. Undertaker. A hundred times. Two hundred times. A thousand times if you must, to save this world, but I will not leave the benefit of your efforts for the villains to enjoy."

"……."

"Each time you regress, I will execute the punishment that should rightly descend on this world. If the villains continue to commit crimes forever, I will forever torture them."

The vapor twisted from the Saintess's mouth.

It was her sneer.

"Although I may be powerless to create a paradise in this world, I have enough ability to create a small hell."

When the Saintess took that final step, I drew my sword like a flash of lightning.

The target was the hand axe in the Saintess's hand.

Why the Saintess had drawn her weapon against me, I could not tell, but I had no doubts about her intellectual abilities. If the Saintess had drawn a weapon, there must have been a reason for it.

What was the Saintess's plan? To subdue me, a regressor, and then what did she intend to do?

It was hard to guess, but certainly, it would not end well for me.

I suppressed an ominous feeling and attacked the Saintess.

"What……?"

However, the Saintess easily dodged my sword energy. Just one step to the side.

A simple movement as if she had known from the start where the attack would come from and where it would go.

Clang—!

Suddenly, a sound like glass breaking rang out from my body. It wasn't from one place alone. Left arm, right arm, left leg, right leg, my limbs vibrated as auras collided.

Four hand axes had struck my body and rebounded in all directions.

I couldn't tell when or from where the hand axes had flown at me.

It was as if they had suddenly appeared 'right in front of me.'

"Keuk?"

If I hadn't developed a habit of wrapping my body in aura like armor, the blow just now would have caused serious injuries to my limbs.

I immediately widened the distance from the Saintess. I kicked the snow-covered ground and jumped far back.

But the gap did not widen.

"You're strong. As expected, Mr. Undertaker."

Despite having jumped tens of meters at once, the Saintess was already standing before me.

"……!"

Not only that. Clang, the hand axes rebounded off my body. This time there were six. I could only react and knock two away with my sword.

'How? Even if she had a talent for martial arts, this was too much. This couldn't be an ability unless……'

It was then.

Seeing the Saintess easily following my movements, a memory from

long ago surfaced.

36th cycle. The first conversation I had with the Saintess.

-How did you create the Constellations?

-Thanks to my ability. I can use [Clairvoyance] and [Telepathy].

-But just with Clairvoyance and Telepathy, it's impossible to perform the constellations, right? You need to observe multiple people simultaneously and send messages. Don't you have another ability?

-Ah, that's...

At that time, the Saintess had smiled faintly.

-That, is a secret. I'll tell you later.

An old memory.

Now, I seemed to know what that secret was.

"Time stop……?"

"……."

The Saintess hesitated.

"Did you know?"

"I only guessed. It was one of several possibilities. To perform multiple constellations and observe multiple awakeners simultaneously, anyway, a tremendous ability would be necessary. Like multiple perspectives or multiple personalities……. But time stop."

Time stop. The least likely joker card I had thought of.

If it was true that she possessed even the [Time Stop] ability, then the Saintess was essentially the most powerful awakener.

I forgot even the predicament I was in and let out a hollow laugh.

“Clairvoyance, Telepathy, and now Time Stop? That’s unbelievable. Even one would be enough to be called a top-tier ability, and you monopolize three. Please stop cheating, Saintess.”

“You flatter me too much. No matter how much I advance, I’m nothing compared to an infinite regressor.”

...At last, everything made sense.

The Saintess had been using [Time Stop] to simultaneously observe so many awakeners and perform the constellations.

Avoiding my attack and suddenly throwing hand axes from four directions was understandable.

After all, if she had stopped time, she could calmly assess from which direction the attack was coming and where she needed to attack.

Was that all? If she used [Clairvoyance] on me, the Saintess could synchronize her vision with mine, immediately knowing which direction I was looking at and aiming for.

If she was cautious, she could be called practically invincible.

“From the beginning, my ability wasn’t this strong. When I stopped time initially, only my consciousness flowed or at best, my eyes could move, but as time passed, it grew stronger. Now, I can stop time and travel across the country to find villains.”

“Amazing. So, what do you intend to do by overpowering me?”

“Well.”

The world momentarily stopped.

In the blink of an eye, I could only widen my eyes.

What had been barely three or four footsteps in the snowy ground had suddenly blossomed with countless footsteps. There were no footsteps of mine. Only the footprints of the shoes worn by the Saintess surrounded me by hundreds, thousands, as if displayed in a

kaleidoscope.

This meant that my moment was her eternity.

The Saintess did not waste her time.

Now, thousands of bullets flying towards me from all directions proved her diligence.

Why just bullets? Among them were dozens of hand axes, each meticulously infused with aura.

[It's a secret.]

Countless bullets surged towards me.

Boss battle.

Threat Level: Lv.4 Oceanic-class

Awakener. Alias, Saintess.

Corruptor. Alias, Executioner.

Begin Subjugation.

Footnotes:

Chapter 42
The One Who Was an Observer IV

Sinnoa

For reference, the proper nouns I use in the text are mostly of my own creation.

I didn't fancy myself a creator afflicted with the delusion that I alone had the right to name everything. Rather, it was simply because I was often the first to witness these wondrous phenomena.

Think about it. Who else but me has watched in real time as an awakener transformed into an anomaly?

Thus, I alone had to come up with terms for phenomena like 'corruption' and for entities known as 'Corruptors.'

What I had to create wasn't limited to terminology. Every time a formidable boss-level anomaly appeared, I had to write the 'strategy guide' for defeating it.

I hope others will not have to make the same mistakes I did.

Therefore, here and now, I will write down a strategy guide to prepare for the Executioner—the anomaly that the Saintess, one of the strongest Awakeners, turned into upon her corruption.

□□□□□□□□□□

[Saintess Corruption]

[Executioner Route: Route Activation Conditions]

1. At least 15 years have passed while the Saintess is still alive.

2. The number of civilian casualties the Saintess has witnessed

exceeds ‘at least’ one million. Especially if she has observed powerless elders and children dying or being tortured over 100,000 times.

3. When the Saintess masters the use of aura.

□□□□□□□□□□

This is known as the ‘Executioner Route.’

None of these conditions being met means the Executioner Route does not activate.

This is knowledge I've gained through numerous regressions. In fact, conditions 1 and 2 are almost identical, so it is fine to consider them as one.

The existence of SG Net is irrelevant here. Even if SG Net, which allows the spreading of videos, disappears, the Saintess does not stop her ‘executions.’ Only the locations of the executions change.

If the pathway to disseminate videos online is blocked, the Saintess would not just use underground parking lots; she would hang the bodies of villains directly in city squares. If she managed to obtain a cassette of the villain confessing their sins, she would play it, or if that wasn’t feasible, she would use paper, attaching it to the corpse’s body as if posting a notice.

Has anyone ever witnessed bodies being hung simultaneously in 12 cities across the nation on the same day and at the same hour?

Let me reiterate, the Saintess is a multi-ability awakener almost to the point of cheating. She should never be underestimated.

The best strategy is never to enter the Executioner Route in the first place. But if you do enter it, you must subdue the Saintess as quickly as possible.

□□□□□□□□□□

[Executioner's Abilities]

1. Time Stop

2. Telepathy

3. Clairvoyance

□□□□□□□□□□

Let’s start with an explanation of Time Stop.

Our time is not the same as the Saintess’s time.

From my perspective, I might have only delayed a day, but to the Saintess, it could have been two days, a week, a month, or perhaps even a year. Each second that passes might give the Saintess an opportunity close to eternity.

Take, for example, right now.

“Damn it...!”

It was impossible to dodge thousands of bullets and dozens of axes. I ran with all my might, but like a light drizzle soaking clothes, or rather a torrential downpour during the monsoon, I was barraged.

I surrounded my body with aura to block the damage, but aura is not infinite. My mental energy was continuously depleted in real time.

[I think Mr. Undertaker’s combat prowess is impressive.]

As the battle continued, hundreds of footprints appeared on the snow-covered ground.

In front of me. Behind me. All around.

Footprints I hadn’t stepped in or seen tightened around me.

[But how long can you hold out?]

The Saintess’s aura was infinite.

Despite having just unleashed countless attacks, the Saintess seemed

not to tire, sending dozens of axes, each meticulously infused with aura, flying towards me again.

It was an absurd manipulation of aura.

“You’re not telling me you’re charging up aura while stopping time?”

[Yes.]

The Saintess’s indifferent tone pierced directly into my mind. Though her tone was the same as usual, for some reason, it sounded annoying to my ears.

[I took a ten-day break and recharged. While Mr. Undertaker was standing still, I rested.]

I cursed internally. It was as if I was fighting someone with an infinite HP and MP cheat code.

‘Is this how Ten Legs felt when it faced me?’

I might not remember Ten Legs, but from its perspective, I must have seemed like a being who, no matter how many times they killed me, would always come back to life and demand a rematch. They probably wanted to complain about me cheating.

Right now, I felt exactly like that. Involuntarily, my monster empathy was flourishing.

However, like my regressions, the Executioner’s [Time Stop] was not a perfect ability. There was definitely a weakness.

‘If she had kept attacking me while stopping time, she could have subdued me easily, but she didn’t.’

Her not doing so meant she couldn’t.

Above all, the Saintess used ‘hand axes’ as throwing weapons rather than ‘swords’ or ‘spears’ that could strike an opponent directly. She stubbornly persisted in long-range combat rather than close combat.

This clearly meant something.

□□□□□□□□□□

[Executioner's Abilities]

1. Time Stop: An ability that allows for an almost infinite number of attacks while always being able to dodge an opponent's attacks. However, it is presumed that time stop is canceled 'in cases of direct contact' with an opponent.

2. Telepathy

3. Clairvoyance

□□□□□□□□□□

This might be the flaw in the Time Stop ability.

And while the Saintess casually mentioned she had 'rested for ten days,' it was likely an exaggeration.

In this era, firearms and ammunition were not abundantly stocked. Gathering those rare resources to bring here and fire at me would have consumed a significant amount of time.

For me, it was merely a moment, but during that time, the Saintess had likely traveled the nation preparing her attack.

Of course, it wouldn't matter if she could stop time for a year, or even ten years, but even for the Saintess, that would be difficult.

Living alone for years in a world where no one else moves or speaks would be challenging.

At least every ten days, if she didn't release time, the Saintess's mental energy would rapidly deteriorate.

Thus, battling the Saintess resembled playing a shooting game, or perhaps more accurately, a bullet hell game.

Even just closing my eyes for a moment, countless bullet curtains

obscured my vision. Somehow, I had to dodge the barrage of bullets and axes and finally, approach the Saintess and 'touch' her.

It seemed an excessively difficult victory condition, but unfortunately, the Saintess's gimmick wasn't over yet.

[Roar!]

I flinched—

A sudden loud bang from my left startled me. Had the Saintess finally resorted to using bombs as well as guns?

But that was strange. I quickly looked around, but there was no explosion anywhere to be seen.

Of course, hesitation during combat was quite fatal. As I flinched, countless bullets pummeled my body.

My entire body vibrated. My head was dizzy. I felt the remaining aura dip significantly from the impact.

'What was that explosion sound?'

As I moved swiftly, I endlessly pondered. Before I could even hypothesize what the explosion sound was, a new noise tore through my mind with a ferocity.

[Screeeeech—!]

My face contorted. The sound was like dragging a steel tooth across a metal plate. Already having a highly developed sense of hearing compared to the average person, my discomfort grew even more.

But with bullets raining down from all directions, such a metallic noise shouldn't have been so loud.

'Telepathy ability!'

I gritted my teeth. This was noise that the Saintess was directly implanting in my head.

“Wasn’t telepathy supposed to only transmit voices!”

[As I mentioned, my ability has evolved over time. I can replay any sound I remember storing. Would you like me to play a song for you?]

Damn it.

If the Saintess personally took on the role of a radio DJ, I would be grateful to listen and even send fan letters regularly. The problem was that the DJ was currently causing me noise pollution.

It wasn’t just explosion sounds and screeching that tormented me.

[Undertaker! I’ve come to help!]

That was Dang Seo-rin’s voice.

Even though my head knew Dang Seo-rin wasn’t actually here, my body couldn’t help but react. I hesitated, and yet another barrage of bullets cascaded down on the aura barrier. It was maddening.

[Hyung!]

That was Seo Gyu. I gritted my teeth and ignored it.

But the next moment, when I heard a whispering voice right next to my ear, I thought I was going crazy.

[Is that the guild master?]

It was none other than Go Yuri’s voice. Chills ran down my entire body.

‘I’m going mad.’

Such maliciousness was unmatched. As much as I knew the Saintess, she knew me too well.

Closing off my senses was useless. How could I dodge telepathy that was being hammered directly into my brain?

Eventually, I couldn’t even trust my own hearing. My senses

muddled, I continued the battle.

[No matter how much you run, it's meaningless, Mr. Undertaker. Have you forgotten that I am still revered as a constellation by others?]

I widened my eyes. Could it be?

[As soon as the battle started, I designated Mr. Undertaker as a 'target for subjugation' to awakeners across the nation. I've notified them of your location as well. Looking through Clairvoyance, hundreds of awakeners are converging here.]

"All the awakeners like me!"

[No, only 50% of the awakeners like you. It's just that many of the strong ones are among that 50%. Many others have been eyeing you eagerly, like the SwordMarquess of Yuldoguk. Now that I've declared under the name of Constellation that 'the Undertaker has fallen,' even if only temporarily, they've been given a reason.]

"Dang Seo-rin..."

[Of course, I haven't implanted any messages to the guild master of Samcheon World or the leader of the National Road Management Corps. But since I didn't want you to be disappointed that they weren't invited, I prepared a surprise gift for you without Mr. Undertaker knowing.]

This is insane.

"Please tell me it's not Go Yuri!"

[You know me well, Mr. Undertaker.]

My head felt faint. Dealing with the Saintess turned Corruptor was deathly enough, but now Go Yuri joining the fight too? Was she planning to turn the regressor into a minced regressor salad?

[You have three hours left.]

A time attack had been added to the bullet hell game. It might have

been just bluffing to make me anxious, but.

In conclusion, the Saintess's abilities were as follows:

□□□□□□□□□□

[Executioner's Abilities]

1. Time Stop: An ability that allows for an almost infinite number of attacks while always being able to dodge an opponent's attacks. However, it is presumed that time stop is canceled 'in cases of direct contact' with an opponent.

2. Telepathy: Initially, it transmitted only the Saintess's voice, but as the ability upgraded, it transformed into 'sound playback.' She could reproduce not only other people's voices but also noises such as explosions.

3. Clairvoyance

□□□□□□□□□□

How was one to defeat this?

Honestly, it wouldn't be out of line to declare her unbeatable.

"……"

But there is always a way to win.

Whether it was Ten Legs, Udumbara, or Milky Way, when I first faced them, it always seemed like there was no answer, but as could be seen from the case of the Udumbara, sometimes the problem was solved in an entirely unexpected way.

I gave up.

More precisely, I gave up on defeating the Saintess.

Instead, I suddenly wiped out all the aura that was wrapped around my entire body.

"……!"

From a distance, I saw the Saintess's eyes widen.

Footnotes:

Chapter 43

The One Who Was an Observer V

Sinnoa

Clang—

The sound of glass shattering echoed from all around. Just now, though invisible to my eyes, it was proof that the Saintess's aura had activated.

The bullets rushing towards me like a swarm of sharks shattered all at once. The hand axes tumbled to the ground. The sight of thousands of bullets, crushed into powder and mingling with the snowflakes, was truly a spectacle.

“…….”

The creator of this miraculous scene, the Saintess—or the Corruptor that would later be named by me as the 'Executioner'—was staring blankly at me.

“What are you trying to do?”

The Saintess's tone seemed casual at first. However, having spent countless years with her, and expecting many more, I knew it was difficult for someone bound by thousands of years of destiny to perfectly hide their emotions.

The Saintess was disconcerted.

‘As expected.’

I nodded.

This fight was never viable to begin with.

The Saintess really had no intention of killing me. Her goal was merely to subdue.

What plan the Saintess harbored now was beyond me. Regrettably, I had mastered mind reading only in the 554th cycle, and this was merely the 107th.

Yet, there were clues for speculation.

"Saintess."

"Yes."

"Please stop using Time Stop. Send back the awakeners you called as well. Otherwise, I will commit suicide immediately, without any delay."

“…….”

The Saintess looked into my eyes. For a moment. Perhaps for eternity. Or maybe she was looking at herself through my eyes. Eyes within eyes met.

Thunk.

The axe the Saintess had been holding buried itself in the snow. Snowflakes continued to fall from the sky. Snow settled on the thousands, tens of thousands of footprints that marked the ground.

Time passed.

"It has stopped."

That was how the Saintess chose to describe it.

I suddenly felt an overwhelming emotion. We both lived in a twisted flow of time, making us kin in that aspect.

Typically, one who has lived in a familiar space is called a compatriot, and one who lives in an unknown space, a stranger. What about time then? To ordinary people, weren't we both helpless foreigners?

Snow fell. I thought of this place as an exile from any world, a place abandoned by the universe.

Coincidentally, exile originally stemmed from returning home. At some point, returning home had become a punishment.

Then, perhaps this flaw in the world was our true homeland.

“…Very well. Since you do not wish for my death, and I do not wish for yours, we should be able to have a conversation.”

“I agree.”

The distance between us was just over 6 meters.

"Let's first establish each other's demands. I wish that you do not suppress my freedom."

“…I, likewise, hope that you do not interfere with my executions.”

The Saintess spoke.

“If another regression occurs, and the 108th cycle begins, Mr. Undertaker will certainly try to prevent me from ‘becoming this way’.”

“…….”

“You wouldn’t want me to become a murderer. You always want to place me in a position that is just and beyond reproach. But this decision—to personally inflict pain on those who have sinned—is a conclusion I have reached myself.”

“So you intend to subdue me?”

“Yes. I planned to detain Mr. Undertaker until I found a way to erase only specific memories. The world is vast and there are many awakeners, so surely somewhere there is a power to manipulate memories. In the worst case, I could rely on Go Yuri.”

Go Yuri is not an option.

“Speaking of which, you mentioned earlier that you had summoned Go Yuri. Is she on her way here?”

“That was a lie.”

The Saintess said indifferently, her expression unchanging.

“The claim that I had summoned other awakeners in the name of the constellation was also a lie. It was a strategy to make Mr. Undertaker anxious and force a mistake. No one else is coming here but us.”

“…I see.”

So it was all a bluff. One really could never let their guard down around her.

I took a deep breath, then sheathed my sword.

“Saintess, I assure you that I will never hide from you the fact that you have decided to punish the villains yourself, not in the next cycle, nor in the one after that, no matter how many regressions I undergo.”

“…….”

“I promise. So, please calm your uneasy mind.”

“…….”

“I am on your side, even if you were to set the world ablaze.”

Silence fell.

As snowflakes landed on the Saintess’s shoulders, a tiny, almost imperceptible sound of glass cracking could be heard. Only the sounds of snow falling and glass shattering softly echoed in the entire world.

“I am distressed.”

The Saintess’s voice seeped in like a shadow among the pale,

transparent sounds.

“That this memory, this conversation, might be completely forgotten by me in the next cycle. That memories of the 16 years I spent with Mr. Undertaker might melt away like snow.”

“…I will remember.”

“Yes.”

The Saintess slightly lowered her eyes.

“That makes it all the more regrettable.”

“…….”

“It's embarrassing. You will probably be sadder than me, but I couldn’t bear it. The possibility that all things, all memories, the meaning of someone's death, might disappear. That I should bear all that on my shoulders.”

“It's okay. I can handle it. And so can you.”

Snow fell.

With a tinkling sound, the Saintess’s lips parted.

“When an awakener’s power reaches its peak, it becomes no different from an anomaly.”

This was the first time in my regressions.

And perhaps the first time in human history that the phenomenon known as 'corruption' was elucidated through a human’s mouth.

“Really?”

“At some point, I was able to move freely even in a frozen world. My telepathy evolved to replay not only my voice but any sound I remembered.”

The Saintess was earnest. She carefully constructed her words at a pace I could follow.

“At first, I thought it was just the blossoming of my abilities. It was a natural conclusion. But as time passed, another hypothesis, another possibility, began to circle in my mind.”

“What possibility?”

“That it wasn’t so much that I was growing, but rather, that I was losing myself—a hypothesis.”

The Saintess’s eyes narrowed.

“Originally, telepathy transmitted only ‘my’ voice, but what if I transcend my physical body? What if I move further away from being human? Then, wouldn’t I be able to reproduce many sounds, not just human voices?”

“Uh… Logically possible, yes. But couldn’t the phenomenon you described be interpreted as just an expansion of your scope or identity?”

“Yes, but the two are not much different.”

The Saintess shook her head slightly.

“…It’s very hard to explain this feeling to someone else, but the symptoms are too distinct to be regarded merely as psychological unease.”

“What symptoms?”

“Transparent aura.”

Why? When the Saintess spoke those words, I too was seized by an ominous feeling.

An invisible tongue seemed to lick my spine from the nape of my neck to my pelvis.

The Saintess was looking straight at me.

“Each awakener’s aura has its own color. Mr. Undertaker, you interpreted the lack of color in my aura as it being ‘transparent’.”

“…Yes.”

“But what if it wasn’t aura at all?”

The Saintess murmured, likely pondering a problem she had often considered within the frozen time.

“As if it has the effect of aura enhancement, but is not aura. Such phenomena must have been witnessed countless times by you.”

“Anomalies…?”

“Yes. Monsters.”

The Ten Legs did not use aura.

They are simply born with bodies that seem enhanced by aura.

My heart thudded. Synced with my heartbeat, a continuous noise echoed from the Saintess’s entire body.

“I am increasingly being eroded by the void.”

“…….”

“That’s not all.”

Snap.

The Saintess flicked her fingers.

At that moment, my vision flipped.

“……?”

No, to be precise, it hadn’t flipped.

It was as if I was experiencing an out-of-body experience—seeing my own body from ‘above’.

My perspective shifted from first-person to third-person.

“Saintess?”

My lips moved. I saw my lips moving.

It was an exceedingly strange sensation.

I could see my own back. If I were to perform strength training in this state, I could precisely measure the weight, but a third-person world did not offer only advantages.

“What in the world…?”

A sensation of buoyancy.

A person's self is ultimately attached to the body.

The body is the most direct object. If the body loses its directness and is laid 'side by side' with other objects, becoming just one of many things, then a person's self also floats aimlessly on the waves of a vast ocean without an anchor.

“That is the world I see, Mr. Undertaker.”

Rustle.

The Saintess stepped on the snow and approached me. I was unable to maneuver like an infant who hadn’t yet learned to control their body.

“At first, this perspective only unfolded when I used Clairvoyance, but as I grew accustomed to it... I’ve reached the point where I can no longer distinguish between my own view and the third-person view.”

The Saintess took my hand.

The touch of her hand, chilled by the snowflakes, was vividly felt. Yet, that touch felt somehow 'distant'.

Should I describe it as if touch had a color? Touch, more than anything, should be felt directly on the skin, yet a sense of distance was perceptible.

As the Saintess said, it was a sensation difficult to explain to

someone else.

It was bizarre.

It was extraordinary.

An anomaly.

“I think I'm already halfway there to becoming an anomaly.“

“…….”

“When you discovered my secret, I thought I was in big trouble. But now that I think about it, I'm glad I was discovered now. If a little more time had passed... I might have lost the most important part of myself.”

The Saintess whispered right in front of my nose/spoke monotonously from afar.

The Saintess gathered the little remaining warmth in her hands around my hands/The Executioner assumed a posture as if praying to the sky.

“If it had gone that far, I might have been able to halt time to prevent your regression from proceeding. No. Not might— I am certain of it.”

“…….”

“I would lose my color, my vision, my form, and even time, becoming merely something that looks down upon and watches everything. Such a grotesquery.”

Vapor streamed from the Saintess's mouth.

A slender thread of human warmth rose in the middle of a snow-covered world.

“Please remember, Mr. Undertaker. This fight, the challenge to save the world, is not a game where time is given indefinitely. There are only infinite opportunities to challenge, but once you enter the

stage, there is a ‘time limit’.”

“Time limit…”

“The duration of that time limit is probably 15 to 20 years. When awakeners become so familiar with their powers that they are consumed by them, they will become like me, nearing grotesquery. Do you understand? An awakener’s power is not purely a blessing. It is a double-edged sword.”

Crackle—

Somewhere, in front of me, or perhaps very far away, the sound of glass cracking resonated.

I then realized that it might not be glass but a kind of transparent film surrounding the Saintess, the human being.

“This time it's because Mr. Undertaker focused on my growth, resulting in me becoming like this the fastest... But in other cycles, who knows. My intuition tells me that the more powerful an awakener’s ability, the more dangerous it seems. For example... Dang Seo-rin of Samcheon World would not be an exception.”

“…….”

“20 years. Please try to restore the world to its original form before 15 years approach. Please remember, Mr. Undertaker, the time limit…”

The sound of glass breaking became more distinct.

I understood the Saintess's intentions. Therefore, I pulled her hand and embraced her back. It might have been a bit too forceful since controlling the body in a third-person perspective is quite difficult.

The Saintess's eyes widened.

“…Ah.”

“You plan to kill me. To make sure the regression happens before you completely change, but that's just greed, to bear it all on your

own.”

A soft laughter was heard.

“Mr. Undertaker, you really do know me well.”

“Let’s go together.”

“…….”

“I haven’t mentioned it, but in fact, I'm quite adept at mental management. I once traveled around the country for three cycles and even worked as a convenience store owner.”

“Convenience store owner?”

“Yes. You, Saintess, might also need to learn to let go a little.”

I pulled up the aura from my entire body.

As the glass-like barrier began to shatter in earnest, crackle— crackle— countless bursting sounds echoed as my aura enveloped us both.

Snow fell. Glass broke. Even as snow continued to fall, the two shadows etched on the white snowfield were not buried.

“…It’s warm.”

The Saintess closed her eyes.

“Why, people. People... even though they are people.”

Clang.

The world quietly stopped the snow.

That was the Saintess's last will.

There is an epilogue.

This epilogue is not limited to a specific cycle.

In the 109th, 110th, 111th cycles... in every cycle where I formed a blood pact with the Saintess, this scene was invariably recreated.

“That happened.”

“…….”

After listening to my entire story, the Saintess quietly propped her chin. She seemed deep in thought, occasionally tilting her head on her own.

“It doesn’t feel like my story, even though it is about me.”

“Is that so?”

The Saintess looked at my face. Her expression was seriously intense.

“It’s unlike you to be wandering outside so energetically.”

“…….”

That was it.

The Saintess stood up and fed the fish in the aquarium.

Fish that she had carefully collected before the world became like this quickly gathered at their owner's gesture. Red, white, yellow, blue—creatures of various colors swam through the water.

“It’s hard to understand why you would anonymously punish villains, considering how diligent you were to roam around outside. The strategy to elevate oneself to a divine position to instill fear in people is effective, but it comes from a mindset that does not trust others. If you were that diligent, shouldn’t you have declared your existence and your powers to the world and directly organized a government?”

“Hmm. Maybe I wasn’t that diligent?”

“That's what I thought. It's mediocre. You don’t want to become mediocre, so you chose a life of seclusion.”

The Saintess's fingertips gently skimmed the surface of the water.

For the fish, it was the boundary of the world, the surface that constituted the screen of their world, lightly disturbed. The Saintess seemed to enjoy the sensation.

“More than anything, in the 107th cycle, I depicted that the phenomenon of corruption automatically occurs as an awakener’s powers awaken but that's a flawed analysis. There’s clear proof against it.”

“Proof?”

“Mr. Undertaker.”

The Saintess spoke.

“You have regressed for countless ages and continued to develop your powers. If my theory were correct, you should have experienced corruption before anyone else. However, since no such phenomenon has occurred for you, it’s likely that corruption is merely a psychological issue.”

Just a psychological issue.

The Saintess was still very strict with herself.

“But I do understand the meaning of your last words.”

“What do you think it means?”

“That a person kills another person. Even though they are people, they kill. It's always a painful truth. And…”

“And?”

“…….”

The Saintess glanced back slightly.

I blinked. It was as if I was a crab in the aquarium, clicking my claws and blinking my eyes.

Then something truly rare happened.

The Saintess faintly smiled.

“It’s a secret.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 44

The Returnee I

Sinnoa

Among the awakeners, there are many crazies.

I don't know about other places, but the proportion of crazies among the awakeners from the Korean Peninsula is definitely high. Like Dang Seo-rin, who is serious about her witch cosplay, or Cheon Yo-hwa, who calls her guild a girls' high school.

But at least they are manageable because human language still works on them.

Today, I'll talk about one of the most uniquely crazy figures among them—the Sword Marquess of Yuldoguk.

As we've seen so far, the "Wheel Murderer" case somehow wrapped up nicely. However, the fact that the Saintess had become corrupted was a huge shock to me.

It's been a while since I've taken such a mental hit.

To find a comparable case, it would be like when I believed Go Yuri was a "good person" and she hit me with a grand slam to the back of my head.

What this means is...

"It’s the holiday season."

A shout erupted from the other side of Busan Station's waiting room.

"You fucking asshole! What the hell are you talking about?"

"Hey."

With a pop, a sound resembling popcorn exploding rang out.

The man who exited the world faster than anyone else, Seo Gyu, was disqualified.

"Screaaaaam!"

People screamed and ran in every direction, a familiar sight, because of a fairy who didn't understand human emotions.

This marked the disappearance of any reason for the birth of SGnet. In other words, I had given up one of the means to control awakeners, both directly and indirectly.

What's to hide?

I, the Regressor Undertaker, had absolutely no intention of saving the world in this 108th cycle. The fact that Seo Gyu was gone was as good as a sign that I had closed shop.

"Besides, that guy... he's too weak against women."

Seo Gyu had completely fallen for Go Yuri and ended up betraying the Saintess's information.

I could understand that. The mind-control beam that Go Yuri possessed was incredibly strong. I almost fell under hypnosis and nearly ended up in an explicit gore-themed doujinshi.

But last cycle was a different story. Thinking back, it's clear now that Seo Gyu was 100% recruited by the Saintess.

He probably took on the role of cunningly manipulating public opinion on SG Net or fueling the fear of the Wheel Murderer.

There was nothing wrong with him cooperating with the Saintess.

The problem was that he hid it from me!

"Despicable guy. Ungrateful guy. After all I did for him."

I had raised him as if he was my own blood, yet in the end,

relationships with fellow guild members were more important to him than his life-saving mentor and teacher.

By the way, I tend to hold grudges a bit long. How long? Well... about 200 years?

When a regressor harbors resentment, not just in June but all year round, it brings hail, frost, and sandstorms.

Is it unfair that the self of the next cycle has to suffer for the mistakes made by the self of the previous cycle? Life is inherently unfair. That brother needs a good beating for a while.

Is there any hyung like me in this world?

Because Seo Gyu loved Italian-style pizza so much, I even went out of my way in Busan to save a pizza artisan and helped him set up a shop. Such was the depth of a hyung's love.

"Pizza confiscated!"

As punishment for disappointing his brother, Seo Gyu would have to endure a pizza-free life for 200 years. In other words, 10 to 15 cycles.

Anyway, Seo Gyu got what he deserved from the fairy.

What really matters is how to make the most of this holiday.

As I crouched in a corner of the waiting room planning my vacation, Fairy number 264 approached me briskly.

"What are you doing, human?"

"As you see, I'm planning my vacation."

"Vacation?"

"Yes. Since the world is ruined anyway, I might as well enjoy some peaceful and meaningful time. If I’m going to take a vacation, why not choose a course I haven’t experienced before?"

"Wow. You're insane... I learned from my seniors not to even go near crazy people..."

The fairy scampered away.

As usual, I farmed some Silver Bells at the souvenir shop in the waiting room and then sank into contemplation.

Suddenly, a conversation I had with the Saintess in a previous cycle struck me like lightning.

-All awakeners like me!

-No, only 50% of the awakeners like Mr. Undertaker. The strong ones are mostly in that 50%, but there are many among the rest who are eyeing Mr. Undertaker for an opportunity. Like the Sword Marquess of Yuldoguk, for instance.

Her words inadvertently pricked my pride.

I, Undertaker, a humble regressor, take pride in treating people without prejudice and helping them. Haven't I always insisted on using formal language to everyone I meet for the first time, lest my personality become arrogant after such a long life of regression?

If I put my mind to it, I was confident I could make not just 50% but 90%, no, 95% of awakeners like me.

"Alright."

I stood up from my crouched position.

In this cycle, I would win over the heart of the Sword Marquess of Yuldoguk.

That the Sword Marquess was a crazy old man was clear just from his title "Marquess of the Sword".

Those familiar with martial arts fiction would know that "Marquess of the Sword" is a title, but specifically, it's a respectful title used only for female masters, not male.

However, our world's Sword Marquess was a man over 60 years old with a splendidly grown beard.

Doesn't that make you uneasy already?

"I am the supreme ruler!"

And this person used the first-person "I" as "this seat".

Calling himself the Sword Marquess, he carried a sword around, but it was actually a fake sword made of aluminum, stolen from a bankrupt kendo dojo.

I believe it is perfectly explained why I haven't been close with the Sword Marquess for all these cycles. He's a complete mad old man.

"And also, the greatest in ancient and modern times."

Now.

You might think, "Ah, I thought he was just crazy, but if we delve into his background, we might find he's surprisingly normal, right? I know that cliché."

If so, I'm sorry to bring sad news: you definitely have no talent as a fortuneteller.

A true madman is different from those pretending to be mad. Digging into their background is like approaching a radioactive exposure site—the madness level only goes up.

"And finally, I am the Sword Marquess of Yuldoguk!"

"Oh. What is Yuldoguk?"

"Ho, you don't know Yuldoguk? Oh, what a great ignorance. It is a nation established righteously by His Excellency the Archduke, who rose in anger against the tyranny of those British fools."

Upon further investigation, it turned out that the real name of Yuldoguk was "Sirland Duchy," a micronation.

How the Sword Marquess found a fateful intersection between "Sirland" in English and "Yuldoguk" in Korean is something even I, fluent in eight languages, couldn't understand. Even the laborers at the Tower of Babel construction site probably wouldn't know.

By the way, Sirland... no, Yuldoguk wasn't a democratic republic but opted for absolute monarchy. A class system was clearly present. It was a bit outdated compared to the global trend.

Taking a step further, the Yuldoguk government learned its statecraft philosophy from none other than the Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

In ancient times during the Three Kingdoms, there was an emperor named Liu Hong in Han, commonly known as Emperor Ling of Han. This ruler, considered advanced and trendy at the time, had intuitively grasped the principles of capitalism.

- The state is my property. Therefore, official positions are my private property.

- Shouldn't one show sincerity when borrowing someone else's private property?

The emperor firmly rejected the old practice of securing official positions based on blood relations. Instead, he relied on the only faith that existed in the world: money, and appointed officials based on it.

This reformist emperor sold higher positions at higher prices, and to accommodate his cash-strapped subjects, he even allowed them to pay for their positions in installments. Contrary to popular belief, the buds of capitalism bloomed in the East well before they did in the West.

Although Liu Hong's reforms ended in failure, they inspired many revolutionaries afterward.

Even the home of capitalism, Britain, couldn't escape its influence.

At the end of the 20th century, a Briton decided to establish a nation in a remote area, learning the wisdom of state governance

from ancient sages.

- Wouldn’t selling noble titles help the state finances?

It was a reversal of Eastern methods with Western tools, and Western methods with Eastern tools.

This Briton went one step further than his predecessors, opening the gates not just to his compatriots but to people worldwide. The British knew well that money should not have borders.

The power of this open door policy affected even South Korea, far away from Britain. The protagonist of this story, the Sword Marquess, is precisely that individual.

He spent a substantial amount of 250,000 won (about $250), including various options, to purchase a baron’s title in Yuldoguk. It was a triumphant return of a noble rank to a Korean since the fall of the Korean Empire.

The old man proudly held his head high.

"From now on, please address me as Sword Baron."

Liking martial arts, hence Sword. Being a baron, hence Baron.

It was a crazy naming sense, but the tragedy didn’t end there.

While humanity was divided and conflicted over race and nationality, monsters treated all humans equally. When Seoul was wiped out in Korea, East Anglia in England was obliterated.

Naturally, the nearby micronation wasn’t spared either. Yuldoguk, boasting an actual population of four, disappeared, becoming a page in history.

It also holds the record for the fastest destruction of a nation after the Gate disaster.

"How could this be! My homeland has perished!"

The old man swallowed his grief after losing his nation overnight.

If he had collapsed here, he would have been nothing more than third-rate. Righteously, he stood up. A man's tears for his ruined country were enough with just a single drop.

"From now on, I shall carry on the legacy of Yuldoguk!"

The shortest-lived nation experienced an equally brief revival movement.

"However, how could I, unworthy as I am, claim the title of Archduke in place of His Excellency's grace? I will only claim a title less than that of a marquess. From now on, please call me Sword Marquess!"

Indeed.

Jumping from baron directly to marquess, skipping viscount, count and marquess, was unheard of even in Yuldoguk. Because the original Yuldoguk didn't have a marquess rank.

Naturally, the official name of the new Yuldoguk became the Tributary State of Yuldo, the country ruled by a marquis. Of course, the only citizen of this backward nation who claimed such was the Sword Marquess himself.

If you've heard the background of how the Sword Marquess came to be, any sensible person would conclude, "If I get close to this old man, my registered address might be transferred to a mental hospital."

However, surprisingly, the Sword Marquess survived. Even in these chaotic times when the world had ended and monsters ran amok, he firmly preserved himself. Far from being confined to a mental institution, the awakeners couldn't wait to take the Sword Marquess with them.

Could it be that he was a master of the sword as his title suggested?

The answer is NO. The Sword Marquess didn't even know how to use Aura. What good would a fashion swordsman wielding a fake aluminum sword do in a fight? I guarantee that even a primary school student who just received a yellow belt in Haidong Gumdo

would show more mastery than the Sword Marquess.

The Sword Marquess's survival strategy was established in a completely unexpected field.

"Sir, elder."

"……"

"……"

"...Lord Sword Marquess."

"Oh, isn’t it a junior of the martial world? What brings you here?"

"It’s nothing much, just wanted to ask how this spring’s farming is going..."

"Gah! Farming is about care and attention. You should think that I, of course, am taking good care of it instead of coming here to spy!"

"No, it's not spying..."

"Gah! Why is such a young junior so bothersome! Keep bothering me, and I might just cut off the food supply to your guild!"

Behind the loudly shouting Sword Marquess lay a golden wheat field.

The Sword Marquess's ability was [Plant Growth].

Regardless of climate, land, or water quality, he could grow crops anywhere and accelerate their growth rate by three to six times, a ridiculously overpowered SSS-class ability.

This made the Sword Marquess evolve from a "crazy old man" to an "absolutely untouchable and undisturbed old man."

"Do you understand? If I just wish it, all of your folks will starve! Want to taste a real famine?"

"……"

Sword Marquess.

Unfortunately for Korea's awakeners... this crazy old man was the only lifeline in a peninsula where civilization had collapsed.

Footnotes:

Chapter 45

The Returnee II

Sinnoa

Sword Marquess, though mad, possessed remarkable abilities.

To intuitively understand just how remarkable, a bit of explanation is necessary.

This world hates humanity.

Teens, caught in their second year of middle school delusions, often mutter, "It seems the world hates me." As they grow, they gradually learn that, surprisingly (or perhaps not so surprisingly), the world is indifferent to their existence.

Honestly, from the world's perspective, there are other things to worry about. Like turtles that have swallowed plastic or quantum entanglement.

But now, that's no longer the case. Something fundamentally changed with the Gate incident. It just changed.

From that day on, the world decided to dislike humanity a bit more.

The Void.

Otherwise known as the Abyss, or Hell. Previously, the term 'Gate' was used, but increasingly, people began to refer to it as the Void.

-Hey, what's that?

-Huh? What is it?

-That flower. Why does it have teeth?

In the Void, the petals of the Rafflesia sprout shark teeth. Spiders grow thirteen legs. Dragonflies develop six side eyes. Headless

elephants roam around.

If monsters and anomalies are left unchecked, massive genetic mutations occur in the affected land, leading to a rapid increase in deformed creatures.

Thus, the Void's poison.

It instantaneously deforms the civilization and knowledge humanity has painstakingly built up over centuries.

Have you ever seen fields stained blood-red? Rice grains that resemble aphids and flies? Instead of rice grains, lilies bloom. A farmer once dug up his field and found that all the rice plants were interconnected underground like a bamboo forest.

Despite being grown in the same field, with the same species, water, and sunlight, the rice on the left side of the field looked different from that on the right.

Human civilization was established on 'reproducibility'. When humanity realized that spring would come again a year after all the changes, they built a tower of gold. At the sharp top of this gold tower, time finally transformed into history.

Now, the tower has crumbled.

Time flows. It flows unpredictably. Like a desert storm, it covers the once-brilliant surface of the tower with sand.

What is humanity? What are 'we'? Are we the same as that being whose head sprouts flowers and whose tongue grows fish gills?

From those gills, the cries of a newborn can be heard. Eventually, they only communicate with the sound of a child's cry, and we cannot understand what those sounds mean.

Occasionally, time flows quickly near Incheon and slowly near Seoul. Nothing repeats. Nothing is reproduced. It just flows.

"Cities are connected....."

Thus, I, the Saintess, the Nomads, the Samcheon Guild Alliance, have declared war against the Void devouring our world.

"Humanity needs to return to the times when it was overwhelmed by nature."

Isn't that regression? The Nomads shook their heads.

"Like evolution and regression are merely human distinctions, this too is merely an adaptation to the environment..... Giving up the rule of areas for the rule of lines."

From area to line.

From line to area.

That was the motto of the National Road Management Corps.

"Then, we can escape from being isolated by the Void and maintain our community....."

Like a knight fitting a disabled person with a prosthetic, the National Road Management Corps has paved the way for humanity.

At last, isolated points, cities, and people have transformed into stations where they can briefly rest.

-I'm continuing to fix the broken railways of this world one by one.

I was able to keep Dang Seo-rin's last will.

It took many years.

And it will take many more years.

-From history to history, forever.

The National Road Management Corps did not represent Busan. It could not symbolize Seoul. The National Road Management Corps was simply humanity's last cradle, the last unit, and the frontline.

"We can do it. No, we must....."

Every time they set off, the patrol units of the National Road Management Corps could not guarantee their lives.

The patrol unit that left for Gangneung never returned. After two years, all thirteen members of a patrol unit exploring the North returned transformed into sunflowers that walked, their heads turned toward the flags they held when they departed.

Still, we did not hesitate to stand at the forefront.

"Heh. This season will be a good harvest too!"

Sword Marquess was indeed a support unit for this frontline.

"With this much grain, we can surely feed Samhan1 well and have leftovers! Truly, it is the providence of heaven!"

No matter how much we pave the way, people need to eat. Whether it's three meals a day, two meals, or even one, the need to eat is my body's urgent fate.

I did not take this hunger as hardship or sorrow.

Infected with the New Buddha virus, one could escape the fate of hunger at any time. It meant transitioning from being human to becoming a being of the Void. The hunger was tragic, but it was a human tragedy, and still, it was the tragedy of beings born and raised on this land.

However, I did not live to see human horrors as human beauty. We needed to eat.

The chef responsible for the rice power of the Korean Peninsula was none other than Sword Marquess.

"Wouldn't it be alright for me to enjoy a little sightseeing this summer?"

And, as emphasized several times, our chef was crazy.

"Ah, Lord Sword Marquess. Sightseeing?"

"Literally, wandering the martial world. Young warriors of the martial arts community. Don't reveal this anywhere. I have kept it a secret until now, but actually....."

Sword Marquess carefully looked around. The glances of the National Road Management Corps, checking for monsters nearby, could not have been as sharp.

After confirming that no one else was around except me, Sword Marquess whispered in my ear.

"I am the rightful disciple of the 260th leader of the Mount Hua Sect."

"....."

"The essence of the three-thousand-year history of the Mount Hua Sect is fully contained within the martial arts secrets in my possession."

So, this man was claiming to be a marquess in Yuldoguk and a Sword Marquess in the martial world, and, to top it off, he claimed to be the next leader of the Mount Hua Sect.

And he wore an aluminum practice sword at his waist.

By this point, my head was spinning.

"Um... if it's alright to ask, why is the elder who represents the future of the Mount Hua Sect in Korea?"

"Of course, it's to hide from the despicable eyes of the Demonic Cult. As the rightful successor of the Twenty-Four Plum Blossom Sword Technique, it's inevitable that those malicious ones glare at me. Look. Even now, aren't the demons controlled by the Heavenly Demon shaking the world?"

"Good heavens."

"That's right. It's exactly the feeling of wanting to seek a deity! Originally, I was a master who had reached the pinnacle, but during my escape from the Demonic Cult, I suffered serious internal

injuries to my energy centers. However, having recuperated here in the land of Haedong, I must now return to my home mountain and fulfill my duties as a disciple."

"You mean to go to Mount Hua in China right now?"

"Exactly so."

I looked up at the sky and sighed deeply.

"Lord Sword Marquess, are you mad?"

Kim Joo-chul and Kim Si-eun father-and-son's tale hinted briefly that in this era, 'overseas travel' was just a fancier term for 'suicide.'

At my straightforward remark, Sword Marquess merely tilted his head.

"I am perfectly sane."

After all, asking a madman if he’s mad would never yield a meaningful response. Why ask a dolphin if it's a dolphin unless one's eyes are crossed? The truth is evident.

I changed tactics.

"If you're talking about the Twenty-Four Plum Blossom Sword Technique, is it the one where, if perfected, the scent of plum blossoms pervades ten thousand li2 from the sword?"

"Oh, it seems the young martial artist has also heard of its great reputation. That's correct."

"Does the Mount Hua you know of bloom with many plum blossoms?"

"Indeed it does."

"...That's a setting made up in Korea."

My knowledge of martial arts was limited to a few novels I read as a child. But even I knew this:

Mount Hua was not particularly famous for plum blossoms.

One could guess as much from the photos alone. Mount Hua was a mountain as bare as its leaves, with rocks starkly exposed, presenting many challenges for plum blossoms to flourish luxuriantly.

The same goes for the scent. Evolving an olfactory system that interprets the smell of rocks as plum blossoms was genetically impossible.

What am I saying?

The self-proclaimed Sword Marquess and prospective 261st Sect Leader of the Mount Hua Sect, holder of a practice sword, a native Korean from Ulleungdo, and a non-speaker of Chinese, was spouting nonsense. This old man was a liar through and through.

"Aaaargh!"

The Sword Marquess roared like a lion.

"How dare a junior mock me! The scent of plum blossoms I once encountered while learning from my master still lingers in my nose! If you intend to insult my master and me, I will not sit idly by!"

"Then why not demonstrate the Plum Blossom Sword Technique yourself, if you are its inheritor?"

"Had I not been attacked by the beasts of the Demonic Cult and my energy centers remained intact, I would demonstrate it right away."

"I'm going mad."

Hey, you're supposed to be a 60-year-old man, but you're younger than me. Plus, back when civilization was intact, 60 wasn't even considered old.

How old am I this year... no, let's drop this strategy.

Even if I win the battle, I feel like I'd lose the war.

Anyway, Sword Marquess was a type of person I couldn't handle.

Fortunately, we had the 'ultimate weapon for dealing with elders.'

"Noh Do-hwa. Help."

"A 60-year-old grandpa? Easy..."

The most beloved woman among the elderly in the Korean Peninsula, the greatest protective gear knight and head of the National Road Management Corps, Noh Do-hwa, smirked mischievously.

"Sir, are you feeling good...?"

"Ah, ah, my whole body feels relaxed."

Noh Do-hwa performed a shoulder massage on Sword Marquess. Her skills were so excellent that one could believe she had been a masseuse rather than a public servant, and Sword Marquess's expression melted.

"Plum blossoms bloom on mountain peaks and even on the streets. Then, wouldn't they bloom in the heart of a person just the same? Since the tradition of the Mount Hua Sect has passed to you, sir, what does it matter whether this place is Haedong or Chang'an...?"

"Uuum, but my sworn brothers..."

"No, no... Your master has already passed away, hasn't he? Then, you are the eldest in the Mount Hua Sect, and there's a tradition of juniors visiting their seniors, not the other way around. They should come to you, why should you move...?"

"Oh? That is indeed a wise saying."

"If you entrust me with a letter, I'll send it to China on your behalf. If they understand their duty, they should rightly come here to see you..."

"Oho! The advice of the head of the post station is absolutely right!"

"Then I'll also look forward to the autumn harvest..."

"Hmm! Leave it to me!"

The National Road Management Corps was a post station, and there the head was the postmaster.

After displaying her miraculous skills in hand and tongue, Noh Do-hwa turned to me and smirked.

"That's why I prefer the elderly to the young... they understand, you know...?"

I won't nitpick over her argument.

But even with Noh Do-hwa's full-hearted play, there was a limit. Sword Marquess was a madman, and madness was incurable.

"I must visit Mount Hua at least once before I die."

With the change of seasons and each harvest, Sword Marquess kept murmuring like someone afflicted with nostalgia.

"I must see it before I die..."

Since the establishment of the National Road Management Corps, Sword Marquess repeated this mantra through the 54th, 55th, 56th, and 57th cycles.

Time passed.

Finally, the 108th cycle.

During the holiday season, I visited Sword Marquess. In the very early part of his first year, Sword Marquess was still living in his hometown, Ulleungdo (yes, he had no reason to be nostalgic).

"Lord Sword Marquess."

"Hmm?"

An old man watering the flowers in the front yard of a humble house turned to look at me. Water trickled from his watering can.

"Who might you be, young one?"

"I am a knight bestowed with a title from Yuldoguk."

"What?"

A normal person would have called the police or at least swung a broom if a foreigner suddenly walked into their front yard claiming a title from a micronation.

"This one is my compatriot! Welcome!"

But, true to his nature, Sword Marquess was extraordinary. I had suspected he had been playing nobility since coming to Ulleungdo, but it seems he had lost his mind even before that.

"But your honorifics are strange. I am not Sword Marquess but Sword Man. Why have you come seeking me?"

I made the saddest face possible. Method acting wasn't particularly hard. It was easy to recall the scene when Dang Seo-rin died.

"Sadly, I must report that Yuldoguk has fallen."

"What?"

"The wicked reach of the Demonic Cult has extended even across the sea to Yeong-gil-ri. Not only Yuldoguk but also the eastern region of Yeong-gil-ri has been devastated, and the Archduke himself did not escape harm."

"No...! How could such a thing happen...!"

"Lord Sword Marquess."

Thud. I knelt in the courtyard. Then, with a solemnity unmatched in the world, I cried out.

"Though the court of Yuldoguk has fallen, how could we accept that the people should bear the grief of a ruined nation? Is it not loyalty to continue the nation with the remaining people?"

"……!"

"As you are now the only remaining noble of Yuldoguk, it is only fitting that you establish a new court on this land. But, as a person, I cannot forget the grace of the Archduke; please ascend to the title of duke and revive Duke's Nation!"

Incidentally, Sword Marquess's house was humble.

And a humble house was in a humble neighborhood.

And a feature of a humble neighborhood is that it's quite easy to peek over the fence when something unusual is happening next door. All the neighbors were looking this way.

Their gaze, in a nutshell, was like, uh, staring at a dick.

"Heaven has not yet abandoned me!"

Sword Marquess paid no mind to the neighbors' stares.

"Get up! How well you've understood my will!"

"I apologize."

"You, you are indeed like my eldest son!"

Basically, that meant best friends.

The 108th cycle.

That day, I became best friends with the prospective Sect Leader of the Mount Hua Sect.

Footnotes:

1 - Samhan, or Three Han, is the collective name of the Byeonhan, Jinhan, and Mahan confederacies that emerged in the first century BC during the Proto–Three Kingdoms of Korea, or Samhan, period. Located in the central and southern regions of the Korean

Peninsula, the Samhan confederacies eventually merged and developed into the Baekje, Gaya, and Silla kingdoms. The name "Samhan" also refers to the Three Kingdoms of Korea.

2 - Li (Chinese: 里, lǐ, or 市里, shìlǐ), also known as the Chinese mile, is a traditional Chinese unit of distance. The li has varied considerably over time but was usually about one third of an English mile and now has a standardized length of a half-kilometer (500 meters or 1,640 feet or 0.311 miles).

Chapter 46

The Returnee III

Sinnoa

David Hume once said that true friendship is not about the age of the individuals, but about the free exchange of souls.

From a young friend, one learns vitality, and from an old friend, wisdom. Immanuel Kant stated that it's not right to choose friends based on their age.

The most important thing to note here is that they never actually made these quotes.

But the nuance is conveyed, isn't it? Perhaps that's enough?

I too followed the ‘nuance’ in my friendship with Sword Marquess.

“Undertaker brother!”

“Sword Marquess elder!”

That day, we emptied four bottles of makgeolli and became sworn brothers.

It was a connection so profound that even if the three brothers of the Yu Family had witnessed it, they would have been engulfed in jealousy and gone into fits of 'Peach Chewing Anger' 500 times.

What am I talking about? Just… understand it through the nuance.

Our ‘Makgeolli Pact’ did not end as merely a night's amusement.

“Elder brother, I have something to confess.”

“Hmm…?”

The next morning, I deeply bowed to Sword Marquess, who had

checked the temperature of the grand hall with his own cheek, being utterly drunk.

“Confess? Uh... What are you talking about?”

“You revealed to me last night that you were a disciple directly taught by the leader of the Mount Hua Sect.”

In truth, he had not.

However, Sword Marquess nodded as if it were the most natural thing.

“Ah, right.”

“How could someone destined to be the leader of Mount Hua Sect merely seclude himself forever in a humble thatched cottage? You must return to Mount Hua, restore the pillars of the sect, though you seek tranquility, the world is in turmoil.”

“What?”

Sword Marquess opened his mouth wide. His surprise was palpable.

For a while, Sword Marquess gave his stomach some fresh morning air in the front yard. More precisely, he let the dawn taste his stomach's air.

I could have described this scene in detail, but for the readers' sake, I will spare any visual or auditory imagery. Such is my boundless goodwill towards you.

“Huuuu.”

The ordeal was skipped over, and only the result remained. Sword Marquess, having downed water from a plastic bucket (yes, the one usually hanging by the spring), looked at me seriously.

“Undertaker brother.”

He seemed to be trying to emit a profound inner energy. In my personal opinion, it was more akin to the smell of his breath than

his energy.

“Are you saying you will accompany me back to Mount Hua?”

“Exactly.”

“While I am deeply grateful for that sentiment, the martial world is now a playground for the wicked Demonic Cult. The path of righteousness has been severed, and justice has collapsed. Villainy adorns itself with the pretense of chivalry. How can you guarantee our safe passage?”

“It is merely through benevolence that we will navigate this troubled world.”

“…!”

Do you understand what I'm saying? I don't. But clearly, the nuance was there, and Sword Marquess seemed to grasp everything by just that.

He slapped his knee.

“Indeed! If it is a task that I cannot accomplish alone, then it shall be done with a brother! Having secluded myself for so long, I had forgotten even this simple truth!”

“Will you trust this brother?”

“Returning to Mount Hua has been my lifelong dream. Friendships that discuss benefits are precarious, but those that discuss wishes are steadfast. I trust only in you, brother.”

What followed was a blur of action.

We left the island immediately. Sword Marquess had lived on Ulleungdo his entire life, but the belongings he had prepared were minimal. We were ready to set off within 40 minutes of deciding to leave.

What stood out about Sword Marquess’s attire was a pouch tied around his waist.

“Elder brother, what is that?”

Sword Marquess stroked his beard magnanimously.

“The essence of the Mount Hua Sect.”

It was the usual nonsense.

I shrugged and stepped onto the deck of the boat.

“Uweeek-”

Oh, and for your information, on the boat back to the mainland, Sword Marquess managed to share the aroma of his stomach with the waters of the East Sea.

At the same time, heaven and the sea were colored in his hue, such was indeed the grace of a true master.

And he wasn't even from Ulleungdo, was he? Even though he had drunk plenty of makgeolli, how could he suffer from seasickness? Such a disgrace for an islander.

“Uweeek…….”

From Ulleungdo to Gangneung, from Incheon to Shanghai, everywhere we went by boat, Sword Marquess showcased a close bond with the ship's rail. Thanks to that, I had become quite skilled in patting Sword Marquess's back like a professional masseuse.

Sword Marquess awkwardly excused himself.

“When my energy center is disturbed, my stomach and duodenum suffer as well. Ahaha. It's embarrassing, I wasn't like this before.”

Was the energy center connected to the stomach? Astonishing anatomical knowledge, as profound as researching what material makes up a unicorn's horn.

Just so you know, managing to find a boat to Shanghai was a miracle and an achievement of mine.

As you are well aware, when the Gate incident occurred (now that everyone is familiar with the terms, 'When the Void arrived' or 'When the Void manifested' would also be appropriate), everything south of the Han River in Seoul was blown away. Incheon was no exception.

There were as many people escaping by sea as there were fleeing by land. If it weren't for my extensive experience traveling abroad, I wouldn't have been able to find a captain in the chaotic port of Incheon.

"Oh."

After enduring countless hardships, dodging typhoons, and surviving complete chaos, we finally arrived in China.

Sword Marquess's eyes reddened.

"This is… the Central Plains……! Look! I have returned in triumph!"

It sounded as if the journey was over.

But I am the Infinite Regressor. I usually operate domestically, but having once called myself an internationalist, I had traveled to China numerous times. Even limited to Beijing, I had been there enough to get sick of it.

So I knew very well that the real hardship was just beginning.

Have you ever read Greek or Norse mythology?

You might have found yourself lamenting while exploring the myths of other nations, wondering, 'Why don't we have a well-structured mythology?'

I could go on at length about this, but that's not my intention right now.

Instead, what I really want to tell you is this:

'It’s damn lucky we don’t have one.'

I bring up myths for a reason.

Since the arrival of the Void, characters from those myths began stepping into reality.

They didn’t just pop up as they were described in the myths. They were updated to be less intellectual, more Lovecraftian, and thus even more misanthropic.

Now you might guess why I considered India and Japan as the top dangerous spots for overseas travel.

It’s not like India and Japan are the only Asian countries with a rich repository of mythological beings. Thailand and others also boast a significant cache of spirits, holding their own in terms of ghostly prestige.

But my point is, with Japan having invited eight million gods to descend upon them, solving their low birth rate and aging population issues overnight, they’re in a better situation than most.

Places like India and Nepal, steeped in Hindu faith, let's just leave those out of this discussion for now.

Have you ever seen the Ganges and the Himalayas dyed red? It's quite a spectacle, but I’d rather not see it again.

That's what the end of the world looks like.

As the world together faces damnation, China wasn't going to be left out. They too were shouting, 'Me too! I want to play too!' boasting a formidable list of supernatural beings.

If you've been to a high-end Italian restaurant, you know they have a dazzling wine list. Similarly, China boasts menus like the Shan Hai Jing, the Shi Yi Ji, the Bo Wu Zhi, and the Shen Yi Jing.

It was indeed a transitional period for martial arts novels, moving from traditional martial arts to xianxia, and from xianxia to xuanhuan. Monsters and spirits that seemed out of place in

traditional martial arts stories were embraced in xuanhuan as being youthful and trendy.

Obviously, being the cradle of martial arts, China was at the forefront of these trends.

Therefore, as the leader of this trip, I made a very rational decision.

“Let’s not go straight to Mount Hua. Let’s stop by Chang’an first.”

“Hm? Why? Wouldn’t that just be taking a detour?”

“There are extremely tricky monsters nearby. We need to move around them.”

Avoidance. Pure and simple.

If you asked me to name the most difficult beings to deal with in China, I'd personally point out two.

'Chaos' and 'Greed.'

To my knowledge, tens of thousands of awakeners in China were destroyed by just these two creatures. And by tens of thousands, I mean closer to 100,000 than 20,000. Considering the civilian casualties, it was an uncountable number.

Even as the genre of the world shifted to xuanhuan, no human had yet achieved the realm of the immortals, a fitting testament to the tragedy that ensues.

“If we were fully prepared, maybe, but right now, taking them on is not a good idea.”

“Hmm. If you say so, brother…”

When venturing into unfamiliar genres, it's wise to maintain proper decorum and distance. My genre, after all, was firmly contemporary fantasy.

I meticulously planned our travel route to avoid Chaos and Greed.

Instead, we frequently encountered other lesser demons, but I handled them all single-handedly on my end.

Sword Marquess watched my swordplay from behind, occasionally letting out exclamations of admiration.

“Your prowess is truly amazing! Equal to or perhaps even greater than me at my peak!”

“……”

Something deep within me stirred like the lava of Mount Hua, but I held it back.

“…Thank you. I still have much to learn. Please continue to guide me, elder brother.”

It's wise to assign specific roles during a trip. You handle the hotels, I’ll find the restaurants, and so on.

If roles are not well distributed in any travel, it quickly becomes tiresome. Anyone who has been on a long journey with family or a partner will immediately understand.

I, Undertaker, might not have shown it, but I prided myself on being a master of travelling. Naturally, I understood the importance of dividing responsibilities.

Thus, during our two-month journey, my responsibilities were as follows:

Planning travel routes, covering travel expenses, procuring food, scouting lodging, hiring locals, interpreting Chinese (the next Sect Leader of Mount Hua did not speak Chinese), carrying luggage, standing guard, and acting as bodyguard.

And what did Sword Marquess handle? Well… drinking?

Anyway. Among my roles, the most crucial was interpreting Chinese.

This was my first time visiting Mount Hua, and we inevitably relied

on local guidance, especially since the main roads had been devoured by Chaos and Greed.

Whenever we passed through rural roads, locals looked at us curiously.

“A Korean? What brings a Korean here?”

“We’re on our way to Mount Hua.”

“Oh?”

“This gentleman here is my grandfather. He insists on seeing Mount Hua with his own eyes before he passes away. I’m an awakener who speaks Chinese, so I decided to fulfill his last wish by traveling here.”

“Ah!”

Initially skeptical, the locals warmed up after hearing my explanation.

Incidentally, throughout the journey, Sword Marquess was carried on my back. It was unavoidable. If I had asked him to walk on his own, the trip would have taken 24 times longer. I’m not exaggerating.

“What a rare filial grandson, no, a filial great-grandson!”

“It's nothing. I lost my parents when I was young, and he raised me alone. I believe it's only right to repay him.”

“In such a chaotic world, to think such people still exist! Well, I don’t have much, but please take some peanuts. Our village peanuts are really tasty.”

Indeed, filial piety is a magic pass that works anywhere in East Asia.

Despite their humble circumstances, local people in the countryside tried to offer me whatever they could. Village elders even tried to fill up buckets with peanuts, which I had to politely refuse. To show

my gratitude, I cleared the nearby monsters like cutting weeds—true win-win.

Sword Marquess, still on my back, was amazed.

“I’ve heard the countryside has become stingy these days, but that’s all nonsense. Isn’t this kindness itself?”

“Well, if I had said you were the Sect Leader of Mount Hua and I was carrying you around, 99% of this kindness would have disappeared.”

“Hm? Brother, what did you just say?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

Day 62 of our trip in China.

After countless twists and turns, including barely escaping a typhoon, we finally arrived at Mount Hua.

“Ah, finally… Mount Hua…!”

The designated 261st Sect Leader of Mount Hua exclaimed as if he were seeing it for the first time.

Of course, I didn’t point that out. I was a respectful younger brother, merely posing a question.

“It was indeed a tough journey. I too am eager to see the grandeur of the sect where you trained. Where is the sect building?”

“Unfortunately, the main hall was destroyed 45 years ago by an attack from the Heavenly Demon.”

‘So there’s no sect building, right? You were just making it up?’ I could read between the lines, but the old man skillfully dodged the question. Clearly, a lifetime dedicated to playing a martial artist wasn’t thwarted by such trivial interrogation.

“The entire brotherhood was slaughtered, and I had no choice but to flee. Now, it’s hard to even find the ruins.”

“So you don’t know where it is?”

“The mountain scenery is truly serene, a real hidden gem.”

My inquiry didn’t even scratch the surface of the Sword Marquess’s mental fortitude.

I shook my head and continued hiking.

Great mountains never flaunt their landscapes from the start but keep them hidden. Mount Hua, a renowned mountain, revealed its true beauty only when one ventured into its layers. With each step, it felt as if a folding screen was unfolding, expanding the scene with each pace.

I looked around the ridge.

“People have left, but the buildings are relatively intact.”

Ah, and by buildings, I obviously didn’t mean those of the Mount Hua Sect. I was referring to various facilities such as rest areas, stairs, snack bars, etc.

Before the Void arrived, these places were probably bustling with tourists. The cable car station looked clean and seemed like the perfect base camp.

I checked the warehouse just in case, but as expected, no food was left.

Well, being a living, breathing biofarm meant there was no need to worry about food during this trip.

“Elder brother, I will set up our base here.”

“As you wish, brother.”

I set down my backpack and also set down Sword Marquess (he had been using my back delivery service even while hiking).

Sword Marquess lay down on the floor of the rest area as if he had finally come alive.

“Ah, my old bones. After decades, coming back here, it seems I can't even walk around anymore.”

Anyone would think he had climbed the mountain himself.

I took out bottled water, a burner, and ramen from my backpack and started cooking.

Just the single line of description about my actions here should give you an idea of how much I suffered during this trip. Yes, I carried Sword Marquess on my back while hugging a meter-tall backpack across the Chinese continent.

“Elder brother, the ramen is ready.”

“Hmm.”

The old man, who had been sprawled out on the floor, got up like a ghost and took the chopsticks.

After slurping down the ramen, Sword Marquess looked up at the ceiling of the rest area.

“Ah. As I've always said, the ramen you cook is truly a delicacy. I've met countless ramen masters in my life, but none can compare to you, brother.”

“You flatter me.”

“No, I'm serious. How do you bring out such a unique taste?”

Well, if you've been cooking ramen for over a hundred years, anyone would reach this level.

In fact, during the 45th cycle, I even became a chef. While I may not be the world's greatest chef, I was certainly the best at cooking with ingredients from the Void. Such is the seasoning of an Infinite Regressor.

“……”

Truly a useless skill.

“Burp. Thank you for the meal.”

I shifted my thoughts. Anyway, what mattered now was not my ramen cooking skills, but how Sword Marquess would react from this point forward.

Throughout our journey, Sword Marquess had always murmured about how he had no other wish but to visit Mount Hua. In the past cycles, he always longed for Mount Hua.

A wish consistently held across time signifies the intensity of one’s heart. It represents conviction.

As a regressor, I find few things as interesting as the human heart.

‘And I have fulfilled his lifelong wish.’

Now that his wish was granted, only curiosity remained.

A regressor’s curiosity, trivial and personal, yet of utmost importance in this world.

‘What will Sword Marquess do now?’

Will he say it’s time to return to the Korean peninsula now that his bucket list is complete? Or will he try to realize his delusion by building the Mount Hua Sect anew? Which will it be?

I quietly observed Sword Marquess. After patting his full belly, he stood up and stretched.

“Now that I’m full, it’s time to get to work.”

Let me mention in advance that all my predictions were wrong.

Footnotes:

Chapter 47

The Returnee IV

Sinnoa

"Work? What are you talking about?"

"Hehe. I have plans of my own. Just watch, brother."

Sword Marquess then suddenly walked out of the rest area.

As for me, Undertaker, had I been one to just sit idly by when told to stay put, I would have given up on being a regressor long ago. Naturally, I followed Sword Marquess. The old man glanced back at me once but didn't try to stop me.

Even though the Sword Marquess had been terrible with directions before we reached Mount Hua, it was as if a navigation system had been installed and updated in his brain; he expertly navigated the mountain trails.

Just when I thought I should ask where exactly we were going, Sword Marquess squatted down.

"……?"

At first, I thought he was just tired from the climb and was taking a rest. But I was mistaken.

Sword Marquess was pulling something out of his pocket. As I approached and peered over, I saw that he had taken seeds from his pocket—a bag of seeds he must have treasured since leaving Ulleungdo.

He began placing the seeds into the soil within the crevices of the rocks.

"……?"

A question mark popped into my head. What exactly was he doing?

"Elder brother. What are you doing right now? Please explain this to me."

"Hehe. Reconstruction."

"Reconstruction?"

"Or restoration, if you want to add a poetic flavor, you could even call it regression."

Reconstruction. Restoration. Regression.

These were truly enigmatic words strung together.

But to my questions, Sword Marquess just chuckled and stroked his beard, not giving a clear answer. Instead of calming down, his response only fueled my curiosity, and I followed him relentlessly.

But following him felt fruitless as he continued the same actions repeatedly. He climbed the mountain trails, planted seeds, covered the sparse soil over the rocks, and gently patted down the small mounds of earth with his wrinkled palms.

The next day, and the day after that, he continued without end.

Really, what was he doing?

‘He can walk well now!’

That was what baffled me the most. He had relied on my back while crossing the Central Plains, but now that we were at Mount Hua, he suddenly seemed full of energy and climbed the mountain too well. Had this old man been pretending to be weak all this time?

‘Could he have been deceiving me…?’

It was not easy to lead an old body up and down a rocky mountain. Yet, Sword Marquess was up from dawn to dusk, walking nonstop.

He didn’t even complain of muscle pain. As if the air of Mount Hua were gasoline for him, Sword Marquess moved around vigorously.

Curious, I even tried sitting cross-legged and practicing something akin to internal energy meditation, but whether it was the air of Gangnam or Mount Hua, my scientific experiments concluded neither contained any mystical ether.

-Roar!

"Ah, brother! Help me! A wicked demon from the Demonic Cult is trying to capture the sect leader of Mount Hua!"

And it certainly didn’t look like ‘weak cosplay’ from any angle. Sword Marquess was truly, utterly frail. He couldn’t even fend off a monster the size of a boar and always ended up running to me.

Like someone who had a strength stat of 99 in stamina but only 10 in combat, Sword Marquess’s capabilities were extremely unbalanced.

“It’s really strange…”

In the end, I had no choice but to continue following Sword Marquess and acting as his bodyguard.

After a while, I grew so tired of this routine that I simply eliminated all the monsters around Mount Hua.

I also went around the areas of Chang'an and Guanzhong, which is modern-day Shaanxi, hunting down other creatures. Thankfully, the locals were grateful and gave us plenty of food and clothes.

One week, two weeks, three weeks.

It was around the time when I began to be known among the people of Guanzhong as the “Taoist of Mount Hua,” almost like a black comedy.

At each spot where Sword Marquess had planted seeds, sprouts began to emerge. Their growth rate was notably fast. It was clear that the ability that made Sword Marquess a grade-S awakened

being, known as [Plant Growth], was at work.

“What kind of sprout is this?”

I muttered to myself since asking Sword Marquess would yield no proper answer.

It was clear—they weren’t just any grass or flowers but ‘trees.’ However, my encyclopedic knowledge stopped there.

Even with my experience as a regressor, which meant I could recognize most plants, I wasn’t knowledgeable enough in botany to identify the species just from these small saplings.

"Hey. What exactly are you?"

The sprouts, of course, offered no answer.

As late summer passed.

Sword Marquess’s peculiar activities continued into early autumn and winter.

White snow settled on the ink-colored rocks of Mount Hua. In this ruined world, winter seemed to serve as a funeral rite for all life. As an undertaker ages, so does winter silently conduct the world’s funerals.

Winter’s touch was cold yet gentle. Life and civilization quietly bowed under its gaze. Rumors spread like snowflakes that a million civilians were buried under snow in Guanzhong within just a fortnight.

My range for hunting creatures gradually expanded. Not just in Shaanxi, but also to Henan.

‘Tutorial dungeons’ weren’t just a phenomenon on the Korean Peninsula but occurred worldwide. Just my luck that an epic dungeon appeared in Yongjing in Henan.

Here, pseudo-sectarian terrorists from Taoist groups were also involved, making it feel like the end of an era.

What choice did I have? I had to help.

…Surely when I started the 108th cycle, this cycle was supposed to be a vacation. Somehow, even on vacation, I ended up working. Is this what they call being a workaholic?

To make an excuse, I had business in Henan anyway. There was an awakener who ran a guild called ‘Baekwha’ back on the Korean Peninsula, and their family originated from this area.

Thanks to that, I managed to gather some good information about them. I’ll talk about that in a later episode.

Anyway.

Spring.

While all life bowed under winter’s gaze, only the sprouts cared for by Sword Marquess stood boldly upright. The lives touched by his hands knew neither the season nor the climate; they grew even in adversity.

When the snow ceased, the small saplings that had once been tiny seeds had grown to my waist height. The trees bid farewell to winter a bit earlier than the rest of the world and greeted spring a bit sooner.

Their etiquette towards the seasons was to bloom in red, to dye the world crimson.

“Ah.”

Only upon seeing this red did I realize the name of these plants.

Plum blossoms.

“…….”

The old man had been planting plum blossoms on Mount Hua.

Residual snow still whispered, and Mount Hua’s rocks were white.

The surface of the rocks, like white plates, neatly divided themselves half in red and half in pink as the plum blossoms modestly plated themselves.

This giant mountain served as a dish for a colorful, red feast prepared by a single shabby old man.

“It’s time to start grafting.”

The shadow of the old man delved into the mountain’s shadow. With each step he delved deeper, the snowy mountain bled red.

Familiar with his movements, the old man broke off twigs from the plum trees. Then again, he planted them among the rocks, in the rugged depths of the valley, in the scarce soil. Amidst the harsh rocks, the plum blossoms spread like moss, but red moss.

“…….”

After that, I limited my outings and spent more time with Sword Marquess.

The terrain of Mount Hua was rugged. Even though his physical strength seemed to have become boundless after arriving here, it was still difficult for the frail legs of the old man to cross the gaps and voids of Mount Hua. I willingly lent my back to Sword Marquess.

Crossing from cliff to cliff, Sword Marquess planted trees.

In the first spring, plum blossoms bloomed near the rest area.

The following year, red blossoms dyed the western peak of Mount Hua.

The giant was massive. The time it took for him to die, and thus the time it took for his blood to fully blossom, was endlessly slow compared to a human life.

Sword Marquess regulated the giant’s time. He dictated not only his death but also the manner of his dying. Sword Marquess did not permit even nature’s law of living in spring and dying in winter.

The blood shed by the giant flowed over three years, passing Jinshaiguan to the northern peak. His wounds bled for four years toward the central peak and then surged to the eastern peak the following year. All the directions of death and life were determined by Sword Marquess's footsteps and handprints.

Our 6th year on the mountain.

"……."

I stood on the roof of a pavilion on the southern peak of Mount Hua, looking down.

The heavens and earth were filled with plum blossoms.

Mount Hua had become a mountain of flowers.

Red and white flowers shyly intertwined down every sliding mountain ridge. The dark trunks of the plum trees languidly rested on the stones. The giant finally held its breath, and in front of its majestic blood-red death, people could only hold theirs.

Thus, without any metaphor, without any interpretation or explanation.

Plum blossoms bloomed on Mount Hua.

"It is done."

A single human had turned a proposition into truth.

To make a proposition bloom, it took six years of an old man's life and several hundred years of a regressor's.

And that proposition was beautiful.

"It is now done."

It was a foggy day.

When fog descended on Mount Hua, the rocks vanished from sight. The fog lived and moved. Only the bright red flowers barely

managed to poke their heads above that opaque surface.

I too woke up and lifted my head.

The rest area where I had mostly eaten and slept over the past six years.

The Sword Marquess was not there.

“Elder brother?”

When no one responded to the call of 'brother,' I felt a premonition. I didn’t even wash my face; I immediately got up and followed the traces of Sword Marquess.

The old man was far away, atop the southern peak, beyond a sea of fog.

And then I witnessed something unbelievable. At first, I thought Sword Marquess was rowing on the rocks because the thick fog spread out beneath his feet made it seem so.

But it was impossible for a man to row on a mountain. Looking closer, I saw that what Sword Marquess was stirring was not an oar but a sword—a wooden practice sword.

The old man was dancing a sword dance.

“…….”

It was a sword dance because of the dance-like movements with the sword, and also a sword mist because the mountain’s fog twisted and whirled with every movement of the sword. The dull blade of the practice sword, like the old man’s wrinkled hands once dyed the giant red, seemed to control all the mountain’s fog.

The old man whirled the world’s fog as if it were his own sleeve.

In that moment, I knew I would never forget this scene.

“…….”

Rustle.

Somewhere, the sound of snow sliding down was faintly heard.

Was it the Sword Marquess stepping on the snow? Maybe. The whole world was wrapped in fog, making it hard to see ahead. Only the sounds and smells distinctly touched the skin.

In the fog, the flowers chattered, and this chattering breathlessly exhaled the scent of plum blossoms into the sky. Or, perhaps, just maybe, the scent of plum blossoms spread from the tip of the old man's sword.

The wind blew. Vast waves of fog enveloped the peak entirely.

"Elder brother?"

Slower than the flow of the tide, the fog rolled in and out.

The white rocks and red plum blossoms revealed their forms again.

But the Sword Marquess was nowhere to be seen.

"Elder brother!"

No answer came back.

Only the echo of 'brother - brother - brother' resounded, soon buried by the chatter of the plum blossoms.

"……."

Suddenly, the world became still.

From the swept-away Mount Hua, only the scent of plum blossoms flowed and spread far into the distance.

Should I call this an epilogue?

There remains one somewhat strange story.

After Sword Marquess disappeared, I naturally set out to look for

him. However, I ultimately failed to find him.

If he had fallen and died somewhere in the mountains, there should have been a body, or at least some trace of it. Even if wild animals had scavenged it, there should have been some remains, but no matter how much I searched Mount Hua, no trace of Sword Marquess was found.

An utterly absurd disappearance.

‘...Could he really have ascended to immortality?’

For a moment, I even entertained such a suspicion.

But it was impossible. Sword Marquess was just an old man who had never learned any martial arts. If he had truly reached a transcendent state as he claimed, I would have recognized it. Hadn’t I carried him on my back for over 60 days during our time together, not to mention the six years we spent together?

Later, when I returned to the Korean Peninsula, I even obtained documents to confirm it. Sword Marquess was definitively, undoubtedly born in Ulleungdo, Korea.

People from the same neighborhood as Sword Marquess didn’t have very detailed memories of him.

“Oh, that old man?”

“I've seen him occasionally. What? He was in our neighborhood decades ago? I don’t remember that far back...”

“He seemed to come and go, appeared and disappeared, you know?”

In any case, Sword Marquess was born in Ulleungdo. Various certificates and records proved this.

If Sword Marquess really had been the next sect leader of the Mount Hua Sect and had finally become an immortal and ascended, then—there would be too much to explain.

First, he would have had to travel to China from Ulleungdo no later than when he was 15 years old. Then, during his childhood, he would have become a direct disciple of the sect leader of Mount Hua.

Sword Marquess was over sixty-five at the time of his disappearance. He had testified before we crossed over to China that Mount Hua Sect was attacked by the Heavenly Demon 45 years ago.

At the time of the Demonic Cult's attack on Mount Hua Sect, Sword Marquess had to have been maintaining his status as a direct disciple of the sect leader. So, by no later than 15 years of age, he must have been receiving the expectations of the sect's disciples as the next sect leader... Was that even possible?

What percentage of probability would one have to defy for such a miracle to occur?

Why would a young Korean child born on Ulleungdo end up at Mount Hua Sect in China in the first place?

I had never heard of Mount Hua Sect, a staple in martial arts novels, actually existing in reality during my time as a regressor. Let alone the Heavenly Demon? The Demonic Cult?

It was an absurd hypothesis. There was no need to consider it; it was merely a ludicrous tale. I decided to discard the theory of 'Sword Marquess = Mount Hua Sect Leader' under a very rational judgment.

However, later on, past the 200th cycle, a very strange incident occurred.

"Sir."

"Hmm?"

"I'm sorry to ask, but could you spare some food?"

At this time, I was walking through Incheon's Chinatown with the Sword Marquess.

The person who called us ‘sir’ and asked if we had any food was Chinese. He probably mistook us for fellow Chinese because of Sword Marquess’s long white beard.

“Ah-”

As revealed during our travels in the 108th cycle, I was the only one among us who spoke Chinese. I thought about how to answer without embarrassing the other party, hoping to respond in Chinese before the old man next to me could create an awkward situation.

And then it happened.

“Of course.”

Before I could even open my mouth, fluent Chinese came from beside me.

Shocked, I quickly turned my head. There was the Sword Marquess, naturally speaking Chinese, responding to the young man who had approached us.

“I don't have much, but how could I not fulfill a simple request from a passerby?”

“You mean ‘sect leader’?”

“I just happened to be buying dumplings over there. It's not much, but take this and quench your thirst.”

“Ah... Thank you, sir! I will never forget this kindness!”

“…….”

My mouth hung open, refusing to close.

The astonishment continued until the Chinese young man who had taken the vegetable dumplings from Sword Marquess disappeared from sight. I barely managed to collect myself and grabbed Sword Marquess’s slender shoulder.

“Wait a minute, Sword Marquess. Just a moment.”

“Hmm?”

“Sword Marquess, did you know how to speak Chinese?”

Sword Marquess blinked.

“Chinese? What are you talking about?”

“What? Didn’t you just speak Chinese! With that young man earlier!”

“I don't understand what you mean.”

Sword Marquess blinked in genuine confusion, as if he truly didn’t understand.

“Why are you acting like this all of a sudden, Undertaker? I didn't say anything. I just handed him the dumplings.”

“No. Wow. No.”

As if I, Undertaker, would fall for such a trick.

I immediately dragged Sword Marquess around Chinatown, trying to find the young man we had just seen or to strike up a conversation with other Chinese people, but it was all in vain.

Sword Marquess seemed genuinely unable to understand Chinese, complaining loudly.

“Ah! To think that a young martial brother would oppress me like this! There is no nationality in chivalry. Even if my language skills are lacking, my level is higher than anyone else’s!”

“…….”

In the end, not a single word of Chinese came from Sword Marquess’s mouth. He wasn’t lying.

Really, wasn’t it enough to drive a ghost to despair?

To this day, I am not sure whether Sword Marquess really became an immortal and left this world in the fog of Mount Hua, whether

he fluently conversed with a Chinese man in Incheon's Chinatown, or whether it was all just my illusion and hallucination.

I only learned one fact.

The martial world is indeed full of extraordinary and eccentric characters.

Footnotes:

Chapter 48

The Survivor I

Sinnoa

Excuse me, but what do you feel when you hear words like 'Student Council' or 'Student Council President' in creative works?

You might wonder why I'm asking such an abrupt question.

It's because it's relevant to this story.

As mentioned at the end of the last story, the martial world is full of eccentrics.

The person I will introduce today is also an eccentric, proudly placing her name among the 'Great Figures Who Illuminated the Korean Peninsula.'

In the distant past, South Korea used to boast about having certain football players and idols.

However, even if civilization collapses, history tends to progress. Now, nations compare their pride based on how spectacular their awakeners are, and the Korean Peninsula has never been left behind.

From the 'Grand Witch who forces her subordinates to wear conical hats 365 days a year on a train' to the 'Marquess who turns Mount Hua into a mountain of flowers,' and so on.

It was a lineup that could not help but make one's heart swell with pride. Is this really the state of the Korean Peninsula?

This land, which could even be described as a haven for lunatics, or rather, great figures, has not ceased to be blessed. There was yet another figure I had not had a chance to introduce.

Name, Cheon Yo-hwa.

Occupation, reflecting the trend that it’s tough to get by on just one job these days, a multi-awakener juggling multiple jobs.

First job, high school student.

As the nation collapsed, so did public education, reducing children who register on internet communities to unemployed, unable to select 'elementary/middle/high school student' as their occupation.

In that sense, Cheon Yo-hwa was one of the last high school students left in the Korean Peninsula. Roughly equivalent to a high school 6th grader.

This alone would be considered a rare occupation of SSR-grade in games, but their other job was a bit more unique.

Second job, Necromancer.

Cheon Yo-hwa was the only necromancer on the Korean Peninsula.

Since we're on the topic of high school, the Korean Peninsula no longer had 'school ties.'

It was inevitable. What good does a fancy university degree do if monsters don't care about your education when they eat you?

However, human systems don't change easily. If there's no bread, eat cake; if there are no football players, suck up to awakeners instead of athletes; and in place of school ties, a new form of connection was quickly installed.

“Hmm?”

One day, as I was making my rounds in the guild, I witnessed a shocking scene.

“Wow, really?”

“Yes, really. Ahaha.”

It was Seo Gyu and Sim Ah-ryeon (the villain OldManGoryeo)

laughing together while having lunch in a restaurant.

As everyone knows, Seo Gyu had anger management issues and Sim Ah-ryeon was a serious social media addict.

Both of them had a bit of a flaw in their DNA that made establishing close relationships with other homo sapiens a bit of a challenge.

It was a scene reminiscent of a hippo and a crocodile amiably sipping from the same oasis waterhole, and, as any reasonable person who witnesses a miracle, I too was overwhelmed with curiosity.

“When did you two become friends?”

Blink, blink.

The question from their guild leader, who was as eminent as the sky, made them look at each other.

“Us?”

“Yeah, we’ve just been friends…”

Are they dating?

In my mind, two spirits clashed: the old-school desire to frown upon workplace romances and the old-school joy of watching young love.

“No, hyung, whatever you’re thinking, it’s definitely not that…”

“So how did you become friends?”

“How we became friends?”

Seo Gyu spoke as if it were obvious.

“Well, we're both from 'Busan Station.'”

“What.”

Indeed.

Nowadays, instead of school ties, awakeners sized each other up by which 'Void' they were in when they awakened.

If we had to give it a name, maybe Void Connection? It was a connection related to place, so it was still a form of connection.

Seo Gyu, Sim Ah-ryeon, and I, we all awakened at Busan Station. Even the one who shall not be named, the Master of Hypnosis 'G,' was from Busan Station. Later on, by the 555th cycle, Oh Dok-seo also joined the Busan Station awakener family.

“You don’t mean... the awakeners are treating Busan Station like some kind of prestigious university, do you?”

“Why not? Of course, we receive that kind of treatment. Hyung, we’re number one in the Void.”

“……”

I was shocked.

You little brats, without me, all of you would have been stranded at Busan Station or dead in a monster’s stomach within three weeks!

In fact, all those from Busan Station died by the third cycle. Even Seo Gyu, the fastest man, set a record for the shortest escape by the 50th cycle.

These little twerps… prestigious?

“Hey, you wet-behind-the-ears kids. What kind of ridiculous void connection is that! If you have time for such nonsense, you should be focusing on aura training, you're really showing off.”

“Hyung, why does every word you say sound so seasoned…”

“That’s strange, isn’t it? If it weren’t for that, you probably would have been quite popular…”

Even as their guild leader lectured them, their faces remained nonchalant.

‘Ah, the old man is at it again,’ their expressions seemed to say.

My head spun and I struggled to breathe. I'm the Infinite Regressor. Destined (or not) to save the world. Should I really be treated like this?

“Guild leader... I think it's natural to consider the Void Connection.”

“What are you talking about, Ah-ryeon?”

“……”

Sim Ah-ryeon’s expression changed to 'Ah, the old man is trying to follow old trends again,' but she quickly shrank back under my gaze.

“Well, it’s terrifying when you first drop into the Void...? Phones don’t work, bizarre creatures keep popping up, people are dying left and right... The Void Connection is about comrades who have struggled through the same hellish ordeal together. Wouldn’t that make you feel a deep bond...?”

“Hmm.”

“It’s not just our guild, I think all guilds would feel the same way...”

Upon hearing it again, Sim Ah-ryeon’s logic didn’t seem so absurd.

“I didn’t struggle, though?”

“……”

“Why? Got something to say, Ah-ryeon?”

“No, guild leader...”

I spoke jokingly, but I was actually serious. This was the decisive reason why I could not sympathize with the latest trend of Void Connections.

Yes, I didn’t feel like I suffered in the same place, at the same time as these guys.

I struggled alongside Old Man Scho.

To me, the Void was less 'Busan Station' and more this 'world' itself.

Challenge, die, regress, and challenge again. A dungeon striving for completion through countless cycles.

Therefore, I could only feel a strong camaraderie with Old Man Scho, who had a regressor's skill just like me.

Of course, now there was no such thing as camaraderie. When the hell was this no-show old-timer going to return from his leave? I might as well smack him dead.

"Just out of curiosity, which is the most famous connection spot among awakeners?"

"Huh? Busan Station."

"No, not that one."

"Not that one? Umm..."

Sim Ah-ryeon grunted before responding.

"...Then, perhaps, Baekwha Girls' High School?"

"Ah."

Baekwha Girls' High School.

A private school by that name existed.

Perhaps some of you have heard of the school name. Whenever posts like 'List of Schools with the Prettiest Uniforms in Korea' popped up on internet communities, Baekwha Girls' High was often mentioned.

I don't know if the uniforms are actually pretty since I'm not interested in uniforms.

But I could admit that they were objectively unique.

Our uniforms here feature traditional sailor outfits, rare in Korea.

-Our uniform's ribbon is the pride of Baekwha!

Such a ridiculous phrase was passed down among students through generations, a truly curious tradition.

In the neighboring Japan, this style of uniform was still actively flaunted, but the trend of sailor suits, despite their naval inspirations, never crossed the Korea Strait.

Yet, Baekwha Girls' High adopted the J-uniform (strictly speaking, it originated in Britain) for a surprisingly simple reason.

The school itself was built during the 1920s under Japanese colonial rule.

Baekwha Girls' High boasted a rather long history. And like most schools of its kind, to its alumni, it was regarded as a 'prestigious high,' but to outsiders, it was seen as 'Hmm, is that all?'

In short, other than the fact that the uniform was a sailor suit and they had a boarding system, it was a common humanities high school widespread in South Korea.

In such an ordinary school, there was a boarding house, but students were advised by seniors not to enter unless necessary. The number of students admitted to prestigious universities was somewhat short compared to its long history, so during the college entrance exam season, the granite school gates were even more clamorously and fervently adorned with banners celebrating admissions to (especially) Seoul National University.

-Huh? Why won't the gate open?

-The security guard isn't here either. Let's ask a teacher.

The Void arrived.

-Huh?

-Wait. Where are the teachers?

-What’s going on...?

The school gates closed.

It was a typical closed-type Void.

However, the duration of closure was not typical. The gates of Baekwha Girls' High did not open for 11 months.

That year, Baekwha Girls' High did not produce a single university entrance exam passer.

In the nearly year-long closed environment, I don't know what tragedies the students of Baekwha Girls' High might have suffered.

I was an outsider, after all.

All I could gather were the 'numbers' observed from the outside.

About 750 students enrolled.

After 11 months, 19 survivors.

After 12 months, 17 survivors. Two had committed suicide.

"Ah, it was actually a bit longer than 11 months!"

I had the chance to talk to a survivor much later, and this is what they testified.

"It was longer?"

"Yep-Yep. You know, sometimes the flow of time changes, right? Space shifts wildly too. Ahaha. I guess our school was one of those cases!"

The survivor's face seemed uncreased. I once heard that when people accept unhappiness, they do so either with their faces or with their hearts.

"So, how long did you feel you were trapped in the school?"

"Ah, four years!"

Some might call this a tragedy.

Out of over 750 trapped, only 19 survived, and of those, two more took their own lives.

But I dare say it was an 'achievement.'

In my first regression at Busan Station, I was the only survivor. There were plenty of cases where everyone trapped in a Void perished.

That ordinary high school students, completely isolated from the outside in a jar of solitude, enduring what felt like four years but was 11 months, and surviving in double digits—it was almost a miracle, wasn't it?

"Hey, a miracle? Undertaker sunbae, you're exaggerating—"

And in the center of all miracles, there's always a hero.

Thank you for the clarification. Let's correct that part about Cheon Yo-hwa:

In this case, the unique and foremost necromancer of the Korean Peninsula, the awakener we will focus on today, Cheon Yo-hwa, was that heroine.

"Go, go Baekwha Girls' High! Fighting!"

"Fighting—!"

The 17 survivors rallied around Cheon Yo-hwa.

…No, to speak more objectively, more precisely, the description above needs to be revised.

Cheon Yo-hwa made the 17 survivors rally around her.

I may mention it in another episode, but Cheon Yo-hwa had such a talent.

Interpersonal skills. Organizational formation skills. The skill to read and manipulate human psychology. The skill to break down the walls around a person's heart. The skill to choose the appropriate space and time. Mediation skills. The skill to resolve conflicts within the organization and project unresolved conflicts outward.

Cheon Yo-hwa wielded all these abilities as if she had been bestowed with them from a divine moment.

As a result.

"President."

"Student Council President."

"President Cheon Yo-hwa."

To the survivors of Baekwha Girls' High, 'Baekwha' was no longer just the name of their alma mater.

It was a school connection, a place connection. According to modern trends, it was a Void Connection, and perhaps even stronger than a blood relation.

Over four years, Cheon Yo-hwa secured 17 awakeners who would throw their lives away for her on the street.

And with them, she stepped back into the world.

Footnotes:

Chapter 49

The Survivor II

Sinnoa

"Vice guild leader, could you come see me for a moment?"

I first became aware of Baekwha Girls' High during my fifth cycle, back when I was still living as Dang Seo-rin's right hand in Samcheon.

"Yes, guild leader. What's the matter?"

"Nothing major, just some new information. Have you ever heard of Baekwha Girls' High?"

A black cat, a witch's essential item as per Dang Seo-rin, was rubbing against my legs at that time.

"No, I haven't heard of it."

"Hmm. Well, there's this school called Baekwha Girls' High. It was swallowed whole by a Gate for about a year? But it opened last week."

"A year, you say. Then there must be no survivors."

As always, I made judgments based on sound reasoning and healthy intellect.

Dang Seo-rin's voice lowered.

"That's... not entirely true."

"Really?"

"It's not precise, but apparently, about 20 people survived."

I widened my eyes.

"Twenty? Are you sure?"

"Yes... I'd like to assert confidently, but I don't know for sure. It's still just rumors at this point. The information I have is 'the Gate was closed for a year,' 'there are about 20 survivors,' 'all those trapped were high school students.'"

"Even high school students."

I was astounded.

As I've said, even as a regressor, I needed three cycles to clear Busan Station, and even then, I was the only survivor.

Both Dang Seo-rin and I could agree that the survival rate at Baekwha Girls' High was astonishing.

"Guild leader. If that's true..."

"Yes. It means among the survivors there might be an extraordinary talent, a once-in-a-generation awakener."

Dang Seo-rin reached out and stroked the black cat, which shivered.

"That's why I'd like you, vice guild leader, to go there yourself and investigate. Check if the rumors are true, and if they are, see if there really is such an awakener, and if there is—"

"We should recruit them into our guild."

"Exactly."

"Understood. I'll make sure to scout them before other guilds start sniffing around."

"Good. Oh, and one more thing."

Dang Seo-rin added offhandedly.

"If their character is seriously flawed, we don't necessarily have to recruit them."

Looking back, our Witch might have had the gift of prophecy.

Really, it was something one could have predicted.

Even healthy adults, once they've been trapped in a Void, often turn loopy. What then of high school students, at the peak of their emotional years, experiencing a long-term real-life horror game?

As soon as I arrived at the 'Guild Headquarters' of Baekwha Girls' High, I began to sense the answer.

"...Is this supposed to be a guild building?"

Crows cawed.

Like the Saintess who lived in an aquarium temple and Dang Seo-rin who stayed on a train, awakeners with unique mental worlds always had distinctively designed homes. Baekwha Girls' High was no different.

Baekwha Girls' High was, quite literally, using an actual school building as its guild lair.

(Congratu) Seo.,; University 2 Admitted! (lations)

The banner hung on the school gate was tattered.

The character for 'Seoul' in 'Seoul National University' was completely worn through, although it could have been Seokang or Seokyeong University, so it couldn't be confirmed without observation.

The sports field looked as if it had been bombarded by meteors, deeply pocked here and there. The net of the football goal was so tangled that even Alexander the Great would shake his head in dismay.

The highlight was the dormitory and school buildings, where the walls had crumbled down, exposing the bare steel framework.

'Isn't this just an abandoned school?'

I wasn't the protagonist of a horror game. Therefore, I hesitated, unsure whether I should really enter.

"Hello. What brings you here?"

"Ah, well...?"

As I stood awkwardly at the gate, the guards approached.

And, well... the guards looked quite unique.

Frankly, their heads were smashed in.

"....."

In other words, zombies.

The guard was exposing his skull to the world, yet his demeanor towards me was very polite. If he had been wearing a motorcycle helmet, I wouldn't have known he was a zombie.

"I'm sorry, but if you don't have business here, please leave. This is a private school. Outsiders cannot enter casually."

"Uh, um."

Even as a seasoned regressor, I found it hard to know what to say in this situation.

Were they not monsters? Should I attack them on sight?

"...I'm here from the Samcheon World Guild."

"Samcheon World? Guild?"

The zombie guard tilted his head.

"Where is that?"

"Um... it's the most prominent guild in Busan, actually."

Wait, why am I explaining things to a monster?

Suddenly gaining insight, I composed myself.

"I'm here to see someone in charge. Is she available?"

"Ah, the Student Council President's guest, I see."

Student Council President?

"She's in class right now, so she can't come out immediately."

"Class?"

"Yes. It's a school here. Naturally, the students are in class at this time."

"....."

At that point, I had an inkling.

A very, very familiar sense of foreboding.

It was similar to the unease that had crept over my entire body when I joined Samcheon after Dang Seo-rin's recruitment proposal, only to find out, 'Oh, by the way, anyone who joins our guild must wear a witch hat regardless of the place.'

Over my many cycles as a regressor, I had developed a sixth sense.

The so-called 'twist sense,' a sensory organ exclusive to regressors.

Whenever a certain level of quirkiness was detected, a tingling sensation would shoot up from the coccyx to the cervical spine. Particularly now, the warning bells were ringing in the fourth cervical vertebra, whereas when I met Dang Seo-rin, it had only reached the sixth thoracic vertebra, indicating a seriously unusual level of quirkiness.

'Should I run?'

If I had been just a bit more experienced, I would have definitely retreated following my body's alarm.

But in my fifth cycle, I was foolishly upright, clinging to a pointless justification that I couldn't just abandon a mission entrusted with full authority by Dang Seo-rin.

"...I see. How long should I wait for the class to end?"

"Hmm."

The guard turned to look at a clock.

It was a giant clock installed on the school's outer wall, fitting seamlessly into the surroundings in design, which meant the clock hands were broken and it wasn't working at all.

Yet, like me with a sixth sense, the zombie guard seemed to effortlessly tell the time from the broken clock.

"Just about 15 minutes until break time. It's a bit awkward to keep a guest waiting... Would you like to come in and wait?"

"I'll just stay here."

I responded immediately. I didn't want to step beyond this gate if I could avoid it. Although I didn't flee outright, I did take my spinal reaction into account to some extent.

The guard shrugged.

"Sure? Well, suit yourself."

It didn't take long for my judgment to prove very correct.

"Ding-dong-dang-dong."

"…?"

I looked at the guard.

Note that I just described the sound effect in quotation marks (""). This 'ding-dong-dang-dong' was not a bell sound. It wasn't a chime from a speaker or a bell tower.

The guard, a zombie with a shattered skull, was making the sound with his mouth and throat.

"Ding-dong-dang-dong."

"……"

At that sight, my third cervical vertebra buzzed.

Just as mice scurry about before an earthquake, my cervical spine's premonition was not wrong. From the school building, more accurately the abandoned school building, zombies swarmed out.

"Ding-dong-dang-dong."

"Ding-dong-dang-dong."

The zombies, all in uniforms, specifically, Baekwha Girls' High uniforms, were moving their lips and chanting 'ding-dong-dang-dong.'

"……"

I shuddered.

'Run.'

But it was too late.

"Did you say you were looking for me?"

Among the hundreds of zombies, a perfectly alive human walked out, dressed in the same white uniform as the zombies.

Her hair styled in a ponytail, dyed orange.

Such a hair color would surely stand out in a traditional private school, perhaps even garnering some kind of support among the students, as if a student had been called out of class because a guest had arrived.

"Who are you?"

That was Cheon Yo-hwa.

"...Hello. I am the vice guild leader of the Samcheon World Guild from Busan."

"Huh? Guild? Vice guild leader?"

Cheon Yo-hwa tilted her head, a reaction that could be seen as quite cute in isolation.

The problem was in her eyes.

Cheon Yo-hwa's eyes lacked focus. It was as if her irises and pupils were indistinguishable, her eyes appearing like wells steeped in dark shadows.

"What's that? I've never heard of it."

"Uh... I see. Well, a guild is a group of awakeners."

"Awakeners?"

"...Awakeners, you know, are people with special abilities."

Cheon Yo-hwa blinked.

In response, my third cervical vertebra also blinked, quite ferociously.

"Special abilities? What's that? Are you some kind of otaku?"

"No, I... Excuse me, but may I ask your name?"

"Ah, it's Cheon Yo-hwa."

At this, she bowed politely again.

And I somewhat relaxed at this 'normal-seeming response.' Inevitably, I've always had a soft spot for polite people. It was the same with Go Yuri.

From there, a parade of verbal slip-ups erupted from me. At the time, I was blissfully unaware of them.

"I am the student council president here."

"Um, haven't you awakened any abilities, Ms. Cheon Yo-hwa? I'm not sure what they are, but the abilities of people here, like that

guard or the zombies roaming the sports field, are affiliated with this place—"

"Zombies?"

Fatal slip-up number 1.

"Yes, your ability is very powerful. Whether you've turned the [dead] into zombies or even the living into zombies, I'm not sure."

"...Dead bodies?"

Fatal slip-up number 2.

"With your abilities and those of the guild members here, you could secure a much better environment than this. In Samcheon World, we don't make empty promises. You wouldn't have to struggle in this crumbling, wall-less [abandoned school]."

"....."

Fatal slip-up number 3.

"Of course, I'm not suggesting we do anything about it right now. Just sparing some time to schedule an appointment, we could arrange a proper visit from our side—"

"Please leave."

"Excuse me?"

"Leave our school now."

Only then did I realize the silence around us.

The guard who had reacted like a living person, the zombies that had gathered on the sports field, the real students mingled among them, and Cheon Yo-hwa herself in front of me.

All were staring blankly at me.

"....."

"No, don’t leave."

Cheon Yo-hwa grabbed my wrist.

"We were actually short on guards. Yes, this is perfect. Sir, would you like to [work] at our school? As a guard. Yes, that would be nice."

"....."

"Or you could [transfer] here. The basketball team juniors were just complaining about the low number of new students."

My second cervical vertebra jolted with a disk-like sensation.

Even I, in my fifth cycle, naive as I was, could recognize that this was a dire situation. I promptly shook off Cheon Yo-hwa's grip and fled without hesitation.

I fully expected the 'enemies' to chase after me. It was a rational judgment and thus a mistaken one.

The entities affiliated with Baekwha Girls’ High did not pursue me.

Looking back, they hadn’t moved a step beyond the school gate.

"....."

The fence that separated the school from the outside was partially broken down, but the zombies, as if facing an invisible wall, never crossed the boundary of the school.

Just behind the gate, just beyond the fence, hundreds of gazes clung to the wall like cicadas, staring blankly in my direction.

"Ding-dong-dang-dong."

"Ding-dong-dang-dong."

"Ding-dong-dang-dong."

The sound of bells echoed across the schoolyard. The zombies turned back.

"Ah, break time is over."

Cheon Yo-hwa muttered expressionlessly and shuffled toward the school entrance with the zombies, a mix of actual humans and zombies, though honestly, it was hard to tell the difference.

They seemed not so much individual entities as a collective organism.

The sports field quickly returned to silence.

Listening closely, I could hear voices leaking from the school building in the distance. English. In another classroom, the sound of a math lesson could be heard.

Astonishingly, the members of Baekwha Girls' High, including the zombies, were 'attending classes' inside the school building.

"...This is insane."

That was my first encounter with Cheon Yo-hwa.

First contact with aliens, failed.

"These kids are insane."

Dang Seo-rin, having received my report, reached the same conclusion.

"Sometimes you get such crazies. How about it, vice guild leader? Any chance they might harm civilians? If so, we might need to intervene."

"I can't be certain yet, but it seems we needn’t worry about civilian casualties. They seem to be nesting in the abandoned school and don’t venture out."

"Hmm, is that so?"

Dang Seo-rin made a perfectly rational decision based on my advice.

"Then let's not bother them unless absolutely necessary. No need to stir up a hornet's nest."

"That's a wise decision."

"Yes. I'm always wise."

"The conical hat."

"The perfect ornament to crown my profound wisdom."

Samcheon World cleanly washed their hands of the matter.

But the world wasn't made up only of rational humans.

Human quirkiness was like the king of fruits, durian.

No matter how tightly you seal it in a box, it asserts its overwhelming presence to everyone around.

Not long after I had been thoroughly chastened and returned, awakeners across the Korean Peninsula began to take notice of Baekwha Girls' High.

"A Necromancer? A magic-user awakener?"

"Even controlling hundreds of corpses at will?"

"That's an absolute superstar newbie."

"Recruit them! Whatever it takes, whatever the conditions, bring them over!"

In the era of humanpunk, where all resources are replaced by human assets, even if other resources failed, corpses were abundantly available, making the profession of a Necromancer inherently attractive.

Of course, I knew that this overflowing charm was akin to Pandora's Box. That is, as soon as you open it, expect Santa Claus to deliver disasters worldwide.

"Ladies and gentlemen, that place is as good as a den of the Void. I strongly recommend against entering."

"Is Samcheon afraid of our guild's progress?"

"Let them be. They failed to recruit, so they're just throwing shade at us. Ignore it, ignore."

Foolishly, the guild leaders disregarded my friendly advice.

Blinded by the emergence of a top-tier talent, they lost their senses.

"Wow! Not some fake virus but a real Necromancer controlling a legion of zombies!"

"Move... everyone move! With a dark mage, we might even break Dang Seo-rin's monopoly!"

With the biggest guild, Samcheon World, declaring they'd sit out this free agent season, other guild leaders rushed in like mad.

They carefully selected the most charismatic emissaries from their guilds and sent them off, furiously tapping the 'recruit' button.

The only difference between the other emissaries and me was the presence or absence of spinal nerves.

"Uh... why aren't these guys coming back from Baekwha Girls' High?"

"Same for you? Our guild members have gone completely silent."

No matter how long the guild leaders waited, their emissaries did not return.

Exhausted, those who visited Baekwha Girls' High in person witnessed a startling sight.

"Hey, why are you working here?"

"What? I'm just a regular guard."

"What?"

The talents dispatched by the guilds had all been employed, in reverse, at Baekwha Girls' High.

Even during their job interviews, some had holes drilled into their skulls, and the new guards seemed to have discharged their cerebrospinal fluid along with their memories of their former lives. They didn't even recognize their former guild leaders.

When you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes back into you. Sending new talents to recruit and instead losing existing talents is always a possibility. However, the guild leaders were too underdeveloped in character to accept such truths.

"What the fuck... No, this won't do. Destroy them!"

And those who seek to destroy others must always be prepared to be destroyed themselves.

The guilds that vowed revenge and charged into Baekwha Girls' High all succeeded in 'getting employed,' thus significantly reducing the unemployment rate on the Korean Peninsula during this job crisis.

"What the hell... What is that?"

"It turns out Undertaker was right!"

"They should never be messed with."

"Fuck, did you see what they eat in that school cafeteria? Human flesh! They’re sitting there eating people! Crazy fucks."

"Fuck, they weren’t unappetizing fruit; they were inedible zombies."

But by then, it was too late.

Pandora’s Box had been opened.

Baekwha Girls' High reached a temporary state of saturation. Suddenly having an influx of new guards made sense; even for a prestigious school boasting history and tradition, 136 guards felt a bit excessive.

The unplanned personnel increase inevitably burdened Baekwha Girls' High's financial operations.

If Cheon Yo-hwa had been a typical corporate CEO, she would have implemented the three great swords of business—'staff cuts,' 'mass layoffs,' 'restructuring.'

But Cheon Yo-hwa was anything but typical. She decided that now was the time to push an aggressive merger policy.

"Uh, uh?"

"Why are they increasing?"

Literally, the 'school' was expanding.

More precisely, the school's boundaries were gradually extending.

The building that had been in front of Baekwha Girls' High had become a 'tteokbokki shop' and a 'convenience store.' Not that they really sold tteokbokki there.

"Hello, boss. Please give me two servings of tteokbokki and three dumplings!"

A zombie student would say.

"Since our student is so pretty, I added an extra dumpling."

The zombie boss would reply.

No actual goods were exchanged. The zombie student handed over invisible money, and the zombie boss handed over invisible tteokbokki. And both were happily smiling.

At least that was relatively normal.

Sometimes, after handing over invisible money, they would receive 'human flesh tteokbokki.'

The snack bar in front of the school was always filled with the laughter of students. During lunch and after school, the shops

thrived. This was truly creative economics.

"Hello! I'm Cheon Yo-hwa, the student council president of Baekwha Girls' High!"

"Eek...! Save me!"

"Ah, wait a moment. Our students are very interested in off-campus experiential learning lately! Aren’t you interested in working with our school?"

"I’m not interested! Go away!"

"Thank you!"

"....."

The guilds that had settled around Baekwha Girls' High were gradually subdued by the school’s educational fervor.

Within less than a year, the Korean Peninsula saw the birth of an unprecedented academy city.

Footnotes:

Chapter 50

The Survivor III

Sinnoa

The academy city was both dead and alive.

It grew voraciously like a gigantic zombie.

In the past, I criticized the idea of an academy city in creative works as being utterly unrealistic. Now, I realize I was wrong. I had no choice but to deeply reflect on how narrow-minded I had been.

Indeed, as unbelievable as it might sound, the academy city was real. Its economic power surpassed that of any other city, equipped with transcendental technology that could create something from nothing. At its helm was none other than the student council president of the academy. Yes, all these propositions were true.

"Is this even real…?"

Dang Seo-rin herself was taken aback by the unexpected debut of the academy city.

"Vice guild leader, is there something wrong with the energy of the Korean Peninsula? Did grandpa Dangun1 get conned into bad real estate when he settled here? As if battling the Ten Legs wasn't headache enough, where did this crazy group come from?"

"They sprang from the Gate. Did you know? Baekwha Girls' High's swimming pool has no water, just zombies in swimsuits floundering on the pool floor."

"…Let's pretend we didn't see that."

Those with a semblance of brains adopted the same stance towards the academy city.

Ignorance.

Even in the cycles when I started acting independently from Dang Seo-rin, the basic strategy remained unchanged.

Do not look. Do not care. Do not engage.

The so-called Three Don'ts Policy was indeed the proper way to deal with Baekwha Girls' High. It was truly the best approach to keeping a durian-sealed Pandora's Box intact.

Even as other guilds were seduced by the prospect of 'an epic Necromancer,' I desperately cautioned against it. That thing will give you an upset stomach.

"What right do you have to block our guild?"

"With a Necromancer, we could defeat Dang Seo-rin!"

Of course, the guilds didn't initially heed my advice. Ultimately, some guild leaders didn't listen and ended up contributing to the establishment of the academy city.

However, I wasn't angry. In the grand scheme of a regressor's long life, these individuals were like immature infants. Continuously cared for with love and attention, they would eventually come to realize the affectionate intentions of their parents on their own.

"Well, if it’s from Undertaker..."

"Think about it, a Necromancer, right? Messing with corpses, what's that all about?"

Ah.

Do you want to know how to subdue proud awakeners? It's simple. Become a regressor, defeat the Ten Legs. Even the steeliest tsundere melts before me.

Thus, from the tenth cycle, when the subjugation of the Ten Legs began, the guild leaders also started to comply with my regulatory measures.

Tapes crisscrossed the gate of Baekwha Girls' High like a spider

web.

[No Entry] [Safety First] [Danger] [Cannibalism Alert] [Controlled Area]

It was a simple solution, but astonishingly, these yellow tapes performed almost like absolute barriers.

As long as no one from outside stirred things up, Baekwha Girls' High was safe. It made one wonder what Cheon Yo-hwa and her student council were subsisting on behind those closed doors.

Truly, very occasionally, when Cheon Yo-hwa herself went out to gather supplies, the Saintess would whisper in my ear, "The student council president has been spotted." Yet, significant incidents were rare.

Even as the 30th cycle passed.

The 40th cycle flowed by.

And even beyond the 50th cycle.

Yellow tapes still crisscrossed the gate of Baekwha Girls' High. I assure you, unless I was on vacation during those cycles, the seal here was never broken.

In other words, during the cycles when I took a break and vacationed, a very high probability existed that the 'academy city' would emerge.

After returning from a tour of Mount Hua with Sword Marquess in the 108th cycle, the same was true.

The Korean Peninsula was proving once again why this land had historically been called Hell Joseon, instilling fear in everyone.

Ding-dong-dang-dong!

"Immortal Life! Radiant Immortality!"

"Sir, here’s your order: two servings of tteokbokki!"

Lonely gourmet of the Ten Legs. The pseudo-religious cult of New Buddha. And now, added to that, the largest academy city in history, Baekwha Girls' High!

Such familiar old friends warmly welcomed me.

I'm so touched by the nostalgia that tears almost come. If a Meteor Shower were to fall now, the Four Kings of the Peninsula would truly be complete.

It was better to regress quietly than to directly face this mess, which I did.

"Hmm."

Upon returning to Busan Station after one vacation season, a moment of enlightenment arrived.

Indeed, the performance of a vacation was unmatched. It cured the unique occupational diseases of Infinite Regressors—[Why Only Me] syndrome, [I'm Tired of This] syndrome, [No One Remembers Me] syndrome, and so forth.

Instead, it reignited the typical chronic conditions of Regressors—[Still, I Must Solve This] syndrome, [I'm Perfectly Fine] syndrome, [Even If Everyone Forgets, I Will Remember Forever] syndrome. Oh well.

After all, isn’t human life merely a record of struggling with diseases called happiness or misery?

A regressor is nothing more than a long-term patient who experiences and manages the same diseases as everyone else, just more deeply and adeptly.

I readmitted myself to the hospital I've long owed—this world—and observed the political state of the Korean Peninsula from an angle I hadn't considered before.

"Compared to Sword Marquess… maybe Cheon Yo-hwa is a very rational conversational partner?"

What a paradigm shift in thought!

Only after serving Sword Marquess, an epochal lunatic for six years, could such enlightenment have been possible.

Indeed, compared to a dog smeared with feces, a dog with mustard stains was practically a cute Shih Tzu.

"High school student council president? Compared to some island nation's nobility, she's totally normal."

The regressor of the fifth cycle, who trembled at the sight of student zombies, no longer existed. Only the awakener of the 109th cycle, freshly returned from experiencing the Marquess and Sect Leader of the Mount Hua Sect of Yuldoguk, remained.

Humans are meant to grow, after all.

As Undertaker, I marveled at my own growth and began preparations.

I grabbed SG Man Seo Gyu by the nape to cure his anger management issues, formed an alliance with the perennial hikikomori Saintess, defeated the Ten Legs and Udumbara, and after pulling Sword Marquess out from his inner power training on Ulleungdo, laid all the groundwork.

Then, months later.

I alone headed to Baekwha Girls' High.

"What brings you here?"

An NPC stood at the gate.

A familiar face among the guards.

Like the inscription on Dante’s gate to hell, 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,' this NPC manned the entrance to a terrifying dungeon.

"I'm sorry, but if you have no business, please leave. This is a

private school. Outsiders cannot just walk in."

"Ah. Thank you for your hard work. I'm not an outsider."

After clearing the entity known as Sword Marquess, to me, the guard was just another insignificant monster.

What doesn't kill me only makes me stronger.

"I'm someone like this."

"Hmm? What is this…?"

I politely handed over a printout.

The printout was kindly stamped with the seal of the Board of Education.

[Baekwha Girls' High School 99th Alumni Meeting Notice]

"…Oh."

The guard's pupils wavered.

I smiled.

"Hello. I'm a graduate visiting for the alumni meeting. I look forward to your cooperation."

"……"

The zombie guard stuttered, frozen like an NPC that had encountered an unexpected player action.

Of course, the document was forged. I had never studied education, nor had I ever heard of an actual teacher carrying such a document.

But what did it matter?

Who would call the Board of Education or a university to check if this was real? They had long migrated to Mars when half of Seoul had been blown away.

"But… this is a girls' school, isn't it?"

"Ah. My gender transitioned. It's called TS disease, you see. I've awakened this ability."

"Uh…?"

The zombie guard, unsure whether to react as if such a ridiculous ability could exist or whether he was committing gender discrimination, was caught in a cruel situation for a pattern-following NPC.

"Um, no, well… Could you come in and wait? I'll call the manager."

"Ah, I had called earlier today to say I'd be visiting for the alumni gathering, but it seems the message didn't reach you. Let's go in and wait, then."

"Th-thank you…"

I entered Baekwha Girls' High far too easily.

See.

This is the experience of a 109th cycle regressor.

[Is this really the best way…?]

I ignored the Saintess's sigh in my ear.

"…You're an alumnus of our school?"

Blink.

Cheon Yo-hwa, meeting me in the student council room, blinked incessantly as she watched my every move.

Even the world's necromancer couldn't hide her confusion in front of a self-proclaimed graduate claiming to have TS disease.

"Yes. I heard a lot about you from the kids. You're Cheon Yo-hwa, right?"

"Uh…"

I treated her casually.

"They said an incredibly smart and quick-witted hubae became the student council president. It even made the rounds in our alumni network."

"That, um… thank you…?"

"By the way, I was part of the student council too, and now I'm the president of the alumni association."

"Oh…"

Cheon Yo-hwa shrank even more.

This was the weakness of those awakeners who had created their own worldview-settings in their skulls.

They resist strongly against outsiders who ignore their settings, but they become infinitely weaker against visitors who faithfully adhere to them.

"We're planning an alumni gathering, and the friends want to visit the school they haven't seen in a while."

"Oh, I see…"

And this was exactly my intention.

The natural predator of a lunatic is a lunatic with a higher level of madness. The truth of reciprocity proved itself once again.

Why? You say you're a student, even the president of a historically prestigious school.

Ah, are you really going to refuse the heavenly sunbae alumni president?

"Right. We'll avoid disrupting classes, but could we possibly use a classroom after school?"

"J-Just a moment, please wait!"

Cheon Yo-hwa stood up and went to a corner of the student council room. Ah, for reference, there were about a dozen other students in the student council room at the moment.

They were not zombies. All were living, breathing humans. Perhaps these were the true members of the 'Baekwha Girls' High Guild.'

"Uh, what do we do? She says she's a sunbae…"

The guild members of Baekwha whispered to each other.

"Doesn't make sense. Can gender really change like that?"

"If you think about it, President Yo-hwa's powers are more amazing, so theoretically it's possible…"

"But what if it's a lie?"

"However, she knew the president's name without being introduced."

"Let's test it."

"What kind of test?"

"If she really graduated from here, she should know things only someone from Baekwha Girls' High would know. Let's ask questions that only an alumna could answer."

They thought they were whispering, but I heard everything.

"Excuse me…"

"Yes?"

"Do you know what we call our dormitory?"

I knew this test was coming.

And I had prepared thoroughly for this very situation over the past several months.

[It’s called Baekwha Hall, but students usually just call it the dormitory.]

Ah, that's Saintess, an awakener with the ability called Clairvoyance—she can observe any Awakener as she wishes.

You might not know, but I've been living side by side with you for more than half a year because I specially asked the Saintess to do so.

"Baekwha Hall, but we usually just call it the dormitory, you know."

"And where’s our cafeteria…?"

"Go out here, down to the first floor, then a bit down the left corridor."

"And the name of our discipline director…?"

"Oh, the Gorilla? He's been around a long time. When I was in the dorms, the dorm supervisor always had permed hair, is he still like that?"

"……"

Cheon Yo-hwa’s pupils wavered.

As a last resort, she brought out a yearbook. She flipped to the section for my supposed graduating year, the 96th.

Of course, when she looked at the yearbook, so did the Saintess.

"And could I possibly hear the names of some of your sunbae friends…?"

"Han Ye-sol. Imi-ri. Park Ha-yoon. Kim Ji-yu. Kim Ye-rin."

"……"

I stood up.

"Why do you keep asking weird questions?"

"Huh?"

"Are you doubting me? Wow, Baekwha has really changed. In my time, we always sent at least two to Seoul National University. Are you guys preparing well for the SATs? As student council president, you should at least be aiming for Seoul National, right?"

"……"

"Yo-hwa."

"Yes…"

"Let's get along well in the future."

"Yes, sunbae…"

That day, the regressor gained a well-behaved necromancer hubae.

Footnotes:

1 - Dangun or Tangun, also known as Dangun Wanggeom, was the legendary founder and god-king of Gojoseon, the first Korean kingdom, around present-day Liaoning province in Northeast China and the northern part of the Korean Peninsula.

2 - Sunbae is the senpai / senior equivalent in Korean culture, likewise, hubae is junior.

Chapter 51

The Trial I

Sinnoa

Following on from the last chapter, let's continue with the story of the Necromancer.

The reason I suddenly appointed the second craziest person in the Korean Peninsula (the craziest being the Sword Marquess of Yuldoguk) as the student council president of Baekwha Girls' High was not because I wanted to become best friends with lunatics.

There were deeper and broader reasons behind it.

And I must remind you that I, the Undertaker, am far from being a villainous character.

I am not the type to devilishly revel in the destruction of my own plans that I have drawn up alone.

Such "dark-hero" type characters are nothing but adults who, having faced communication failures in their childhoods, have transformed their hope in humanity into contempt for mankind, ultimately never escaping their profoundly childish traumas.

"So, that’s what you say, but why are you looking at me like that…?"

"What’s important right now isn’t that, Ms. Do-hwa."

"I see. Shall I gouge out those eyeballs of yours and pickle them in salt before dipping them in soy sauce…?"

"Too much salty food isn’t good for the body."

"This fucking regressor bastard…"

Having had a rough childhood, Noh Do-hwa was quick to anger and curse.

Of course, as a morally upright adult, I knew how to respond calmly even to such fury.

"The one I've personally recruited this time, Cheon Yo-hwa, will be classified as a critical resource in our plan."

"Why? Because you have a school uniform fetish, you pervert…?"

"I don't like school uniforms. Try being my age, Ms. Do-hwa. Everyone looks like a kid to me."

"Wait, you're practically a thousand years old by your subjective standards, how am I supposed to reach that age…?"

"That's not my concern. Anyway, the importance of Yo-hwa's Necromancy is that it provides us with a stable 'workforce'."

"Hmm…"

Noh Do-hwa sipped on the coffee I had made.

Over the 1000 years (actually, at this point it was only 771 years), my barista skills had continuously improved, following an upward curve. Although I still couldn't perfectly imitate Old Man Scho's Café au Lait, except for that, my skills could be said to have reached their peak.

Even Noh Do-hwa, who generally maintained a cynical attitude as her signature, warmed up when drinking my coffee. "Shit, why is this so tasty…?" she murmured to himself.

Pleasing, isn't it? This is the reward of a regressor.

"Is manpower really that important? Honestly, these days it seems like the only surplus we have is manpower…"

"I'm talking about the manpower of the National Road Management Corps."

"Ah…"

Noh Do-hwa nodded, holding the coffee cup with both hands.

"Well, I'm slowly realizing it myself, managing this organization. Being a member of the National Road Management Corps is pretty much synonymous with being in a suicide squad. If you send them into the Void, there's a 20% chance they'll return as aliens with flowers sprouting from their heads or something…"

"Now, if we assign the more dangerous tasks to the zombie corpses, the survival rate will drastically increase."

"That sounds plausible... Let's try it."

"Before that, there's a condition."

"What condition…?"

I looked around. Although there had been no dialogue until now, the Saintess had also been silently sipping her coffee.

I smiled reassuringly in front of the trustworthy 'Regressor Alliance.'

"From now on, you are graduates of Baekwha Girls' High."

"....."

"Here, this is the graduation album of the 96th class, which I've manipulated in advance. You see the picture of Class 2? Just pretend it's Ms. Do-hwa and the Saintess's childhood. I was the vice president of the student council, and Ms. Do-hwa was the president while the Saintess was the secretary."

"……"

"And this is the exclusive data I prepared for Baekwha Girls' High. Dorm names, a list of teachers who frequently interacted with students, school-specific slang—it's all written here, so memorize it."

"……"

Noh Do-hwa looked at the Saintess.

The Saintess nodded.

"I have already memorized it."

"Fuck, is this for real…?"

It was real.

"Hello! Sunbaes! Nice to meet you!"

A few days later.

We were able to witness Cheon Yo-hwa, who was heading straight towards us. Not only Yo-hwa but also the student council of Baekwha Girls' High, which means the real survivors, were all lined up.

"Ah, yes… My name is Noh Do-hwa…"

"Speak comfortably, please, sunbae! Hehe. You were the student council president? We heard from Undertaker sunbae that you need our help. Command us like dogs!"

"How badly did you fuck them up…?"

Noh Do-hwa glared at me reproachfully.

As for me, it was regrettable. It was a truly ignorant and ignorant response, wasn't it? Those awakened in the 109th run had not yet experienced what a lunatic group Baekwha Girls' High was.

"Don't let your guard down. If you don't respect their concept, that's when the real hell begins. I warned you."

"No, they seem like really nice kids though…"

"They are nice, but it's a limited-time niceness. They all turn into cannibals if they don't consume human flesh at least once every four days."

"……"

Baekwha Girls' High joined the National Road Management Corps.

That very night, six members of the National Road Management Corps 'enrolled' at Baekwha Girls' High.

The admission conditions were not too strict. Just needed to drill a hole in their skulls.

"What the fuck?"

Only then did Noh Do-hwa realize the seriousness of the situation.

"Awakener Undertaker, what kind of crazy fucks have you brought here…?!"

"I warned you beforehand."

"I didn’t know it would be this bad…!"

"By the way, how did they end up dying?"

Noh Do-hwa handed me the report. How fitting for a former public servant. In this collapsing world, when something happens, it's always documented.

Victim A: What? Is this a new member?

Cheon Yo-hwa: Hello! I'm Cheon Yo-hwa, the student council president of Baekwha Girls' High!

Victim B: Huh? Girls' high? Student council? What's that, a role-play?

Cheon Yo-hwa: No? I really am the student council president of Baekwha Girls' High!

Victim A: Geez. Our newbie learned some weird stuff from somewhere. You look too old to be just graduating from high school.

Victim B: Right. Role-playing should be done by those who can pull

it off without bothering anyone. No one recognizes a low-tier awakener like you as a student council president.

Cheon Yo-hwa: (Strange laugh)

Hmm.

Even reading this far was enough.

According to the attachments, parts of the corpses of Victim A and Victim B were found canned.

I diagnosed the cause of the victims' deaths.

"This is suicide."

"Is this for real…?"

Noh Do-hwa shuddered.

However, she was also an adept at dealing with lunatics, having maxed out her skills in ‘Lunatic Sociology’ specialized for dealing with lunatics.

As soon as she figured out that Cheon Yo-hwa was the lunatic from the Sword Marquess's group, Noh Do-hwa immediately adjusted her stance.

"Cheon Yo-hwa, hubae…"

"Yes! Sunbae Noh Do-hwa!"

"How’s your college entrance exam preparation going?"

"Huh?"

"Oh my. In my time, if you were the student council president, you were naturally expected to get into Seoul National University. Cheon Yo-hwa, you must be aiming high as well…?"

"……"

Noh Do-hwa immediately disciplined her and put Cheon Yo-hwa to work like a dog. By the way, I also showed Yo-hwa a forged Seoul National University admission certificate.

It was a forged document again. So what? What can you do about it?

Besides, I was set up as a graduate of the German Language and Literature department. As you know, my German skills are perfect.

Moreover, with my [Complete Memory], I could even perform the feat of reciting Goethe's Faust and Schiller's poems off the top of my head.

I raised my eyebrows as if it were a hardship.

"Hmm. Isn’t this basic for a Baekwha Girls' High student council president?"

"……"

Cheon Yo-hwa, overwhelmed by her sunbaes' authority, broke down in tears.

If she had been ‘fake’, at this point she would have raised a white flag and dropped the concept. But Cheon Yo-hwa was real. In her mind, Baekwha Girls' High existed, and naturally, the school's traditions were intact.

"I will diligently receive guidance and corrections from you sunbaes…"

The monster of the academy city that once terrorized all awakeners on the Korean Peninsula was nowhere to be found. Only a pitiful student remained.

That is exactly what is meant by being caught in one's own trap.

"Oh. So the zombie corps really is useful…?"

And thus, Noh Do-hwa confirmed that there was indeed value in 'maintaining such a concept' with Cheon Yo-hwa.

Then there was no reason to hesitate any longer. Noh Do-hwa, the epitome of pragmatism, immediately changed the dispatch of the National Road Management Corps to 'field training' and forced it upon Yo-hwa.

The organizational structure of the National Road Management Corps evolved.

-Scouting party: Baekwha Girls' High Guard (zombie). At least one awakener commands the zombies, breaking through the void first to check for any dangers and reporting back to the main force. Zombies perform only the simplest tasks, as they cannot make detailed judgments.

-Main force: At least two awakeners form a strike team, traveling from city to city, checking roads, escorting migrants and merchants, and commanding the zombie scouts.

-Support force: Capable of immediately repairing any damaged roads. Basically, grunt work.

With the addition of the 'scouting party' by Cheon Yo-hwa, the National Road Management Corps made a tremendous advancement. The disappearance rate of members, which had been as high as 20%, dropped to less than 5%.

However, the proportion of zombies turning into real corpses increased accordingly, but no one cared. In a world where human rights had vanished, considering zombie rights was a bit too harsh.

"This is the true utility of corpses…?"

Corpses were a good thing.

They could work without eating, felt no pain, didn't need their rights considered, and acted exactly as pre-programmed. Zombies were like an addictive drug once you got a taste.

Especially for someone like Noh Do-hwa, who pursued pragmatism more and more.

Noh Do-hwa had developed a new taste.

"Awakener Undertaker. What exactly is a zombie…?"

One day, I received such a question.

"Excuse me?"

"Think about it. The zombies created by Cheon Yo-hwa all perform their roles. Guards, students, teachers... They act only according to pre-entered instructions and can't respond to unforeseen situations, but within the confines of their roles, they seem quite human-like…"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Well, isn't this just like NPCs, not zombies…?"

Noh Do-hwa's eyes gleamed darkly.

"You call them zombies based on their appearance, but I don't think that's quite accurate. Yo-hwa is a Necromancer, but she's not mass-producing 'zombies'... she's more like a designer who creates 'NPCs'. In some ways, it's also like installing 'AI'…"

"Hoh."

NPCs, not zombies.

Such naming by Noh Do-hwa, who judged things solely by their usefulness, was typical.

"An interesting interpretation. But even so, does it change anything?"

"Well, we'll have to see about that…"

Noh Do-hwa grinned.

"I think a lot of things can change…"

"Is that so?"

"Yes. In that regard, could you please call guild leader Dang Seo-

rin…?"

Even as the chief of the National Road Management Corps, I couldn't simply order Dang Seo-rin around. But since I was the only member of the 'Epicurean Guild', Dang Seo-rin would readily listen to me.

The next day, Dang Seo-rin arrived at the headquarters of the National Road Management Corps, clearly annoyed.

"What is it? I'm really busy these days."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I asked awakener Undertaker to invite you. It's just that only the Great Witch of Samcheon World can handle this task... Oh, and this is a copy of the Necronomicon I stumbled upon at an old bookstore last time. When I saw it, I thought it perfectly matched the Great Witch's library…"

"As a guild leader living on the Korean Peninsula, it's only right to cooperate with the duties of the National Road Management Corps."

"Could you please cast a magic spell…?"

Thud.

Dang Seo-rin placed several large books on the table, the titles of which were unfamiliar even to a regressor like me.

[Supreme Court Case Law], [Three-Concept Latest Case Law], [Civil Execution Law], [Key Issues in Tax Case Law], [Criminal Procedure Law: Articles and Case Law]...

Each one was terrifyingly thick. Clearly, they had been created to destroy a person's head both physically and mentally. Even Dang Seo-rin hesitated for a moment in front of their overwhelming presence.

"What are you using these for?"

"Heh. Don't worry. Great Witch, you just need to use [Repeat] [Text-to-Speech] [Play]..."

"That so? Alright."

Dang Seo-rin entered the warehouse and cast the Cursed Song Incantation.

Soon after, the many case law books in the warehouse began to turn their pages one by one, automatically supporting ‘text-to-speech’. Naturally, it was quite a magical sight.

And after sending Dang Seo-rin away, I immediately brought Cheon Yo-hwa to the warehouse.

"Cheon Yo-hwa, hubae…"

"Yes, sunbae!"

"Bring about three guards here and leave them. And could you please ask them to [remember all the sounds coming from this warehouse]…"

"Huh? Uh, inputting that much will really drain my energy."

"It’s a sunbae’s order…"

"Ugh..."

And at that moment, I stood with my mouth agape, utterly unable to comprehend the kind of mind that could conceive such a notion, and thus I could only admire it.

"Noh Do-hwa, are you possibly…?"

"Yes."

Heh, Noh Do-hwa chuckled.

"If the National Road Management Corps is getting established, shouldn’t we consider setting up a court too…?"

This person… was trying to create ‘AI judges’ using zombies!

Footnotes:

Chapter 52

The Trial II

Sinnoa

"Unbelievable."

I asked, half in disbelief, yet the other half tinged with undeniable anticipation.

"Can zombies really perform the role of a judge?"

"No, no, they're not zombies; they're NPCs. Please don't make that mistake again. And as for whether they will succeed… Well, I don't know, but it's definitely worth a try…"

Despite her words, Noh Do-hwa's sly gaze sparkled with unmistakable excitement.

Like little kids playing tricks behind their teachers' backs, the two of us watched the room of zombies—rather, the warehouse constantly reciting the text of the law books.

Judges!

In this devastated world, somehow reviving the function of a 'court' had been a long-held ambition for both Noh Do-hwa and myself.

The National Road Management Corps had managed to connect the shredded lands of the nation like a delicate web. However, operating a national court system seemed impossible.

"I could take on the role of a judge temporarily for significant cases, or powerful guild leaders could gather and handle them like a jury system."

Neither the guild leaders nor I had leisure. How could we handle dozens of incidents happening every day in an apocalyptic world?

In the end, the guilds that had taken over each city had no choice but to run their own 'court-like systems.'

In plain terms, it was like handing a gavel to thugs. How could that possibly function properly?

While places like Busan, governed by Dang Seo-rin—who boasts intelligence of 91 and political acumen of 95—enjoyed a golden age (by post-apocalypse standards), most cities on the Korean Peninsula were ruled by local tyrants. Unless one was Sim Cheong1, one often faced utterly unreasonable verdicts. Even if you were Sim Cheong, it was still crap.

"How long will it take to input all the law books into their heads?"

"Ah. Hmm, I've never asked for this much memory input before, so I can't be sure, but a month should be more than enough!"

Noh Do-hwa nodded at Cheon Yo-hwa's words. We sealed the warehouse door and returned to our daily routines.

One month later.

Noh Do-hwa, myself, and the Saintess, forming what you might call the full Regressor Alliance, gathered together. Cheon Yo-hwa also joined as a guest member.

"Then, let's open it!"

With a thud, the heavy warehouse door opened.

A foul odor wafted out, as if someone had stewed the essence of an unemployed shut-in for three months in a corner.

And no one even wrinkled their brows. Of course. Nowadays, if you smelled a corpse outside your house, you'd just think, 'Someone else bit the dust last night,' and move on.

"Hmm."

In the center of the warehouse, a zombie... no, an NPC stood with an incredibly stupid expression, gaping wide.

One might doubt whether it could properly memorize the law, but none of us judged people solely on their appearance.

"That looks incredibly stupid," said Noh Do-hwa.

"Anyway, let's test it. You all didn't come here just to be busybodies. Now, Cheon Yo-hwa, hubae...?"

"Ah, yes, Sunbae!"

With a hop, Cheon Yo-hwa stepped in front of the NPC and reached out to stroke its head.

"You are a judge."

[……]

"When disputes arise between people or organizations, determine who is right or mediate between the two!"

As she whispered about the 'role of a judge,' dark shadows crept from Cheon Yo-hwa's forearm into the NPC's head, swaying like black serpents.

That must be Cheon Yo-hwa's Necromancy.

Soon, the black serpents all retracted into the NPC's head. Cheon Yo-hwa fluttered her hand, "Phew."

"It's done. It's my first time asking someone to do something like this, so I'm not sure if it applied well. Anyway, feel free to ask it anything!"

"Hmm."

I glanced at the Saintess.

Her usual expressionless face made it hard to read her, but even the Saintess seemed intently focused on the NPC before us—a regressor's eyes could tell.

After all, wasn't she the very person who turned dark during the

107th cycle because villains roamed unpunished?

Noh Do-hwa, sensing my gaze, deferred to the Saintess.

"Why don't you ask the first question…?"

"……"

Nod.

The Saintess stepped forward to face the NPC.

Despite holding the attention of some of the most powerful awakeners on the Korean Peninsula, the NPC simply gaped dumbly.

Cheon Yo-hwa cheerfully suggested, "Please set up the situation!"

"…A middle-aged man entered an abandoned house. However, an 11-year-old child was actually living there. The man was checking for any useful items when he discovered the child, who immediately cursed at him to get out. Enraged by the insults, the man charged at the child and fatally stabbed him in the throat with a dagger the size of a kitchen knife."

"Whoa."

"The man believes he had no intention of killing the child. In this case, was there intent to commit murder, and thus would it affect the sentence?"

[Initiating response. Intention in murder does not necessarily require a premeditated intent to kill.]

Suddenly, the NPC's head, which had been tilted at about a 10-degree angle, snapped to an upright position.

[Awareness of the killing is sufficient, which includes involuntary manslaughter.]

"……"

[Given that the defendant charged at the victim with a dagger after

being severely provoked by insults and inflicted a fatal wound on the victim's neck, it is impossible to accept that the defendant lacked 'awareness of the killing' at the time. Considering the circumstances, it is justifiable to convict the defendant of this murder.]

"……"

[Response concluded.]

The NPC's head slumped again.

"Hmm."

As everyone hesitated to speak, Noh Do-hwa let out a grunt—or rather, it was more like a groan.

People have unique habits when deep in thought.

In Noh Do-hwa's case, it involved fidgeting with her always-worn black leather gloves. She pinched the tip of the glove's index finger, tugging it this way and that as if managing invisible nails before slipping it back in place.

"Hmm. Well, that's…?"

With a sharp pull, Noh Do-hwa stretched the leather glove taut, almost to the point of snapping.

A sinister laugh echoed through the shabby warehouse.

"Let's test it in the field right away…"

The beta test results for the 'AI judge' were less than spectacular.

"What? An AI judge?"

"What good is that supposed to do?"

The reason was that the guild leaders who occupied various cities felt no need to adopt an AI judge.

They already enjoyed the status of warlords. Why should we

separate judicial power? The separation of powers is an outdated concept, isn't it?

But even if guild leaders behaved like warlords within their territories, they had their limits. In other words, once they stepped outside their neighborhood boundaries, they turned into weaklings.

"They invaded our territory first!"

"Why is that your territory? It's ours. Plus, you killed our people first!"

Typically, guild disputes like this.

Usually, guild leaders either fought to the death or asked a third party for mediation.

And there were only three people in the Korean Peninsula who were universally recognized as 'capable of fair mediation.' Dang Seo-rin. Noh Do-hwa. Me.

"National Road Management Corps Commander!"

"Commander, please make a judgment!"

Noh Do-hwa tried her best to look empathetic.

"Oh, such a thing has happened. As always, I will mediate with all my heart, ensuring no grievances or resentment remains…"

"Oh my. Thank you, Commander!"

"Yes."

The problem was that the three of us could not possibly be perfectly fair.

Of course, we strived to be as fair as possible, but whether outsiders saw it that way was another matter.

It was nearly impossible to satisfy both sides in a dispute, and so, whenever we offered a mediation, quite a bit of grumbling followed

behind the scenes.

"But folks, have you heard about the newly introduced AI judge? It's really something…"

"Really?"

Seizing this opportunity, Noh Do-hwa pushed the AI judge to the guild leaders.

And, as always, she schemed a little here too.

"You know I used to be a civil servant before the world turned out like this, right?"

"Oh, yes. That's a well-known story."

"Actually, back then, the government was already debating whether to introduce an AI judge, and if so, to what extent should its authority be recognized. Maybe we could just let it handle very trivial cases based on precedents. That was also a mainstream opinion in the legal community."

"Oh… Yes…"

"Some time ago, our scouts brought back a few computers from a government building, and one of them had an AI program installed. So, this is a real AI that was actually used in practice. What do you think, everyone? How about we try hearing a decision just for a test?"

"Hmm."

"Of course, I have no intention of entrusting decisions to a mere program. Just think, [What kind of decision would have been made if civilization were still intact], and let's just listen to it for reference. The world has changed so much that we can't apply the judgment directly, but still, I think it makes sense to ask for an objective opinion from a 'third party' other than 'us'…"

"Hmm."

Up to this point, the National Road Management Corps Commander had been peddling something the guild leaders couldn't simply refuse. After all, he was the head of the organization that paved their roads and maintained their routes.

More importantly, I stood behind Noh Do-hwa. The presence of an awakener who alone had shattered the Ten Legs made the warlords think twice.

"So, shall we just hear what it has to say?"

And the guild leaders experienced that the AI judge was reasonably fair and surprisingly convenient to use.

[Judgment. A shall compensate B with 200 million.]

"In this day and age, where do you even find 200 million in cash?"

Noh Do-hwa chuckled sinisterly.

"What do you think? If you are not satisfied, I can mediate from the beginning and ignore this program's opinion…"

"……"

"……"

The guild leaders were deep in thought. Their looks could roughly be translated as:

"If it was before the country collapsed, a compensation of 200 million could roughly equate to handing over a small workshop to them, isn't that a small price for a dispute?"

"Anyway, it sided with me. If I let Noh Do-hwa mediate and he smoothly glosses over it saying 'let's get along,' wouldn't it actually harm my dignity more?"

The guild leaders exchanged glances.

"Uh, well. How about we try to come to an agreement among ourselves first and if that doesn't work, can we then ask the

Commander for help?"

"Oh, by all means. It's absolutely fine. This AI-loaded NPC will also be distributed among you, so make good use of it…"

"Really? That's okay?"

"Of course. Heh. It's free…"

Noh Do-hwa's judge NPCs were distributed evenly across the cities of the Korean Peninsula.

Guild leaders returned to their cities, pondering how to utilize their newly acquired toys.

And of course, even if a guild managed one city, there were numerous factions within it.

"Your people invaded our territory first!"

"Why is that your territory? It's ours. Plus, you killed our people first!"

"Hyung!"

"Hyung, please make a judgment!"

"Uh…"

When disputes arose among factions, it was naturally the guild leader's role to mediate.

By making the right judgments, the guild leader showcased their power, but it was not easy to always be seen as fair.

And the guild leaders finally realized.

This interesting but seemingly outdated AI judge could indeed perform a role.

"But guys, have you heard about the newly introduced AI judge? It's really something…"

"Really?"

AI Judge, national debut confirmed!

Footnotes:

1 - Sim Cheong-jeon is a story about the titular Sim Cheong, who throws herself into the Indang Sea as a sacrifice so that her blind father can regain his eyesight. This selfless act of filial piety causes her to be resurrected and become an empress, and her father's blindness is cured.

Chapter 53

The Trial III

Sinnoa

Before civilization collapsed, people used to half-jokingly say,

"Ugh, seriously, what kind of verdict is that?"

"We might as well leave everything to AI; it would probably be better than this!"

Of course, the other half of this sentiment carried a serious undertone: an AI, made of steel and code, might indeed be more impartial than Homo sapiens, who are often entangled in various vested interests.

Now that AI judges have debuted nationwide, one could exclaim, "Wow! An era of law where biased judgments are impossible!" But, naturally, things in the world never turn out to be that simple.

[Judgment. The defendant is sentenced to life imprisonment.]

"What?"

"He killed someone and it’s not the death penalty?"

"Why can’t we just kill the criminal?"

People were baffled.

Since there had been no updates since civilization's downfall, the judgments of AI judges were inevitably bland for the post-apocalyptic humanity accustomed to harsher realities.

[Judgment. The defendant is sentenced to three months in prison.]

"What?"

"He dared to touch someone else's property and it’s not the death penalty?"

"Why can’t we just kill the criminal?"

From the start, the concept of 'prison sentences' handed down by AI judges was an antiquated artifact.

Prison? Who has those anymore?

Would anyone build indestructible walls, install iron bars, and, furthermore, expect to feed, shelter, and care for prisoners? Do guards get paid out of thin air?

Yes, the AI judge was fair.

But that fairness was akin to divine fairness—it was utterly useless if it didn’t descend to reality.

"Wait a minute. Isn't three months in jail roughly equivalent to losing a pinky finger?"

"Ooh…"

Thus, inevitably, there arose a need for a professional class to 'interpret' these 'divine words.'

Guild leaders, or their most trusted aides, took over roles once held by shamans in ancient times and priests in the Middle Ages.

If a guild leader had achieved enough to own a city, they could arguably be considered the closest to god within that city.

"So, guild leader, what about six months in jail?"

"Well, that's cutting off the index finger. Of course, if the victim prefers, cutting off a toe is also an option."

"And what about one year?"

"From then on, it might be appropriate to take off a hand or a foot. Oh! But be careful not to damage their labor capacity, so let's split

it 50-50… Say, three fingers from the offender, two from their family members, making it a five-finger punishment altogether."

"Ooh…"

"Exactly, guild leader."

If prisons were antiques, collective punishment was the hot new commodity desired by all the trendy guilds.

"What if all fingers and toes are cut off?"

"Then they gotta die. Shit. If you can't play the game right even with 20 life points given, you're just not cut out for it."

"Fair point."

"After all, if there's nobody willing to sacrifice a finger for a criminal, who would mourn their death anyway? Just kill them all."

"Ah…"

The above conversation is a compilation edited for easier reading, originally spoken by a guild leader in Incheon.

Interpretations by 'shamans' varied greatly from city to city. While some, like Incheon, cleanly converted all life stats to fingers and toes, others interpreted a six-month sentence as six months of slavery, turning the offender into the victim's slave.

But precisely because of this, guild leaders happily embraced the AI judges.

"This isn't bad."

Dang Seo-rin casually tapped the AI judge's head.

"It’s much more comfortable for guild leaders to say that they just added interpretation to an already impartial judgment from someone else—from beginning to end—rather than claiming they made the judgment alone."

"Hmm."

"The judgment wasn't wrong. It's just that the application to reality, or the interpretation, was lacking. Thus, even if a small mistake occurs, the guild leader's dignity is relatively less damaged. Ah, maybe this was also a principle behind why ancient rulers were also priests."

As expected from a guild leader governing one of the most successful cities on the Korean Peninsula, her comments carried significant weight.

Although Dang Seo-rin herself never used the AI judges for her own judgments, handing them over to the general public instead.

This was not just because she viewed 'taking on unnecessary responsibilities' as a hallmark of leadership.

Dang Seo-rin, who styled herself as a Great Witch, governed Busan in a unique—well, very 'witch-like'—manner. In her Busan, a separate system known as 'witch trials' operated.

But let's leave that topic for another time since today's story is not about Dang Seo-rin.

Frankly, I wasn't particularly enthusiastic or serious about introducing AI judges. I was merely astonished by Noh Do-hwa's spark of innovation.

As previously mentioned, the judgments of AI judges were too disconnected from reality—mere babblings of Confucius or Mencius for all practical purposes.

I, the Undertaker, had ambitions. Someday, I aspired to create a legal system that truly suited the post-apocalyptic world. From my perspective, AI judges were just clever inventions, inadequate gadgets falling short of a regressor's standards.

Yet, precisely this aspect, being 'too disconnected from reality', ironically began to resonate not just with guild leaders but also with ordinary people.

"Why doesn't it sentence anyone to death?"

[Initiating response. Modern jurisprudence and legal philosophy can contemplate the death penalty from various viewpoints. Among them, the most compelling argument is that the government can never decide on the right to life of its citizens. Citizens delegate some of their rights to the government through a social contract, but they retain exclusive rights concerning the dignity of life. The government is not a natural person but an artificial entity similar to a program, and therefore cannot make autonomous judgments on matters not programmed into it.]

"Hmm... So?"

[Lowering the intellectual level of the explanation by two steps. Changing response. The government is not infallible. Incompetent judges, malicious evidence tampering, or factions attempting to politically engineer judicial murders could all lead to errors by the government. Therefore, it is wise to preemptively block actions that make such errors irreversible, such as the annihilation of life itself.]

"Ooh... So?"

[Lowering the intellectual level by six steps. Changing response. Let's just cherish life.]

True to its word, the AI judge simply refused to execute any death sentences.

"A serial killer who butchered two-year-old children for no reason."

[A death sentence could be pronounced, but it would not be carried out.]

"A spy and terrorist who bombed public facilities, killing three thousand people!"

[A death sentence could be pronounced, but it would not be carried out.]

"Hitler!"

[A death sentence could be pronounced, but it would not be carried out.]

"Shit, still not killing? Even now?"

As the situation unfolded this way, the citizens of Busan (Dang Seo-rin had set up the AI judge in a public square for civilians to toy with) were utterly baffled. Just how far did it have to go before it would sentence someone to death?

"…This is really absurd. Just stab him in the neck, and he'd be dead easily; why all this fuss about not executing?"

"Hmm, but think about it, before the world turned out like this, it did feel like this. People who deserved death didn't die and just rotted away in jail eating beans."

"Yeah. That's how it was."

"How did it all change?"

"....."

"....."

The people of the post-apocalypse longed for the past.

They had been running blindly without a chance to look back, and thus, the survivors who had managed to keep going realized just how far they had run from their past by listening to the AI judge's rulings.

Yes, the world had changed. They had changed too.

They had just caught their breath for a moment, and the likelihood of humans completely conquering the void to rebuild civilization seemed distant. Everyone in this era knew they were witnessing the twilight years of humanity.

Nostalgia for a homeland they could never return to.

Thus, when people of this era miraculously had leisure time, they

would gather in guild buildings or such places to watch 'movies from the previous era' on large TVs.

It didn’t matter if the movies were uninteresting.

"Wow, look how clean the asphalt roads are!"

"Cars are actually driving around!"

"Insane. They just drink coffee like it’s water."

"Why doesn’t he kill someone for bumping into him?"

For people, films from the old days served as a means to momentarily recall the glorious past of human civilization.

This was evident from the way they watched TV. They didn’t sit neatly in a row, attentively watching the screen. Instead, they huddled together, cracking peanuts, casually glancing at the screen, and loudly discussing the 'exotic items' in the videos.

"Hot water comes straight from home? Just push a button for bottled water? Wow…"

"But why do they look so dissatisfied? It’s practically heaven."

"Anyway, everyone was so spoiled back then. Those guys all need their heads peeled by monsters for their brains to cook right. Hey, pass me that hammer, this one’s tough to crack."

Roughly, this was the contemporary self-portrait.

Thus, the 'unrealistic judgments' of AI judges, initially treated like toys, gradually began to take on a different hue over time.

[Judgment. Defendant B shall pay plaintiff A 1 million won.]

"Really? Wait, I’ll get it together in a week."

"Huh?"

Some people started to take the AI’s judgments seriously.

In this world, money was more like a talisman than currency—a talisman that reminded them of the times they were part of a civilized society.

Collecting '1 million won' worth of such talismans was extremely difficult.

But one citizen eventually gathered 50,000 won, 10,000 won, 5,000 won, and 1,000 won bills from wherever possible and truly handed over 1 million won to the plaintiff.

"Are we good now?"

"Uh, yeah…"

"Yeah, I'm sorry for disrupting your business. This settles things between us."

Surprisingly, one citizen's apology was accepted.

Money, which had lost all its value as currency and couldn't be exchanged for other goods—essentially having lost all meaning as money—was recognized as compensation for wrongdoing.

This accidental incident gradually led more citizens to voluntarily comply with the AI's judgments.

Certainly, in cases where people were seriously injured or their lives were at risk, citizens did not rely on the AI judge.

But for minor disputes, things that didn't warrant killing each other over, people willingly submitted to 'old judgments'—the justice of times when the world was still intact.

"Here's 3 million won."

"Let's get along better from now on."

Even if the most recently issued currency had been printed over ten years ago, the bills were crumpled and grimy from human contact, people cherished and exchanged them with great care.

From afar, it looked less like the execution of laws and more like some kind of religious ritual.

A ritual to prove and certify to each other that they were once members of a world that had already perished.

A process to affirm that we all belonged to the same community.

What can I say? Unlike in stories where currencies turn to trash the moment an apocalypse strikes, reality was quite different.

"…I really didn’t see this coming."

I felt somewhat emotionally punched.

Not that it felt entirely bad. After all, it confirmed that despite the world falling apart, most people were still suffering from nostalgia.

Even after the 109th cycle, I continued to keep the 'AI judges.'

Even if they weren’t much help judicially, if they could remind people living in such times of their 'humanity' even a little, then that in itself was meaningful, wasn’t it?

"Judge."

[Yes.]

"There’s this infinite regressor who keeps ditching his colleagues to flirt with his wife, continuously neglecting his duties as an old man. Meanwhile, the colleague left behind is breaking his back trying to save the world. What judgment fits this despicable regressor?"

[Judgment. Not guilty.]

"……"

Humanity be damned.

Clearly, AI still didn’t understand the human heart.

Footnotes:

Chapter 54

The Ruler I

Sinnoa

Today, let’s talk about Dang Seo-rin, the guild leader of the Samcheon World Guild.

But before that, let’s digress a bit... Being a regressor, there are aspects that I notice more keenly, changes that I feel more distinctly than others.

Like the increasing wrinkles on Noh Do-hwa’s forehead as the years go by—just kidding.

For example, the 'change of language.'

Those who have read my stories so far must already be familiar with these linguistic changes.

A prime example is 'monster.' Initially, these strange lifeforms were called by their English name. Sometimes, they weren’t even considered lifeforms, which is why they began to be referred to as ‘grotesques’ or 'aberrations.'

Everyone knows that 'gate' changed to 'void.'

Until now, I’ve kept this hidden to avoid confusion, but the term 'awakener' has also undergone various transformations.

Many people called them 'hunters,' then 'transcendents,' and later on, 'ascendants' became quite common.

The latter terms increasingly reflected a bizarre ideology known as 'Awakener Supremacy.' Those who wanted to distance themselves from this pseudo-eugenics preferred the more neutral term 'Awakener.'

Why?

"Awakener Undertaker…"

Noh Do-hwa would call me.

That’s not so much an honorific like 'doc' but more a way of saying 'I don’t regard you as a transcendent or ascendant.'

This wasn’t my idea; I heard this secret directly from her in one cycle. It’s so typically Noh Do-hwa, isn’t it?

Anyway.

Amidst the flux of linguistic changes, there were words that remained grand and steadfast over time.

One such word was 'guild.'

No one knows who first started calling the group of awakeners a 'guild.'

It was as if, in the collective unconscious of Koreans, there was a declaration: 'From now on, we agree to call it a guild.' The name naturally stuck.

Most awakeners joined a guild as if it were the most natural thing. Even that crazy Sword Marquess created a one-person guild called Yuldoguk, didn’t he? (In the 108th cycle, the guild briefly increased to two members.)

Here, some might wonder.

What does a guild actually do?

Is it like an adventurers’ guild in an RPG where you can take on quests? Can you evolve through tiers from B-class, A-class, S-class, or bronze-silver-platinum based on how brilliantly you perform quests?

Unfortunately, no such thing happened. That’s just the insane habit of East Asians who, having learned bureaucracy from ancient times, apply ranks and grades even to private sectors.

I can answer what a guild is very simply.

It’s just a gang.

"Guild leader."

"Yes?"

For example, in the 6th cycle, when I was serving as Dang Seo-rin’s right hand in the Samcheon Guild, something like this happened.

"The awakeners from the Blue Sea Guild went around all the bars in Nam-gu last night."

"What?"

The lounging Dang Seo-rin sat up.

"Those bastards should stick to eating seaweed on their island. What are they doing on the mainland? Do we have proof?"

"I’ve gathered all the evidence. I even had Manager Yu turn on the minimap. You can give the order to execute the plan anytime."

"That’s why I like having a vice guild leader."

"Will you go yourself?"

"Of course. Let’s crush them."

I once mentioned that I might have told too many positive stories about Dang Seo-rin. Do you remember?

If anyone from Dang Seo-rin’s fan club is reading this, I apologize. In fact, such conversations were quite common in the Samcheon World Guild's office (a train car).

The 'Great Witch Idol Dang Seo-rin,' the biggest star awakener in the history of the Korean Peninsula, known today, is merely a product of extensive historical distortion years later.

I know this well because I spent decades working as something like her manager.

-Ding, ding, ding, ding!

As the bell rang, the guild members disembarked from the train in droves.

Over two hundred guild members, all wearing pointy hats. Not just that, each one also held a broom.

In a world gone mad, our guild was an exceptionally good example of insanity.

Dang Seo-rin climbed onto the roof of the station, like a principal on a podium, and looked very pleased at the sight of everyone in pointy hats.

"Hello, everyone."

"Yes, Great Witch!"

"The Blue Sea Guild brats were hanging around Yeongdo last night, having a feast at the bars we protect. They have a lot of money. They had 16 rounds of drinks! Life must be good in Yeongdo. But they didn’t say a word to us, their neighbors. How should we feel about this slight?"

"Kill them all!"

Someone shouted. It was Yu Ji-won, my lieutenant and the top agitator in Korea.

Dang Seo-rin blinked, as if encountering a surprising perspective.

"Hmm… I hadn’t considered that angle, but hearing you guys, I suddenly feel enlightened. Yes, that’s a great idea. Let’s kill them."

"Ooooo!"

Dressed in black pointy hats and black cloaks, the members of the Samcheon World Guild marched through the city.

Grown adults embarrassed? Well, there were some non-adults, but setting them aside, of course, it was embarrassing, but you’d be

killed for saying such a thing in front of Dang Seo-rin.

The opposing guild, caught off guard by a sudden full-scale attack, panicked.

"Shit! It’s the Witch’s cult!"

"It’s Samcheon."

"The Witch’s cult is attacking! The crazy witch is here!"

"It’s Samcheon World, dammit! Do you want to die?"

No one listened to Dang Seo-rin. Hardly anyone remembered the name Samcheon. It was just the Busan Witch’s cult.

And the Witch's cult’s specialty was witch hunts. In these times, civilization had progressed enough that, unlike the primitive Middle Ages, it was the witches who did the hunting, not the other way around.

"Please, spare me…"

Within three hours of the battle's onset, the Blue Sea Guild, based in Yeongdo, Busan, was annihilated.

Thump, thump. Dang Seo-rin, looking somber, tapped the opponent's head with the end of her broom.

"Hey."

The broom's stiff bristles poked the Blue Sea Guild leader's eyes.

"Argh… Ah…"

"Why would someone who can't last a day without groveling rob the wallets of honest citizens? We don’t want to fight you. But when the merchants ask us for help, huh? We can’t just ignore the people’s pleas. Why make things difficult for us?"

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry… Please, just let me live…"

"Let’s play our witch game. We’ll dunk you in water, and if you

sink, you’re innocent; if you float, you’re guilty. Got it?"

"You son of a bitch! You insane lunatic! How can you call yourself human?"

"Guys, what are you doing? This man’s going for a swim."

I repeated,

"He’s going for a swim."

Again, unlike the primitive inquisitors who tied rocks or iron weights to ankles, we used the modern invention of 'concrete hiking boots.'

There were underwater mountains; the sea had many mountains too. Concrete boots helped humanity conquer underwater peaks.

Soon, bubbles rose from the sea off Busan.

I nodded.

"He’s not floating, guild leader."

"Innocent, then."

Dang Seo-rin pressed her pointy hat to her chest.

She lowered her head, looking sad.

"This too is a tragedy of these troubled times. Let’s all pay our respects."

"A moment of silence."

Following Dang Seo-rin, all two hundred guild members observed a moment of silence.

Our guild didn’t just handle water magic. We also mastered fire magic that brought out the scent of burning wood, time magic that made you acutely aware of each second of a fleeting day, healing magic that gifted the effects of a foot massage by walking on heated stone paths, and many others…

As a guild led by Dang Seo-rin, who was versed in all types of magic, Samcheon World never discriminated between white and black magic, and loved all four elements equally.

In a world gone mad, Samcheon World was even madder, especially Dang Seo-rin.

Now.

Even with this brief anecdote, I believe you can understand why I called a guild a 'gang.'

I chose a slightly provocative story, but the main source of income for guilds was protection fees. They diligently collected taxes from people doing business, working, and taking refuge in the cities.

There was no choice. The fantasy of gold coins dropping when monsters were defeated did not exist in reality.

There was no miraculous superconducting energy source 'mana stone' to replace oil.

The only somewhat useful items monsters dropped were their meat, but a guild running a butcher shop had its limits. People didn’t prefer monster meat, and it sometimes contained radioactive 'seasonings.'

In the end, guilds had no choice but to extort 'protection fees' from people. Up to this point, all guilds across the country, no, the world, were the same.

The real difference came after that. It depended on how one interpreted the concept of 'protection.'

"The essence of the world is a struggle of all against all, and humans are the most fearsome beasts. Protection of humans, by humans, and for humans is the most necessary measure for current humanity."

Humanists who adopted this answer settled into their territories. It was the ruling philosophy chosen by the majority of tough guys.

"Isn't the monster scarier than humans?"

About 4% of the population, the extreme minority of cowards, thought differently.

"Sure, humans are dangerous, but monsters are even more dangerous."

"Why bother? Monsters don't even drop anything useful."

"Why not? Busan drops, doesn't it?"

Dang Seo-rin set the first day of each month as the protection tax due date. At the end of each month, she led the guild members on a void-clearing expedition outside Busan, then returned.

It wasn’t just about hunting. Dang Seo-rin always filmed the scenes of the monsters being killed and dragged at least one live monster back to Busan.

She demonstrated in front of Busan citizens that the Great Witch's magic did not apply only to humanity.

-Gweeeeh!

The monster, after tasting fire magic, water magic, time magic, and healing magic in order, screamed in gratitude with its limbs bound tightly.

"More torture! More! More!"

"Indeed, the Samcheon World guild leader knows how to entertain."

This magic show became so popular that it became a proud symbol and attraction of Busan.

Surprisingly, when they collected protection taxes the next day or the day after the execution show, the payment rate significantly increased. The citizens' response was along the lines of 'Since they gave us such an entertaining show, we should pay the admission fee.' Even in the days when the Korean National Tax Service was running smoothly, the ratio of sincere taxpayers wasn’t this high.

"Guild leader… Are you a genius?"

"Yes. You can keep complimenting me."

"If not for the pointy hat, you'd be in the biographies of great figures."

"Do you want to die?"

As predicted by Dang Seo-rin, Busan naturally fell into the hands of the Samcheon Guild.

As the situation turned interesting, even some humanists had to reconsider their political philosophies.

"Now that I think about it, monsters are scarier than humans."

"Right. You can at least talk to people; you can't negotiate with monsters."

"How did we miss this obvious truth until now! I feel pathetic!"

As the nation of early adopters, Korean guild leaders did not hesitate to emulate Dang Seo-rin.

Whether out of love for their hometown or a thirst for power, guild leaders switched their primary occupation to hunters. Guild leaders who failed to transition were naturally weeded out, so they weren't even worth mentioning.

However, none of them could keep up with Dang Seo-rin's 'magic show.'

Who could dare to perform a spell that cuts off a monster's limbs (actually more than just four limbs) and reattaches them while floating in mid-air?

"Why are the executions in our neighborhood so dull?"

"Over there in Busan, they've got fire magic and water magic and all sorts of things."

"Hah, nothing beats the original."

In a world where the internet and cinemas had perished, monster executions were irresistible entertainment. More and more civilians began to move to Busan.

The fact that Dang Seo-rin had set protection taxes at a very reasonable level also contributed to the migration boom.

And it was around this time that our Great Witch, Dang Seo-rin, started having strange thoughts—though she was always a bit strange, these were 'even stranger thoughts.'

Footnotes:

Chapter 55

The Ruler II

Sinnoa

I mentioned in the previous story that while all the guild leaders nationwide gladly accepted the AI judges, Dang Seo-rin was the exception.

"Ah, seriously—"

Now, I want to explain the reason behind it.

Because, in a certain sense, regarding this matter, I too couldn’t escape responsibility.

So, one could say this is the record of two accomplices: Dang Seo-rin and me.

"Failed again. Again."

The starting point was the 6th cycle.

Dang Seo-rin had taken off her pointy hat (a rare occurrence) and was pulling at her hair with one hand.

Like a novelist blocked on their writing or a lyricist dissatisfied with their lyrics.

Actually, this description was closer to the truth than a metaphor. Dang Seo-rin was holding a quill pen (she had actually hand-carved it from a goose feather) and was creating a spell.

"This one’s taking a while. What spell are you trying to make?"

"Equivalent Exchange."

Dang Seo-rin pouted.

"I’m trying to make a spell that exchanges two different objects or phenomena on a one-to-one basis."

"...I can't quite grasp where you’d use such a spell."

"Huh? You can’t judge a spell by its practicality. It’s all about the romance and making something cool."

"That’s a very guild leader-like statement."

As I mentioned before, Dang Seo-rin’s ability was called Cursed Song Incantation. In other words, to activate a spell, she had to sing a song, and naturally, the song had lyrics.

In essence… for Dang Seo-rin, creating a spell was no different from writing song lyrics.

I didn’t know much about magic since I hadn’t mastered it, but according to Dang Seo-rin, "When the right lyrics are completed, it feels like the gears in my head click into place!" and the spell is activated or something like that.

So, in fact, Dang Seo-rin’s trademark 'Resurrection Magic' was composed of lyrics like this:

Roll it, roll it

Bottom of the abyss, peak of the ether

All things swirl and spin

The peak of the ether, the bottom of the abyss

The eternally breathing fire wheel

Incidentally, the language was entirely in Latin.

Could Dang Seo-rin speak Latin? No, but there was a Latin major among the Samcheon World Guild members who served as her translator shuttle. That guild member was promoted to the executive team solely because they knew Latin.

It might not be new to you by now, but I hope you realize how seriously Dang Seo-rin took her witch cosplay. Her life was just one big fandom activity.

"Latin is a superior poetic language," "Especially, any chorus must be sung in Latin no matter what," thanks to Dang Seo-rin's nonsensical philosophy, whenever large-scale song magic like the Ten Legs extermination battle was activated, we could listen to a grand Latin chorus that covered the skies.

Honestly, it was impressive.

That's why she became the greatest idol on the Korean Peninsula. Anyway.

"Where did you get stuck?"

"Umm—I feel it lacks a bit of intuition. For example, vice guild leader, if someone offered you a bag of factory-made potato chips in exchange for six cartons of milk, what would you do?"

"That's a fair trade."

"Right? That's the kind of 'equivalent exchange' I'm thinking of. The problem is, beyond food and drinks, it gets a bit vague."

Dang Seo-rin chewed on the tip of her feather.

"For instance… let's say someone proposed to get rid of all the monsters in this world in exchange for you being imprisoned for 1000 years."

"Hmm."

"By the way, it's solitary confinement. You get meals on time but can't talk to the guards. You can read books or watch dramas, but you can't communicate with anyone."

If I heard this proposal now, I'd accept it as a complete bargain.

But back then, I was just a regressor in my 6th cycle. I hadn't even lived 100 years, and those less-than-100 years felt incredibly tough.

"Well? Would you take the deal?"

"...It's ambiguous. I'm not sure."

"Exactly. 'Not sure' is the honest answer."

The Great Witch gave a satisfied smile.

"Because we don't have a clear intuition about what 1000 years feels like, right? Even if someone tells us to live for 1000 years, we can't grasp how long that really is. Whether it's 1000 years, 900 years, or 1100 years, it all feels vaguely the same."

"Hmm."

Dang Seo-rin was right.

In fact, in our relationship, Dang Seo-rin was almost always right.

The notion that I'd accept the proposal now also stemmed from my acquired intuition about what 1000 years truly meant.

"Not just 1000 years, but my entire life experience is too limited."

"Hmm."

"...Yeah. I get what you're saying. I mean, even if I've experienced many things compared to others, it's still not enough to create a grand spell like [Equivalent Exchange]. Got it?"

"No one could amass such experience. Life isn't infinite, and lifespans are limited."

"...Indeed."

Dang Seo-rin stood up from the wooden chair and suddenly began to sing a song I had never heard before.

In fact, Dang Seo-rin often habitually, and spontaneously, hummed songs. Listening to her was also part of the unofficial duties of the vice guild leader.

I clapped. After finishing her solo concert, Dang Seo-rin gracefully

picked up her pointy hat and bowed.

"Was that the equivalent exchange spell?"

"Yeah. The spell didn’t activate, though. How was it?"

"It was good."

"Great."

Dang Seo-rin smiled.

And that was it.

Sometimes Dang Seo-rin agonized over how to create the equivalent exchange spell, in other words, what lyrics would trigger the spell, lost in the struggles of a creator. But she never completed the equivalent exchange.

Before she was killed by the Ten Legs.

The 6th cycle, the 7th, the 8th, the 9th were all the same.

In every cycle, Dang Seo-rin was obsessed with the equivalent exchange spell and never completed her bucket list.

In terms of completion, it was barely 10%.

We were never granted enough time to create a grand spell like equivalent exchange.

I didn’t know exactly how Dang Seo-rin died. I couldn’t protect her, but my pride lay in the fact that I always died a little earlier than our little witch.

Thus came the grand 10th cycle.

"I can’t walk your path with you, but at least I’ll follow your footsteps with the same pace as mine."

"Even if we can’t live together, we’ll die together."

"Take care, my companion in time."

Dang Seo-rin left her last words and died.

I couldn’t prevent her death, but at least I could hold her funeral. I acted as the funeral director. Since neither of us had any family, it was a solo affair.

I don't wish to detail Dang Seo-rin's funeral now, and I'm not sure if I'll ever want to.

But one thing was certain: her smiling last words left a deep mark on my heart.

After the 10th cycle ended, in the 11th cycle.

"Ah, seriously— Failed again. Again."

"This one’s taking a while. What spell are you trying to make?"

"Equivalent Exchange."

I no longer spoke formally to Dang Seo-rin, and she called me 'Undertaker' instead of 'Vice guild leader,' but our relationship remained amicable.

"Nice name. A spell that swaps two objects or phenomena?"

"How did you guess? How did you know, you?"

Because I was a regressor and once served you as my lord, I barely swallowed those words.

The person in front of me had asked me to keep the secret of my regression. I had made that promise.

In retrospect—Dang Seo-rin had a chilling cruelty.

To herself. To me.

Sometimes the measure of a relationship was how much cruelty people allowed each other.

"...Where are you stuck? From my perspective, the intention to swap all things seems too grand."

"Oh? That’s a valid point. More precisely, it’s the fundamental issue of lacking intuition about all things. Hmm."

Dang Seo-rin closed one eye.

"Can you listen for a moment? Sometimes hearing another’s opinion might help spark an idea."

You never revealed your spell creation process to anyone because you believed "magic must always be mysterious!" So why wouldn’t you cast any spell on me? You had laughed it off foolishly.

As someone who remembered all that, I couldn’t refuse Dang Seo-rin’s request.

"Is it an honor to be the first to hear the unfinished song of the Samcheon World' Leader?"

"Think of it as an honor."

I listened.

"How was it?"

"I enjoyed it. Impressive."

"Of course, it’s impressive. What I want from you is feedback. Feedback. The Latin lyrics mean this. Anything you think should be changed?"

"Hmm. How about replacing ‘object’ with ‘starlight’ or ‘moonlight’?"

"Oh?"

"This part expresses things that can’t be measured, right? So, instead of using a mundane word like 'object,' wouldn’t it be better to use something that conveys the meaning of things difficult for humans to grasp?"

"Ah—so, starlight, hmm. Oh? Wait a minute. Then…?"

Dang Seo-rin, as if struck by inspiration, scribbled furiously in her

notebook.

Of course, I had no talent as a creator, critic, or even as a mage.

I simply recited the unfinished lyrics from previous cycles.

"Got it! Yes! It’s still far from complete, but it feels like progress!"

"I’m glad it helped."

"Wow—thanks, Undertaker. What’s this? Do you have a talent for witchcraft? Want to join our guild? I can parachute you straight into the executive team. Huh?"

"Sorry, but the Samcheon World's uniform is a bit…."

"Huh? Want to die?"

And so began our 'making the equivalent exchange spell.'

Even though the Ten Legs began to be eradicated from the 10th cycle, Dang Seo-rin poured nearly all her lifespan into the battlefield, leaving her with little time to focus solely on spell creation.

Nevertheless, Dang Seo-rin steadily made progress, word by word, sentence by sentence, cycle after cycle.

"Instead of ‘exchange’ in the chorus, wouldn’t ‘judgment’ be more genuine, at least for you, Dang Seo-rin?"

"Oh?"

My role was to convey this unfinished product to the 'next cycle's Dang Seo-rin.'

"Here, the word ‘alchemy’ carries more emotion than ‘transaction’…."

"Instead of insisting on completing the equivalent exchange spell with just one chant, how about splitting the spell into two separate songs?"

"First, a resurrection, then a song about things whose value can’t be measured, and finally…."

The 11th cycle, the 12th, the 13th.

With each passing cycle, the completeness of the equivalent exchange spell increased.

Initially, Dang Seo-rin had been half-giving up, wondering how to complete such a grand spell, but as time went on, her expression brightened noticeably.

"Oh? Wait. Hold on. If I follow your suggestion like this…? Oh? Maybe, just maybe, I can really create this…?"

To be honest.

Perhaps all of this was my little indulgence.

Even if I couldn’t reveal I was a regressor to Dang Seo-rin, I wanted us to have at least one creation we made together.

It didn’t matter what that creation was. Equivalent exchange just happened to catch my eye by chance.

I always had a side that made me chuckle because it was so soft. Both to myself and to her.

I wanted to believe that sometimes the measure of a relationship was how much one could yield to the other.

And once again, Dang Seo-rin was right.

"—Unbelievable! It’s complete!"

Finally, in the 26th cycle.

"To think I could create such a grand spell with just two chants…. I’m a genius! And Undertaker! You might be a bit of a genius too!"

Dang Seo-rin had completed the equivalent exchange.

Footnotes:

Chapter 56

The Ruler III

Sinnoa

So, if you ask what the Great Witch Dang Seo-rin did with the grand spell she painstakingly created over such a long time— well, not much.

"Undertaker, are you good with pain?"

"I'd say I handle it fairly well. Why do you ask?"

"Do you have the generosity to forgive me even if I inflict pain on you?"

"....."

I felt uneasy.

"What are you planning?"

"Just answer the question first. Do you or don't you?"

"...I suppose I can say I do."

"Good. Undertaker, I'm going to show you something really interesting."

Right after she said that, Dang Seo-rin took out a fountain pen and stabbed it into my right hand.

I screamed like Tom from "Tom and Jerry." What the hell? Is she crazy?

"Wait! Stop! Hold on! I'm doing it too!"

"What?"

Dang Seo-rin promptly stabbed her own left hand. Blood dripped

from the pen’s sharp tip. Is she really insane?

As I looked on in bewilderment, Dang Seo-rin did something even crazier. As both of us bled, she began to sing.

And then, something amazing happened.

"Ah-♪"

A blue 'scales' appeared in the air, like a faint hologram.

At the same time, the wound on my right hand healed instantly. Instead, a new wound formed on my left hand.

The exact same thing happened to Dang Seo-rin but in reverse. The wound on her left hand moved to her right hand.

Shortly after, drops of blood balanced on the scales, and then the scales vanished from the air.

I was dumbfounded.

"What is this…?"

"Ah, this is the equivalent exchange."

Dang Seo-rin smiled with an otaku grin.

It was somewhat irritating.

"Your wound and my wound. My pain and your pain have been swapped."

"That’s amazing!"

I was genuinely impressed.

Our hands were still bleeding like faucets, but it was undoubtedly a remarkable spell.

"How does it work?"

"I told you, it’s equivalent exchange. The spell enacts a fair

exchange as I see fit."

"Incredible. So, could I potentially transfer my wounds to Ten Legs after getting injured?"

If that were possible, it could revolutionize our strategy against the monsters.

But Dang Seo-rin shook her head and clicked her tongue in her annoying manner.

"Unfortunately, such use is nearly impossible. The spell requires the other party's consent."

"Oh…"

I couldn't hide my disappointment. That's why she asked me those strange questions earlier.

"...Wait, then what can this be used for? Exchanging pain for pain or pleasure for pleasure, but the total amount remains the same. Could it perhaps be used to convert energy into another form?"

"Oh— that's a brilliant idea, but it's impossible too. As I said, consent is required, and you can't ask energy or materials for consent. They don't have brains. Oh, and it doesn't work on plants or animals either since they don't understand human language…."

"Then it's a completely useless spell!"

"Magic is never useless!"

Dang Seo-rin's berserk button was pushed. She was a lunatic who would immediately launch attack spells once triggered.

Naturally, our fight ended in my victory. For Dang Seo-rin to defeat me, she'd have to prepare her song spells at least 30 minutes in advance. That's the nature of the matchup between a straightforward warrior and a devious sorcerer.

After such a trivial quarrel, time passed.

Of course, I had the [Complete Memory] ability, so instead of saying "some time passed," I could specify it had been exactly 398 days since then. Just a literary expression. Counting every single moment like someone with savant syndrome wouldn’t interest anyone.

So, 398 days, 16 hours, and 38 minutes later, I visited the Samcheon World headquarters after a long while. But Dang Seo-rin wasn’t there.

"Ah, are you looking for the Great Witch? She’s out for today’s trial."

A guild member who recognized me explained. Her silver hair shimmered prettily.

Her name was Yu Ji-won, a talent selected in the 5th cycle and now serving as an executive in the Samcheon World. While she was quite capable, she had some significant personality flaws— a psychopath.

She was also the Latin major.

"Trial day? What’s that? And why is an operations chief manning the counter? Where are your subordinates?"

"Most of the guild members are out at the square. I don’t have much to do there, so I’m guarding the base."

"Hmm. So, what’s trial day?"

"Recently, in Busan, we designated the last day of every month as trial day."

The silver-haired psychopath adjusted her glasses.

"The Great Witch personally presides over trials for those who’ve committed murder or caused serious injuries. The public response has been very positive."

Ah, by the way, ‘Great Witch’ was Dang Seo-rin’s official title. Especially for guild members of the Samcheon World, it was

mandatory to use this title.

Similar to how I had to call the old man Swordmaster.

Only in the 5th cycle, when I served as the vice guild leader, did I get to call Dang Seo-rin ‘Guild leader.’ Because that was my condition for joining her.

"She’s probably on the last trial by now. It’ll take about an hour. Would you like to wait in the reception room? I’ll get you a ticket."

"No, it's fine. I’d just waste expensive snacks being here with you guys. Where is the trial held?"

"Right in the square ahead, Great Witch."

I walked to the indicated location.

Finding the way wasn’t difficult. It was the same square where Dang Seo-rin held her 'monster dissection shows,' commonly known as the execution square.

Despite the apocalypse, the well-maintained square was already bustling with the trial. It was grand. At a glance, about 600 citizens were sitting here and there, watching the trial.

"Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!"

"Quiet! Please be quiet!"

A Samcheon guild member’s voice boomed.

It was probably amplified with a 'Voice Amplification' spell. Since no singing was heard, a 'Silence' spell must have been cast too.

'Considering the spell has a basic repeating magic function, it must be at least three chants. Dang Seo-rin seems to have put a lot of effort into this.'

I turned my gaze.

In the center of the square, a man who appeared to be the

defendant stood with his head bowed. And Dang Seo-rin, the judge, was leisurely leaning her chin on her hand at the table.

'I’ve never seen a sight like this before.'

In my regression life, Dang Seo-rin holding public trials and passing judgments in front of citizens was unprecedented.

I watched the trial from a distance with interest. As the square quieted down, the guild member raised their voice.

"Please be quiet! I’ll repeat! The defendant is a witch who joined Samcheon World six months ago and was assigned to the combat squad. However, during last week’s expedition against the monsters, the defendant fled first, collapsing the front lines. This did not result in fatalities but caused two injuries, putting the combat squad in significant danger."

"Booooo!"

"You coward!"

Some citizens threw stones, but they couldn’t reach the trial table, likely due to a protective barrier, and bounced off.

"Quiet, everyone! Now, the Great Witch Dang Seo-rin will pass judgment!"

Silence fell over the area.

The hundreds of citizens, who had been boisterous as if at a festival, fell silent.

If the measure of an artist is how many people they can entertain, then the measure of a ruler is how many they can silence. This scene showed the status of Dang Seo-rin as the guild leader in Busan.

"This defendant is a deserter."

Dang Seo-rin’s voice flowed through the amplification spell. It was a stunningly beautiful voice.

Gentle and slow, yet the words flowed quickly, each complex term and sentence striking the listeners' ears.

Her voice wasn't just speech but rather a breath, filling the square's atmosphere.

The Samcheon World guild members looked at her with a dreamy reverence.

Well, it was somewhat cringe-inducing, but I understood their feelings as someone who had once been Dang Seo-rin's right hand. That voice was somewhat of a cheat.

"Deserters are usually dealt with by immediate execution. But in this case, there were no fatalities, and the deserter turned themselves in the next day. These factors should be considered."

"....."

"Deserter. Do you regret fleeing, putting your comrades at risk?"

"Yes, I'm sorry…."

"Can you promise never to make the same mistake again?"

"Of course, Great Witch. Absolutely…."

At that moment, blue 'scales' appeared above Dang Seo-rin's head.

The blue light wasn't like a neon sign but more like the bluish light of the stars scattered across the night sky, tracing the outline of the scales.

"Then, you can be forgiven. Neither I nor the witches of the Samcheon World, nor your comrades who had to cover for you, will hold [your desertion last week] against you."

Silently.

From Dang Seo-rin and the guild members' chests, and from the direction of the Samcheon World headquarters, black smoke—thin as thread, moving like snakes, crawled out.

The black threads gathered on the left side of the scales. With a clatter, the scales tipped heavily to one side.

"In return."

Dang Seo-rin waved her finger.

"From now on, [you cannot retreat from any battlefield first. Even if you must retreat, you can only do so after ensuring all your comrades have retreated]."

"Ah…"

"Not just your comrades. Citizens are included too. You can't withdraw until their safety is secured. In other words, [you will always be the last to retreat]."

"....."

"Do you agree?"

The defendant's face turned pale.

Battles with monsters were never safe. Jumping off a cliff with a wingsuit had better survival odds.

But for some reason?

The defendant's expression showed not only paleness but also a hint of relief, as if finally at peace.

"...Yes, Great Witch. I agree."

"Good."

Silently.

A white thread-like snake emerged from the defendant's body. It resembled a breath in the winter air. Not just from the mouth, but an exhale from the whole body.

The defendant looked up blankly at the white snake leaving his body. It coiled on the right side of the scales.

With a clatter, the scales balanced.

"The balance is achieved."

"Thank you… Thank you…."

"Now, fight for your comrades, and more importantly, for the citizens."

Ohh, some spectators let out a sound. Hundreds of citizens responded with applause.

"....."

The scene was a shock to me. The equivalent exchange, a seemingly useless grand spell, was now functioning as Busan’s court.

This was why, even in future cycles, Busan rejected AI judges, unlike other cities.

It was because of Dang Seo-rin's 'witch trials.'

Footnotes:

Chapter 57

The Ruler IV

Sinnoa

After the trial ended, we went out to eat Sundae stew.

I didn’t particularly feel like going back to the guild building, and besides, my relationship with Dang Seo-rin was no longer just 'guild leader and vice guild leader' but more like 'foodie friends.'

And I couldn’t hold back my question even before the assorted sundae platter arrived.

"Seo-rin, what was that back there?"

"Hmm? What?"

Dang Seo-rin tilted her head with a dumbfounded look. I frowned and handed her a small dish with some gochujang sauce.

“The trial, I mean. Since when did you start using equivalent exchange for judgments? It wasn’t there the last time I visited."

"You just haven’t been around Busan enough to notice. We’ve been doing it for nearly half a year now. Here, try this."

Dang Seo-rin handed me a small dish with a perfect mix of salt, pepper, and chili powder.

"The citizens really love it. These days, it’s counted among Busan’s top three attractions along with the monster dissection shows."

"What the…? Explain a bit more. Sir, can we get some Dongdongju here?"

"Coming right up!"

I took the jug of Dongdongju and mixed it with half a cup of iced

water. This was Dang Seo-rin's favorite ratio. The prestige of having looked after a friend for hundreds of years came from such small gestures.

"What's there to explain? An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. I just applied the Code of Hammurabi as it is."

"Hmm."

"When the country was still intact, we could throw everything into prison. But now, there are no prisons, right? Cutting off fingers or choking necks wastes valuable labor… So, I just arrange 'a revenge that everyone can agree on.'"

"…'Vengeance is mine; I will repay,' says the Lord."

"Huh?"

"It's from Romans 12:19. For heaven's sake. You do something ridiculous every time I look away."

"What? Are you picking a fight?"

"My sanity is what's being picked on. This is really absurd."

The assorted sundae, sundae stew, Dongdongju, and well-fermented kimchi disappeared beyond our chopsticks and bites. The meal was delicious—a proper feast only available in Busan these days.

"I think it was odd that old society tried to handle everything with prison sentences."

Dang Seo-rin raised her chopsticks.

"Think about it. How can theft and murder receive the same punishment? The feeling of losing your belongings versus getting stabbed is vastly different. There's a qualitative difference, you know, a difference in quality."

"Hmm."

"Theft varies, too. The feeling when today's food is stolen, when the

radio you've kept secret from other survivors is taken, or when your kidney is stolen…"

"The last one counts as theft?"

"Of course. Anyway, punishment must vary according to the severity and circumstances, the character of the perpetrator and the victim. For instance, Jesus might turn the other cheek, but Undertaker, you'd probably consider it 'a fair deal' only after taking their cheek and a molar. Am I wrong?"

"I understand your point."

"And surprisingly… The greatest witch in history, the unparalleled and unique Dang Seo-rin, can arrange a fair deal for anyone."

At that moment, a little kid approached the restaurant and shyly held out a pointy hat, saying, "Great Witch!" Dang Seo-rin smiled brightly and signed the hat brim.

As soon as the fan service ended, Dang Seo-rin's face drooped like a sponge soaked in hot water. This happened wherever our idol of Busan went.

"So cute."

"But that fairness is just 'what you think is fair.' People can always judge wrongly."

"That's why equivalent exchange doesn't work without the other's consent. If they think the deal isn't fair, they just don't agree."

"Who would dare refuse a judgment from Busan's ruler?"

"In a world like this, they should be grateful I even hold trials. If I don't pass judgment, it's a witch hunt. Regardless of the crime, they end up dead. Isn't this better than death?"

"Hmm."

"If you're still uneasy, come observe the trial next month."

Dang Seo-rin grumbled.

"By the way, what have you been up to that you're so hard to see these days?"

"....."

...Honestly, I was a bit lost around this time.

If you're an astute reader, you might already have figured it out, but the 26th cycle was when the Swordmaster officially declared a 'vacation.'

When a teammate you believed would stick with you through the end of the world suddenly retires, it's like FC Barcelona after Lionel Messi's transfer. My mental state was like that.

I showed some embarrassing behavior as a regressor during this time… Let's skip the black history.

"Alright. I'll come again in a month."

"Yeah. Bring some Melona."

Exactly a month later, I arrived at Busan's 'execution square' with homemade Melona ice cream.

"Here you go."

"Oh, thanks… Wow! It looks just like Melona!"

Dang Seo-rin marveled at my culinary skills.

For the record, I could replicate nearly 92% of the taste of pre-apocalypse cup noodles, bagged noodles, and snacks. I got the recipes directly from the headquarters of snack companies, so you can trust me.

What? How else do you think a regressor spends all that time? This is the most productive hobby I could find.

"I reserved a good spot over there."

This time, I could watch the entire trial from a prime seating position.

As I sucked on a Melona—Dang Seo-rin, sitting at the trial bench, was also casually chewing on a Melona—I observed that surprisingly… Busan's witch trials were quite rational.

"You cut off someone's leg, so you'll serve the victim for life. [You'll follow all the tasks originally performed by both legs as directed by the victim]. You can't leave the victim's side without their permission. Do you agree?"

"The only remaining newspaper in Busan falsely accused a citizen, leading to their suicide. Though there's no family left to seek revenge, the damage to the newspaper's reputation must be repaired. From now on, all your actions must be recorded in a column of the newspaper. [All your past and future wrongdoings must be published accurately]. This will let everyone in Busan know what kind of person you are. Do you agree?"

"You didn't pay wages for work done. Labor is an investment of time. [For the exact same amount of time the victim worked, you'll follow their orders]. Of course, unreasonable orders like suicide aren't allowed. You'll eat the same food, sleep in the same bed, wake up, and rest at the same time as the victim. Do you agree?"

If civilization were intact, such judgments would be unthinkable.

Without Dang Seo-rin's magic, these deals could never be realized.

Her judgments were cruel and harsh— yet they held a strange persuasion, making hundreds of people in the vast square feel 'convinced.'

Each time a judgment was passed, the blue scales shimmered in the air.

The most impressive trial was for the defendant who had killed someone, a murder trial.

"....."

Dang Seo-rin chewed on the popsicle stick from her finished Melona.

On one side stood the murderer, on the other, the bereaved family. Her dark blue eyes scanned them.

"Do you regret the murder?"

"...Yes."

"Are you genuinely sorry to the bereaved?"

"Yes… I am sorry…."

"Then, [you must endure whatever the bereaved do to you without resisting]. You can't complain or express your grievances. You just have to accept it."

"....."

"Do you agree?"

"....."

The silence was quite long. Despite the lengthy pause, the moment the defendant nodded was surprisingly short.

"Yes. I agree. Please… please do that, Great Witch."

The scales gleamed.

"You bastard!"

At that moment, a family member jumped the fence and lunged at the defendant. Thud! The sound of a fist shattering bone echoed clearly in my ears.

"How could you! You killed our child! You promised to marry her, how could you! Bastard! Son of a bitch!"

In normal circumstances, someone would've intervened. In a pre-apocalypse court, security would have stopped it.

But in the execution square, no one stopped the family. Other relatives who followed began to kick the defendant on the ground.

Busan had clear visibility since most high-rise buildings were demolished. The red sunset reflected off the sea, bouncing back to the city as it always had.

In the execution square, under the blood-red sky, the defendant's blood drops fell around. Soon, the breathing stopped.

"....."

And in that moment— I was struck by the intense realization that all this might just be an external reflection of Dang Seo-rin's inner world.

While all spectators watched the bereaved family's punishment, I alone turned my head to look at Dang Seo-rin.

She was looking at me, too.

Between us, the sunset was deep red.

There's an epilogue.

I don't believe I have the right to judge everything in the world.

So, I didn't stop Dang Seo-rin's 'witch trials.' She had her own rationality and fairness.

Also, to be fair, her rationality and fairness were the best possible in the apocalypse.

Other cities? Private sanctions based on the guild leader's personal gain. And even AI judges weren't introduced until much later.

Not just in the 26th cycle, but in every cycle I shared the completed 'equivalent exchange' spell, Dang Seo-rin consistently held witch trials.

"So… how was it?"

"What do you mean?"

"The trial."

We had returned to the train of the Samcheon guild and were drinking.

Usually, we would visit various places to maintain our friendship.

But if Dang Seo-rin said, "Let's drink on the train tonight," it meant she wanted to get really drunk.

As the ruler of Busan and the leader of the Korean guild alliance, as well as the progenitor of song magic, the Great Witch couldn't afford to show herself drunk and stumbling on the streets. Not even in front of guild members.

It took someone like me, who defeated the Ten Legs and recaptured the Han River south of Seoul, or a teacher with many disciples through SG Net, for Dang Seo-rin to not lose her authority when hanging out together.

"I think it's fine."

"What part is fine?"

"Everything seems fine, just by the fact that you're asking someone else if it's okay."

"Fuf."

Dang Seo-rin laughed.

"What's that? Silly."

But her expression visibly relaxed.

While I endured a drunk friend's ramblings for a while, Dang Seo-rin suddenly activated the equivalent exchange spell.

"Undertaker, put what you think of me on the scales."

"What? Are you a child…? Are you asking like a parent who asks if

you like mom or dad more?"

"Ah, come on. Just put it on. Do you agree?"

I sighed and said, "Alright."

Then, from my chest, a shadowy, radiant snake tail emerged.

Dang Seo-rin twirled her finger. From her heart area, a white thread-like snake crawled and coiled on the other side of the scales.

Screech—

An impossible noise sounded as the scales slowly balanced. Soon, they reached perfect equilibrium.

Dang Seo-rin smirked like a cat.

"Hmm."

"What is that?"

In the night, the scales Dang Seo-rin created glowed faintly like starlight, and the Milky Way shimmered outside the window.

It was a Meteor Shower.

With the rain of stars as a backdrop, Dang Seo-rin smiled brightly.

"A secret."

It was a truly witch-like answer.

Footnotes:

Chapter 58

The Puppeteer I

Sinnoa

This story's genre is somewhat bizarre mystery.

I occasionally use the term 'route.'

This is because I often liken my journey to prevent the world's destruction to mountain climbing.

Mountaineers who ascend the Himalayas often refer to the paths they take as 'routes.' I, too, borrow their terminology to describe my own strategies.

The grand premise of a regressor.

'How can one prevent destruction?'

How can one conquer the summit of the 'Everest of time' that no human has ever reached?

Throughout my 1183 cycles of regression, there have indeed been countless routes.

For example, from the 35th cycle to the 107th cycle, the paths I tried to pioneer were the 'Civilization Rebuilding Route' or the 'Revival Route.' For this ascent, the members of my climbing team were as follows:

1) The presence of a 'Saintess' who could observe all awakeners within the radius and maintain a very high moral standard.

2) The presence of 'Seo Gyu' with the ubiquitous ability to maintain SG Net, a community where all awakeners could participate anytime, anywhere, regardless of their segmented activity ranges.

3) The presence of 'Noh Do-hwa,' a national road management corps leader who could connect and maintain road networks between city bases without political corruption.

4) The presence of someone who could mediate and lead them all, always diligent, a modern-day knight in shining armor, in other words, me, the Undertaker.

Those who have followed my story thus far would agree that my preparation was methodical and thorough.

Even in the situation where we lost Old Man Scho, the strongest swordsman and the ultimate joker, I pride myself on having done my best.

However, the 'Revival Route' collapsed in an instant.

-Please remember, Undertaker.

-The abilities of awakeners are not purely blessings. They are double-edged swords.

Codename, Saintess.

Her codename after falling, Executioner.

The appearance of this being completely derailed the route I had planned.

-If awakeners become so accustomed to their abilities that they are consumed by them, they will become monstrous like me.

-20 years. Ideally, before 15 years approach, you must restore the world to its original form. Please remember, Undertaker.

That's right.

Awakeners were never the complete opposites of monsters. They were of the same kind. If monsters were beings born from the void, awakeners were nurturing monsters in their minds and hearts.

Dang Seo-rin. Noh Do-hwa. Cheon Yo-hwa. Sword Marquess.

The abilities they possessed, miracles unattainable by ordinary humans, were not just blessings but also curses.

By now, some readers might be starting to understand why I had to struggle through 1183 cycles.

Exactly. To catch monsters, you need awakeners, but if an awakener becomes too powerful, they turn into a colossal monster. It's as if the world itself is—

'Do you perhaps enjoy bleak stories? In fact, I do enjoy them very much. Bleak.'

'Here, I've made a bleak stew that's quite delicious. Would you like to try just one spoonful…?'

It's like they shyly ask, forcing their preferences on others.

You might think, "What kind of lunatic would do such a thing?" Unfortunately, the world's unreasonable fate doesn't end here.

But for now, I'll set aside the regressor's complaints.

Today, I want to talk briefly about the first route I ever established.

Called the 'A Route.'

The first route in my regressor life, also known as the 'Academy Route.'

Unlike other routes, the 'A Route' was uniquely co-created by Old Man Scho and me.

It was before Old Man Scho went on his damned vacation (seriously, if that old man ever comes back).

"Hey, Embalmer."

Old Man Scho said while lifting a dumbbell.

Why he suddenly picked up a dumbbell was beyond me. After all,

Old Man Scho was always pumping iron 24/7.

For reference, Embalmer is another name for the Undertaker. Old Man Scho sometimes called me that, not out of respect for my alias, but to sneak in a nuance of 'damn' into the pronunciation. Damn old man.

"Why?"

"Have you heard the news?"

"What news?"

"In Fukuoka… No, kid, why is your tone like that? Huh? Talking back to an elder with that kind of attitude."

The exact time was the 18th cycle.

At this point, Old Man Scho's mental state was still intact. Of course, even when Old Man Scho was sane, he was just an added German tyrant to the world.

Here's a surprising fact: that old man graduated from art school.

Doesn't it sound off?

Anyone who knows history can guess what kind of sentence emerges when 'Germany' combines with 'art school.'

"Did you leave your brain cells behind during your last regression...? Anyway, what about Fukuoka?"

"Oh, right. I heard an interesting awakener has appeared in Fukuoka. Codename Puppeteer."

"Puppeteer? What's their ability?"

"Who knows. Awakeners usually keep their abilities tightly under wraps. I only heard that the committee courted them several times."

Old Man Scho tapped his nose. It was annoying.

"But I have a feeling. Puppeteer must be exceptional."

"Oh, that feeling."

"Why? My intuition is usually right."

In subculture works, there's a concept called 'Academy Drift.'

It refers to when a perfectly good work suddenly takes a detour with the protagonist enrolling in an academy, often leading to the work's decline.

However, there was a very rational reason why Old Man Scho and I established and ran an academy.

"We need to recruit them."

It was to gather promising talents.

It was nearly impossible for Old Man Scho and me alone to prevent the world's destruction.

So we needed to form the most powerful party possible to at least flip off the world that constantly cooked bleak stews.

Even when recruiting talent.

-Would you join our guild and serve us?

-Would you like to enroll in an academy and receive lessons from experts?

There was a significant difference in the tone between these two invitations.

Especially for Asians. Including Koreans, many Asians had a perverse obsession that got excited by words like 'education,' 'entrance exam,' and 'prestige.'

To study and succeed in a guild was merely a power play, but to enter an academy and study well was seen as self-discipline, filial piety, and patriotism.

There was no reason not to exploit such a good culture.

Old Man Scho put up the signboard of 'Academy Principal' instead of the rigid title of guild master. I took the position of vice-principal.

We even added some seasoning to it.

-Academy run by a German!

-Proven skills from the Ten Legs Raid. Guaranteed by Sword Star and Undertaker.

The slogan of a foreigner-run academy with pure German blood was practically a brainwashing ray for Asians.

By the way, the name of our educational institution was Freedom Academy, in German, Freiheit Academy.

If Germans had seen it, they might have raised their eyebrows at the institution that oddly emphasized ‘pure blood’ and ‘freedom.’ One of the most famous buildings built by Germans had the slogan ‘Arbeit macht frei’ (Work sets you free) at its entrance.

Fortunately, Old Man Scho was a supporter of the Social Democratic Party. People trusted the specialized foreign awakener academy without any hesitation.

Creating an organization that we called a guild but read as an academy to selectively extract promising awakeners from various countries.

This was the essence of the ‘A Route.’

“What. If they are really outstanding, we should recruit them. So, are you planning to go to Fukuoka to recruit this Puppeteer? Do ferries still operate these days?”

“If there’s a will, there’s a way. A scholar who wants to go will find a way. How could I not get even a single ferry?”

“Even if you safely cross the Korean Strait, the Japanese won’t let you take their awakener easily. They’re in a rush too.”

“It’s fine. They’re not Japanese but Korean.”

“What?”

“Originally from Busan, they quickly evacuated as soon as the gate opened.”

“But why evacuate to there… It’s not like monsters are North Korean soldiers. It’s hell there and here alike.”

“Who knows? It’s only been three years.”

“Oh.”

I took a moment of silence.

“…But if it’s Fukuoka, are they involved with the Provisional Government there? You’ll be in trouble if you get entangled with them.”

“No idea. Do you think I’m omniscient?”

“Hmmm. So, when are you planning to go?”

“Well, when are you planning to go?”

“…?”

“…?”

We exchanged glances.

“…?”

“…?”

Communication, failure.

We silently raised our swords. We deeply respected the traditional method that humanity had always chosen when communication failed since ancient times.

Five minutes passed.

“Have a safe trip, Embalmer.”

“Damn it…”

“Where are you trying to defeat a Swordmaster with such poor swordsmanship? Ah, if you see any instant ramen on the way, get some. Preferably tonkotsu. Isn’t Fukuoka famous for its tonkotsu? Let’s treat our stomachs.”

I had no choice. At that time, I was still weaker than Old Man Scho.

Dragging my bruised body, I pathetically left the principal’s office.

[The Saintess of National Salvation is cheering for you.]

I gave a bitter smile.

‘As expected, the only one on my side is a constellation.’

Of course, in the 18th cycle, I didn’t know the constellation’s true identity as an awakener. My relationship with the Saintess was close to what is known as parasocialism.

“Only the constellation understands me. I’ll be on a short business trip to Japan, so please take care of that old man.”

[The Saintess of National Salvation cheers you not to worry.]

“Constellation…!”

To give a similar example, it was like a fan getting overly attached to a Vtuber.

Why? After all, the constellation genre also originated from internet streaming platforms. This much was a healthy hobby.

Hmm.

…It was an immature time in many ways.

Even if my memory classified it as a dark history, to others, the awakener known as ‘Undertaker’ was undoubtedly a person of

interest.

Old Man Scho. Dang Seo-rin. Undertaker.

No matter what, the main characters of the Ten Legs Raid were the three of us.

And it was the first case in the world where boss-level monsters were subjugated purely by a private organization, not government-led.

Korea originally had a tradition where militias received buffs over regular armies, so it wasn't strange.

Of course, if we were to rank purely by popularity domestically and internationally:

Dang Seo-rin > Old Man Scho ≧ Undertaker

would be the order.

If Old Man Scho and my fame fluctuated, Dang Seo-rin always maintained the top spot.

She was the leader of the Korean Guild Union (the name varied slightly by cycle). More importantly, her character overwhelmed both Old Man Scho and me.

A witch singing on the battlefield? Isn't that a cheat? How could two swordsmen compete with that?

Simply put, once you saw Dang Seo-rin singing a four-part a cappella on the battlefield, everyone would think she was amazing. Especially when her song provided buff doping without side effects.

Ah, already the Korean awakeners couldn't go to boss raids without Dang Seo-rin's song…

Anyway.

In Korea, my position was the second-in-command, occasionally falling to third when Old Man Scho unleashed his ultimate

potential.

“Welcome to Japan, Undertaker!”

Even that level of position was enough to attract a swarm of flies.

“Waaaaaa!”

“Welcome to Busan!”

“Undertaker! Undertaker! Undertaker!”

As soon as I landed at the port, nearly three hundred people cheered in unison. It was more of an army than flies.

Moreover, they vigorously waved banners instead of wings. The banners were emblazoned with symbols like:

[★Pride of Korea, Awakener Undertaker★]

[Welcome to Busan!]

[All members of the Second Provisional Government of Korea]

Ah.

My head hurt.

‘Busan? You idiots…’

Let me explain.

Of course, I had sailed from Busan to Fukuoka, Japan. I didn’t return to Busan after a tour of the Korean Strait.

It wasn’t my destination that had gone crazy but their minds.

Fukuoka (福岡).

Reading the Chinese characters, it means ‘prosperous hill.’ The second character (岡) signifies a mountain or hill.

So, these flies before me decided to call Fukuoka ‘Busan.’ Ignoring

the perfectly good city name.

It was akin to telling Native Americans, ‘From now on, you’re Indians.’

The even more ridiculous point was that Japan already had a city called Toyama (富山), which could be phonetically rendered as ‘Busan.’

In short, these people were being triple nuisances to Busan, Fukuoka, and Toyama.

Why on earth?

“Ahaha. Welcome, Undertaker!”

The middle-aged man at the front of the welcoming crowd explained everything.

Mayor Jung.

Real name Jung Sang-guk.

He wasn’t the current mayor. In Korea, the public servant job had been abolished along with elementary, middle, high schools, and universities long ago.

Jung Sang-guk was the ‘former’ mayor of ‘Busan.’

Currently, he was also the head of the Second Provisional Government of Korea.

When a massive void swept over the south of the Han River, causing the Blue House and National Assembly to reconcile and start a grand coalition towards heaven, Sejong and Busan were the remaining city bases to stabilize the situation.

The public servants in Sejong attempted to control the military (and they, too, amicably departed to the bellies of the Ten Legs).

Meanwhile, Mayor Jung Sang-guk of Busan chose a more traditional approach.

-Citizens, what kind of people are we?

-Uh… The people of delivery?

-No, we are the people of Terran.

Jung Sang-guk lifted his supporters and organization, relocating them like a command center.

His generation found this joke quite fitting, and the citizens were impressed.

If Kim Il-sung, the founder of the Daedonggang faction, could only practice teleportation alone, Jung Sang-guk managed a mass teleportation. It was proof that the Nakdonggang faction inherited the martial arts of Samhan. His methods were different.

Now, Koreans acknowledged Jung Sang-guk's name value on par with Admiral Won Gyun and Prime Minister Lee Wan-yong of the Korean Empire.

Considering Koreans' typically stringent evaluation of politicians, this was no small feat.

By nature, all politicians are strictly idealists.

Politicians believed that even if they lacked legitimacy in reality, they could always borrow from ideals. So did Jung Sang-guk.

The exile group became a 'government-in-exile,' which suddenly transformed into the 'Second Provisional Government of Korea.' Jung Sang-guk's business card changed accordingly, now reading 'Prime Minister of the Second Provisional Government of Korea.'

On the day he was elected Prime Minister, Fukuoka was renamed Busan. Thus, Jung Sang-guk also acquired the title of 'Mayor of Busan' as the representative of the Fukuoka Korean Association.

It was madness.

And now I was invited to this mad show.

It was common grammar worldwide for fallen politicians to cling to war heroes.

“I have long admired you, Mr. Undertaker!”

Jung Sang-guk, who once boasted a StarCraft ladder score of 2150 as a Terran user, beamed brightly and hugged me.

Following the Prime Minister of the Second Provisional Government, the ministers of foreign affairs, finance, justice, and internal affairs all shook my hand. It was a very orderly mechanical hug.

I smiled mechanically as well, and inwardly assigned modern MZ-generation nicknames like damn, fuck, damn it to the provisional government ministers.

‘Damn old man. This is why I didn’t want to come to Fukuoka for a business trip.’

Kuk-ku-ku.

From afar, I heard Old Man Scho’s laughter and a hallucination of ‘yeah, your swordsmanship is weak.’ Damn it.

Footnotes:

Chapter 59

The Puppeteer II

Sinnoa

To put it bluntly, I had no respect for the Second Provisional Government. I respected my eye crust more and didn't want to be unnecessarily rude.

The problem was the Fukuoka city government.

The ones who leaked the information about my visit to the provisional government were likely from that side.

At this point, unlike the Korean Peninsula, the governmental organizations in the Japanese archipelago hadn't completely collapsed yet.

Therefore, they had the luxury to hold on to the "provisional government" coin without discarding it.

Who knows? This coin might rocket to Mars' atmosphere.

It was an extremely irrational judgment, but gamblers are often resistant to rational persuasion. Moreover, the Japanese had the sweet success story of the Lee Wan-yong coin etched in their minds.

The point when the Japanese government began regaining its rationality was much later, with the descent of the eight million monstrosities. It was a good trade, except for the price of offering heads, arms, torsos, legs, and innards for wisdom.

I would eventually take down a monstrosity called Inunaki... but all these tales are for later.

It wasn't yet a realized future.

Therefore, for now, I had to consider Fukuoka's authorities' dignity.

My task was to abduct an A-class awakener residing in Fukuoka without causing a fuss. Provoking the locals would be foolish.

Of course, in my 180th cycle, I could have kidnapped the Puppeteer without caring about politics, but at this point, I was merely a novice in my 18th cycle.

What could I do? Sometimes, you have to do dirty work.

"Haha. To have a patriot like you supporting our provisional government feels like gaining a thousand troops!"

"Oh, support is too grand a word. I just want to share the hardships of my compatriots abroad during these tough times."

"Ahaha, I see. Truly humble! Here! Please accept a drink, Mr. Undertaker!"

In the end, I spent the night drinking with the provisional government officials. While Jung Sang-guk might have enjoyed the 'sweet conversations with the war hero Undertaker' more than the alcohol.

Anyway, I sang his praises enough to make Jung Sang-guk satisfied.

"By the way... what brings you to Fukuoka?"

"Ah, it's more of a business matter than official duty."

"Oh, in these times, what's the difference between business and official duty? Any business you undertake is practically a national project. Please, do tell me."

"Your words put me at ease. I'm looking for an awakener known by the codename Puppeteer who resides in Fukuoka. Do you know of them?"

"...Puppeteer?"

For the first time, Jung Sang-guk stuttered.

"Yes, Puppeteer."

"...I know them very well. But why...?"

"As you know, I run a small academy, a training facility exclusively for awakeners. I'd like to see this Puppeteer in person and, if suitable, invite them to enroll in our academy."

"I see..."

The former mayor of Busan stared at me and muttered.

"...Maybe this is for the best."

It was a murmur whose meaning eluded me. The silence between us stretched for a couple of seconds before Jung Sang-guk awkwardly broke it.

"Do you smoke?"

I was a staunch anti-smoker, but that question was a signal for a private chat outside.

For that, I could temporarily sacrifice my lung health. Some people even abandoned their homeland, so what was a little smoke?

"Yes, I am desperate for one."

"Let's go. I can't stand the heat, need some fresh air."

We left the bar and polluted the night sky of the city.

As the level of fine dust in Fukuoka rose appropriately, a rather remarkable sight unfolded.

"Oh. A shooting star."

"Oh? Really."

A few meteors fell from the night sky. It was more of a sprinkle than a meteor shower.

Soon the cosmic rain ceased. Jung Sang-guk, however, was barely looking at the meteors, nervously glancing around.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm envious of you, Mr. Undertaker."

"Sorry?"

"Sometimes I imagine how great it would be if I were an awakener."

Jung Sang-guk pulled out a portable ashtray with trembling hands and stubbed his cigarette into it.

In that gesture, I didn't see his neatness but rather the survival instinct of someone living abroad.

If he had carelessly flicked the ash on the streets of Fukuoka, passing Japanese might wonder, ‘Does this Korean think of our land as an ashtray?’

"Puppeteer is my daughter."

I was so focused on the portable ashtray that I reacted a bit late.

"...What?"

"Puppeteer, Ha-yul. Lee Ha-yul. She's my daughter. If you take her, please take good care of her."

This was unexpected.

Just as I was about to ponder the peculiarities of fate, I quickly came up with a question.

"Wait a moment. Aren’t you Mr. Jung? Pardon me for asking, but if your daughter's surname is Lee..."

"Ah. She took her mother's surname."

Could it be that he believed a child should inherit not only the father's surname but also the mother's?

But my imagination was too limited.

The former mayor of Busan smiled. It seemed a forced smile.

"She's my second... a hidden daughter."

Damn.

The first day's schedule ended.

After that, I had 2 nights and 3 days of alone time. The provisional government had arranged my accommodation.

‘He’s something else, alright.’

Even with the country falling apart, he managed to flee abroad with his second family. A true hero who could even use teleportation had to be different.

Long ago, when Emperor Gaozu of Han was defeated by the demonic Xiang Yu and had to flee, he was forced to climb onto a carriage.

At that time, Liu Bang threw his children off the carriage, claiming it was overweight. Those who had played RPGs would understand that having a full inventory was an unforgivable sin for a player.

However, in the game of the Chu-Han Contention, children were designated as essential items, and a warning popped up, saying, [It's unacceptable to discard them!]. He failed to abandon them in the end.

This is why people need to learn martial arts. If Liu Bang had mastered the teleportation technique like Jung Sang-guk, he could have committed such atrocities without relying on a weak carriage.

"Mr. Undertaker, are you there?"

Knock, knock.

Just as I was testing the boundary between meditation and daydreaming, a martial arts master visited. It was our first reunion in two days.

Jung Sang-guk handed me a piece of paper with Puppeteer's address

written on it.

His appearance was odd. Despite the warm spring day, he wore gloves and had a rather strong fragrance.

He even declined to accompany me to Puppeteer's house.

"Why? Aren’t you coming with me?"

"I'm sorry."

Jung Sang-guk smiled awkwardly.

It was a smile unbecoming of a politician. His expression was stiffer than it had been at the drinking party.

"My daughter is going through a strong rebellious phase these days..."

"But wouldn't you be worried about me meeting your daughter alone?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. Besides, there's a housekeeper at Ha-yul's place, so it's fine."

"Hmm."

"More importantly, I talked to Ha-yul about you yesterday. You don't need to worry."

"Got it. See you in the evening."

Actually.

I should have noticed the oddity then.

If Jung Sang-guk's second family was functioning properly, the housekeeper wouldn't be there but rather his daughter's biological mother.

Moreover, it was strange that someone who had struggled so hard to win my favor suddenly refused to accompany me.

But what could I do?

I checked the address and asked locals for directions, eventually arriving at Lee Ha-yul's house.

Knock, knock—I knocked on the door handle attached to the entrance (few people used electronic doorbells due to electricity conservation) to announce my visit.

"Is anyone home?"

Knock, knock.

"Hello, I'm the Undertaker. I'm here on Mr. Jung Sang-guk's recommendation. Is anyone home?"

Knock, knock.

"....."

It was purely my experience as a regressor who had gone through countless hardships that made me sense the foreboding then.

I turned the doorknob. It was unlocked.

"....."

As I stepped into the foyer, my sight was filled with cobwebs.

The corridors, living room, and first-floor staircase of the house were covered in giant cobwebs. Like an abandoned house.

No matter how hard life abroad was or how illegitimate a child, it was too odd for the daughter of the head of the provisional government to live in such conditions.

'No, are these even cobwebs? They are too big.'

Rustle—

Something was under my shoe. A doll.

Distracted by the cobwebs, I hadn't noticed the dolls placed all

around the house.

"Lee Ha-yul?"

I carefully navigated the house, avoiding the dolls.

Figures, Russian matryoshka dolls, Japanese Ichimatsu dolls, Barbie dolls, ball-jointed dolls, stuffed dolls, paper flower dolls.

Literally a house of dolls.

Or perhaps a spider's nest.

A woman in her 40s, presumed to be the housekeeper, was found dead, hanged by cobwebs in the second-floor bedroom.

"....."

I was used to corpses. I didn't panic, but seeing the 13 dolls surrounding the corpse as if in prayer was a first.

It wasn't the only first.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.

Dolls attached to strings moved up and down around the corpse.

Like playing on a seesaw at a playground.

I had no idea what kind of mechanism it was, but the strings wrapped around the dolls' wrists extended to the corpse's 'jaw' and 'hands.'

So, as the dolls moved up and down, the corpse's jaw clicked, and the fingers wiggled weirdly. Yes. Like a nutcracker.

"What the...?"

The stench was overwhelming.

Judging by the rigor mortis, she had been dead for over 30 hours. At least 30 hours, but it felt much longer.

That was strange.

Over 30 hours meant it wasn't yesterday but the day before.

Moreover, Jung Sang-guk had testified that he met his daughter yesterday and told her about me. So, the housekeeper was already dead by then?

'Strange.'

I instinctively felt that Jung Sang-guk had lied to me.

Especially the gloves. His out-of-season gloves bothered me.

I left the 'house of dolls' and returned to my lodging. I planned to gather my belongings and track down Jung Sang-guk.

Soon, it turned out I didn't need to.

Jung Sang-guk's corpse was hanging from cobwebs in the middle of my lodging.

"....."

How?

Something was off. No, it was dangerous. Even though Jung Sang-guk was a powerless traitor, finding his body in my room was bad news.

My mind quickly cooled.

A familiar sensation.

I acted swiftly.

'I need to handle this.'

Fwoosh—!

Without investigating further, I immediately incinerated the body. Completely. Using all my aura to erase any trace, including my own.

Only someone who had accumulated inner power over multiple cycles like me could perform such a feat effortlessly.

'59 seconds.'

I grabbed a book and walked out of the lodging casually. I greeted the staff brightly on purpose.

To them, I would appear as 'a guest who briefly entered and left the room.' It would be hard to believe that a body was incinerated in such a short time.

Now, I only had to worry about witnesses. Anyone who might have seen Jung Sang-guk enter my room.

No need to worry about CCTV. Nowadays, CCTV was rare. Not because of electricity but because they were prone to being infected by monstrosities, making people avoid them.

I asked the lodging staff, 'Have you seen Mr. Jung?' They shook their heads, saving their lives.

So far, four minutes had passed.

While not a perfect alibi, it was sufficient for plausible deniability.

I hadn't committed any murder.

That was the truth.

And I was strong.

The power of truth sometimes wielded sharp blades even in the hands of the weak. In the hands of the strong, it was unmatched.

'Scho, old man. I'll make sure to charge you well for this trip.'

I headed back to the house of dolls.

This time stealthily, without anyone noticing.

—Circumstantially, the 'culprit' was almost certainly Jung Sang-guk's illegitimate daughter, Lee Ha-yul.

Evidence was unnecessary. I was neither a detective nor a cop. I was a regressor. I could verify evidence in other cycles.

What mattered now was to gather as much information as possible about the culprit, Lee Ha-yul, to gain an advantage in future cycles.

It turned out to be necessary.

At the entrance, I found an awakener with bright chestnut hair, presumably Lee Ha-yul, dead.

"....."

Lee Ha-yul was in a wheelchair, stabbed in the chest by a knife held by a doll.

I first realized then that the Puppeteer was a legless girl.

Without ever having heard her voice and knowing I would never hear it in the 18th cycle, I covered my forehead with my left hand before her corpse.

"That damned old man..."

Really.

I would charge a high price for this trip.

Footnotes:

Chapter 60

The Puppeteer III

Sinnoa

As I mentioned earlier, I was neither a detective nor a cop. My deductions spanned both the past and the future.

That was why I could pull off such tricks.

“Puppeteer is my daughter.”

“What?”

“Puppeteer. Ha-yul. Lee Ha-yul. She’s my daughter.”

19th cycle.

I deliberately followed the same steps as the previous cycle and came to Fukuoka.

Unless the butterfly effect intervened, the law of causality was strict. Jung Sang-guk, just as he did in the last cycle, said, “I’ll contact my daughter. Please wait at the lodging for a few days.”

The difference in the 19th cycle was that instead of eagerly heading to the lodging to enjoy the hot springs, this time, I secretly followed Jung Sang-guk.

A detective who catches only the crime without deducing the criminal’s past is third-rate. A detective who reveals the past events that led to the criminal’s wayward path is merely second-rate.

A true first-rate detective tracks the crime to unfold and witnesses all the causes in real-time.

Is that even a detective? If you’re upset about it, awaken the regression ability. The contract condition is that you must slay the Ten Legs and other monstrosities. It’s that simple, right?

Knock, knock.

Jung Sang-guk headed to the 'House of Dolls' as soon as the drinking party ended. After a few knocks, the housekeeper appeared.

So far, everything was normal.

The abnormality began immediately after.

“I’m back.”

Bowing, Jung Sang-guk lowered his head.

It was Jung Sang-guk, not the housekeeper, who bowed. Jung Sang-guk bowed to the housekeeper.

I couldn’t help but widen my eyes. Then, just as my mouth was about to drop open, the housekeeper spoke.

“Come in.”

“Yes.”

The Prime Minister of the Second Provisional Government of Korea followed the housekeeper inside as if it were natural.

“…….”

What on earth was going on?

Feeling as if I had seen a ghost, I clung close to the 'House of Dolls.'

Though my sight was blocked by the wall, my aura-enhanced hearing assisted my eavesdropping.

“How was the meeting?”

“Uneventful.”

“What’s Undertaker’s goal?”

“He wants to take Ms. Ha-yul to the academy.”

Murmur.

Their voices carried through the wall. Jung Sang-guk spoke with utmost respect but also with a hint of fear, while the housekeeper was cold and mechanical.

“Academy?”

That voice, precisely speaking, pronounced ‘a/ca/de/my’ in a segmented manner.

“Yes. He aims to gather and train talented awakeners like Ms. Ha-yul.”

“…….”

Ms. Ha-yul?

He called his own daughter 'Ms. Ha-yul'?

“I received the curriculum. Here. I read through it once, and it seems quite plausible. Sword Star is the principal, the Undertaker is the vice-principal, and Dang Seo-rin is an honorary professor…”

“So?”

“Excuse me?”

“Did you accept it?”

“No, no! How could I? I couldn’t make such a decision alone, so I arranged for him to stay at an inn in the city. He’ll stay put for about two days.”

Silence.

“He left during the meeting.”

“…Excuse me?”

“He went out during the drinking party. Alone with the Undertaker. What did you talk about?”

“Ah… Just stepped out for a smoke. Nothing much.”

“Liar.”

A chill ran down my spine.

‘How does she know that?’

There was definitely no one around when Jung Sang-guk and I talked alone. Could it be that someone from the provisional government at the party leaked information to the housekeeper?

Was this seemingly ordinary middle-aged housekeeper really the one pulling the strings behind the provisional government?

The questions didn’t last long. Soon, crucial testimony spilled from Jung Sang-guk’s mouth.

“Come down. Downstairs.”

At the command to come downstairs, Jung Sang-guk, who had maintained his composure, began to panic.

“Please, believe me! Ms. Ha-yul! Please, I beg you! Just spare the Doll Room!”

My jaw dropped.

“Lee Ha-yul!”

There was no mistake. Jung Sang-guk had addressed the housekeeper as 'Ms. Ha-yul.'

It made no sense unless Jung Sang-guk was senile and couldn’t tell his daughter’s face from the housekeeper’s.

There was no way the housekeeper and Lee Ha-yul were the same person. The housekeeper was in her 40s. In contrast, the corpse of Lee Ha-yul I saw in the previous cycle couldn’t have been older than her early 20s.

Thus.

‘Lee Ha-yul was controlling the housekeeper!’

Puppeteer.

Whoever gave her that name was spot on. I surmised that Lee Ha-yul had the ability to control people.

The housekeeper was a marionette. A puppet of Lee Ha-yul.

And not just the housekeeper.

I recalled the 'countless requests for handshakes' from the provisional government officials when I arrived in Fukuoka. The ministers of foreign affairs, finance, justice, and the interior. Their hugs felt strangely stiff.

‘Are the high-ranking officials of the provisional government marionettes too? All of them? Or only some? If only some, how far?’

In the 18th cycle, I had never imagined this truth, and it struck me like a shockwave.

In some sense, Old Man Scho was right.

“Come down. I’ve said it twice.”

“Please, please…”

The plea was cut off.

Jung Sang-guk could no longer articulate words. Only faint sounds like 'ugh- heok, guk-' could be heard.

The human ear was not so precise. Understanding everything by sound alone was difficult, but I could guess that Jung Sang-guk’s mouth was blocked by something.

“Hmmph…”

Jung Sang-guk struggled.

Given that an adult man couldn’t put up a proper fight, it was likely

he was subdued by some abnormal means.

Cobwebs.

I recalled the cobwebs that had bound the housekeeper and Jung Sang-guk's corpses. And the cobwebs that covered the House of Dolls.

Perhaps they weren't cobwebs but 'puppet strings.'

"Hmmph…"

The sound of a body being dragged. The vibrations from the first floor gradually subsided.

I quickly understood the situation. Jung Sang-guk was being dragged to the basement by the housekeeper.

There was no more sound to be heard. The walls were too thick. My aura, accumulated over the 18 cycles, could only reach so far.

The basement. That must be the true lair of the Puppeteer.

Once again, my decision was swift.

I decided to break in.

An outstanding awakener has an exceptional memory. To survive the void, you must know how to remember various rules.

There is a proverb that is almost like common knowledge.

-A well-built awakener's lair is comparable to the void.

Personally, I think it's somewhat exaggerated, but it means to be cautious.

For example, every train Dang Seo-rin used as her lair had a robust security system.

Unwelcome guests who entered without a 'train ticket' would learn how wonderful a killing machine a train could be.

This place was no different.

The 'House of Dolls' I visited in the last cycle was already an empty shell left after its owner died.

When I visited the first time, the Puppeteer must have deliberately lifted the security. They needed me to witness the housekeeper's death and return to the lodging.

-Click, click, click.

In other words, this was the first time I had set foot in the lair of the House of Dolls in its true sense.

The clicking noise echoed from all directions as soon as I burst through the door. The dolls were making the noise.

Entrance. Hallway. Ceiling.

Marionettes hung by puppet strings fiercely moved their jaws.

Along with the clicking of the jaws, the dolls' joints creaked. Their blue, black, yellow, and red eyes rotated.

-Click, click, click, click.

A territorial marking. A signal to alert of an intruder.

And preprogrammed movements to eliminate impurities.

The marionettes' movements were clearly meticulously calculated.

Their joints creaked like piano keys, the strings swayed, and a faint golden aura was present in the puppet strings.

'Aura!'

At the time, the only ones who had mastered the use of aura were Old Man Scho and me. It was a specialty of the Freiheit Academy.

The puppet show unfolding before me was solely self-taught.

'Not only can she control people, but she can also imbue the puppet

strings with aura!'

I was impressed but didn't hesitate.

Like the famous opening scene of the movie Cube, semi-transparent threads tightened from all directions. Any ordinary human would be dismembered just by touching them.

Fortunately or unfortunately, my life was far from ordinary.

I jumped in headfirst without using a sword, wrapping my entire body in aura.

Swish—slash, slash, slash! The puppet strings, charging with killing intent, snapped as soon as they touched my body.

-Click, click, click, click.

The dolls moved even more frantically. The mass of cobwebs multiplied exponentially.

But it was useless.

Old Man Scho had evaluated me as '5th rate in martial talent, but top-class in aura talent.' It was as if my external skills were compensated by internal energy.

And I had the [Resume] skill. A skill that carried over my physical abilities, including muscle strength and other body capabilities, into the next cycle.

That included the amount of aura.

In martial arts terms, by the 19th cycle, my internal energy had already surpassed a full 60 years.

Crack!

I reached out and crushed the head of a doll. The dolls swung up and down on the strings but couldn't escape my grasp.

No matter how power-crazed the monstrosities of this world were,

60 years of cultivation was a lifetime achievement for a human.

I had spent that lifetime on the battlefield.

The awakeners entrenched in the relatively safe rear of Fukuoka couldn't withstand my life.

-……!

The entrance was breached. The hallway and living room were successively neutralized. About 300 dolls crumbled in my hands.

Soon the murderous cobwebs also calmed down. The precise arrangement of the dolls must have been the core of this lair's security system.

High-level awakening abilities. Excellent understanding of her powers. Prudence in not revealing her true form. Bold and decisive actions. Mastery of aura at a young age, learned independently. Precise calculation abilities.

…The test was over. Although I didn't want to admit it, Old Man Scho's intuition was correct.

A prodigy. The Puppeteer was certainly worth recruiting.

Even if she had no legs, that wasn't a significant hindrance. She might not be able to fight on the front lines, but she had enormous potential as a support member.

"Lee Ha-yul. Are you listening?"

Silence.

"I am the Undertaker. Colleague of the Sword Star and the Great Witch. I apologize for barging in like this. It was my fault."

Silence.

"Lee Ha-yul. I want to talk to you. I used force to demonstrate my skills. I could break into the basement, but I don't want our relationship to start off on the wrong foot."

Silence.

“My goal is to persuade you to join the academy in Korea. Give me a chance to convince you.”

Creak.

The basement door opened.

“Come in.”

The housekeeper was holding the doorknob. Hearing her voice up close, the mechanical tone was even more apparent.

On reflection, the ideal form of machinery for humans had always been dolls, from paper and clockwork to AI chips.

Thus, the term mechanical sound could be corrected to doll sound without much error.

I passed the housekeeper and stepped into the basement. Thud. The heavy iron door closed behind me.

“…….”

Finally, I made eye contact with Lee Ha-yul herself.

This was the first time. In the previous cycle, her corpse had its eyes closed.

Golden eyes.

Light chestnut hair.

A legless girl.

Sometimes an awakener’s manifestation altered their hair and eye colors. The girl sitting in the wheelchair had a completely different hue from her father, Jung Sang-guk.

“Ugh! Hmmph, ugh…”

Jung Sang-guk, who had been dragged here earlier, was also in a

wheelchair.

In terms of mobility issues, he was worse off than his daughter. Though he had legs, his entire body was bound tightly with puppet strings, like prey caught in a spider web.

Moreover, his fingernails were freshly dripping blood.

'...Ah.'

Hmm.

That's why Jung Sang-guk wore gloves in the 18th cycle.

Footnotes:

Chapter 61

The Puppeteer IV

Sinnoa

"Ugh…!"

Jung Sang-guk's eyes were bloodshot. His mouth and tongue were bound by puppet strings, preventing him from speaking, but it didn't matter.

Body language was a universal language. Jung Sang-guk writhed desperately, sending out an SOS signal.

I felt sorry for him, but my priority was not the parent, but the child. Jung Sang-guk's struggles only agitated Lee Ha-yul.

"……."

Lee Ha-yul silently drove a nail under his fingernail.

Rip! His nail tore. Another competitor in the same business sector had just opened.

"Ugh, please…!"

The blood loss from excessive competition drove Jung Sang-guk to faint.

I mourned for him inwardly. It was all because he was born in the wrong era. If he had been born during the Japanese occupation, a traitor of his caliber wouldn't have faced nail torture.

I spread my hands.

"Lee Ha-yul, I have no intention of interfering in matters between you and Jung Sang-guk. As I said earlier, my only goal is to persuade you to join the academy."

"……."

"Let me introduce myself again. I am Undertaker. I exterminated the Ten Legs in the Korean Peninsula. I am now the vice-principal of the Freiheit Academy."

By now, it was time for Lee Ha-yul herself to introduce herself, but that didn’t happen.

Instead, the housekeeper marionette, who had opened the basement door for me, stood behind Lee Ha-yul’s wheelchair and spoke in a mechanical voice.

"Lee Ha-yul. Puppeteer."

"...I understand you're being cautious, but can't you speak in your own voice?"

"Impossible."

"Why?"

Lee Ha-yul opened her mouth wide. Her neat teeth were visible, but beyond them was a black void.

I tilted my head.

What was this? Unless she mistook me for a dentist, this pose made no sense.

Then the housekeeper, like a ventriloquist's dummy, spoke.

"Vocal cord. Disability."

It was an unexpected statement.

"She can't speak."

"……."

"So she can't converse."

I then realized that Lee Ha-yul's disability was not only the loss of

her legs.

A physical speech disability.

...Therefore, the girl in front of me must have endured extreme discomfort before awakening her ability. Mobility issues. Communication issues.

Considering she was the illegitimate child of a prominent politician, it wouldn't be surprising to add identity issues to the list.

Her [Puppeteer] ability was truly a miracle for Lee Ha-yul.

"...I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's fine."

Lee Ha-yul closed her mouth. The Puppeteer's expression remained devoid of any emotion.

"It doesn't matter."

"Hmm."

"How did you find this place?"

It was a bizarre sight.

The voice came entirely from the housekeeper, but the conversation was with Lee Ha-yul. The direction of the gaze and the voice were mismatched.

Despite the strange feeling, I continued to meet Lee Ha-yul's eyes.

"I followed Jung Sang-guk. His request for me to wait at the lodging for two days was suspicious. I saw him enter the House of Dolls and decided to eavesdrop for a while."

"……."

The girl's eyes softened slightly.

It seemed she liked the term 'House of Dolls.'

"Thanks to that, I overheard your conversation with Jung Sang-guk. If you saw my rampage upstairs, you would know I excel in aura manipulation."

Lee Ha-yul tilted her head.

"Aura?"

"...Hmm."

I ignited an aura in my palm. A murky flame. My aura was achromatic.

"This. You infused your puppet strings with golden aura earlier, right?"

"You call that aura."

"Some people call it inner energy. It's a matter of preference. Some call it magical energy or pronounce it as aura. Did you learn aura manipulation on your own?"

"Yes."

"Impressive."

"Even the magical girls said that."

By the way, 'magical girls' referred to the strongest group of awakeners in Japan, who later essentially succeeded the role of the Japanese government as the 'Magical Girl Council.'

How such a chaotic situation came about… well...

Let's just say that awakeners get stronger the crazier they are. I'll have another chance to discuss them later.

"The magical girls? Did they try to recruit you?"

"Yes. I refused."

"May I ask why? I want to reduce the chances of failure by learning from rejection cases."

"They're weird."

"……."

"Dresses. Lots of frills. Terrible fashion sense. They end their sentences with 'nya.' Abnormal."

"……."

It was quite an assertion coming from a girl currently giving her father's fingernails a strip show in real-time.

Anyway, the small talk served as a good icebreaker between us.

Contrary to what I expected, Lee Ha-yul was quite easy to converse with. If you ignored the strange puppet voice.

"Is it alright if I ask why you're trying to kill Jung Sang-guk?"

"Ugh…?"

Jung Sang-guk reacted to the word 'kill.' Even when he was dragged to the basement and had his nails ripped out, he hadn't expected his daughter would kill him.

But Jung Sang-guk was always meant to die.

In the 18th cycle, Lee Ha-yul killed Jung Sang-guk, hung the housekeeper, and then killed herself.

Everyone but Jung Sang-guk himself knew his death was an inevitable part of the schedule. Lee Ha-yul naturally answered my question.

"This man betrayed my mother."

Mother? She must mean Lee Ha-yul's biological mother and Jung Sang-guk's second wife.

"He said he'd bring a doctor. That there was medicine. That the treatment was progressing, but mother died."

"Ugh…!"

"Mother wanted to stay in Korea. This man forcibly brought her here. And neglected her."

Lee Ha-yul's 'voice' remained unchanged. An unchanging mechanical tone.

But her 'eyes' burned as if melting gold. That was the temperature Lee Ha-yul originally possessed.

"I remember. Since I was five, this man rarely visited our house. He found mother annoying. Me too. He was afraid of staying in Korea. Afraid we'd be discovered."

"Hmmph!"

"On the day mother died, I awakened. This is mother's revenge."

Jung Sang-guk struggled desperately, indicating it wasn't true. His old wheelchair creaked noisily.

...I could feel the sincerity in Lee Ha-yul's words.

But I also knew that sincerity did not guarantee the truth, past or future. That was the most painful truth about human nature.

"Can I hear Jung Sang-guk's side too?"

"……."

Lee Ha-yul looked up at me, her golden eyes scrutinizing my face for intent.

Nod.

"It doesn't matter."

"Ah…!"

Jung Sang-guk's tongue finally regained its freedom. Spider threads still wrapped around his tongue and teeth, but they loosened a bit.

"Lies! Mr. Undertaker! Please don't believe the words of a child, especially one who tortures her own parent! I am Jung Sang-guk!

Jung Sang-guk! A man who dedicates himself to the nation and people!"

"Ah, I'm sorry. I pretended otherwise at the drinking party, but I actually think of the Second Provisional Government as a farce."

Jung Sang-guk wore a blank expression.

"Excuse me?"

"I treated you well out of respect for the Fukuoka officials. I have no interest in you. Mr. Jung Sang-guk. Why would awakeners who stayed in Korea and fought the Ten Legs have any affection for you?"

"……."

"Besides, as I said, my goal is to take the Puppeteer to our academy. Now I just want to verify if Lee Ha-yul's claims are true. As you know, a teacher needs to understand a student's family background to some extent."

"It's a lie!"

Jung Sang-guk shouted.

"How did I neglect anything? What? Neglect what! If I were to take my second family in secret, should I have announced it to everyone? Think about it! If I really intended to neglect them, I would have left them to die in Korea!"

"……."

"Sure, it's tough here too, but you know! The Ten Legs! That damn bastard! Our military, the South Korean Army, was annihilated! Even the North Korean Army was wiped out! Knowing that, should I have left So-yoon and Ha-yul to die there? Yes! I'm a traitor! I, Jung Sang-guk, am a traitor! But I wanted to save my family. I wanted to save my family, so I pandered to Japan and survived!"

I could also feel the sincerity in Jung Sang-guk's words.

But I knew that mimicking human pain was a politician’s instinct.

"If I were a selfish person who only thought of myself, I wouldn’t have cared for Ha-yul! But how can a daughter, no matter how resentful, treat her parent like this?"

Spider threads quickly bound Jung Sang-guk’s tongue again.

At first, I thought Lee Ha-yul was forcefully silencing him.

But it wasn’t that.

"He brought us here and neglected us."

Jung Sang-guk's mouth moved. It was his voice, but not his words.

They were Lee Ha-yul's words.

Lee Ha-yul was manipulating his tongue, teeth, and throat, speaking through him, either deliberately or driven by emotion.

"This house was originally shabby. I used my ability to control people and renovate it."

"Ugh! Even that! In these times, that was a blessing and a luxury! Now that you’re grown, don’t you see that?"

"Lies. Your house was completely different."

From then on, a very strange thing happened.

Both of them were using the same tongue and mouth to talk. No, to argue.

Lee Ha-yul’s words were choked and broken, sounding like mechanical stutters. Jung Sang-guk must have been resisting.

But his resistance was unsuccessful. So the two ended up conversing in turns.

It was as if I didn’t exist, and the father-daughter emotions erupted violently in a single, yet diverging, direction.

"I have never treated you as my daughter! You’re a crazy girl who tortures people!"

"You’re not my father either."

Their anger peaked.

But I thought both of their statements were wrong.

Jung Sang-guk was also a puppet.

As the mayor of Busan, he was a puppet saying whatever the citizens wanted to hear, and as the representative of Busan in Fukuoka, he said whatever pleased the Japanese.

To him, language didn’t matter. He could name the exile group the Second Provisional Government. He could rename Fukuoka as Busan.

Whether in his own country or a foreign one, Jung Sang-guk was a lifelong servant to state power, a 'national slave'.

If language is the essence of humanity, Jung Sang-guk merely mimicked it.

Something that imitates a human. We call that a puppet.

Strangely, the genes of a puppet were passed down to another puppet.

To Lee Ha-yul, who grew up watching her mother and father, to a child, the archetype of a human was imprinted as a doll.

Parents inevitably pass down some legacy to their children, whether they wish to or not.

Even the parts they ignored, their children did not. They couldn’t ignore them.

That was the destiny of humans.

"Lies."

"No, it’s not…!"

And if one has devoted their life to power, they must accept this outcome too.

In a spiraling conflict, the winner is the one who holds the stronger power.

Before they crossed to Japan, immediately after, the power holder in this family was undoubtedly Jung Sang-guk. He had the power to control other puppets.

"Lies, everything. All of it."

Not anymore.

The owner of the 'House of Dolls' was no longer him, but Lee Ha-yul.

"Ah—hmm?"

Jung Sang-guk’s throat was constricted.

Lee Ha-yul said nothing. Just as she had been since birth. She looked at her blood relative as she had at birth.

Puppet strings dug into his flesh.

Ugh, the sound of a convulsion.

"……! ……!"

Struggling.

A little.

And then.

"……."

The puppet went limp.

The basement fell silent.

In the end, the final words of a politician who stirred up turmoil in this end-of-the-world era were:

Lies.

Everything.

All of it.

His last words were cut into three parts. Three sections of his throat.

As someone who had lived as a politician, were his final words closer to truth or lies?

"……."

Watching Lee Ha-yul, covered in blood, I pondered for a moment.

Some might argue that those weren't his final words since they weren't spoken of his own volition.

Maybe.

But it was undoubtedly his legacy.

Footnotes:

Chapter 62

The Puppeteer V

Sinnoa

There is a bit of a long epilogue.

In fact, my whole story is one long epilogue.

To confess truthfully, I originally intended to title this memoir something like ‘The Regressor’s Epilogue.’

“Huh? Mister, are you crazy?”

If it weren't for the interference of the web novel otaku, Oh Dok-seo, that would have indeed happened.

“Why? Isn't it good?”

“What's so good about it? These days, even those kids who live on SG Net wouldn’t fall for a title like that.”

“Hmm… Then how about ‘The Infinite Regressor’s Daily Café’?”

“What?”

Oh Dok-seo looked like she heard something unspeakable.

“What did you just say?”

“My hobby is being a barista. Every time I go to see Old Man Scho’s corpse, I also make café au lait. So I thought of using the word café…”

“You're really insane, aren’t you?”

There was genuine sincerity in Oh Dok-seo’s words.

Though I knew an otaku's sincerity didn’t guarantee truth, surprisingly, I sensed some truth this time.

Hmm. Is it really that bad…?

“How to Fail at Infinite Regression?”

“Your Excellency.”

“I am a Regressor.”

“Oh god.”

“The Regressor Abandons Salvation.”

“Bullshit.”

“The Regressor’s Epilogue.”

“Get lost!”

“The Records of the Regressor’s History.”

“Oh, please! Mister! Stop!”

“…….”

Why is this?

Is this a generation gap? No. It can’t be. My aesthetic sensibility, honed over thousands of years, had transcended human levels, capable of casually greeting Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Goethe with ‘Yo, long time no see.’

I poured out all the title candidates I’d thought of for twenty minutes, but they were all cut off by Oh Dok-seo.

Even if my character was at the level of Siddhartha Gautama, this was an excessive tyranny.

I said in anger.

“If you’re so good, why don’t you name it yourself?”

“Fine! But no matter what title I come up with, you must never interfere! I’ll read everything you’ve written and then give it a

comprehensive title!”

“Alright. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“Deal!”

“Deal.”

Looking back now, I shouldn’t have made such a foolish promise.

What was I thinking, trusting Oh Dok-seo with naming?

A 50,000 won cap? Jeans full of holes? Gum that couldn’t even blow a balloon? I’d rather trust Jung Sang-guk’s patriotism.

In the end, I still don’t know what title was given to my story. Just by calling it a ‘story,’ you can guess.

What a paradox. Not being able to call a father a father... No, it’s more like not knowing the name itself. Oedipus not recognizing his father would be more fitting.

I don’t know what it’s like from your perspective. If you are reading not only my story but also its title, please at least understand that it wasn’t a title created by me, the Undertaker.

Anyway.

Let’s return to the epilogue of the Puppeteer, Lee Ha-yul.

Jung Sang-guk died.

The former mayor of Busan died. The current Prime Minister of the Second Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea died. The president of the Fukuoka Korean Association died. The representative of Busan died.

No word was appropriate. Jung Sang-guk did not die for those reasons.

To be accurate in the diagnosis considering the cause of death, the

following phrase was most fitting for the coffin of this death.

Lee Ha-yul's biological father died.

Although I didn't agree with Freudian psychoanalysis, I enjoyed using its terms.

A child killed their father, but Lee Ha-yul was not Electra. Nor was she Oedipus.

A parent's death should be called a prologue, not an epilogue for the child.

It was a cruel affair.

From now on, I planned to do something cruel.

"Lee Ha-yul."

"Yes."

Lee Ha-yul responded. Not from the already decapitated Jung Sang-guk but from the maid's lips.

"Don't do it."

Lee Ha-yul tilted her head.

"What do you mean? This person is dead. Perception. Can't be stopped."

"I wasn't telling you not to kill Jung Sang-guk. I meant don't kill yourself."

"……."

Pause. The red circles in Lee Ha-yul's eyes grew larger.

No further conversation was needed. Every breath from Lee Ha-yul was language. The girl was confused.

"How?"

“If you killed your parent, you killed them. Why follow after and die? You have a talent. The talent to kill people and the talent to save people are the same. If you are determined to kill yourself, turn the blade of that determination to stab the anomalies.”

“…….”

“This world needs awakeners. Humanity’s survival is at risk. Whether they are Korean or Japanese, such distinctions are meaningless. Whether Jung Sang-guk is dead or not, ultimately, everyone you’ve known so far will die at the hands of the anomalies.”

“…….”

“Help us. I will help you so you can.”

Silence followed. Half of the silence flowed from the gaping mouth of Jung Sang-guk lying on the concrete floor.

Was it just my imagination? It felt like all the dolls densely packed in the basement were staring at me.

“If I follow you?”

“…….”

“Can it be stopped? The world’s end.”

“No, I can’t guarantee it.”

“What did you say your alias was? Sorry.”

“Undertaker.”

“Undertaker.”

Although I had introduced myself several times, it seemed that only then did Lee Ha-yul's brain properly register my alias.

She wouldn’t have considered it before. People facing death didn’t bother to remember new acquaintances.

Lee Ha-yul muttered.

“Swordmaster’s comrade.”

“Yes.”

“Dang Seo-rin’s boyfriend.”

“That’s fake news.”

“Really? It’s on the radio, every day.”

“It’s fake news. I can swear on anything except Jung Sang-guk’s patriotism.”

“…….”

Silence again.

Lee Ha-yul raised her index finger.

“A condition.”

“Tell me. I’ll do my best to meet it.”

“Lies. I hate.”

“Sounds like a plea not to act like your father. I can promise that for sure. I’m a firm believer in not marrying.”

“……?”

“I have no intention of having children. So there’s no chance of becoming someone’s father. It’s a perfect solution to fulfill your condition.”

“…….”

Lee Ha-yul laughed quietly.

There was no sound.

It was a smile I saw for the first time.

“I’ll follow you.”

In many cycles after the 19th, Lee Ha-yul was often recruited as my subordinate.

Even after Old Man Scho went on ‘vacation’ and the Freiheit Academy was effectively closed, her fate did not change.

Lee Ha-yul faced countless brutal deaths at the hands of anomalies, both at the frontlines and the rear.

The only promise I could make to Lee Ha-yul was that I would face a slightly quicker, slightly more brutal death.

Of course, much had changed.

“Oh, Ha-yul.”

“…….”

“Do you want some coffee? You like con panna, right?”

“…….”

“Okay. Just wait a bit.”

I had learned sign language first. Now, even without her controlling a doll, I could understand what Lee Ha-yul was saying quickly.

Even now, she yawned silently from the sofa in the guild’s hideout. She stretched extensively.

Looking around with sleepy eyes, she spotted the maid. A light snap of her fingers, and the maid doll activated.

“Where is the wheelchair?”

“You left it with Noh Do-hwa yesterday.”

“Oh.”

“Endure a bit of discomfort today.”

“Yes.”

Originally, I intended to leave her in the care of the Saintess instead of my guild’s hideout. Both expressionless, both recluses, both with supporter-type abilities. Didn’t they seem alike?

But after a brief communal life in the 20th cycle, the Saintess requested a return.

“She’s too different from me.”

“What?”

“Lee Ha-yul is… to put it in understandable terms, she’s an insider.”

“What?”

“She’s a different type of person from me. Undertaker, please refrain from thinking that just because we are both rear support with few expressions, we’d be close like sisters. Two of my fish tanks broke.”

“…….”

“I like being alone.”

For some reason I couldn’t grasp, it seemed I had an MBTI clash with the Saintess.

What could I do? Like Sim Ah-ryeon, Lee Ha-yul also became a permanent member of my guild. After all, her talent as an Awakened had no dispute that she was A-class.

More importantly, Lee Ha-yul’s talent, as seen in the ‘House of Dolls,’ was specialized in establishing a hideout. Thanks to Ha-yul, I was able to build an impregnable hideout.

This will be discussed in another story.

The everyday life of Lee Ha-yul encountered a slight turning point around the 54th cycle.

The 54th cycle was the monumental run where I brought Noh Do-hwa into the National Road Management Corps.

In other words, it was the time when Noh Do-hwa and I began to get along genuinely.

“Master Artisan Noh Do-hwa, it’s been a while. This girl with brown hair just returned from Japan. Could you make her a prosthetic leg?”

“Sorry, who are you…?”

“…...”

“Just kidding. Awakened Undertaker, I get scared just looking at you. Honestly, you make me jump, so please don’t come into my sight without signaling… Honestly…”

“…….”

“Does it make a difference if a Korean goes abroad and comes back? I’m very busy with many clients…”

“Ah.”

“I’ll schedule you, but it will take a month. Today, I’m also busy dealing with local grandpas. Seriously, why are the roads in Busan so bumpy…?”

Hmm. Right. To be honest, Noh Do-hwa and I were not particularly close personally.

There was no one who had any emotional connection or rapport with Noh Do-hwa. The fact that I could schedule an appointment in a month was fortunate. Other awakened would have waited at least three months, even if they were early.

A month later, Noh Do-hwa examined Lee Ha-yul.

“Your legs were thoroughly wrecked. Huh. Not only were they physically torn, but three curses are overlapping. Untreatable, constant intoxication, hallucinations. Quite detailed. May I ask

where you sacrificed your legs...?

“They were never there.”

The maid answered. Despite the unfamiliar experience, Noh Do-hwa didn’t raise an eyebrow.

“Huh. So the curses just happened by chance. Well, Japan is known for that. Do you get phantom pains at least once every three days…?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“There are ways to know. Quite severe. Very severe. Hm…”

Noh Do-hwa continued measuring Lee Ha-yul’s body with a measuring tape.

The unique part was that she measured even the lengths of Lee Ha-yul’s ‘missing legs.’

“……?”

Lee Ha-yul looked puzzled, unsure if she was being insulted or not.

But Noh Do-hwa had no intention of humiliating her.

Of course, she had a vicious nature of mocking others when given a chance.

But I had never seen her mock a patient in my entire life as a regressor.

“Please shake your body a bit as if you are moving your legs.”

“Okay.”

“Good. Very good. Now, please move as if you are walking in place. Ah, try jumping slightly? Even just lifting your hips is enough. Hm. Well done…”

It seemed that Noh Do-hwa could genuinely see Lee Ha-yul’s legs.

Not just the muscles, but also the bones, joints, and nerves were all visible to her. Such ‘vision’ was included in Noh Do-hwa’s ability.

Noh Do-hwa’s awakened skill was [the ability to observe and replace lost body parts].

It was an amazing ability, but she refused to name it. It was Noh Do-hwa’s will.

Moreover, she declined even having an alias.

“A public official making a name for themselves is pointless.”

That was Noh Do-hwa’s philosophy.

Such a person was brought into the National Road Management Corps as the leader. By me.

Anyway, due to this reason, her ability was roughly referred to as [Prosthetics Production]. Even [Restoration of Loss] would have been a cooler name.

“Yes, the measurements are done.”

Noh Do-hwa scribbled some complex numbers in a notebook.

“It usually takes one to two weeks to produce prosthetics. Is this tall person Lee Ha-yul’s guardian?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have a preference between wood and metal for the material?”

“What’s the difference?”

“Wood needs to be replaced often. So you would have to visit our workshop periodically, which is inconvenient. Metal has a longer replacement cycle, but it might make a squeaking noise and rust. Many patients find it bothersome.”

“…….”

“If you bring your own materials, we can work with those too. Prosthetics are meant to last a lifetime. It’s not too late to decide after finding good materials. You don’t have to rush to get high-end materials right now.”

Lee Ha-yul pondered.

I could sense her consideration as an expert in dolls.

“Then, metal.”

“Do you dislike clockwork?”

“No.”

“Does the ticking sound of a clock drive you crazy and make your hair stand on end, and do you feel an obligation to smash it immediately?”

“No.”

“Do you usually perform covert operations and have assassination missions?”

“No.”

“Great. I’ll make it as quickly as possible, but it might take more than 15 days. Once it’s done, I’ll send someone to inform you.”

Even though she said that, it took less than five days for Noh Do-hwa to call us back.

Some people either reflected their hopes in the deadlines they gave or distrusted the timeframe, and Noh Do-hwa’s basic distrust level was over twice her hope level.

“This is Lee Ha-yul’s prosthetic leg.”

“…….”

Noh Do-hwa handed over a long wooden box with a hollow gaze. The plain wooden box was neat and clean without any decoration.

On one corner of the box, the words ‘Lee Ha-yul, xxxx year xx month xx day’ were engraved with a carving knife. The numbers changed every cycle.

Noh Do-hwa’s habit was to give the completed product in a box rather than handing it over raw.

Now you can guess why no ruffian dared to mess with her. If someone did, there were countless awakened ready to form a lynch squad to protect her.

“This is your first time at our workshop, so would you like to try it on here? If it doesn’t fit, I’ll adjust it.”

“Okay. Please.”

“Then, Awakener Undertaker, please turn around.”

I complied with the prosthetist’s instructions.

I could hear faint sounds of clanking and scraping behind me.

Between the metallic noises, Noh Do-hwa’s explanations continued, “Do it this way” and “If it doesn’t work, don’t get angry, just calmly try again.”

Finally.

“It’s done.”

I turned around.

“Please stand up.”

“…….”

Lee Ha-yul fidgeted in the wheelchair.

Even during the journey from Japan to Korea, she had been extremely sensitive to the setting of the wheelchair, such as the angle and puffiness of the cushion.

Like someone suddenly leaving a rented room they thought they

would live in forever, Lee Ha-yul stood up a bit dazed, with many worries and a bit of expectation.

"……!"

With a silent breath, whether it was a shout or an oath, or a silent encouragement to herself or the world.

She stood on two legs.

For the first time since infancy.

"……."

"How is it? Does it hurt, feel prickly, or ache?"

"No."

There was a particularly strong mechanical tone in her voice.

"How. It doesn't. Hurt. At all."

"Huh."

Noh Do-hwa tapped, tapped, Lee Ha-yul's 'legs' with a stick. The metal parts clinked.

But the material didn't matter.

"It feels like real legs, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I can move my toes. It feels. Real. I'm walking. My feet are walking."

"Yes, indeed. Look, I attached a spring here. It has no practical purpose, just looks cool. The clock hands spin faster as you run, but it's purely decorative. I wish I could make vocal cords too, but that's tricky. So, do you like it?"

"Yes."

Lee Ha-yul cried. She wiped her tears with her hands.

Tears kept falling, blocking her mouth, but she could speak fluently with a mouth that wasn't originally hers.

"Thank you."

"Huh."

Noh Do-hwa smiled faintly.

"That's a relief."

Depending on who was watching, her smile might seem creepy or sinister.

But I could confidently say it was a genuine, kind smile.

She was a person who found satisfaction in just replacing lost body parts for patients. A person whose greatest desire was to build a direct road from the most inconvenient elderly patient's house to her workshop. I always felt a sense of guilt for dragging her into the mundane world and assigning her the title of National Road Management Corps leader.

"Thank you."

Lee Ha-yul looked at me.

"Thank you, oppa."

Even after that, Lee Ha-yul often moved around in a wheelchair. She was so used to controlling the doll and liked the feeling of the maid pushing her.

But I saw.

"……."

One summer night, when a meteor shower rained down from the sky.

The sight of Lee Ha-yul standing on two legs, reaching out towards the starlight from her wheelchair.

Looking up at a star that shone golden like her eyes, in a daze.

A sparkling little star.

Ultimately, everyone is born accepting something from someone else, whether it's heart or flesh.

We were all born as dolls.

But Lee Ha-yul, the Puppeteer, would die as a human every time she faced countless deaths.

Listening to the lullaby of starlight.

Footnotes:

Chapter 63

The Sleepwalker I

Sinnoa

In my regressor life, I considered the 1st to the 100th run as the "early phase." Another term would be "childhood."

It was a period when I held the romantic illusion that if I just eliminated the anomalies, peace would somehow come to the world.

And during this early phase, there were three boss monsters who had claimed the Korean Peninsula as their territory.

Level 1 Boss: Crawling octopus head. No matter how much you stab it, unless you pierce both hearts simultaneously, it showcases infinite regenerative abilities and never dies! It's called the "Immortal Ten Legs"!

Level 2 Boss: Ignorance is your downfall! Rejoicing at the promise of free immortality during the apocalypse, you accept it only to find out it’s nothing but fertilizer for growing a massive World Tree! The New Buddha and Divine Buddha, "The Immortal Udumbara"!

Level 3 Boss: You will fall victim even if you know about it! In the 7th year from the start of the regression, it inevitably descends from the night sky, the unavoidable Armageddon, "The Inescapable Meteor Shower"!

The geographical setup of the Korean Peninsula is truly awe-inspiring.

However, among them, the Ten Legs can now be ignored. By the 100th run, the Ten Legs are nothing more than a minor mob that can be one-shot-killed.

-Kyu?

Yes, even if you act cute, I won't spare you. Tentacle-headed Cthulhu knockoff.

The Udumbara, also known by names like "Divine Buddha Virus," "Red Cordyceps," and "World Tree," had a more infamous reputation.

-I'm hungry?

It might be a bit unfair from its perspective, but the Udumbara had the worst compatibility with a regressor from the start.

From the moment I discovered that the origin of the Udumbara was in Room 202 on the second floor of a closed inn in Onyang, the Udumbara was perfectly conquered.

So, let's talk about the final chapter of childhood.

"Look! Hey, look at the sky."

Let's talk about the Meteor Shower.

"Wow! A shooting star! So many of them!"

"The sky is beautiful even if the ground is fucked…"

Strictly speaking, among the three early-phase bosses, only Ten Legs exclusively operated in the Korean Peninsula.

As known, the Udumbara spread across East Asia as a pseudo-religious cult called the New Buddha.

The Meteor Shower was the same. The falling stars did not only strike the Korean Peninsula.

They struck the entire world.

"Huh? Why does it keep getting closer...?"

"What are you doing? Get away! Run!"

"Run? Where to? They're falling from the entire sky, guild leader?"

“…….”

Have you ever played a battle royale game?

In such games, as time passes, the playable map area gradually shrinks. For example, the "safe zone" gets smaller as the magnetic field contracts.

It was a method to force players into a tighter ring as the game progressed.

This world mimicked the worst parts of games because our lives were a shitty game.

“Half of the Eurasian continent is gone!”

“What nonsense are you talking about?”

“Exactly what I said. It just got erased. Last week, when the Meteor Shower hit, half the continent just vanished.”

“This is insane.”

Once it hit South America, once Australia, once Eurasia, and once the Pacific Ocean.

Continents struck by the stars invariably turned into barren lands where no human could survive.

It was truly Armageddon.

Humanity, momentarily indulging in an apocalyptic romanticism while gazing at the showering stars in the night sky, was horrified.

“Again, again! Another one’s falling!”

“Damn, where this time? Where is it going to hit...?”

Meteor Shower. Western awakeners often called it "Armageddon," and Japanese Awakeners called it "Meteor." According to the classification of the Library Society, who saw naming anomalies as their mission, its threat level was "Continent," and it was identified

as "Shining Little Star."

“…….”

The falling star that Lee Ha-yul reached for in a previous episode was none other than this.

It was another method by which our world was meeting its end.

The first time I encountered the Meteor Shower was in my 23rd run.

The number 23 held significant meaning for me. In a slightly negative way, to be more blunt—since we are close enough to use such expressions—I hope you’ll understand with generosity—it was pretty shitty.

Perhaps some of you, with an exceptional memory like mine, might quickly recall the events of the 23rd run, more precisely, the events that started from the 23rd run.

“Huh? Old man? Old man, are you here?”

Ta-da!

Congratulations! You have found the corpse of Old Man Scho!

“Damn it.”

Yes.

The 23rd cycle was the first time Old Man Scho went on vacation. It was also the moment when "Congrats! Shitty End!" was chosen as the BGM for my character, the Undertaker.

At that time, I was… well.

To be honest, I was pathetic.

Would it be right to call it a dark history? The person I thought I would fight alongside for life had suddenly disappeared.

“Wow, casting such high-level magic with just two chants... I’m a genius! And Undertaker, you seem like a genius too!”

I didn't say it, but I helped Dang Seo-rin perfect her Equivalent Exchange magic for this reason. Back then, I relied on Dang Seo-rin mentally.

Because, well...

I feel a bit hesitant to reveal this, but I believe we’re close enough to freely discuss such things now.

I'll be honest, because she was the only one in my regressor life who could share the same timeline with me.

“We can’t live together, but at least we can accompany each other in death."

“Please take care of me, my companion in time.”

Of course, Dang Seo-rin didn’t remember the time she spent with me. But at least, her magic, which opened songs by burning her lifespan, continued to accumulate lifespan even through regression.

So, it's really embarrassing to say, but I treated Dang Seo-rin as a substitute for Old Man Scho.

No, even calling her a substitute is too weak. I was clearly dependent on Dang Seo-rin.

Despite my mental breakdown, I didn’t forget my final role as a regressor.

Somehow, I established an organization by myself without Old Man Scho, made Dang Seo-rin the leader, and eradicated the Ten Legs.

And in the 7th year.

“Wow. Undertaker, look over there.”

“Hmm? Is it a shooting star?”

“Yeah, there are so many.”

Dang Seo-rin, walking barefoot on the sandy beach with shoes in hand, pointed to the night sky.

That was the moment I first observed the Meteor Shower.

Naturally, I never imagined that the twinkling Meteor Shower in the night sky could be an anomaly.

I returned from the night walk and fell into a comfortable sleep.

And when I woke up, I found myself at the starting point of my regression.

Back at Busan Station.

“…Huh?”

I was so dumbfounded that I looked around blankly. What the hell was going on?

Anyone would be disoriented if they went to bed and suddenly regressed.

At first, I thought it was a dream, but no matter how much I pinched my cheek, I didn’t wake up. So- goodness. I had really regressed "while sleeping."

“You fucking asshole!”

The trademark exclamation of SG Man (I didn’t know Seo Gyu's real name back then) rang out like an alarm app that lives to ruin a salaryman's morning.

And I felt exactly like a salaryman in the morning. A mix of 30% confusion and 70% frustration.

‘No, really, hold on. Why is this happening?’

But regardless of my confusion, the physical time of the world flowed steadily.

A scream tore through the waiting room of Busan Station. Seo Gyu's neck was neatly severed by a fairy.

People were running away in panic, but I was the only one standing there dazed, my mind blank.

When your mind is vacant, some people replace it with reason, and I was usually the latter.

'Did someone poison me?'

This was the most rational guess.

'Or an assassination? No matter how, but to assassinate me, the Undertaker, like twisting a chicken's neck in my sleep?'

Ah.

I groaned.

'How could this happen! I was too complacent!'

Indeed.

In the end, the enemy of humanity was not the monsters but humanity itself. Our ancestors wrote the first histories to leave the message [Humanity sucks] for future generations, didn't they?

"Now... I will live for myself."

While I was solemnly declaring my resolution, the fairy, who was playing with Seo Gyu's rolling head, tilted its head.

"Huh. This human isn't running away and is talking nonsense?"

"Shut up, tutorial mob."

After responding to fairy number 264's argument with a flick on the forehead ("Huek!"), I farmed Silver Bells from the souvenir shop in the waiting room as usual.

And immediately went into strategizing.

Never sleep alone. Not only establish a guild and recruit comrades, but also build an impregnable hideout fortress for communal living...

It was around this time that I started putting effort into the guild hideout.

Later, due to being completely brainwashed by the mysterious entity named Go Yuri, the hideout was destroyed from within. But until then, my guild hideout was an impregnable fortress, the epitome of resilience (let's temporarily ignore the fact that both eventually fell).

Of course, even though I declared my intention to live for myself, I wasn't the kind of regressor protagonist in Korean web novels who struggles alone.

Humans should live together, right?

Naturally, I actively shared my hideout construction know-how with those around me.

"Hey, Undertaker. I appreciate you looking out for my safety, but isn't this a bit overreacting...?"

Hmm. Maybe 'sharing' is not as appropriate as 'insisting.'

"Hah! Being careless like that will get you assassinated without anyone noticing, guild leader Dang Seo-rin!"

"Eh? Um? Ah, uh-huh...?"

"You get praised as the best awakener in Korea, and your pride is soaring! No matter how strong you are, that's only after singing three verses of the Cursed Song Incantation! Before that, you're just a mage before warriors! Do you think those wicked assassins will wait until you leisurely hold a concert?"

"No, well. This is my guild headquarters, right? I've set up a really good watch and patrol system. It's impossible to break through to my sleeping quarters unless it's an awakener like you…"

“Hah! Assassins would have already bribed all your loyal guild members! What if the enemy has abilities like hypnosis or brainwashing?”

“Eh…”

Surprisingly, I accurately predicted my future defeat by Go Yuri. This is the power of a regressor.

A damn pathetic power.

Dang Seo-rin seemed to reach a similar conclusion.

“If an awakener has such a cheating ability, security is meaningless…”

“Hah! From now on, before you sleep, you must sing [Repeat], [Auto-play], [Silence], [Shield], at least four layers of songs. And call Ha-yul to cover the train carriages with her puppets.”

“But it’s like spider webs…”

“Haaaaah! If you die, it’s the end of Korea. Do you realize your position?”

“Um, well... Fine. Sorry…”

“If you’re sorry, then it’s okay. Actually, it’s unrealistic to sing the Cursed Song Incantation before sleeping.”

“Oh! Right, that's what I…”

“So, we must build an ironclad fortress. Don’t worry, Dang Seo-rin. I won’t ask you to leave your precious train. I’ll just remodel it into the strongest fortress on earth.”

“…….”

Dang Seo-rin looked at me with an expression that said, ‘Why has this kid suddenly become such a bother?’ but I ignored it.

In the end, not only my hideout but also the Samcheon World’s

train was remodeled into the “Ultimate Weapon - Fortress Train - Galaxy Express 999.” Now, even if an army of assassins came, it would be futile.

In the 7th year.

“Wow. Undertaker, look over there.”

“Hmm? Oh, it’s a shooting star. It must be a Meteor Shower that appears around this time.”

“Really? There are so many. It’s nice. If someone hadn’t covered my luxurious train carriage windows with iron bars and spider webs, it would’ve been much prettier.”

“…….”

After having a drink with Dang Seo-rin, I returned to the hideout and fell into a comfortable sleep.

“Hello! Everyone! Oh? The numbers are a bit small... Anyway, you must be surprised to be summoned here suddenly! But don’t worry! I’ll kindly guide you from the beginning!”

Naturally, I regressed again.

The familiar ceiling of Busan Station’s waiting room greeted my eyes. Of course, Fairy No. 264 was flying around cutely.

“…….”

My vision blurred.

And SG Man's unmistakably friendly alarm sound rang in my ears.

“You fucking asshole!”

Footnotes:

Chapter 64

The Sleepwalker II

Sinnoa

I barely, truly barely, managed to hold onto my sanity, which was on the verge of escaping from my skull.

‘It wasn’t an assassination…?’

Then, did my hideout with a security level 6, constructed with all the knowledge of a regressor, mean nothing?

What about the ever-vigilant Poison Surveillance System, painstakingly set up by gathering all the awakened ones with medical abilities like Uehara Shino and Sim Ah-ryeon?

Or the Ultimate Weapon - Fortress Train - Galaxy Express 999, which I created despite causing immense stress to Dang Seo-rin?

Indeed. It was all useless. All of it was a waste.

From the perspective of my 1183rd cycle, the 24th cycle me was nothing but an utter fool.

Especially that railgun fortress; it became such a black mark in my history that I wouldn’t mention it in any future stories.

‘Then what on earth did I die for? What caused my death?’

Confusion. Agony. Pain.

My brain was still hardened, buried under preconceived notions. To reach the idea that ‘maybe monsters don’t need a fixed form? Maybe even the [phenomenon] of starlight in the night sky could be a monster? Perhaps the word monster is somewhat inaccurate, and it would be better to use the term "anomaly" instead,’ my brain needed to become more flexible.

Right. If you don't know, you suffer.

But even my 24th cycle self wasn't so foolish that he couldn't reach the conclusion that 'something very strange indeed happened that night.'

And so, back to the 7th year.

"Wow. Undertaker, look over there—"

"Yes. It's a meteor shower. It usually appears around this time of year. Enjoying the view, aren't you?"

"…What? You seem a bit irritable today. What's been bothering you all day?"

It's because our death is sealed on the day the meteor shower falls.

But I couldn't reveal that regressor knowledge to Dang Seo-rin. Naturally, without a reasonable explanation, Dang Seo-rin left in a huff.

Determined to apologize someday, I looked up at the night sky, unable to handle my own tension and nervousness.

'I won't sleep tonight.'

Click.

I drank the secret Lotte canned coffee I had saved for this day, keeping my eyes vigilant.

I chose the location with great care: the summit of Bongrae Mountain in Yeongdo, Busan.

To reach this place, one would have to step on the strings laid out by the Puppeteer like spider webs, alerting me to any intruder. Unless, of course, the intruder fell straight from the sky.

The night sky was still adorned with a beautiful meteor shower.

…….

“Huh?”

Wait a minute.

When I took a walk with Dang Seo-rin earlier, it was 9 PM, so based on that time, it has already been…….

Hasn’t it been six hours of the meteor shower?

‘Is it normal for a meteor shower to last this long?’

It wasn’t just a trickle, either. It was like a heavy downpour in summer, with thick streaks of starlight continuously crossing the night sky.

And the streaks were getting thicker.

“…….”

Chills ran down my spine.

Unknowingly, I dismantled my disguise and stood up.

“Shit. No way, right?”

Of course, that “no way” was correct.

From now on, humanity had to fight and defeat the starlight from space, and this was the new quest assigned to the regressor.

Yeah. What could I expect from this shitty game?

Accurately describing the moment the world ends is something few people can do.

More precisely, as far as I know, there were only two people in this vast world capable of such a feat.

The Saintess with [Time Stop]. And me, the [Infinite Regressor], the Undertaker.

The Saintess, no matter how suddenly an incident occurred, could

call out “Time” and meticulously record the situation, and I could simply turn the wheel of regression.

But unfortunately, at this time, I hadn’t even exchanged names with the Saintess.

Therefore, I had to witness the world-ending scene caused by the meteor shower alone.

“Stars… are getting closer?”

Boss battle, against the Meteor Shower. Phase 1.

First, countless starlights start pouring down from the night sky.

If you are very far from the meteor shower’s impact point, your chances of survival are high. The meteor shower is not a real meteor shower. It’s a monster. It falls infinitely slower compared to actual meteors.

If you’re standing near the impact point? You can only offer your condolences. You’re already 99% dead.

The 25th cycle me fell into this category.

Because the area that the meteor shower first decided to fall on was none other than Gyeongsangnam-do, Korea.

“Damn it.”

From the Ten Legs, to Udumbara, and now to the meteor shower, I couldn’t help but feel a growing respect for the legendary Dangun in my heart. Is the geographical position of the Korean Peninsula real?

The only consolation was that, well, you could experience something quite mystical just before dying.

-Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

A melody delicately plucking the heavens.

-Shining like a diamond in the sky.

Phase 2 of the boss battle began.

I quickly descended Bongrae Mountain.

Despite it being the middle of the night, people were outside, or poking their heads out of windows to watch the night sky.

It must have been due to the surreal scenery and the ethereal melody.

“What’s this? A song?”

“Where is it coming from?”

“Speakers…? No, that can’t be right.”

Murmurs.

After the collapse of civilization, humanity’s biological rhythm reverted to the Stone Age. Almost all humans were forced into a good child’s lifestyle, falling asleep as early as 9 PM.

Considering that, the scene before me was certainly abnormal.

-From the eastern sky, to the western sky.

Even with a little exaggeration, the celestial song from the meteor shower carried a rhythm engraved in the DNA of modern humans.

“Doesn’t it seem familiar?”

“This is a lullaby!”

“What? A lullaby?”

“Yes! It’s hard to hear because of all the noise, but it’s a lullaby. That, what was it? Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star!”

“Ah.”

Mozart’s lullaby. Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.

Although the lyrics may vary by nation and people, it's a song so instinctively recognizable that almost everyone can identify it.

-Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

Listening to the lullaby drifting serenely from the sky, while the stars drew nearer and nearer, one might forget that we were being invaded by one of the most dangerous monsters in the world.

But as all humans gazed blankly at the night sky, the melody broke, and pieces of the world were torn away.

-Vvveeeeiiiiiing!

"Argh! Damn it!"

"Is it an air raid siren?"

"No, the government's gone and the speakers are broken, so what…."

People grimaced and covered their ears at the sudden siren. Fortunately, it stopped shortly after, but we mustn't let our guard down.

That sound was the indicator that the monster had entered a new phase.

Phase 3, commence.

-Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

-Shining like a diamond in the sky.

Whoosh——

The previously slow-falling meteors all converged over Busan at once.

Twisting into a beautiful, bright white arc, each star held its own unique pitch, spreading like wings.

I arrived at the guild headquarters of Samcheon World around this

time. Some guild members, including Dang Seo-rin, were outside the train station.

I shouted urgently.

“Dang Seo-rin!”

“Huh? Undertaker? Why are you here at this hour….”

A look of irritation crossed Dang Seo-rin’s face briefly, probably remembering our earlier argument.

But there was no time to dwell on that.

“It’s a monster!”

“What?”

“That starlight! It’s a monster!”

“……!”

As soon as she heard my words, Dang Seo-rin’s expression changed. Not as a friend on a gourmet tour, but as the leader of the Samcheon Guild Alliance and the Samcheon World guild master, her face turned fierce.

“That’s absurd! It’s just a phenomenon.”

“What phenomenon? Even though most scientists are employed inside monsters, no one has ever announced the existence of meteors that sing lullabies for over six hours while falling slowly from space!”

“Wait. Then, how the hell do we…?”

I understood the unspoken question Dang Seo-rin swallowed.

[Then, how the hell do we stop that?]

It took only a few words to break the fixed ideas about monsters, proving that Dang Seo-rin was faster than anyone else in this regard.

But in every other respect, we were already too late.

-From the eastern sky, to the western sky.

Thud.

Dang Seo-rin and I turned our heads simultaneously. Thud. One by one, the Samcheon World guild members who had been standing guard around us fell to the ground like scarecrows.

Even Dang Seo-rin couldn't help but be shocked.

"What——"

"Damn."

It wasn't just the guild members. Thud. Thud. Citizens who had come out to admire the rare night sky view, and people who were listening to the low-quality lullaby through their windows, all collapsed as if fainting.

"Are they… dead? All of them? Just like that?"

"No."

I approached the nearest guild member to check their condition.

"…They've fallen asleep."

"What?"

"Literally, they're in a state of sleep. It's hard to believe, but the whole city is falling asleep right now."

I slapped the guild member's cheek, but they didn't even flinch. Even after channeling aura, there was no response.

I groaned.

"It seems that not only the starlight but also the lullaby itself is a monster. It probably has a [Forced Sleep] effect. The moment we hear the lullaby, it's over. It's a damn situation. We need to escape."

I immediately decided to abandon the city.

“Escape?”

“Yes. Dang Seo-rin, we need to leave this city quickly.”

I grabbed Dang Seo-rin’s wrist. She felt unusually light.

“If we stay here, we’ll soon fall asleep too. Then there will be no one left to report this phenomenon or the monster.”

“…….”

“We have to struggle until the end. It’s not over yet. Let’s go, Dang Seo-rin. Hurry.”

At that moment.

The night sky turned bright white.

Blindingly, blindingly bright.

Dang Seo-rin, whose wrist was held by me, looked up dazedly.

“Ah…….”

White night.

Phase 4 of the boss battle.

And the final phase.

“…It’s too late. Undertaker.”

“…….”

“Something strange has been happening lately. People who were usually fine became anxious and irritable. Undertaker, you knew… this would happen, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t. I just guessed something would happen tonight. I never imagined the countless starlights would be monsters.”

“Hmm, sorry. I should have taken it more seriously.”

“…I’m the one who should apologize.”

I murmured.

“I promise I won’t do this ever again.”

“Heh. Okay.”

Dang Seo-rin chuckled as if she had heard a funny joke. I hugged her tightly.

The sky, bleached white, was filled with the lullaby, mingled with static noise.

More twisted and stuttering than before, the lullaby now sounded like noise from a broken radio.

-Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

-Shining like a diamond in the sky.

The light approached.

As my vision grew brighter, instead of awakening, my eyelids became increasingly heavy.

Dang Seo-rin might have felt the same. She blinked her eyes slowly while hugging my back. Perhaps, instead of hugging, she was collapsing toward me.

“Undertaker.”

“…Yes.”

“I, actually…”

Flash———

The world turned white before my eyes.

The night sky, the city, Busan’s waterfront, the collapsed bridge in

the middle, the beach. Dang Seo-rin's face. Shadows. Breathing.

Even the world.

That was my 25th annihilation.

Footnotes:

Chapter 65

The Sleepwalker III

Sinnoa

In the first battle with the meteor shower, I received a report card marked "utterly defeated."

In fact, even the term "first battle" reflects a very human-centric perspective. For the meteor shower, it was the third.

Since I'm already writing the report, I might as well write it all the way through. Although the 25th cycle me died and couldn't witness it firsthand, after the meteor shower fell to the ground, the following scenes unfolded.

Flash———

As soon as the starlight touched down, it evaporated everything within a radius of tens to hundreds of kilometers in an instant.

Evaporation, literally. It's a phenomenon hard to describe with any other word.

-BOOM!

Everything within the starlight's range—humans, animals, plants, even most monsters—turned to ash in an instant.

Not gray ash, but pure white ash, giving it a beautiful appearance.

If you run to where the meteor shower first appeared, you can witness the entire world turned into a white ashland, with countless particles floating like cherry blossoms in the air. It's quite a spectacle.

Of course, no matter how pretty it is, you shouldn't think about getting close.

Even one step into the 'Territory of Ashes,' or even a single finger crossing the boundary, and you'll inexplicably burn to white ash.

Yeah, this is a message for my 26th cycle self. You idiot with too much curiosity.

Thus, the entire Gyeongsangnam-do region of Korea was wiped out, but unfortunately, the meteor shower's havoc didn't end there.

Next came Hawaii in the Pacific, the Ingrian region of Russia, China, France, India, Pakistan, Israel, and so on. The meteor shower went on a world tour.

Each time, the world became perforated like Swiss cheese often seen in Tom and Jerry. The habitable area for humanity shrank accordingly.

This world tour took a total of six years.

Exactly six years after the meteor shower first fell on Korea, the entire world turned to ashes.

In the fifth year, the meteor shower hits Seoul. This time, not only the Korean Peninsula but half of East Asia gets included in the 'Territory of Ashes.'

The meteor shower that killed me during the vacation cycle when I was running a convenience store was the one aimed at Seoul.

There are no exceptions to the apocalypse.

No matter how deep you dig underground or build a bunker, or even if you escape to the sea on a boat, the day will come when every surface on Earth is covered by the 'Territory of Ashes.' Even the sea turns white when struck by the meteor shower.

A beautiful death.

A bleached end.

A white world.

“…….”

In the 27th cycle, I succeeded in escaping the meteor shower.

‘Escaping’ is perhaps more accurately described as ‘scouting to strategize for the future.’ It wasn’t hard to avoid the meteor shower’s range.

Even if it meant that my base, the Korean Peninsula, Dang Seo-rin, and many of my connections would be turned to ashes by the starlight, I meticulously gathered information on that monster.

‘I must endure now.’

It was a familiar task for a regressor like me.

It was around this time that I started using the term "anomaly" or “grotesques” instead of "monster." Observing the meteor shower made me revise many of my preconceptions about monsters.

Of course, that didn’t mean a miracle like defeating the meteor shower happened right away.

Because at this point, the Korean Peninsula was a literal hell.

“Immortal life! Eternal flame! Celestial court!”

“Oh! You know the New Buddha! If you just wear flowers on your head, you can survive even if your limbs are blown off!”

“Why do we need awakeners? If you just believe in the New Buddha, you can truly achieve eternal life!”

In the seventh year, a meteor shower hit Gyeongsangnam-do, and on top of that, the World Tree ‘Udumbara’ fully bloomed.

And that wasn’t all. If Baekhwa Girls' High School wasn’t properly sealed, our dark mage junior, Cheon Yo-hwa, would gleefully create an ‘academy city.’

Honestly, even as a regressor, this was too much bad luck.

A meteor strike comparable to a nuclear explosion, an apocalyptic cult spreading across East Asia, and a zombie city added to the mix? What is this? Are they telling me to just die quietly?

‘I must endure.’

So I obediently died.

Yes, a regressor can just die and start over.

‘A flow of change will surely come someday.’

In other words, I bided my time.

Sometimes I died from the starlight bombardment, sometimes I got bitten by the million-strong zombie army of the academy city. I refined strategies for the world's end and lamented the lack of a masterpiece to execute those strategies while growing impatient, enduring and enduring, waiting.

Can I really clear stages this difficult? No, these stages?

I endured.

Maybe it was time for me to, like Old Man Scho, shed my sense of duty and focus on enjoying small pleasures. After all, I knew better than anyone that no matter how many regressions I went through, the world didn’t change much.

I endured.

What if I just told Dang Seo-rin everything?

I endured.

And then.

“The constellations don’t exist.”

Finally.

“The Saintess of National Salvation and the Conqueror of the Alps, they’re all characters I created by myself.”

Splash.

A small wave rippled through my world.

—Finally, the tide of change had arrived.

No matter how much the world forced the genre of despair upon me, I, the Undertaker, never broke.

If Oh Dok-seo had heard me, she might have retorted, “No, mister, that unbreakable spirit is exactly the key seasoning that makes despair delicious,” but I’d cleanly ignore such comments from a literary pervert otaku.

Game Changer.

The Saintess’s overwhelming awakening abilities turned the tide of war, which had repeated dozens of times, completely.

[I found it, Mr. Undertaker.]

[Chungcheongnam-do. Asan. Onyang.]

World Tree Udumbara, extermination complete.

The regressor’s ‘knowledge’ of the future and the Clairvoyant’s ‘sight’ of the present created an overwhelming synergy.

Even aside from her awakening abilities, the Saintess was a reliable partner.

We shared information, planned strategies, and together, we eliminated the factors turning the Korean Peninsula into a fiery hell.

“However, I can’t seem to figure out how to deal with the meteor shower. Starlight falling from the sky, and the effect of forcibly putting people to sleep…….”

“Don’t worry. I have a plan.”

I said.

“The only role you need to take on right now, Saintess, is that of a prophet.”

“……?”

The Saintess tilted her head.

Before long, a translucent message appeared to all the awakeners active in Korea.

[The Saintess of National Salvation sends out a quest.]

“Huh?”

“What?”

The awakeners read the quest window with puzzled expressions.

The message read as follows:

□□□□□□□□□□

[Meteor Strike]

In six years, a top-class anomaly called ‘Meteor Shower’ will fall on the Korean Peninsula. The meteor shower will burn down the entire southern part of the peninsula.

Survive the threat of the meteor shower.

-Reward: Survival

-Failure: Death

□□□□□□□□□□

A quest distributed to all the awakeners in Korea. Thanks to the Saintess’s [Telepathy] ability, the message was transmitted both as voice and text.

Of course, the messages were sent under the name of a constellation, not the Saintess herself.

“Wha? Death? Just die?”

“Damn it. What kind of quest is this?”

“There’s no chance this is a hoax… right?”

The awakeners fell into confusion.

Even I, the regressor, was almost fooled, the Saintess impersonated the constellations so well. It was extremely hard to doubt the authenticity of a quest given by a constellation. Who would imagine a madman using [Clairvoyance], [Telepathy], and [Time Stop] all at once to impersonate the constellations?

Moreover, this was the moment that revealed how skillful the Saintess was at manipulating the constellations, thus showing her natural talent for inciting the awakeners’ psychology.

“An anomaly? A meteor shower? …What’s that?”

“There are no clues except that it’s six years away. How are we supposed to proceed with this quest?”

“Is there anyone with specific information? If you share it with our guild, we will reward you handsomely!”

The Saintess didn’t reveal all the information at once. She guided the awakeners to voluntarily piece together the clues.

[The Chancellor of the Red Cape secretly tells you that anomaly is the term constellations use for monsters.]

To particularly devoted awakeners, she gradually leaked information as if it were special knowledge meant just for them.

[The chain quest for ‘Meteor Strike’ has been activated!]

For specific awakeners, she framed the information about the meteor shower as a quest, revealing it step by step.

□□□□□□□□□□

[Identity of the Meteor Shower] (2/4)

So far, it has been revealed that the meteor shower is the entity responsible for destroying numerous worlds.

If the starlight of the meteor shower touches the ground, no one can escape destruction.

Currently, you are the only one who has accurately grasped the danger of the meteor shower.

□□□□□□□□□□

I prepared all the quest rewards to motivate them.

Having run a convenience store once, I knew that in an emergency, I could secure a significant portion of the remaining logistics in Korea.

I hid the stolen goods in a remote warehouse, and when the constellation revealed the warehouse's location as an 'event reward,' the awakeners eagerly rushed to gather the supplies.

Additionally, when Cheon Yo-hwa joined our operation later, the authenticity of the 'quests given by the constellations' reached its peak.

"Oh, the meteor shower? Indeed. They led my homeworld to its end."

"I'm just a fugitive. So, I don't know much about the meteor shower. But rumor has it… that before the starlight falls from the night sky, a song always resounds."

These NPCs were created by Cheon Yo-hwa under my orders.

Occasionally, when entering the depths of the void, NPC villages would be found. The NPCs claimed to be 'refugees from a world that had already been destroyed.'

"A song? What song?"

“I don’t know the details either.”

“Ha, this seems like crucial information……. We’re stuck here.”

The NPCs’ zombie-like appearance, with parts of their bodies melting away, added visual impact and credibility to their statements. To the uninformed, it would seem like an ominous sign of something truly terrible about to happen.

About a year passed like that.

-Anonymous: Comprehensive compilation of information on the top-class anomaly ‘Meteor Shower.’

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Regarding the ‘song’ consistently reported in quests related to the meteor shower.

-Anonymous: Posting the messages supposedly sent by constellations regarding the meteor shower so far.

A ‘Meteor Shower Board’ was even created on SG Net.

Here, the awakeners not only voluntarily organized the information but also actively discussed strategies.

Believing the information was hard-earned through their own blood and sweat, they became more convinced of the meteor shower’s appearance.

There were always one or two awakeners like Old Man Scho who doubted the existence of the constellations.

But combining the Saintess’s [Clairvoyance], [Telepathy], and [Time Stop], Cheon Yo-hwa’s [NPC Creation], my future knowledge as the regressor, and skillful resource distribution created an unquestionable sense of ‘authenticity.’

As a result.

-Anonymous: There’s only a year left until the meteor shower appears. Shouldn’t we start joint training between guilds?

-Anonymous: I heard Samcheon World already periodically gathers allied guilds for training.

-Anonymous: Objectively speaking, Dang Seo-rin is the only leader for Korea.

Anonymous: Are you wearing a pointy hat?

The awakeners in Korea were fully prepared to hunt the meteor shower.

From now on, it was the regressor's time.

Footnotes:

Chapter 66

The Sleepwalker IV

Sinnoa

I could end the Ten Legs with a single strike.

Originally, I had mastered a miraculous power that was only allowed to the Sword Star in this world, the aura of starlight, known as Sword Force.

Despite this, I never ended the Ten Legs in one turn kill. Instead, I always ensured that the 'Korean Awakeners Alliance' was established and dragged them into the battlefield against the Ten Legs.

“It's been a while. How have you been, Undertaker?”

“Ah, Undertaker! How are you!”

This was because, to use a somewhat comical expression, the awakeners needed ‘awakening.’

In the battlefield, I showed them how powerful the Ten Legs were, how mistaken their arrogance was in seeing themselves as transcendent beings, without needing to lecture them.

Humans, Homo sapiens, only learn whether something is shit or soy paste by tasting it themselves.

After a life-or-death battle with the Ten Legs, the awakeners of the Korean Peninsula realized, ‘Ah, if we don’t form an alliance in advance, we’ll all die when an A-class anomaly appears.’

I added one more trick to this.

“It's been a while. How have you all been?”

“Good, good!”

“Getting used to the aura?”

“Haha, well, not quite yet…”

I advertised that ‘only those who joined the alliance would receive special tutoring on advanced aura techniques for free.’

Even though civilization had collapsed, the zeal for education was engraved in the DNA of Koreans. Words like ‘advanced,’ ‘learning,’ and ‘special tutoring’ paralyzed their brains.

Many awakeners had witnessed firsthand in the battles with Ten Legs how useful aura was. The tentacles of Ten Legs were tougher than the toughest squid legs, and only blades imbued with aura could pierce them.

“Undertaker!”

“Undertaker, I’m stuck in my training…”

In a sense, the Korean Awakeners Alliance became a sect that revered me like a Grandmaster.

Originally, Old Man Scho filled this role, but he had retired…

Of course, the awakeners were all lunatics. There were countless people who treated their superiors like dogs.

Therefore, even while teaching them aura techniques, I never demanded anything in return.

Running a guild? Why should I interfere? It’s your guild, so handle it yourself. Tuition fees? Forget it, just suck the essence of the techniques from me. Sure, take this and that, take my liver and gallbladder. It’s fine. I don’t need anything.

In the apocalypse, such behavior was the perfect way to be treated like a pushover.

But what if that pushover nonchalantly walked through anomaly-infested voids, traveled from city to city, effortlessly dispatched Ten Legs, received plenty of favor from the constellations, and boasted

friendships with the guild master of Samcheon World and the National Road Management Corps chief?

Even awakeners, who selectively let rationality enter their skulls, would have to reconsider the definition of ‘pushover.’

“Master, when will we ever be able to repay our debt?”

“I can collect your debt anytime, but I won’t, and I’ll continue not to. So, keep learning aura techniques that suit you. You’ll survive life-threatening situations and solidify your authority as a guild master, but you won’t give me anything in return. We all know this, you, me, Dang Seo-rin, and Noh Do-hwa.”

“Master! No, hyung! Please!”

The so-called Super Subordinate phenomenon.

To exaggerate a bit, if I came up with a suitable reason and said, ‘I heard the guild master in Incheon is stirring trouble in Korea...,’ the guild masters here would lead their entire forces to cause havoc, thinking, ‘Grandmaster wants us to crush the Incheon guild!’

Moreover, the extermination of the Meteor Shower wasn’t just any reason but one that involved the fate of the entire Korean Peninsula. The guild masters who owed me naturally had no choice but to gather.

“You’re always popular.”

After a round of intense handshakes, Dang Seo-rin greeted me with a weary face.

“You could just settle down in one city, but you always travel all over the country. Are you diligent or not…?”

“Why, I’ve settled down. All of Gangnam in Seoul is my turf. Are you underestimating the land value of Gangnam now?”

“There’s nothing in Gangnam now except your guild building.”

“It’s a low-point investment. When civilization starts to rebuild, the

life of Undertaker will become a legendary real estate story.”

Dang Seo-rin chuckled.

“So, no thoughts of settling down? No thoughts of dating? I hear a lot of people like you.”

“I’m not interested in dating…”

The Meteor Shower had to arrive at dusk.

We waited for the night, holding brooms in our hands while chatting. Why did we all have brooms? Well, you’ll soon find out.

Tense air.

To ease the hardened atmosphere, light jokes and small talk flowed quietly in the camp.

Maintaining normalcy to ignore the abnormal had been a wisdom humans learned long ago.

“Why? Are you impotent?”

“I’m just not interested in dating. Honestly, my mental age is around a thousand years. No matter how it is, I can’t date kids, can I?”

“Pff. What nonsense.”

Not only Dang Seo-rin and me, but all the awakeners exchanged trivial jokes.

It was natural. The Meteor Shower was supposed to descend over Gyeongsangnam-do in the 7th year of regression.

Here in the Gimhae plains, not a single elite warrior hadn’t crossed the wall of life and death dozens of times.

They all knew how crucial it was to control their mental strength right before a battle.

“Actually, it’s hard to imagine you dating anyone.”

“Yeah, even though there’s nothing rough about you, you have the look of someone destined to be single forever. You have that kind of vibe.”

If it were after the 50th cycle, SG Man Seo Gyu and the villain Sim Ah-ryeon would have joined in the joke.

“Heh. More than anything, it’s the partner who should be worried. Seventy percent of your conversations would be about the Three Kingdoms, twenty percent about the Chu-Han Contention, and the remaining ten percent about the Water Margin. Who could endure that? Even a thousand-year love would wither.”

If it were after the 55th cycle, the National Road Management Corps chief Noh Do-hwa would have sipped her ginger tea, exhaling hot breath and equally hot sarcasm.

“Haha. I sometimes think I wish senior would stop talking about the Three Kingdoms! Honestly, I don’t even find it interesting. Well, except for the part where Dong Zhuo burns down Luoyang!”

If it were after the 109th cycle, Baekhwa Girls' High student president Cheon Yo-hwa would have added with a bright smile.

“……”

[…….]

Lee Ha-yul and the Saintess would have always been silent.

Throughout my life, spanning 1183 cycles, allies sometimes increased and sometimes decreased.

But today was the 42nd cycle.

Our blood pact was not yet complete, and thus, I would describe one of the most difficult and intense battles.

———, ——.

—. ———. …….

……., ……, …….”

Countless voices disappeared.

Above us, only Dang Seo-rin and I, our breath turned into white smoke and rose.

Our breaths for two people turned a reddish hue.

My companion in time muttered.

“Indeed. I’m not interested in dating either.”

The dusk descended from the sky.

A pleasant tension seeped through my body.

[——It’s coming.]

The Saintess’s low mutter.

Suddenly, the world’s crimson glow burned a bit brighter.

It was like a giant wreath of flames.

The sky’s zenith burned red, while the edges turned blue, black, pitch-black, quietly darkening.

The flames lived and moved. The crimson dusk at the center exhaled continually into the dark blue night sky, and inversely, it inhaled from the periphery.

The sky— the world, was breathing in the glow of dusk and starlight.

“Dang Seo-rin.”

“Yes. I know.”

Dang Seo-rin had already started chanting.

How long had it been since the song flowed from her lips?

Suddenly, the darkness at the edge of the sky swallowed the entire celestial dome. The world darkened as if dusk had never existed.

Night sky.

It wasn't a physical or astronomical change. It was as if a mother quietly covered her child's eyes with her palm, the entire world was momentarily shrouded by something.

"It's here."

"Damn. It's real."

Murmurs.

Some awakeners stirred at the incomprehensible phenomenon. The tension they had carefully suppressed with thorough strategy meetings, tactics, and witty banter suddenly surged to the surface.

Some clenched their fists at the arrival of the anomaly that had been foretold for six years.

In an era where power poles and streetlights had closed their eyes, only the elite warriors' eyes dimly glowed. They stared at the night sky, arranged in meticulously planned formations.

[The Saintess of National Salvation announces that...]

[A top-class anomaly 'Meteor Shower' has appeared over the Korean Peninsula.]

Whirr—

The night sky's darkness vomited out the highly condensed starlight. It was as if a giant playfully poked the sky's balloon with a scale.

But the result was no joke.

"Starlight!"

"The strategy was right…?"

“My God. That’s not just a meteor. It’s an anomaly controlling the entire sky.

Normally, from this point, the Meteor Shower would stay in the sky for six hours.

But as observed through many cycles, during those six hours, the Meteor Shower wasn’t merely showing off how beautiful its starlight was, doing a runway walk, or rather a Milky Way walk, in the night sky.

In fact, it was casting a ‘spell’ on the humans on the ground over those six hours.

It could be called hypnosis or brainwashing. The key was, the more people who looked up at the starlight in the night sky, the stronger the Meteor Shower became.

[The Saintess of National Salvation advises non-combatants not to look at the night sky.]

Thus, in this boss battle, cooperation and swift resolution were paramount.

Instead of waiting for the Meteor Shower to gather enough power to fall, we aimed for its weakest point.

In other words, striking in the early stages was my strategy.

“Ah——”

To initiate this plan, Dang Seo-rin opened the first movement.

First melody, repeat. Second melody, expansion.

The song, often used in large-scale battles, filled the plains.

This alone was enough to back up the allies within the range of her magic. However, we were fully prepared for this battle.

“……Bzz, ……Ah…….”

Each combatant had a radio attached to their chest or waist. These items were prepared specifically for this battle. There was even a base station built nearby.

It was a tactic only possible because I, as a regressor, knew the exact location of the battlefield.

It was evidence that we had concentrated all the remnants and dregs of civilization for this critical battle.

Simply spreading Dang Seo-rin's song through the radios would have been convenient, but such a convenient cheat didn't occur. Thus, an additional melody was necessary.

"Ah——ah, ah——"

Third melody, Medium.

A pre-designated substance resonated with Dang Seo-rin's song like a kind of mirror, thanks to magic.

Naturally, all the radios distributed to the awakeners were designated as 'mediums.' Since this designation required another layer of magic, Dang Seo-rin had been pre-enchanting the radios whenever she had spare time.

The total time spent on this task was three years.

Moreover, the equipment designated as 'mediums' by Dang Seo-rin wasn't just cheap radios.

The final and most important Cursed Song Incantation that we had prepared and Dang Seo-rin executed resonated.

"Ah—— Ah———"

Fourth melody, Flight.

The fourth song wrapped around the sky once and continued in endless da capo through repetition.

Grasping.

Nine hundred awakeners gathered in the Gimhae plains, and among them, seven hundred selected for combat clenched their hands as promised.

Every one of their fists held a broom.

“It’s a bit late to point out, but… Was a broom really the best choice?”

“Yep, absolutely.”

Dang Seo-rin answered, having finished the fourth melody. She had a look as if wondering why such a thing was asked.

“A witch can only fly with a broom.”

With a tap, Dang Seo-rin kicked the dirt. Perhaps it was because she had repeated this action thousands, tens of thousands of times. The pose of the great witch was relaxed and elegant.

Frrrrrk— From her small frame, a black cloak three times her size fluttered like a flag.

I chuckled. Then, I spoke into the radio.

“All units, commence takeoff.”

That was the signal.

Seven hundred awakeners of the alliance simultaneously leaped from the plains and soared into the night sky.

Boss battle.

Anomaly: Meteor Shower

Threat Level: Lv.3 Continental-class

Begin Subjugation.

First phase, takeoff.

Footnotes:

Chapter 67

The Sleepwalker V

Sinnoa

To state the obvious, homo sapiens do not have wings.

Most people have no intuition for flight.

Unless they are pilots who treat the engine sounds of an airplane like their heartbeat or paragliders who feel their parachutes as extensions of their arms, humans generally don't find much thrill in flying.

And where intuition is absent, fear is born.

"Argh! I'm flying! I'm flying!"

"How high do we have to go?"

As seven hundred awakeners soared into the air, relying only on cheap brooms, screams erupted from all sides.

"Mom! I really hate this!"

"I'm falling! Ahhh!"

"Waaaah!"

Of course, we had conducted several joint training sessions beforehand. Those with a fear of heights were excluded from the combat team.

However, even so, cheap brooms were far from reliable as humanity's new wings.

An owl flying through the night sky gave us a look that seemed to say, 'What are these new suicide seekers?'

[The Saintess of National Salvation announces that the vanguard has currently surpassed an altitude of 300 meters.]

In a sense, the owl's look was accurate. If not a suicide squad, what would you call a group charging with makeshift wings to take down a top-class anomaly?

Only the guild members of Samcheon World skillfully demonstrated the art of flight.

[600 meters.]

Oh, by the way, I was quite proficient in broom flight myself. Believe it or not, I once took second place in an internal flight competition at Samcheon World.

Leading the vanguard, alongside me, was Dang Seo-rin, the perennial champion of those flight competitions.

[1500 meters.]

It started getting cold.

"Aaah——."

But it didn't matter. Dang Seo-rin was already singing another verse of the Cursed Song.

The fourth melody, body reinforcement.

Combining existing spells like 'temperature regulation' and 'breath support,' it was a comprehensive package developed by Dang Seo-rin. It helped withstand hostile environments such as the deep sea, scorching deserts, and the void to some extent.

As expected, as soon as Dang Seo-rin finished chanting, a pleasant warmth enveloped my entire body.

[2200 meters.]

Higher. Higher.

[2900 meters.]

A quick glance downward showed the ground already a tiny speck below. Ignoring the instinctive dizziness, I turned my gaze back to the sky.

There was the Meteor Shower.

From below, the starlight seemed about to fall at any moment. However, no matter how high we flew, the stars didn't appear any larger.

An optical illusion. A trick of the world. Staring at the starlight continuously, I felt my sense of proportion between distance and size breaking down.

But this too was an illusion within an illusion. We were undoubtedly getting closer to the Meteor Shower.

[3500 meters.]

Finally.

[4100 meters. Approaching Target.]

[Engage.]

Shhhh—

It sounded like waves crashing. At an altitude of 4100 meters, it was a sound that shouldn't be heard.

As we pierced through the surface of that noise, suddenly, everything turned pitch black.

It was more fitting to call it a 'dark abyss' than a 'night sky,' as the inky blackness covered everything.

Shaa, shaaa—

Each time an awakener followed me up, the darkness rippled. They lowered their brooms and hovered in midair.

Awestruck by the unfamiliar sight, the awakeners gaped.

“My god, this is….”

“It’s the void!”

Before confusion spread through the combat team, I grabbed the radio and shouted.

“We have just entered the Meteor Shower’s territory! No need to be surprised or tense! It’s just the void we’ve experienced countless times before, but now it’s in the sky!”

“Ah.”

“Continue the operation! Reform your formations! Team up with your combat units! Reorganize and charge as trained! You have 40 seconds!”

“Team 8, gather! Team 8, gather!”

“Team 11! Why are you there! Get over here, you idiot!”

The formation of awakeners, momentarily disrupted by the ascent into the night sky void, quickly reformed.

Meanwhile, I kept my eyes fixed on the direction of the Meteor Shower.

Starlight that seemed ready to fall at any moment. No, it gave the illusion it was already falling.

But it was clear that it was just crouching there, watching us.

Surpassing intellect and reason, the instincts honed through dozens of cycles fiercely sensed its hostility.

Contrary to my instincts, the surroundings were eerily calm.

It felt like being dropped in the middle of a calm, dark ocean.

“This place is strange, Undertaker.”

Dang Seo-rin pulled her broomhead close to me and murmured.

“The air feels heavy. It’s a bit hard to breathe. It feels like I’ve entered shallow water rather than the sky.”

“The anomaly must have a water attribute and be preparing for rain. What did you expect? The void is just void.”

“That’s true.”

“Do your best with the last song.”

“Yes. Leave it to me. And you, too. This operation depends on you.”

“Of course.”

Then, a small voice of the Saintess whispered into my ear.

[Be careful, Mr. Undertaker. The altimeter is broken.]

Broken?

[It was recording about 4100 meters just before entering the void, but now it’s showing 7182 meters, -9699 meters, 21337 meters, 0.01 meters, changing erratically. In real-time.]

“…….”

[It’s not just the altitude. Other metrics like pressure are fluctuating continuously. Good luck.]

I nodded.

Exactly 40 seconds.

I looked back. Seven hundred perfectly aligned members of the flight squad were behind me.

“Continue the operation! Charge! Charge!”

“Waaaah!”

Boss battle, Phase 2, begin.

Seven hundred members of the flight squad followed me in a spearhead formation. Dang Seo-rin, who had been at the forefront with me, shifted to the rear as planned.

The starlight remained unresponsive.

Which was our greatest opportunity.

“Aaah—aaah—a——”

From the rear, Dang Seo-rin’s voice awakened the night sky.

The fifth melody, ‘Mirror of All Things’.

This too was a recently developed high-difficulty grand magic. Combining [Focus], [Absorption], [Reflection], and [Amplification], it was Dang Seo-rin’s masterpiece, finally unified into one song.

Its effect was clear.

Shhh—

Translucent mirrors formed around the seven hundred awakeners. Like planets orbiting the sun, countless mirrors surrounded our flight squad.

I gave the command without hesitation.

“All units, pour out your power!”

The awakeners, as if waiting for this moment, unleashed their aura and mana towards the mirrors.

The mirrors reflected the awakeners’ auras precisely towards ‘other mirrors.’

Ching—

Mirrors that finished their reflection shattered instantly. Countless mirror fragments scattered in the air like white spring flowers.

The streams of aura, reflected from the rear, bounced off more and larger mirrors as they moved forward.

Ching— Ching— Ching—

Each time, the mirrors shattered, and the aura, superimposed repeatedly, was passed to the next mirror.

The glass, stained with the colors of the aura, poured out every color into the pitch-black night sky.

The radio buzzed noisily.

[Team 12, charged!]

[Team 11, charged!]

Exactly.

The role of the ‘Mirror of All Things’ in this battle was to concentrate firepower.

With slight variations, the seven hundred-member squad formed teams of about sixty members each.

Meaning, roughly sixty awakeners focused their aura, their strike, into the mirrors.

[Team 6, charged! Charged!]

[Loss rate, about 5%!]

Rumble!

The mixing of differently colored and patterned auras created thunderous sounds. Like a giant beast growling.

From Team 12 to Team 1.

Passing through twelve zigzagged intestines, the roar of the Korean Peninsula alliance surged up to its throat.

[Team 4, charged——]

[Loss rate below 3%. Within calculated range. Transmitting.]

[Team 3! Passed!]

A storm of aura swept forward.

Occasionally, a scream of ‘Hic!’ escaped. Awakeners not accustomed to flight stumbled in the aura storm.

It was anticipated. Therefore, I placed inexperienced awakeners in the later teams, and skilled elite warriors in the lead teams.

There was no problem.

Dang Seo-rin controlled everything from the rear, and I commanded everything from the front.

[Team 2… passed! Somehow, we made it!]

[Go! Go! Go!]

Some awakeners exclaimed in awe. Like ancient Egyptians in awe of their self-made pyramids, they too were thrilled by the torrent of aura.

And then.

[Team 1! Charged! Mr. Undertaker!]

The leader of Team 1 shouted. Yu Ji-won. In the distant past, she had served as my adjutant when I was with Samcheon World.

[Now—— Now! Transmitting!]

[Loss rate below 1%! Below 1%!]

[Mr. Undertaker!]

Rumble—!

Finally, the auras of seven hundred were delivered right before me.

All the mirrors created by Dang Seo-rin shattered. The magic mirrors fell to the ground, scattering countless fragments.

Except for the largest mirror right before my eyes.

The transparent concave mirror swirled with the aura storm.

“Huff…!”

Every hair on my body stood on end.

An euphoria like becoming an omnipotent god surged up my spine. Which mere mortal could be granted such power, and who could wield it properly?

That’s why I stood at the forefront.

I infused my aura into the torrent of aura that seemed ready to explode beyond my control.

Ink-black. This was the color of my soul.

The torrent of colorful auras was instantly tainted black, as if a drop of ink dyed water in a beaker.

Pop, the skin on my right hand peeled up to my forearm. Unable to withstand the output of the aura.

“……!”

My ears rang. I heard no sound. Thunder rumbled incessantly around me, and my vision darkened, making everything invisible.

The pain of bursting blood vessels.

But still, there was no problem.

-Saintess! The position——

[Adjust 3 cm to the right.]

A calm voice echoed directly in my mind.

[Now, 11 cm down.]

[Too low. 2 cm up.]

In the 42nd cycle, I didn't know, but the Saintess was meticulously correcting errors using 'Time Stop.'

She must have reviewed and recalculated countless times whether the aura would hit the Meteor Shower. Perhaps spending days and nights.

That long time was but a moment to me, and I endured all the pain to hold on to that moment.

[Yes, just a little. Just a little more…….]

[Now.]

Softly.

[Now, Mr. Undertaker.]

The Saintess's time intersected with mine.

At that moment, I roared and fired the storm of aura gathered before my eyes. My own roar was inaudible to me.

Rumble—!

Only the roar of a giant beast.

The ink-black roar, penetrating through the souls of seven hundred and the twelve intestines, shook the world.

-What?-

Finally, the Meteor Shower, which had been silent, reacted. Like an entity just awakened from a deep sleep.

Boss battle, Phase 3, begin.

-Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

The Meteor Shower trembled.

-Shining like a diamond in the sky.

-From the eastern sky, to the western sky.

A familiar melody. The lullaby that had always led the ground to ruin from the 23rd to the 41st cycle resonated through the storm.

It intended to lull us to sleep again.

“Aaah—aaah, aaah——”

And for this very moment, Dang Seo-rin played her final card.

The song, resonating from both the far and near side of the night sky, but the moment the two waves met at the center.

-What?

———The song abruptly ceased.

The sixth melody, Antiresonance.

An application magic of [Silence] that nullified all noise by emitting a sound wave precisely countering the opponent’s sound.

I shouted, filled with joy.

“The power to create miracles with song isn’t a patent exclusive to you!”

The point where the Meteor Shower’s void and Dang Seo-rin’s magic crossed was exactly where I was flying.

The black waves emitted by the Meteor Shower and the white waves emitted by Dang Seo-rin clashed endlessly. Black and white. The colors of humanity’s song. The shades of the anomaly’s song.

The battlefield in the night sky was filled with the songs of humans and void, while I alone raced through the line of silence.

Following the Saintess’s guidance, constantly aiming the storm of aura.

-What?

Was it because its lethal move didn't work? An unidentifiable noise seeped into the lullaby sung by the Meteor Shower.

But, it was too late.

To land this strike, this surprise attack, the seven hundred combat team and nine hundred support team had trained relentlessly.

Dang Seo-rin developed three high-level spells, prepared radios, and enchanted them with medium magic.

The Saintess had worked in secrecy, hiding her existence to lend credibility to the constellations' messages.

The time the Saintess spent over seven years to unite all the awakeners of the alliance was near eternal. The few days spent fine-tuning the aim were but the final seasoning of that eternity.

And my 150 years.

The optimal route. The best strategy.

-What? What? What? What? -

Thus, this was the first and final strike.

The only moment the Meteor Shower was off guard. A moment when it had not yet fallen on any ground, destroyed any nation, or killed any awakener, and thus was least experienced.

Literally, the regressor's killer move.

-What? What? What? What? What? What? -

You can't blame it for being unfair.

That's how you've fought all along.

You too shall die in your sleep, anomaly.

-What? What? What? What? -

Flash———

Starlight ascending from the ground pierced through the starlight descending from the sky.

Footnotes:

Chapter 68

The Sleepwalker VI

Sinnoa

-Waaaaah!

The area once known as the Gimhae Plain.

This place had fallen into a state resembling Tom and Jerry's cheese block due to the urban development boom.

It was dug here, and dug there. As it was nibbled away here and there, the area that could truly be called a ‘plain’ had significantly shrunk.

In other words, if urban development stopped, everything would revert to its original state.

When the scales of the 10,000-year war between nature and civilization, environment and humanity, tipped back towards nature, the Gimhae Plain rapidly regained its former glory.

Of course, a significant portion of nature’s territory had to be ceded to the anomaly who fought as mercenaries in exchange for victory. As a result, it was hard to tell whether it was truly nature or the void, making the plight of nature not much different from human affairs.

Among these, the Gimhae Plain was an area where civilization was removed swiftly, perhaps too quickly.

-Waaaaah!

About seven years ago, an air raid alarm was suddenly issued from the west of the Gimhae Plain, and a small-scale ‘bombing’ took place there.

The exact cause and details of the incident were unknown.

It happened at the exact moment I was forcibly summoned to Busan Station and began living as a regressor.

Even the information that a bombing occurred nearby would have been hard to obtain if I were not a regressor. There were testimonies that it was shelling rather than bombing, rumors of a gate suddenly opening, and whispers that a secret government research facility exploded.

It was all a mystery.

-Boom!

Maybe a small gate appeared in the Gimhae Plain, and the bombing occurred to eliminate it.

Perhaps it was someone's desperate decision to save the nation, thinking they couldn't afford to lose Busan after Seoul had been devastated.

Maybe it was because the area was sparsely populated compared to other densely populated cities, making the sacrifice seem acceptable.

Or perhaps it was just a tragic mistake due to an error in command transmission. I considered this possibility the most likely.

But now, there was no way to uncover the truth. With the government and civilian organizations that were supposed to investigate the truth gone, what could be done? Especially when documents and witnesses related to the incident were also impossible to find.

Not only nature but also human history was swallowed by the void.

Nevertheless, one clear fact remained: the Gimhae Plain, where the bombing occurred, could not have been a mere barren plain.

Even in places where there was no way to prove it, people lived.

Let's talk about the epilogue.

[——Mr. Undertaker.]

[Wake up, Mr. Undertaker.]

Blinking, I opened my eyes.

I realized that I had briefly lost consciousness. A momentary blackout. Fortunately, as a regressor, I had experienced fainting countless times. I was not startled by something I had grown accustomed to long ago.

[Have you regained consciousness?]

If I had to guess why I fainted, it was probably because of the lullaby sung by the Meteor Shower that made my eyes close involuntarily.

Unlike other awakeners, I was flying at the forefront. In other words, I was the farthest from Dang Seo-rin's white magic, the 'Antiresonance' song that nullified the lullaby.

"Yes, I'm fine. You don't need to worry, Saintess. How long was I unconscious?"

[Not long. About a second.]

"You noticed I fainted in just one second? That's impressive."

I was genuinely astonished. After all, I hadn't known at the time that the Saintess possessed the 'Time Stop' ability.

During this crucial battle, the Saintess periodically stopped time to observe the battlefield. Her Clairvoyance must have caught the moment I slumped on my broom.

[A problem has arisen, Mr. Undertaker.]

The Saintess skillfully shifted the topic. It wasn't just to avoid my suspicion; there was a genuine urgency in her voice.

A chill ran down my spine. Even without Dang Seo-rin's magic, people's voices resonated with emotions.

“Don’t tell me we failed to subjugate the Meteor Shower?”

[No. The subjugation itself is almost certainly a success. But… look over there.]

Even without a clear direction, I instinctively turned my head.

The night sky where the starlight of the Meteor Shower had been.

The strike prepared for years by seven hundred awakeners was indeed sharp. The storm of aura we created had torn the Meteor Shower apart.

Yes.

It was torn apart.

“What…?”

My heart pounded.

The Meteor Shower was certainly defeated. The sphere that emitted a strong, concentrated starlight was no more.

And while there were anomaly that disappeared like smoke upon being defeated, many others left corpses like animals.

I muttered blankly.

“A corpse of starlight…?”

Have you ever seen white phosphorus?

Exactly that scene unfolded before my eyes, no, before our eyes.

Torn starlight.

The fragments of starlight, shredded to pieces, were falling towards the ground.

“Ah.”

The chill that surged up my spine pierced my heart, making it throb

ominously.

Why didn't I foresee this?

If there was a meteor falling from the sky, destroying it mid-air would be a problem——

Even if the destruction succeeded, the countless fragments of the meteor falling to the ground would still be an issue.

"Shit!"

It was simply unimaginable that an anomaly composed of 100% pure starlight would leave a corpse. A corpse of light? Who could have predicted that?

Therefore, this was another instance of 'you suffer if you don't know.' Damn it.

It was like the final parting gift from the Meteor Shower, shattered by the regressor's ambush, to humanity.

In the 42nd cycle, where we succeeded in subjugating the Meteor Shower for the 'first' time, we had no choice but to fall for this trap card.

"It's over! It's really over! We actually hunted a top-class anomaly!"

"Long live the United Awakeners Alliance of Korea! Long live!"

"Unbelievable… This is the world's first subjugation of a top-class anomaly. We actually did it…?"

"The constellations are invincible! Undertaker is a god!"

Looking around, there were no combatants paying attention to the Meteor Shower's corpse in this aerial battlefield.

They were all just excited about having won a historic battle.

Only the Saintess and I were focused on the strange undulations in the night sky, on the fragments of starlight starting to fall.

‘If the fragments fall to the ground like this— no, it’s okay. Even if Gyeongsangnam-do becomes a territory of ashes, it’s not the worst situation.’

I was not the type of regressor who had faith in myself. Such self-confidence was a luxury only diamond spoon-type regressors, who could save the world in just two or three regressions, could afford.

Naturally, I anticipated the possibility of my plan failing and evacuated as many residents from Gyeongsangnam-do as possible.

“The infrastructure will be destroyed…”

But it was manageable. In this era, the true infrastructure was not capital or material but the awakeners.

Swallowing the bitter taste rising in my mouth, the Saintess spoke in a voice even more urgent than before.

[…Mr. Undertaker. The starlight fragments are spreading wider.]

“What?”

I quickly leaned out and looked down.

Indeed, the starlight fragments were actively defying the concept of vertical fall. As expected of anomaly, who questioned the laws of physics when bored, their anti-intellectual behavior was showing.

[They’re not just falling over Busan’s airspace. They’re expected to easily cover the entire Korean Peninsula.]

“Damn it, this insane setback.”

I muttered without realizing it, but strictly speaking, it wasn’t exactly a setback.

As already described, if left unchecked, the Meteor Shower would bombard the entire world over seven years. Hawaii, India, China, France, and so on.

In other words… this thing didn’t pour out all its power in its first

debut. It was more like a stealthy powerhouse. Similar to the World Tree, Udumbara.

We had stabbed such a stealthy powerhouse in the gut, so the ripple effects of its hidden power were bound to be unleashed.

The conclusion was simple.

Even in death, the Meteor Shower's fragments alone could easily annihilate the Korean Peninsula.

'What should I do?'

Countless thoughts crossed my mind.

'Abandon the Korean Peninsula?' 'The seven hundred awakeners are fine. We could abandon the main force and deploy a secondary unit.' 'But what about the nine hundred non-combatants providing backup on the ground?' 'Will they die?' 'Dang Seo-rin is fine, isn't she?' 'What about the Saintess?' 'Can the Alliance of Awakeners maintain the same solidarity without the constellations' trust? Even after the last ethical restraint is removed?' 'Territory of ashes.'

The starlight fragments fell slowly.

My decision-making speed increased.

'Abandon this cycle.' 'But gather as much information as possible.' 'Do the Meteor Shower's fragments also turn the ground into a territory of ashes? Will they disappear silently upon falling? Or will they remain as mysterious, eternal sources of light?' 'Even if I die, I struggle until the end.'

[Mr. Undertaker.]

A voice echoed quietly in my mind.

[Mr. Undertaker, give the order.]

The Saintess, the mastermind behind the constellations, awaited my command as a regressor.

I took out my radio.

“All units, the battle is not over!”

Attention focused on me.

“Everyone, look down! The Meteor Shower’s corpse is falling in hundreds and thousands of pieces! Even after subjugation, the fragments persist instead of disappearing!”

The awakeners murmured. They were all highly competent elites, but it would take five to ten minutes for their murmuring to coalesce into clear judgments and refined actions.

The commander was the one who shortened that time to tens of seconds.

‘Saintess.’

I hadn’t given any prior instructions to the Saintess.

[The Saintess of National Salvation issues an urgent quest!]

But as if reacting to my thoughts, at that moment, a message appeared before all the awakeners.

———————————

[Debris of the Destroyed Meteor]

You have successfully subjugated the continental-class anomaly ‘Meteor Shower’ for the first time in history.

But there is no time to celebrate. The Meteor Shower’s fragments are falling.

Prevent the Meteor Carnival.

Good luck.

-Reward: Survival

-Failure: Destruction of the Korean Peninsula

———————————

The timing was perfect.

In this moment of uncertainty without any data, the awakeners had no choice but to accept the constellation's testimony as fact.

I shouted.

"We must stop them!"

The night sky rippled.

"There are still nine hundred non-combatants on the ground! As long as they remain, the Korean Peninsula is not finished! Here, we entrust the future to the non-combatants and face death without fear!"

All the awakeners looked at me. I saw black gunpowder ignite in their pupils.

"From the 1st to the 12th squad! Follow your team leader's orders! Don't let a single piece of the anomaly's corpse touch our land!"

[Yes!]

[Understood, Undertaker!]

The radio crackled, transmitting the team leaders' voices.

"Launch! All units, launch! I will lead!"

"Waaah!"

The formation of seven hundred combatants, shaped like a cone, scattered instantly. Like fighters taking off from an aircraft carrier.

The difference was that we were not ascending but descending.

"Aaah—aaah——"

Even Dang Seo-rin, who was at the very back, didn't miss the timing. Although it wasn't in the plan, she responded swiftly.

The seventh melody, Rapid.

The brooms we were riding accelerated instantly. We quickly caught up with the falling fragments of the Meteor Shower.

“Aaah——”

Dang Seo-rin’s magic burned brightly, consuming her lifespan. Therefore, she usually didn’t sing beyond the fourth melody, and never more than six melodies even in crucial moments.

The seventh melody. That was the boundary line where she stepped into the land of death.

With the speed gained by burning her life, I charged into the line of fire.

“Ugh!”

I swung my sword at one of the fragments torn from the Meteor Shower. Just destroying a single piece caused my whole body to suffer severe pain.

It was expected. I had just squeezed out every bit of my aura and strength to deliver the final blow two minutes ago.

The remaining aura in my body was already depleted. My right hand, unable to withstand the output, had all its skin peeled off, exposing the muscles.

Continuing to fight in such a state was practically suicide.

Barely scraping together the remaining aura, I wrapped it around the blade and attacked the fragment. Part of it turned to ashes upon contact.

But I didn’t stop and immediately charged at the next fragment.

I wasn’t the only moth drawn to the flame.

[Aaaaargh!]

[11 o’clock direction! The 11 o’clock direction is covered by another team! This bastard is spreading out more and more! We have to destroy it before it spreads!]

[Twelfth squad, annihilated.]

[Die! Die, die! Just die!]

[Thank you, Great Witch! I love you! Long live Samcheon World!]

[Tenth squad, 2 o’clock direction clear.]

I wouldn’t say all seven hundred ignored their lives.

Some combatants pretended to fight while prioritizing their survival. Perhaps some even concluded to elevate their guild’s position in the ruined Korean Peninsula.

But at least my pen was for recording those who were different.

[3 o’clock direction clear. Tenth squad, annihilated. Six members left. Moving to the 4 o’clock direction.]

[Seventh squad, annihilated. But the 11 o’clock direction is clear. Now moving to join the 10 o’clock squad… Ah. Spotted one remaining fragment. Unable to join.]

[I’ll go first, Undertaker. I haven’t forgotten what happened in Sejong. I’ll always be grateful.]

[Fourth squad, annihilated.]

Stars fell.

Burning the last of their vitality to embrace the remnants of starlight, their bodies turning to ash.

And the night sky began to fade. The dark waves spread by the Meteor Shower lightened from the horizon.

Under the fading night sky, countless ashes fell— alongside the silent descent of brooms that had lost their owners.

[Undertaker.]

[Mr. Undertaker!]

[Undertaker——]

Falling. Falling.

Endless descent.

How much time and noise had passed?

“Undertaker!”

Blink.

When I opened my eyes, I was already falling. The deafening sound of wind struck my ears.

It was not strange to faint in a hellish battlefield, but this time, three things were particularly strange.

First, the world was upside down. I hadn’t realized immediately because of the high altitude, but I was falling. The broom was nowhere in sight. My cause of death this cycle seemed likely to be falling.

Second, Dang Seo-rin was in front of me.

Simply saying she was in front of me wasn’t enough. Her beloved pointed hat was gone, and she, too, was falling from the sky like me.

And at some point, she was holding me.

“Dang Seo-rin?”

I barely moved my lips. The taste of blood, lead, iron, and ashes mingled in my mouth.

Despite the intense conviction that this was reality, everything felt dreamlike. Like a sleepwalker uncertain if they wanted to keep dreaming.

“What’s the situation…?”

Dang Seo-rin smiled brightly. We were falling, and death awaited us at the end of this fall.

Was this a dream?

Her smile grew closer. Closer and closer.

Eventually, her smile was felt not by sight but by touch.

That was the third strange thing.

“I… love humanity!”

Her face, covered in blood, sweat, and ashes, smiled brightly again.

“You… what did you just…?”

“I hate people. They annoy me. Honestly, I hate crowded places. I’m sick of people trying to curry favor with me.”

Flap—

The wind continuously battered our bodies. Hugging me tighter against the sky’s resistance, Dang Seo-rin spoke.

“I hated everything before the world ended, and I’ve hated it all since. But still, humanity is amazing!”

“……”

“No one will remember, no. No record will remain. We just saved the world! Right, Undertaker?”

“……”

“And— I hope you don’t hate people too much.”

“……”

Wind.

“I’m not the type to ask such things. Ah—I should have asked. Why you keep making that face. Where you used to live and what you did. Why you like Café au Lait. Why your eyes look sad. I should have asked a lot, and I could have.”

Waves.

“Do you hate me? Undertaker?”

“Not at all.”

Immediate reply.

“Not at all……. Absolutely.”

“Yeah.”

A smile.

My dream. My disease. The reason I chose to dream of life, my sleepwalking’s cause.

“And just like me, as much as you like me, just a little more, love humanity.”

And…

The sunset.

The night sky disappeared.

The sunset spread.

When the Meteor Shower spread the night sky, the world was just beginning to see the sunset. Our battle took place between the start and end of the day’s sunset.

Thus, when the Meteor Shower was defeated and we were falling, the world was still experiencing a grand sunset.

“Ah.”

Not a sunset swallowed by the night sky.

A sunset pushing away the night sky.

An inverted sunset that could only happen once in this world, on this earth.

“Ah….”

A red that stretched to the eternal horizon.

“Truly, truly— A beautiful sky—”

This is where the epilogue ends.

From the 43rd cycle, we also devised measures for the corpses, allowing the seven hundred awakeners to safely return to the ground.

There was still much to discuss about the Meteor Shower. Speculations about its origins, experiments on harnessing starlight.

Nevertheless, today’s story ends here.

Because that day’s sunset was too red, and humanity was simply a being that flew towards the eternally setting horizon.

Boss battle.

Anomaly: Meteor Shower.

Aliases: Meteor Strike, Armageddon, Worry, Nuclear Lunch, Milky Way

Threat Level: Lv.3 Continental-class

Patterns: Phase 1 ‘Emergence’, Phase 2 ‘Descent’, Phase 3 ‘Mass Sleep’, Phase 4 ‘Impact’.

Estimated casualties: Unknown. Estimated missing: Unknown.

Numerous world destruction records.

Subjugation complete.

Footnotes:

Chapter 69

The Recorder I

Sinnoa

These days, I often thought I talked too much about Dang Seo-rin.

Of course, I couldn't tell my story as a regressor without mentioning Dang Seo-rin. However, even the greatest output of the Korean Peninsula, the Great Witch of the railroad, the idol of all people, has a personal life.

Yes, a personal life.

I was not the type to actively dig into someone else's secrets, nor was I the type to interfere with their hobbies.

Even if that 'someone' was a mentally unstable, dual-personality, malicious stuttering keyboard battler.

"Ah. G-Guild leader... G-Good morning...."

Sim Ah-ryeon.

Alias: One of the greatest trolls on SG Net, known as the villain OldManGoryeo.

However, during the 50th cycle, she was praised as the [Healing Angel] for treating ordinary people for free. She even volunteered as an art teacher, school nurse, and librarian for elementary school children.

Fashion style: Prefers brown tops. Especially likes to wear a white doctor's gown over a brown turtleneck. Why? Because she wants to show off that she's an expensive healer.

Even with just this, her character seemed quite amusing, but her awakening skill was even more outlandish.

Ability: Commonly known as Grudge Orb. To put it differently, she drank in all the aggro. The more she was cursed at, the stronger her healing abilities became. Because of this ridiculous ability, Sim Ah-ryeon practically lived on SG Net, attracting all sorts of aggro.

She was practically the Anubis of the Korean Peninsula... but when it came to her personal life, she had some surprisingly wholesome hobbies.

"Yes, good morning. Are you going out somewhere at this hour?"

"I-I thought I'd try painting again after a long time, hehe. You gave me an easel last time, guild leader...."

Sim Ah-ryeon, who was awkwardly laughing, had a canvas and easel tucked under her arm.

Hobby: Painting.

That's right. She was actually an art student. Readers with good memories might recall that when we raided the villain OldManGoryeo's house during the 50th cycle, Sim Ah-ryeon was painting.

And... believe it or not, Sim Ah-ryeon was actually one of the most academically accomplished members of our guild.

Education: Art Department at Yewon School, Seoul Arts High School, and Seoul National University's Design Department—quite the royal road.

Not only that, but she also swept school art exhibitions from a young age and even won awards at various design exhibitions.

She had two minister's awards in elementary and middle school and a president's award in high school. All the aspiring art students born in the same year and preparing for college hated Sim Ah-ryeon. Her talent for attracting aggro was evident from an early age.

Sounds like bullshit? I thought so too, so I snuck into the ruins of her schools and dug through the data. It was true.

How could this be real... Back then, I could only lament amidst the exhibition materials in the middle of a deserted school.

With such a brilliant educational and career background, what Sim Ah-ryeon mainly did was:

-OldManGoryeo: Hm... It seems you've never observed people in real life. Did you draw this with your own body as a reference? Then seriously, I recommend you switch from illustrator to live specimen in a lab.

-OldManGoryeo: Wow, jackpot. If you draw like this in an entrance exam academy, you could get your tuition refunded immediately.

-OldManGoryeo: Seriously, I drew better than this when I was eight, lol.

These kinds of nitpicking comments.

Or she'd draw comics that pissed people off and post them on SG Net.

Right now, Sim Ah-ryeon was smiling innocently in front of me, but just last night, she had once again earned the Triple Crown of curses from SG Net members.

"Where are you going to paint?"

"Ah, the Han River. I thought I'd paint some landscapes while listening to the murmuring water.... The weather is really nice today. Hmm. If I get bored, I might walk around the neighborhood and offer free checkups to any sick elderly people I find...."

"Oh, Lord. Why did you give this child such an ability as Grudge Orb."

"Eh?"

"Nothing.... Anyway, you're going to the riverside in front, right? Give me your bag."

"Eek. Y-You don't have to... Ah. Thank you, guild leader...."

Sim Ah-ryeon followed me timidly, but once we reached the riverside and she set up her easel, her hesitation vanished.

Facing the canvas, she hummed to herself, "Hmm, mmh, hmm," and began to paint with smooth, swift strokes.

"....."

Her hand moved with incredible speed, one of the virtues of a painter being 'speed'. Sim Ah-ryeon's hand was remarkably fast.

It wasn't just her hand that was fast. Having lived as a regressor, my eye for art had grown quite sharp, and Sim Ah-ryeon's painting reached a significant level, even to my discerning eyes.

"Heh... As expected. I'm a genius...."

Her occasional muttering was, well, honestly a bit cringe-worthy.

'Well. It's a much healthier hobby than trolling on the community sites.'

I shrugged.

At least until then, I had no intention of getting involved in Sim Ah-ryeon's hobbies.

The change began in the 95th cycle.

Let me briefly describe the historical flow surrounding us. The first time the Meteor Shower was subdued was in the 42nd cycle.

Unfortunately, due to the law of action and reaction, when the Meteor Shower was defeated, our awakeners also perished.

However, the time of a regressor defies the laws of physics. By the 43rd, 44th, and 45th cycles, the strategies for dealing with the Meteor Shower had become more refined.

By the 95th cycle, it could be said that the strategies were complete.

"Dang Seo-rin, when the Meteor Shower appears, use magic to set up a net below it."

"Huh? A net? Why?"

"Think of it as a meteorite. Destroying the meteorite is one thing, but the debris after destruction is also a problem, isn't it?"

"...Ah."

Listening to my advice, Dang Seo-rin began developing magic. The net magic 'Heavenly Net' solely for dealing with the Meteor Shower was completed. With this, the final desperate move of the Meteor Shower was easily sealed.

And that wasn't all.

The quest list of constellations tempting the awakened of the Korean Peninsula also evolved day by day.

The AAA-grade game 'Growing as an Awakener on the Korean Peninsula,' planned by me and serviced by the Saintess, was an open-world sandbox ultra-real MMORPG. It provided a lot of information about the voids and even offered 'customized growth' automatically.

"Huh. My awakening ability wasn't turning filth into potable water but actual purification?"

"After clearing the dungeon, a build-up guide that optimizes my ability appeared!"

"Damn. The world is shit, but at least there's a sense of growth."

"Quests are invincible, and constellations are gods!"

"Repeat after me! The Meteor Shower is just... a star."

Of course, all these rewards were what I had obtained by struggling as a regressor.

Running an academy and nurturing as many awakeners as possible

paid off. I developed their potential and optimized builds.

"Huh? The reward is... an Equivalent Exchange Grimoire? What's this?"

Just look at Dang Seo-rin; the Dang Seo-rin of the 4th cycle and the Dang Seo-rin of the 95th cycle were entirely different.

The magic she barely created over several years in previous cycles was now almost given for free.

"...Unbelievable! Such an outrageous magic exists?"

The effect was tremendous.

Not only S-class individuals like Dang Seo-rin, but even most awakeners were growing rapidly like Bitcoin in the early 2020s, following an upward trend.

As a result, while it might not reach the level of the Ten Legs, the Meteor Shower began to join the ranks of easily defeatable strange phenomena.

Udumbara? That was already included long ago.

-Kyuuu?-

-So Hungry-

-Twinkle?

Ah, but alas, the Korean Peninsula's strange trio that drove the early part of my regressor life into despair was now out of service.

Anyway, in all things, benefits come with drawbacks.

As the Saintess's power reached its limit, the probability of the corrupted version, the 'Executioner,' appearing increased. The same went for others.

The awakeners had grown stronger, but they had also become more dangerous. It was safe to say that 'acceleration' was starting.

If this were a character collection gacha mobile game, there would be no problem. Rather, it would be advantageous.

'10th cycle Dang Seo-rin is 2-star, 50th cycle Dang Seo-rin is 3-star, 100th cycle Dang Seo-rin is 4-star! Wow! Multiple Dang Seo-rins!'

'You can sell the same character several times by just changing their outfits?'

'Limited edition pickup rerun! Saintess Alternative version - Executioner appears! Clairvoyance, Telepathy, Time Stop, existing abilities greatly enhanced!'

'If you don't like it... you'll have to draw it, right?'

Etc., testing people's wallets and patience from various angles.

But as you know, this was reality. As a regressor, I had to be mindful of various side effects.

"Um... Guild leader...?"

So, if anyone in reality said such lines, one should be extremely cautious.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Ah-ryeon?"

"I-I don't know if I should say this. Actually, I shouldn't, but... but I thought maybe it might be okay if it's you, guild leader...."

"Mm? What is it? Just tell me."

"T-Then… Lean in a bit."

Sim Ah-ryeon whispered in my ear.

"Um... Guild leader. About the Meteor Shower. Could you maybe, even just a little, subdue it slowly...?"

?

"Why?"

"Because I want to paint it...."

?

"Why?"

"B-Because... it's so cool. Stars that bring about destruction from the sky. Creating waves of darkness. Even a lullaby from the sirens... Honestly, I think it should be preserved forever for future generations in a painting...."

???

If someone claimed that Cthulhu appeared in the sea and said, 'Wow, I must paint it in hyper-realistic detail to ensure as many civilians as possible see it!', they would be treated as a lunatic. My expression at that moment was precisely like witnessing such a lunatic.

"Ah-ryeon, the guild leader is confused right now, but the Meteor Shower is a top-tier anomaly."

"Yes? Ah, yes... According to the library society, it's a continental-class anomaly. It's the most dangerous anomaly observed on the Korean Peninsula. I know that, of course...."

"Yet you want to leisurely paint the Meteor Shower? Are you serious? What if the combat team members die while subduing it?"

"Um... Well, I think sacrifices for the sake of art are inevitable. Last time, I wanted to paint the Ten Legs, but... it's such a pity that the painting was lost. It's an eternal loss for humanity...."

"....."

By the way, the formal identification name for the Ten Legs by the library society is 'crawling baby Cthulhu'. Basically, Sim Ah-ryeon genuinely wanted to paint Cthulhu.

And she actually did.

It was so absurd that I set up a situation for her to paint during the

next Ten Legs subjugation.

"Wow, these tentacles! So bizarre, no terrestrial, or even marine, creature has ever evolved to have these in their evolutionary history...! To think such things exist! This is unbelievable! Heh, heh. I must paint, I must paint...."

"....."

I slightly regretted it.

But the surprising fact was... Sim Ah-ryeon's paintings of anomalies posted on SG Net became massively popular.

-Anonymous: (Doodle) Posting a small sketch of the Ten Legs today... ^^

(Image attached)

-This is the Ten Legs that was subjugated last time! I was incredibly lucky to join the subjugation team and got a chance to sketch it! But the team fought so well that I didn't have enough time to sketch... ㅠㅠ

-It's embarrassing, but I hope this helps other awakeners who couldn't join the subjugation get a sense of what the Ten Legs looked like... So I'm posting it here...!

-Postscript: It seems SG Net lowers image quality every time you upload a file, which is always a shameㅠㅠ. Admins, please do your best...!

Hmm.

Yes. I know what you want to say. Unfortunately, this really was a post written by Sim Ah-ryeon (aka villain OldManGoryeo).

She just wrote it anonymously instead of with her official nickname.

Naturally, comments with a completely opposite sentiment to the usual trolling posts of the villain OldManGoryeo flooded in.

-[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: Wow! It's so pretty!! (>_<)!!

-Anonymous: Isn't this too realistic...?

-Anonymous: If you joined the subjugation team, doesn't that mean you're quite high-ranking among the awakeners? Damn. Impressive.

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: It really looks like the Ten Legs.

Anonymous: looks like? Really?

Anonymous: Don't be mean to the talented person.

-dolLHoUse: disgusting

-AhdsLove: Please, talented person, join as a regular member. I always search for your drawings, but it's hard to find them ㅠㅠ.

-Anonymous: Really well-drawn.

-Anonymous: I was in the subjugation team, and the Ten Legs really looked like this. The feeling is exactly the same.

LiteraryGirl: How did you catch such a monster?

Anonymous: 'Undertaker' and 'Great Witch' did it.

Anonymous: Just the GOAT.

-Anonymous: But why does the person uploading this drawing always seem so annoying?

Anonymous: What's annoying about it??

Anonymous: Don't slander the talented person.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: It's a wonderful drawing. It feels more like an abstract painting than a realistic one, but it still feels like I'm really seeing the Ten Legs. You have a natural talent for depicting anomalies!

Hmm.

I nodded at CookingQueen's comment.

There were quite a few awakeners on SG Net who had participated in the Ten Legs subjugation. If even those people unanimously testified that it looked real, then Sim Ah-ryeon certainly had some talent.

Brushstrokes that made even those who didn't know feel like it was real, and those who knew also felt like it was the real anomaly. The vigor that seemed to leap off the screen. Talent. The aesthetics of anomalies.

"Heh... So many compliments about how well I drew...."

"....."

Then suddenly, an idea struck me like lightning.

It was a flash of inspiration that often came to me as a regressor.

"Ah-ryeon."

"Hehe... Yes? Guild leader?"

"You like drawing anomalies, right?"

"Wh-Why do you ask? Y-you're making me nervous. Why all of a sudden....?"

I put my hand on Sim Ah-ryeon's shoulder.

Sim Ah-ryeon, who was tilting her head in confusion, saw me smiling broadly at her.

"Have you ever thought about becoming a constellation?"

"......?"

Footnotes:

Chapter 70

The Recorder II

Sinnoa

I, the Undertaker, never choose people to associate with carelessly, but I am extremely selective when it comes to talent. This means I am thorough in both public and private affairs.

In the context of Koei's Romance of the Three Kingdoms, I wouldn't even consider generals with martial strength of 70 or strategists with intelligence of 70. That's my gaming style.

Through dozens of regressions, I carefully selected and created what I call the "Regression Alliance" — an ultra-secret society that understands I am a regressor and strategizes accordingly.

As for the personnel? Simple. By the 95th regression, it was even simpler.

Me, the Saintess, and Noh Do-hwa. That's it.

Among us, the Saintess manipulated all the awakeners in the Korean Peninsula as a puppet master for the constellations, while Noh Do-hwa extorted every awakener by saying things like, "Oh, you want to use the roads in the apocalypse? Then you'll need to show us some respect." Each could be called the ruler of the peninsula's mind and material, respectively.

Therefore, the executive members of the Regression Alliance at that time, besides me, were basically just those two. Occasionally, Seo Gyu or Yu Ji-won joined as non-permanent members, but that was a rare exception.

Naturally, it was absolutely impossible for someone like Sim Ah-ryeon, with [Martial Strength 4] [Political Power 3] [Charm 16] [Intelligence 77] and only barely A+ level skills, to join our Regression Alliance.

“T-The guild leader… is a regressor?”

But, surprise! There’s no such thing as “absolute.”

Sim Ah-ryeon, holding the cafe mocha I made for her with both hands, had her mouth open wide in an O shape.

“Yes.”

“So, you’re saying you’re not just someone who was born with an extremely lucky streak, monopolizing all sorts of serendipitous opportunities while others struggled, and even unnecessarily generous, making people envious and miserable with your diamond spoon Awakening Ability?”

“…Yes.”

What the hell did she think of me all this time?

Fortunately or unfortunately, Sim Ah-ryeon's shock didn’t last long. By the time she had drunk half of her cafe mocha, her expression relaxed as if she had entered a hot spring.

When I asked her why, her answer was absurd.

“Well… uh, honestly, I feel like I understand a lot more now. You figured out the conditions for my ability [Grudge Orb] to activate, didn’t you…?”

“Hmm.”

“Moreover, thinking that your current position is not just due to innate talent or luck but a result of repeatedly struggling through regressions… it makes me feel a bit more at ease. Though, seeing how hard you’ve worked is something else….”

“…….”

“By the way, guild leader. Can I post this anonymously on SG Net?”

“Do you think you can?”

“It would definitely become a top recommendation post….”

The ghost of this community.

“It’s too risky because of Go Yuri.”

“Go Yuri? Ah, the Satisfaction Society… Actually, I’m not too fond of that person either. Don’t you think their character overlaps with mine? It’s like they’re imitating me… Though, that part isn’t entirely un-cute….”

“……?”

“……?”

Whenever I talked to her, the number of question marks increased exponentially. Was this perhaps Sim Ah-ryeon's hidden awakening ability?

I constantly twisted the question marks in my mind as I continued explaining. SG Net was actually created by Seo Gyu, and the constellations were nothing more than puppets controlled by a single person.

“Hiek. Hieeeek…!”

Sim Ah-ryeon, having witnessed the truth of the world, once again had her sanity points drained. Her hands, holding the cafe mocha cup, trembled.

“Wh-Why are you sharing these secrets with me? It’s overwhelming! I didn’t want to know this much…!”

“Calm down, Ah-ryeon. What if your bizarre drawings were recognized as ‘official illustrations’?”

Sim Ah-ryeon’s ears perked up.

“Official…?”

“Yes. I’ve been posting the strategies I’ve learned through regressions on SG Net, but starting next cycle, I’m thinking of

refining these strategy posts. I plan to use your drawing skills for this purpose.”

“How…?”

Like this.

A few days later, I gathered the Saintess and Noh Do-hwa and handed out a small booklet.

The Saintess tilted her head in curiosity.

“Undertaker, what is this?”

“Take your time reading it.”

The booklet, produced by a rare printer, contained both text and illustrations.

———————————

[Library Society’s Encyclopedia of Anomalies]

‘Ten Legs’

Aliases: Crawling Baby Cthulhu, Lord of Shadows, Thorny Hell, Lurker

Threat Level: Polis

Contamination Level: None

Habitat: Throughout the Korean Peninsula

Characteristics: It is characterized by tentacles that resemble human fingers. Contrary to its name, ‘Ten Legs’ actually has hundreds, thousands of tentacles. Not all tentacles are attached to the main body; smaller tentacles grow from the larger ones.

The tentacles continuously grow and break off in real-time. They rapidly extend to tear apart their target or fire off to pierce the target.

In addition to the visible tentacles, dozens of tentacles always burrow underground. Therefore, when fighting Ten Legs, one must never let their guard down, as tentacles can emerge from behind or below at any time. Due to the ‘spikes emerging from the ground,’ Koreans widely know it by the alias ‘Lurker.’

The main body is quite small compared to the tentacles. The main body consists of two hearts, and both hearts must be struck simultaneously to…

———————————

The Saintess blinked.

“Library Society’s Encyclopedia of Anomalies?”

“That’s right. A kind of strategy guide. Starting from the next cycle, I plan to distribute such guides under the name of a new constellation.”

“……!”

In other words, a ‘constellation that oversees information.’

Until now, the Constellations manipulated by the Saintess had names borrowed from real human history. The ‘Saint of Salvation’ was Joan of Arc, and the ‘Conqueror of the Alps’ was Hannibal.

While this method had the intuitive advantage of borrowing originality from history… I thought it was time to flesh out the identities of the constellations a bit more.

“Are you planning to establish a new constellation responsible for information on anomalies and strategies?”

“Yes. While it’s not bad for me, a regressor, to monopolize information, it draws too much attention to me. Entities like Go Yuri become unnecessarily interested in me.”

Not just Go Yuri; there were countless unknown entities in the world whose identities even I didn’t know.

“I will create an encyclopedia board on SG Net and make it seem like a new Constellation manages it. Of course.”

I pointed to Sim Ah-ryeon, who was quietly sitting beside me.

“The person who will actually manage that board is this guild member, Sim Ah-ryeon.”

“…Indeed.”

“It will be more credible for others to accept information distributed under the name of a Constellation rather than information I personally release. Especially if accompanied by such vivid visual materials.”

“Huh. So the one posting those anonymous anomaly drawings was her….”

With their attention focused on her, the Saintess and Noh Do-hwa's eyes made Sim Ah-ryeon’s shoulders twitch.

“So, you’re planning to appoint Sim Ah-ryeon as the co-moderator of SG Net, in addition to Seo Gyu, who has been the main moderator…?”

“Yes, sort of.”

“That’s quite a significant role. While Seo Gyu hardly participates, Sim Ah-ryeon here is quite infamous in the community. I’m sorry to say this in front of her, but do you think she can handle the position…?”

“It’s fine. We’ll test it in the next cycle.”

“Indeed…”

Noh Do-hwa’s laughter echoed softly in the meeting room like a shadow.

“I, too, was tested in ‘that manner.’ Heh, sometimes even I can’t keep up with the Undertaker’s sense of time….”

Thus, the next 96th cycle began.

I took Sim Ah-ryeon around the entire country. The purpose? To gather illustrations for the anomaly encyclopedia.

I showed her the continental-level anomaly ‘Udumbara’ in Onyang, Chungcheongnam-do, and the village-level anomaly ‘Trolley Dilemma’ on the Donghae Line. I selected anomalies that were difficult for ordinary people to encounter and showed them to her one by one.

“A-Amazing…!”

Every time she encountered a bizarre anomaly, Sim Ah-ryeon busily painted.

For half a year, we collected illustrations.

-The Playground of Constellations!

-The Only Safe Internet Community!

-Welcome to SG Net!

Finally, SG Net was opened.

It was slightly later than usual in other cycles, but it had been prepared so thoroughly that SG Net was almost like a 'renewal.'

“What? Library Society’s Encyclopedia of Anomalies…?”

“What’s this?”

The full-scale introduction of the ‘anomaly encyclopedia,’ planned since the last cycle.

Previously, SG Net had only [Freeboard], [Creative Board], [Group Board], [Guild Recruitment Board], and [Chat Room]. Now, there was a prominent [Library Society’s Encyclopedia of Anomalies] at the top.

All other boards were displayed in gray, but the encyclopedia was

in red. It was eye-catching.

The content was even more eye-catching.

“There’s information about monsters…?”

“What?”

“Ten Legs, Gremlins… Udumbara? Trolley? Wow. There were monsters like these?”

With visual materials collected over the past half year and the data accumulated over dozens of cycles, the flood of information began.

[The Librarian of the Great Library manages the encyclopedia.]

Thus, a new Constellation made its debut.

[The Librarian of the Great Library comprehensively oversees information about all things, especially collecting data on anomalies.]

[The Librarian of the Great Library wants you to share information with others. Sharing is the way to praise and honor the Librarian of the Great Library.]

[The deeper your faith in the Librarian of the Great Library, the more information you didn’t know will be unlocked.]

As planned by the Saintess, messages were sent to awakeners across the country.

In the monitoring room, Sim Ah-ryeon nervously chewed her nails and fiddled with her smartphone.

“Stop looking at it. You’ll wear out the screen.”

“B-But… We’re fooling so many people so thoroughly. C-can I really do this…?”

“Yes. You’ll do great.”

“Really?”

“Ah-ryeon, you have a natural talent for this.”

“Really?”

From my experience over dozens of cycles, you’re a genius at this anonymous masquerade.

Sure enough, it wasn’t long before there was a commotion among SG Net members.

-Anonymous: I went to Onyang as the encyclopedia said, and there was a flower tree growing on a corpse, just like in the picture. What should I do?

LiteraryGirl: What do you mean, what should you do, you idiot? That’s a zombie virus! Burn it!

Anonymous: But it grants immortality?

Officer: Stay right there. I’m coming to burn the whole inn down with you.

Anonymous: Gulp.

-CookingQueen: Interesting.

-Anonymous: Hey, I always thought these green bugs were goblins, but they’re actually gremlins. When I broke the machine as the encyclopedia said, they just disappeared on their own.

Endless testimonies.

People were reporting that when they went to certain locations described in the encyclopedia, they found anomalies exactly as depicted in the illustrations, and when they followed the strategy, they were really able to defeat them.

Eventually, The Librarian of the Great Library quickly gained recognition among the awakeners.

Even if they didn’t want to acknowledge it, there were occasional incidents that forced them to.

-Anonymous: If the constellation truly manages all information, shouldn't it know my personal information too? Hey, Librarian, if you're really a Constellation, guess who I am.

[The Librarian of the Great Library]: Park Sang-soon. 37 years old. Guild leader of the Blue Sea Guild. Currently accessing from Yeongdo, Busan.

Anonymous: ?

LiteraryGirl: ?

Anonymous: Wow, really? He was the Blue Sea guild leader?

[Samcheon] WitchJudge: LOL

[Samcheon] Officer: Is this what represents one of Busan's top guilds? Embarrassing.

Doxxing!

It was revealed that anonymity on SG Net was futile in the face of the 'Librarian of the Great Library.'

Of course, all anonymous non-members accessing SG Net had their identities visible to Seo Gyu, who could use that information to accurately identify them through the Saintess's [Clairvoyance].

But the awakeners, who didn't know this secret, must have found the Librarian of the Great Library terrifying.

After the incident where a non-member's identity was exposed, any criticism or doubt about the Librarian of the Great Library vanished from SG Net.

"G-Guild leader…! This is fun!"

Sim Ah-ryeon also accepted that her soul had 'community spirit' emblazoned across it. Yeah. I figured as much.

Unlike Seo Gyu, who somewhat reluctantly managed SG Net, Sim Ah-ryeon energetically took on the 'constellation's duties.'

Naturally, more awakeners began to follow the Librarian of the Great Library.

-Anonymous: I found a way to defeat gremlins without breaking machines.

-Anonymous: Trolley < < < I've encountered it three times already. If you follow my instructions, you'll never be in danger.

Thanks to this, spreading strategies about anomalies became much easier, and the tendency of awakeners to hoard valuable information also lessened significantly.

'This should continue to work well in future cycles.'

A highly satisfying outcome.

I watched Sim Ah-ryeon busily working on her smartphone with a pleased smile.

Of course, unexpected incidents occurred because of the 'anomaly encyclopedia,' but that story is for another time.

"…Ah, guild leader. There's a problem."

"Hmm? What's the matter?"

"I accidentally posted a comment as [Librarian of the Great Library] instead of [OldManGoryeo]…."

"……"

"I deleted it immediately, but several members saw it. Eek. Real-time posts are flooding in! They even took screenshots! These community ghosts. How did they capture it so quickly in that short moment…? They should live their real lives instead of being on the community… What should we do…?"

"……"

Yeah.

I'll have to remind her to be more careful with comments in the next cycle.

Ah, there's no epilogue.

Footnotes:

Chapter 71

The Designer I

Sinnoa

By the way, the group called the "Library Society" has been mentioned several times, but we never really had the opportunity to explain it properly.

The reason why this thought suddenly came to mind is that during the 562nd run, Oh Dok-seo asked this question:

"Hey, mister. How do you join the Library Society?"

"Hmm? Why the Library Society?"

"Why? Because it's cool."

Oh Dok-seo occasionally got fixated on something out of the blue.

From the fashion choices of rappers with caps and jumpers, jeans that looked like they could drip like candle wax at any moment (including three holes), and chewing gum (fake) being chewed in her mouth, it was clear that Oh Dok-seo had a severe case of "Chuunibyou"—a terminal illness for those in middle school.

She prided herself on being a "Literary Girl," sharing common symptoms with other Chuunibyous. That is, she had a peculiar, ecstatic fascination with nouns like "library," "society," and "librarian."

According to a paper from the Korean Psychiatric Association, this disease is, unfortunately, incurable. The only treatment is for the patient to actually enter the university's literature department. How terrifying.

"Since you're a regressor who has gone through hundreds of runs, you must know the key members of the Library Society, right? Isn't that right?"

"Hmm…."

I made a subtle expression.

"Well, I do know them, but…."

"Then introduce me to them! No, before that, tell me what the Library Society is all about. They upload entries in the SG Net's Encyclopedia of Anomalies, but other than that, they're a secret organization shrouded in mystery."

"...Do you really want to know?"

"Huh? What's with that all of a sudden? Stop being stingy and tell me everything you can."

"You'll probably regret it... Well, alright."

If you insist, I must oblige.

- Chzz, today's music for you all is Mozart…….

Next to the table we were sitting at, a wooden vintage radio was playing music.

I took a sip of my Café au Lait, fueling my bright red tongue with engine fuel.

And then, I began to speak to the little Prophet in front of me.

The Library Society.

Also known as The Great Library.

No one knows exactly when it was founded, but it's a very old organization, a secret society at that.

Naturally, its existence is thoroughly hidden from the public. Even if the name of the organization accidentally gets exposed, people are likely to brush it off, thinking, "Hmm? Sounds like a plausible group in reality?" Thus, unlike the Freemasons or the Illuminati,

who merely pretend to be secretive but suffer from exposure, they are on a different level.

"Oh... A secret organization, indeed."

Oh Dok-seo's eyes sparkled.

Even she, who usually looked at everything with a cynical, bored expression as her default, seemed to have a sense of romance.

I thought to myself, this is going to be trouble, but continued explaining nonetheless.

The exact location of the society's headquarters is unknown. However, there are rumors that it is in North America.

Branches of the society are spread worldwide. The Korean branch's hideout is somewhere in Cheorwon.

"Cheorwon? Why Cheorwon of all places?"

"To be precise, it's in Geunnam-myeon, Cheorwon, where there are fewer residents. Like any secret society, they prefer to avoid people's attention."

"Oh…."

The Library Society had been aware of the existence of anomalies long before the Gate Incident, possibly hundreds or thousands of years ago.

They collected information on anomalies, wrote strategies and manuals, and secretly trained "Librarians."

Librarians are specialists in combating anomalies. They are professionals who have sworn to dedicate their lives to eradicating or collecting anomalies, even if it means abandoning humanity and morality.

Librarians strictly follow a hierarchical order.

The hierarchy is known to consist of [Knight], [Baron], [Viscount],

[Count], [Marquess], and [Duke].

Among them, there is only one Duke. The head of all librarians, the so-called Duke of the Black Library. Nothing is known about this person. It is even uncertain whether they are human or not.

"Wait. Then how do you address librarians with their titles? Like [Baron-level Librarian]?"

"Well, something like that. From the Count level, they also have separate titles. For example, a Count specializing in dealing with false books would be called the ‘Count of the False Book Tower’."

"That's so cool...?"

"Additionally, the suffixes of the titles change with the ranks. A Baron's title ends with 'Guan' (關), a Viscount's with 'Ga' (家), a Count's with 'Lou' (樓), and a Marquess's with 'Gak' (閣). For instance, the Marquess in charge of managing forbidden books is known as 'Cheon Hae-gak'."

"That's incredibly cool...?"

Oh Dok-seo's eyes grew more and more dreamy.

According to some stories... in the deepest depths of the Great Library headquarters, there is a kind of prophecy book called the "Black Notebook."

The Black Notebook is said to contain prophecies about the disasters that will befall humanity and the anomalies that will bring about the end of the world, written in very strange languages and characters.

To prevent the apocalypse that will come someday, to preserve humanity, to continue history, the librarians of the Library Society are still working somewhere in secret.

"——And all of this is bullshit."

Blink.

Oh Dok-seo blinked her eyes while holding the espresso I made her with one hand.

"Huh?"

Hmm. That's quite a nice reaction.

I smiled gently.

"Kiddo. The Library Society doesn't exist. Well, if you dig around, you'll find plenty of groups with similar names, but there is no organization that has been secretly working in humanity's shadows for thousands of years to counter the threat of anomalies."

"Huh? Wha-? Why? Why not...?"

"Because."

I slowly stood up.

"I, the Undertaker, am the master of the Great Library, the founder of the Library Society, the one and only Duke, the Duke of the Black Library."

"....."

Why. What's so surprising?

I gave a sly smile to the Chuunibyou bubble gum girl, whose lips were moving like a fish's.

Do you think the fake organizations I've created over a thousand years are just a few?

Playing the mastermind is always fresh and thrilling. I was always prepared to respond, "Ah, that was my plan," "That was also me," and "That, too, was me," no matter what incident occurred as an SSS-class Regressor.

However, no matter how much of a Regressor I was, I couldn't create something from nothing. That was a fact proven by the demon Parmenides in 500 BC.

I also had sources from which I was inspired—or rather, forcibly stimulated—to establish the Library Society.

The original existed elsewhere.

That point of stimulation began in the 46th run, from a radio broadcast presumed to have come from the USA, North America.

Since the collapse of civilization, humanity, which had enjoyed the era of videos, had regressed to the radio age in terms of cultural level.

And I was very familiar with handling radios from the early stages of regression. I even had the experience of setting up a broadcasting station to help Dang Seo-rin with her idol activities.

To boast a little... Legendary radio channels like "Nymphcalypse" and "Ravenclaw Busan Branch," which had countless listeners across the Korean Peninsula and even Japan, wouldn't have been able to take off without my help.

This wasn't just self-praise but an objective fact. Even the channel hosts often made such remarks.

-Oh, do you mean the Benefactor? Wow. Their help was truly invaluable for the establishment and maintenance of our channel! Until five years ago, I didn't even know how to operate a channel!

-The Benefactor, you say? Hmm. I've mentioned it a few times on the broadcast, but they are truly a person to be grateful for. Sometimes, we need rare materials or tools to maintain the channel, and if we ask the Benefactor, they procure them like a ghost.

Here, "Benefactor" referred to me. I had significantly contributed to maintaining the cultural level of East Asia after the apocalypse.

An event where famous radio channels gathered and broadcasted 24-hour relay on Christmas Day—dubbed the "Radio Festival"—was also planned by me.

Always be thankful to me, cultural citizens of East Asia.

For this reason, one wall of my hideout was always lined with radios.

The lineup was splendid. Starting with South Korea's first vacuum tube radio, the Geumseong A-501, followed by Sony's CF-580, CF-3800, Germany's Grundig Party-Boy 210, China's TECSUN PL-680, and more...

Among them was a radio made by the Zenith company called the K731.

You don't need to know what product this is. Just know that it's an antique from the 1950s, made of maple wood, and has a vintage feel.

You know those wooden wardrobes in old people's houses? This wooden radio had the same glossy texture.

-Chzz,- this is… the CP Foundation. The current situation is… chzz,-

One winter morning, that antique radio quietly whispered in English.

"Hmm?"

At the time, I was enjoying a cup of Café au Lait, savoring a bit of romance. Not fully awake from my morning daze, I stared at the radio.

'Did I... leave the radio on overnight?'

And here, it becomes clear why I'm not suitable as a protagonist for a horror movie. Because I have the complete memory ability, I never brush things off with, "Eh, it must be my imagination," or "Hmm, my memory is a bit fuzzy," thus never inducing frustration in the audience.

'...I didn't leave it on.'

My eyes snapped open. I immediately turned up the radio's volume. The static noise peculiar to radios blared up.

-Chzz- Zone 7 has fallen. I repeat. Zone 7 has fallen. We used a nuclear warhead according to the protocol, but it had no effect.

A nuclear warhead?

Trying to suppress the noise and listen to the voice, it seemed the other person was an old man. He spoke typical Californian English.

-Oh, the dragon... The dragon has been released. It's all over now. Chzz- Can you see it? The giant shadow of the dragon beyond the mushroom cloud. It's over. The Foundation is doomed. The world is doomed too.

I turned the frequency dial back and forth. But with each move, the static noise echoed, and the old man's voice continued crackling without breaking.

The conclusion was clear.

"...This thing has become an anomaly."

I clicked my tongue.

Contamination.

Since the world started falling apart, various electronic devices getting infected by anomalies was a common occurrence. I called this phenomenon "contamination", “corruption” or "infection."

Especially CCTV, telephones, cell phones (the older, the riskier), computers, GPS navigations, radars, and televisions were dangerous. They were prone to malfunction at a fairly high rate.

In fact, the most lethal blow to human civilization was not physical threats like the Ten Legs but these "contamination" phenomena.

In the early days, the leaders of various countries who tried to combat anomalies with nuclear bombs merged with the almighty mushroom cloud, puzzled, "Uh? Why is the missile heading this way instead of the target?"

Radios were not an exception to contamination.

However, I had performed intense exorcisms on the radios I collected, so I thought they were relatively safe...

-This is Zone 7. I am Martin Russell, the chief director of Zone 7. After confirming the failure of the final barrier protocol in Zone 7, I moved to Bunker 24 and am currently attempting to communicate externally.

"Hmm."

-From the bunker, I can monitor the interior and exterior with CCTV, but many are broken. The remaining cameras are not expected to last long. If a rescue team is organized, please dispatch them promptly so that we can respond internally. Currently, there are six survivors in the zone, including myself. I am alone in Bunker 24, and the remaining five are scattered.

-According to radar, the entities that escaped containment are converging on North America instead of spreading worldwide. Why? What's the reason?

The radio content was quite strange.

Typically, radios infected by anomalies either mimic ghost sounds or launch nonsensical mental attacks.

-All Foundation personnel would already know this... Zone 7 is located on Molokai Island in Hawaii.

-If, by any chance, a civilian hears this communication, ignore it completely. And run as far away as possible from North America. Or enjoy a last supper with your family.

But this anomaly... claiming to be a part of a "Foundation" was genuinely mimicking a person.

It really felt like a human was broadcasting beyond the radio.

It truly seemed like someone was desperately, earnestly transmitting from somewhere in captivity.

Thus, during the 46th run, I couldn't help but be intrigued and

wonder.

-Entities are indiscriminately destroying Foundation zones.
Ch[illegible]. Oh, God! Please have mercy on humanity...

If this were true.

If the old man was really in Bunker 24 or whatever, if the "Foundation" existed, and if the entities that escaped containment were real.

What on earth was happening in North America?

Footnotes:

Chapter 72

The Designer II

Sinnoa

‘So the headquarters is in Hawaii? Maybe I should casually visit Hawaii.’

I wasn't capable of such a thought back in my 46th run.

In an ordinary web novel, if a regressor has gone through 46 runs, people might react with, "Wow, they must be an expert by now! But if they haven't saved the world by then, they must be pretty incompetent, right?" But in my story, the 46th run was still fresh, like a newbie fully charged with vitamins.

Anyway, in my 46th run, I was like most South Koreans who say they've traveled abroad, having only been to Japan or China at best.

India? The United States? Europe? I only gathered information from rumors; I had never experienced the soil of those places on my shoes.

Ah, Old Man Scho once said he would show me his hometown, but the promise between men seemed unlikely to last over a thousand years. That old geezer.

-This is Zone 7, chhhiiizz. I am Martin Russell, the head of the bunker. Chiiizz the food stored in the bunker is slowly running out.

-Did the series of projects the Foundation prepared for the world's end not get activated? Or have they been activated, and this place is just the remnants of the world left behind?

-Either way… chiiizz I will continue to record with the hope that my voice file might be helpful someday. This is Martin Russell, 677 days of survival.

The broadcast continued.

I named this phenomenon the "Foundation Broadcast," or simply the "Broadcast" anomaly.

And I spent a long time figuring out the characteristics of the "Foundation Broadcast" in detail.

1. If there was another listener besides me near the radio, the broadcast would never proceed.

I found this quite interesting, so I had Sim Ah-ryeon and Seo Gyu sit and listen, but the radio remained silent.

In the end, both of them shook their heads, saying, "Sigh, the guild leader/hyung is playing tricks with anomalies again…."

Did I really have so little trust? Why? How come?

I even suggested to the Saintess to use Clairvoyance and listen with me, but even that was calculated as a "listener," and the radio remained dead.

"Um… Mr. Undertaker, as much as you're bored, using an anomaly as a prank is a bit troubling. I'd appreciate it if you could refrain."

"……"

I felt wronged.

2. Even if the run changed, the "Foundation Broadcast" continued, and the "Old Man" always broadcasted from Zone 7 bunker on Molokai Island, Hawaii.

However, this anomaly only appeared on the Zenith K731 radio, an antique I personally collected. Other radios could never catch the "Foundation Broadcast."

Why? I have no clue.

The ecology of anomalies was full of mysteries.

-This is Martin Russell. Uh, hmm. The escaped entities are still predominantly concentrated in North America… Damn it. It's been

1203 days. Did humanity survive? Am I really the last survivor?

The broadcast times were all over the place, but generally from 1 AM to 7 PM. If the broadcaster's claim that he was in Hawaii was true, it would be from 6 AM to midnight Hawaii time.

A reasonable time for someone to be awake.

And this is the most important…

3. The content of the broadcast changed subtly with each run.

In the 46th run, he said an entity called "The Great Dragon" appeared in Zone 7 and destroyed the Foundation, but in the 49th run…

-Oh, God! The moonlight! Ah, the Goddess of Parmenides has finally gone mad! Urgent broadcast. Never, under any circumstances, come into contact with the moonlight! Unless you want to melt like wax!

-Annihilation? Did the entire Foundation really get annihilated? Backup? Oh, my God. My God, why. Why the worst-case scenario…

He wailed, saying that the "moonlight" had exterminated humanity.

With each run, the method of the world's destruction changed slightly.

I sipped my Café au Lait with a bitter smile.

"If this is true, North America must be a hellscape equivalent to the Indian subcontinent."

At the time, I guessed it was probably a lie.

I didn't particularly intend to eliminate the Foundation Broadcast. It wasn't causing harm to humanity other than whispering to my radio.

On the contrary, the Foundation Broadcast became excellent background music for me when I wanted to listen to the radio out

of boredom.

As I said, there weren't many things to entertain oneself with in this era. But a radio channel that changes its content with every broadcast? That's golden.

Moreover, the settings the man subtly revealed about the "Foundation" in each run provided me with a lot of inspiration. I learned quite a bit from it.

What I learned was…

"Standardization of information."

Back to the 562nd cycle.

Oh Dok-seo tilted her head with a puzzled expression. The radio next to the table was leisurely playing Mozart's symphony.

"Information… standardization, what?"

"The so-called 'Foundation' set very detailed grades and rules for entities. Hmm. For example, let's say there's a gremlin."

A gremlin is an anomaly that clings to all electronic devices and causes them to malfunction bizarrely.

There was once a rumor in Gyeongsangnam-do that gremlins only infected televisions and radios, leaving cell phones untouched.

Meanwhile, in Gyeongsangbuk-do, there was a warning that cell phones were the most dangerous.

In Gyeonggi-do, there was a public belief that all electronic devices except for CCTV were safe. Can you believe that?

This was the result of the breakdown of information transmission within human society.

"In this situation, sharing information within the Korean Peninsula itself is difficult. When civilization was intact, we could share visual

materials and other forms of data through videos or whatever…."

But now, all mass media except for radio had perished. SG Net was the only place left for information sharing, but even it wasn't perfect.

"It's one thing for anomalies to have chaotic traits, but how would you describe how powerful an anomaly is?"

"Uh…"

"S-class? A-class? What's the difference between an S-class anomaly and an A-class anomaly, and how dangerous are they? Combat power 1000? 2000? Let's say it has a combat power of 1200. Does that number intuitively tell you anything?"

"…No."

Exactly.

So, inspired by the radio broadcast's "Foundation," I established a fictional organization called the "Library Society."

The setting was simple. A secret group that had been researching anomalies for a very long time, thus establishing a "standard" method of classification—a professional classification method.

But in reality, it was a database containing the experiences and knowledge of me, the regressor Undertaker.

Having gone through multiple cycles and fought countless anomalies, it was an Akashic Record created from my blood and sweat.

The "standard" defined by the Library Society, that is, the danger threat levels of anomalies, were as follows:

Lv.1: Village-class.

Anomalies that could wipe out a village were given this threat level.

"To be considered a 'dangerous anomaly,' it had to be at least this

level. It's a minimum threshold that filters out minor anomalies."

I wrote examples in my notebook and showed them.

As expected of LiteraryGirl, Oh Dok-seo followed my notes with her still-shocked eyes.

"A single goblin isn't worth assigning a danger level to. But 30 goblins? 40 goblins? That's enough to classify them as village-class."

"Aha…?"

"In other words, even if it's the lowest level, once it's classified as village-class, it means it's already judged as 'very dangerous.' Ordinary people should run away, and even awakeners should avoid it unless they're combat specialists. Yes. I'm talking about you, Oh Dok-seo."

"……"

In reality, most awakeners lost their heads fighting village-class anomalies one-on-one.

Even Lee Ha-yul, the Puppeteer, lost an arm fighting a village-class anomaly out of overconfidence in one of the runs.

In my view, the danger level names used by the "Foundation" sounded cool but were likely to make ordinary people think, "So how dangerous is that exactly?"

I prioritized intuitiveness in selecting terms. "It's dangerous enough to wipe out a village = village-class."

"How is it? Simple, right?"

"…Indeed. It's simple."

"From the next danger level onwards, it's not just about individual life-threatening situations."

Lv.2: Polis-class.

Anomalies that, once they appear, would typically devastate an entire city. These are extremely monstrous beings.

"The Ten Legs is a representative example."

The anomalies "Chaos" and "Tami" mentioned during my trip to Mount Hua in China were also polis-class.

Those two alone caused nearly ten million casualties. This is just an estimate, though.

The Ten Legs may seem trivial now, but in the early stages of regression, it wiped out the Korean Peninsula alone. Even at the city level, it was like a wall of lamentation for awakeners.

The primary culprits that regressed the modern nations' progress back to the Iron Age were mostly polis-class anomalies.

"Ordinary people and even awakeners should run away unless they are prepared for battle. Of course, the odds of escaping are quite low."

"Wow… It doesn't feel real since I saw you end it with a one-turn kill…."

"Exactly."

That's why I tried to refrain from soloing the Ten Legs in the extermination battle, leaving it to other awakeners.

"Anyway, next."

Lv.3: Continent-class.

If polis-class anomalies represent despair for individuals, continent-class anomalies signify despair for humanity.

"At this point, the very preservation of the Homo sapiens species is seriously threatened."

"……"

The world tree Udumbara, which spread a zombie virus across East Asia, lured people with the promise of immortality.

Meteor Shower, which turned the entire world into a gray territory over seven years.

These beings naturally make modern humans exclaim, "This is just bullshit!"

"Hey, wait."

"Hmm?"

"If Meteor Shower is only level 3, is there another level after that?"

I wondered what she was talking about, but then realized that with Oh Dok-seo's [Prophecy], she had only seen about 40 chapters of the serialized work... which, in my terms, contained content up to around the 20th run.

No wonder she didn't know.

I casually moved my pen.

"Yes. Of course, there is."

Lv.4: Ocean-class.

"Oh…."

Oh Dok-seo murmured as she looked at my notebook.

"In the novel I read, you were an intense hot-blooded character fighting Ten Legs in a fierce battle…"

"Ah, I miss those days. I thought I'd save the world within 30 runs back then."

"...What kind of anomalies are at the ocean-class?"

"I can describe them, but you probably won't get a clear picture. Sim Ah-ryeon hasn't drawn any illustrations yet."

Ya-o-yorozu no kami descending upon the Japanese archipelago. "Asura," "Astra," and "Sand of the Ganges" turning the Indian subcontinent into the most dangerous void on Earth.

I often joked about the Korean Peninsula's precarious position, calling it Hell Peninsula, but compared to those places, it was heaven.

Again, I must warn you, never travel abroad in this era.

After listening to my explanation, Oh Dok-seo's face turned pale.

"Do I have to fight those kinds of anomalies too? Me?"

"Don't be too scared. The you of the 561st run, the you of the 560th run, the you of the 559th run, the you of the 557th run all endured well."

"……"

"You'll do well in this run too."

"...Wait a minute. Why did you skip the 558th run? What happened to me then?"

"……"

"Why did you skip it!"

I averted my gaze.

"Well…"

"Hey! I'm not even a combatant; I only have the [Prophecy] ability! Why are you dragging a non-combatant into the battlefield!"

"Whoa, calm down. Calm down. Do you think I'd drag you around without any plan? Oh Dok-seo, you're actually a multi-ability awakener. Once you awaken your second ability, you'll be fine on any battlefield."

"...Really?"

"Absolutely. You'll 100% survive on the battlefield. You just need to complete the training curriculum tailored for Oh Dok-seo, tested and proven over several runs. Trust me."

"...Should I really trust you?"

"Of course."

The training curriculum was grueling enough to make one wish for death, and in the 558th run, Oh Dok-seo did cross the Jordan River during training, but that was a mishap of bad luck and misfortune and won't happen again. Definitely.

"Ugh. How did I end up involved with such a crazy guy... I shouldn't have read that web novel in the first place…."

"Not all anomalies are about overwhelming physical power. We'll start with simple and fun anomalies like the 'Trolley Dilemma' or 'Hero Syndrome,' so don't worry."

"How can an anomaly be simple and fun? You really have a weird sense of humor... So, who was the most unusual anomaly you've ever faced?"

"I'll tell you about that later."

Leaving the despairing Oh Dok-seo aside, I sipped my café au lait. Although the coffee had gone cold while I was talking, the lingering taste on my tongue was still delightful.

—Judging by her expression, it seems I never mentioned that the danger levels of anomalies didn't end at level 4.

Lv.5: Outer God-class.

The final level. These were my true enemies as a regressor. They were the ones who forced me into near-eternal repetitions of runs.

Well, there's no need to explain everything to Oh Dok-seo all at once.

We had plenty of time left.

"Ah."

Oh Dok-seo stood up from her chair.

"Sorry, I need to go to the bathroom for a moment."

"You don't need to announce that."

"Ugh. I drink too much coffee when I'm with you…"

As Oh Dok-seo grumbled and left the room.

The vintage radio made of maple wood, the Zenith K731, which had been quietly playing Mozart's symphony until then, suddenly emitted static.

"This is Zone 7 head, Martin Russell. Damn it. The zombie virus has been confirmed to have landed in California. The nuclear warheads are… What? What the hell is the Foundation doing? Why is the missile direction… Oh, God! No! Stop! Oh, Lord, have mercy on humanity…"

"….."

In this run, too, I silently prayed for the people of North America who were facing a new apocalypse.

There is an epilogue.

It might seem like the episode ended there in the 562nd run with the conversation between Oh Dok-seo and me.

But there was still a mystery left regarding the "Library Society."

Since I always aimed to be as honest as possible with you all, I must confess about this mystery here.

It was in the 924th cycle. A long, really long time later.

"Hey, hyung."

"Yeah?"

"You might want to come over here and check this out."

Called by our SG Man, Seo Gyu, I approached the computer. He was managing the community.

"What's going on?"

"You know, recently you told us to create a library board, right?"

"Yeah, I did."

"The traffic there has increased drastically… like, really drastically. I thought I should check if you were working on something."

"Um. That was probably Ah-ryeon."

"Sim Ah-ryeon? She did?"

"Yeah. I entrusted her with managing the Library Society board."

Even after hearing my answer, Seo Gyu made a puzzled expression.

"No matter how much of a shut-in spirit Sim Ah-ryeon is, this…?"

"She's not an ordinary spirit."

"Of course. But still, this doesn't make sense? Look at this, hyung."

Seo Gyu showed me the computer screen in detail. As he scrolled up, posts poured out like a torrent.

Like a downpour.

"There were 400 posts today alone. Oh, just now. Did you see that?"

"……"

"They aren't just random posts. Most of them are secret posts, but look, when you use admin privileges to view them… Look!"

I saw it.

[Library Society's Encyclopedia of Anomalies]

"Illustrator"

Alias: Illustrator, Fan Art

Threat Level: None

Contamination Level: Unknown

Habitat: SG Net (Internet Community)

Decryption: All information from the Library Society, except for inevitably lost documents, has been safely transferred to the Library Society's Encyclopedia of Anomalies board on SG Net.

However, at some point, "attached files" started appearing on the documents. These attached files are all "illustrations," that is, image files.

The illustrations depict the forms of anomalies, and through cross-verification by various Librarians, it has been confirmed that the representations are "extremely accurate."

Anomalies not only spread void poison in their physical forms but also through copies, such as photos or videos. These illustrations are extremely dangerous.

Attempts to incinerate the illustrations a total of 501 times by the Burning Department have ultimately failed to delete them. It has been officially recognized that all documents in the Library Society have been contaminated by the "Illustrator."

Below are the recommendations from the Burning Department's Librarian and the orders from the Forbidden Books Department's Librarian.

[Burning Artist V]

Adding a [Show/Hide] feature to all documents' illustrations was the best we could do.

It has been confirmed that documents with illustrations are also unlocked and made available to the public.

Librarians should not open or view the illustrations recklessly. If verification is necessary, formally request approval from the Burning Department.

[Cheon Hae-gak M]

From the Forbidden Books Department: All Librarians' activity logs are recorded, and whether the illustrations are viewed is also stored.

Disclosing the personal information and community activity history of "Viscount Seo Hwa-ga," a member of the Prophecy Department, who illegally viewed the illustrations 41 times.

The disclosed history includes all activities under the Librarian's alias and anonymous activities. The disclosure scope includes login times, post contents, and comments.

Additionally, Viscount Seo Hwa-ga is ordered to live jointly with a Librarian from the Burning Department. Viscount Seo Hwa-ga's LSO procedure is suspended.

Posts with content I had never seen before were clearly visible.

"Burning Artist? V? What's this now?"

The Library Society was undoubtedly just a setting I created hundreds of runs ago for fun.

Terms like Cheon Hae-gak and Black Library were all just my masks, and I certainly hadn't written such posts.

Most importantly.

There was no character named "Burning Artist" in my setting book. V… perhaps for Viscount?

"Is my setting book… self-propagating without me knowing?"

Beside me, Seo Gyu was spitting while he spoke.

"Right? All these posts are properly written. Hyung, no matter how crazy Sim Ah-ryeon is, how could she write posts at this speed?"

I stayed silent. Not because I didn't have anything to say, but because I was too shocked.

"…This is the first time I've seen something like this."

To reiterate, this was the 924th cycle.

Really, truly, new events in my life had become as rare as finding a diamond shard on the banks of the Ganges River.

"Plus, there's a language translation function. See this [Language Selection] button? It looks like it's translated into every language in the world?"

"…Could it be AI or something, constantly generating posts?"

"That's possible, but how? Unless it's an awakener with the [AI Utilization] or [Auto Post Generation] skills, this isn't possible."

"…You're right."

"Moreover, I checked the IPs with admin privileges, and all these IPs are properly registered on SG Net. So if an awakener did this, they'd need the [SG Net ID Generation] ability. Is that even possible?"

"…If there's a skill like [Internet Community Sabotage] that integrates all those abilities, maybe."

"Oh."

"But it's definitely an unusual phenomenon. I'll report this to the Saintess and see if tracking the location is possible. Seo Gyu, keep monitoring. You did well to tell me."

"Yes, hyung."

Before long, the Saintess responded.

[Tracking the location is impossible.]

"What?"

[My Clairvoyance can't identify the awakener of that IP. Mr. Undertaker, do these people even exist?]

"……"

A chill ran down my spine.

Numerous hypotheses crossed my mind. The possibility of a skill that nullifies the Saintess's Clairvoyance, the possibility of an anomaly causing different worldlines to intersect on SG Net, or even the possibility that anomalies themselves could access SG Net…

I looked at the computer monitor. Every time I refreshed the page, new documents were being posted in real-time.

"If so… If these are not real humans, then where are the authors posting hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of posts on that internet site… where do they exist?"

[……]

The Saintess was silent.

…To reiterate.

There were still many unknown mysteries in this world that even I did not know.

Footnotes:

Chapter 73

The Genealogy I

Sinnoa

To summarize my story at this point: I am the one who provided full support for Dang Seo-rin to rise as the strongest idol in the Korean Peninsula; I am the one who founded the National Road Management Corps, monopolizing the roads and controlling logistics; I am the one who created SG Net, seizing the power of public opinion and information; I am the one who debuted the constellation called ‘The Librarian of the Great Library’; I am also the one who established the Library Society as a front organization —yes, that was me as well.

By now, some of you readers might think of me as an 'infinitely omnipotent mastermind' and even become my followers.

But that's a misunderstanding. As I have repeatedly said, my story is closer to a tale of failures than of successes. Naturally, I made a lot of colossal mistakes.

Shall I introduce one of the memorable episodes among those countless blunders?

Whhooosh!

Now, everyone.

It might be a bit abrupt, but do you like 'The Lord of the Rings'?

By ‘The Lord of the Rings,’ I mean the trilogy directed by Peter Jackson, not the original novels written by Tolkien.

Of the trilogy, my favorite is, of course, the final installment, ‘The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King’ (2003).

Among its scenes, the one where the cavalry of the human kingdom charges at the orcs—the so-called ‘Charge of the Rohirrim’—is my

top pick.

In the movie, there is a scene where humans and orcs brace themselves for the clash.

“Form ranks, maggots. Form ranks! Pikes in front! Archers behind!”

“Advance! And fear no darkness! Arise! Arise, Riders of Thé□den!”

“To death!”

“Forth, and fear no darkness! Arise, arise, Riders of Th□□den!”

Ah, the parts marked with '□' are to respect the fearsome copyright of the Tolkien Estate. Even though I, the Undertaker, appear this way, I strictly adhere to copyright laws.

Anyway, as the cavalry finally begins their charge, a horn resounds across the Pelennor Fields with a mighty *Wwwooooosh*.

Oh boy, truly, onomatopoeia is already difficult to express, but capturing the sound of that horn with mere letters is utterly impossible.

With the crude combination of letters ‘Wwoooosh,’ I can’t even convey 0.01% of that magnificent sound effect.

I was able to watch the movie only after the hype had long passed. Before I started my life as a regressor, I didn’t have much interest in cultural activities in general.

But then.

“Wh-What on earth... Guild leader... You haven’t seen ‘The Lord of the Rings’? I-I don’t get it. What I mean is, why do you even live? Why do you unnecessarily continue your life...?”

After receiving this scolding from Sim Ah-ryeon, I somehow managed to obtain a Blu-ray and watched it in my home theater.

Wwwoooosh!

And then... I got hooked.

You could say I finally opened my eyes to what cavalry ecstasy is. When the cavalry's hooves mercilessly trampled the orcs, my heart was also trampled at the same time.

It was the 380th run.

This incident happened during another 'vacation cycle.'

"Cavalry."

"...Yes?"

"Let's cultivate a cavalry unit."

The conference room fell silent for a moment.

Thunk. At that moment, Noh Do-hwa, the National Road Management Corps commander (this person drinks any kind of coffee without regard to the beans or type, just whatever is given) set down her café mocha as her lips were unsealed.

"What nonsense are you talking about...?"

"I'm talking about raising a cavalry unit. In a world where neither cars nor motorcycles run anymore, how long are we going to cling to outdated vehicles? Isn't it time we urgently needed a new mode of transportation that can operate without gasoline, just by grazing on weeds?"

"If anything, horses seem much more outdated than cars...?"

"Times change according to the environment."

By the way, when I advocated for something within the Regressor Alliance, I never just spoke. I distributed prepared audiovisual and statistical materials.

"As you can see, thanks to the growth of the National Road Management Corps, logistics movement between cities and guilds is

becoming more active. However, the amount of fuel reserves in each city is rapidly depleting. In the end, it's clear that all reserves will be exhausted within two years. Noh Do-hwa, leader of the National Road Management Corps, we must start preparing countermeasures now."

"If my memory serves correctly, there was a plan recently proposed by you, Undertaker, to use Gremlins to move cars...?"

"Gremlins are anomalies. No matter how carefully you handle them, accidents can always happen. So we need to have a Plan B ready to switch policies anytime."

"That's strange. What you're saying seems reasonable, but why does your expression look so...?"

It's because Buddha sees only Buddha, and Noh Do-hwa sees only Noh Do-hwa in her eyes.

"Well. I acknowledge that as a Plan B, it's somewhat plausible, but even if it's a cavalry unit, how do you plan to raise horses...? We don't have the luxury to expand pastures now..."

"It's okay. I'm not planning to ask the busy Sword Marquess to tread on weed fields either."

"...? Then how do you plan to raise the horses?"

Noh Do-hwa's puzzled look was a legitimate reaction. In a world covered by void, even wild greens that look normal on the outside can cause serious problems if consumed recklessly.

If you eat just anything? Whether human, animal, or plant, any organism can experience the miracle of its genes changing in real-time.

Experiencing white hair growing on the scalp and then suddenly sprouting teeth instead of hair was indeed a unique experience. If Darwin and Lamarck were reborn in this era, they would've reluctantly admitted, 'Well, this isn't exactly what I intended...' and showed reluctance.

“Do-hwa, we need to break away from the fixed idea of horses.”

“Yes? ...Ah, wait. Wait a moment. That academic nonsense feeling you give off is starting to creep in...”

“What is a horse? What is the essence, the idea of a horse? Isn’t it an animal that humans can ride and gallop on?”

“Goddamn it.”

“I don’t simply want a replica of a horse. I want a true horse. A horse that humanity has never seen before—a true horse itself. One that doesn’t fear the enemy’s pike formation, with explosive acceleration and long-term endurance, capable of carrying heavy loads, gentle and kind but only to me, ruthless to the enemy, doesn’t poop much, and eats just anything.”

“Goddamn it...”

“And I plan to use the void to create this horse. How about it? Isn’t my plan perfect? Doesn’t it make your heart race?”

“Yes, it makes my heart race. Because of the angina you’ve caused. I can’t sue you since the Medical Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Agency is gone... Uh. Excuse me, Saintess? Can you please stop this man...?”

At that moment, the Saintess, who had been quietly sipping her coffee, opened her lips. With a blank expression.

“Last week, Mr. Undertaker asked me if it wouldn’t be cool to have a moving steampunk mobile fortress like in ‘Howl’s Moving Castle’.”

“.....”

“Compared to a steampunk mobile fortress, the idea of a true horse is relatively more acceptable. Ms. Do-hwa, I advise you to give up.”

A long sigh echoed through the conference room.

“Goddamn it...”

I took that as a sign of ‘This business plan is great, let’s proceed quickly.’

Starting the very next day, I set up a horse ranch in the plains around Daesan-myeon, north of Changwon, South Gyeongsang Province.

“The modern trend is to return to farming... no, to ranching.”

Wearing a straw hat, I looked down at the plains. It was a splendid piece of land I had chosen.

With Joonam Reservoir nearby, the environment was perfect for use as a pasture. The location was also excellent. The National Road Management Corps and Samcheon World’s headquarters were just a stone’s throw away in Busan.

‘After traveling all around the country during my regression, I now have an eye for land that can rival even Master Mu-hak.’

I couldn’t help but feel proud.

Originally used mainly for farmland before the civilization collapsed, now mostly abandoned by residents, the area was overtaken by weeds and wild trees.

Of course, the genetics and biology of this era were so advanced that the weeds and wild trees were officially categorized under ‘anomalies.’

Gobble Gobble.

Slime Slime.

There were two main types of anomalies inhabiting the Daesan-myeon area.

One looked like a goblin but had a body made of liquid slime called ‘Slogoblin,’ and the other looked like a slime but had goblin skin called ‘Goblime.’ Both had a village-class danger rating according to the Library Society’s classification system.

I had no idea how such hybrids came to be, so don't bother asking. Maybe, um, one day Goblin A found the slime's backside attractive... or maybe Slime B found comfort in a goblin's butthole. Either way, the result was equally vile.

Gobbble!

Slaaaime!

Without a moment's hesitation, I wiped out both rare species within two days. After the apocalypse, the term 'biodiversity' was removed from dictionaries worldwide, so it was a legal act.

While wandering around Changwon, I also cleaned up the wild trees with my aura.

Neigh! Neigh!

Next was the perfectly legal and peaceful relocation operation. I went to Jeju Island, caught the horses grazing on the grasslands, and loaded them onto the ships.

Then I rowed back and forth between the mainland and Jeju Island.

Fuel? That's a luxury.

'We don't even have a liter of oil to support your reality edition of Animal Crossing...' declared Noh Do-hwa as she handed me exactly 500ml of black oil in a beaker.

But who am I, the Undertaker? Using an aura-coated oar, I managed to ferry over 200 horses over fifteen days.

Not only that, but I also crossed over to Japan, negotiated with the Magical Girl Association, and brought back four high-quality racehorses. They readily agreed since we had done several projects together.

Of course, the Magical Girl Association didn't provide a boat, so I had to row my way across the East Sea with my bare hands—or rather, an oar.

[Why on earth do you go to such lengths…], the Saintess's murmurs occasionally reached my ears, but I ignored them.

While I respect the Saintess, after much persuasion, I finally got her to read Romance of the Three Kingdoms last week. But after finishing it, her comment was:

'…In the end, Sima Yi won, so it's a story with neither lesson nor value, isn't it?'

Unbelievable. Not a fan of Shu (loyalists), nor Wei (traditionalists), nor even the lunatic faction of Wu—she liked Jin? Is she really the same species as me? The Saintess does not understand the human heart.

[No, I'm not saying I like the Sima family, just that the story's conclusion was… It's nothing. I'm sorry. I was wrong. Please continue raising the horses.]

Hmph.

With the love and support of a regressor, and most importantly, the genetic mutations from the void, the horses grew healthily.

If the world were normal, it would take at least 2-3 years for horses to mate, give birth, and grow from foals to adults. But what kind of world is ours? It's a world where Newton's concepts of absolute space and absolute time induce seizures and convulsions.

Thanks to the world-class mental illness, at my ranch (I named it 'Idea Ranch'), foals grew into adults overnight.

Of course, that was an extreme case, and generally, growth was erratic over half a year.

Neigh! Neigh!

Grrr…

Under my care, the horses learned the mysteries of evolution. I named all these tasks 'genealogy work'… or simply 'gene work.'

Towards a stronger horse!

Towards a faster horse!

Towards the best horse!

In some sense, evolution was similar to the regressor's life of filtering out the optimal path. So, could I, the Undertaker, be called an expert in gene work?

And so, half a year later.

"You mean there's already a result...?"

"Yes, Do-hwa, I formally invite you to my [Idea Ranch] for inspection and a tour."

"Wow. I haven't been this reluctant to accept an invitation in a long time..."

"But this is the Plan B we submitted at the Alliance meeting. As the meeting chairperson, you should verify it, right? Also, it's not good to stay in Busan all the time. People need to get out once in a while."

"....."

"You're coming, right?"

"....."

I had even prepared a safari truck for the occasion.

I invited not only Noh Do-hwa but also Seo Gyu and Sim Ah-ryeon, among our guild members. They would feel left out if I played without them.

"Ah...! Guild leader, you always boast about the ranch, so I've been dying to see it! Can I draw it and post it on SG Net...?"

"Hyung, you keep singing about the Peach Blossom Spring and the Utopian Ideal, so I'm curious too. Since it's a ranch you made, it

must be extraordinary, right?”

Ah-ryeon and Seo Gyu excitedly chatted in the backseat of the safari truck.

In the apocalyptic era, there were few entertainments. Humanity regained the virtue of being delighted with each invitation like this.

On the other hand, Noh Do-hwa, sitting in the passenger seat, had a face that looked as if she were going to a funeral.

As soon as she got into the truck, she buckled her seatbelt and whispered to me quietly.

“Undertaker...”

“Yes?”

“Why isn’t the Saintess here...?”

“Oh, I invited her, but unfortunately, she caught a cold. So, she said she’d come next time.”

“.....”

Noh Do-hwa’s face turned a bit paler.

I put a cassette tape into the fairly old safari truck and played some music. The backseat got lively with the driver’s excellent music selection.

“Then, let’s start the first safari tour of the Undertaker’s Idea Ranch, the first public opening.”

“Wow, wow...”

“Woooo!”

Vroom!

The safari truck roared, belching out exhaust. I also honked energetically, and the horn, set to sound like a bugle, blared out.

Wwwooooosh!

Perfect.

As the horn, which once resounded across the continent for humanity's last stand, echoed magnificently again, Noh Do-hwa’s murmured quietly, at a volume only I could hear, drifted from the passenger seat.

“God damn it...”

Footnotes:

Chapter 74

The Genealogy II

Sinnoa

Noh Do-hwa's ominous muttering had no effect on our safari adventure.

Even Sim Ah-ryeon and Seo Gyu, who were not easily excited, were noisily chatting in the back seat. It must have helped that I had prepared factory-made potato chips and chocolate snacks for this day.

“This is my first time being invited somewhere and playing with others...”

“This is also the first time my hyung has invited me somewhere, so I’m really looking forward to it.”

“As expected of the Busan Station fam... The bond is incomparable to other losers...!”

I smiled contentedly and turned the steering wheel. Today, I, the Undertaker, was guiding them not as a guild leader but as a humble guide.

“From here, it is the entrance to Idea Ranch. Welcome, everyone.”

“Wow! Ah? Ahhh...?”

Sim Ah-ryeon's cheer, as she looked at the ranch through the window, peaked like a soprano and gradually descended.

“Uh... Guild leader...?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Why does the horse ranch have... um, a ten-meter-high barbed wire fence and concrete walls?”

“Hmm.”

I nodded.

“Certainly, it’s not a very visually appealing outdoor decoration.”

“Yes, yes. It's a bit scary, or to be more honest, it’s almost hideous...”

“I agree.”

I pressed the remote control button.

With a rumbling sound, the heavy gate sealing the safari theme park slowly opened.

“But Ah-ryeon, the appearance of something is just a secondary attribute, not its essence.”

“Y-Yes...?”

“Think about it. Ranches naturally have fences. It’s only natural because the animals should not escape. Our Idea Ranch has just made the fence a little more sturdy. The essence of the ranch hasn’t changed at all. Understand?”

“Eh...”

The tires of my safari truck rolled gracefully through the open gate.

“By the way, it’s fine to keep the windows open, but don’t stick your head out. It could be dangerous while driving.”

“Ah, yes. Yes...”

As soon as Sim Ah-ryeon pulled her upper body back inside the car, I pressed the remote control button again.

With a clattering sound, metal bars rose from the window frames, protecting the windows. “Hic,” Sim Ah-ryeon flinched.

“Guild leader? The iron bars on the windows, why did they suddenly...?”

“Well, I made some modifications to the truck for the safari. How is it? Isn’t it awesome? Your guild leader has many talents.”

“It’s amazing, really. But, why is such amazingness necessary...?”

“.....”

By this point, Seo Gyu also fell silent like Noh Do-hwa. Looking through the rearview mirror, I saw that his manly face was starting to sweat.

“Of course, it's to thoroughly ensure the safety of our precious tourists, isn’t it?”

“No, what I mean is, why is safety necessary for just a casual look around the ranch...”

“Ah-ryeon.”

Seo Gyu spoke solemnly.

“Y-yes?”

“Put on your seatbelt.”

“Ugh. I hate wearing a seatbelt because it’s uncomfortable and makes me feel suffocated...”

Then it happened.

Heeeeyaaa!

“Eeeeek?”

Simultaneously with the cute neigh from outside the car, Sim Ah-ryeon screamed inside.

“Ah. Everyone, please turn your gaze to the 2 o’clock direction. Can you see? This is our proud first horse from Idea Ranch, Kkingkki.”

“A horse...?”

Noh Do-hwa looked out through the metal bars with cold eyes.

“Is that a horse...?”

The horse was warily eyeing our safari truck.

A sign that originally read ‘Kkingkki’ was hung around its neck, but it had broken it again, so only ‘Kki■ki’ was legible. Really, it was quite a troublemaker.

Of course, having been raised in the void, it looked somewhat different from an ordinary horse. That is, its appearance, a secondary attribute, not an essential quality, showed a slight difference.

For example, unlike other horses, Kkingkki could walk on two legs. Not like a human's upright posture, but hunched over.

Anyway, it was still a horse.

Its skin color was not brown, black, or white, but a somewhat greenish hue, likely an adaptation to the weed-filled plains of Daesan-myeon.

And... well, its teeth were sharp. But horses originally have well-developed teeth. Kkingkki had simply undergone a bit of convergent evolution.

Anyway, it was still a horse.

Finally, its hooves, in other words, its nails and claws, had also become slightly sharper. But considering that hooves are originally part of a horse’s body, this was a minor change.

After surveying all these attributes, Noh Do-hwa muttered bleakly.

“That’s... a dinosaur...”

At that moment, Kkingkki opened its mouth.

Heeeeyaaa!

Well. From the bond I built over the past six months with the horses, I interpreted it as “What nonsense are you talking about,

Do-hwa? I'm a horse."

"Huh? A dinosaur? Oh, don't slander us. How do our kids look like dinosaurs? Dinosaurs are hideous creatures covered in fuzz, whereas our kids have smooth skin."

"Hmm. Leaving aside the fact that horses grow manes, since when did horse skin boast a smooth green color like a reptile...?"

"Velociraptor?"

Seo Gyu shouted from the back seat.

"Raptor! It's a raptor, hyung!"

"Raptor?"

"Yes! From Jurassic Park. Wait. Oh my god, don't tell me you haven't seen Jurassic Park either?"

"Of course not. That movie came out before I was born."

"No, that's the old trilogy. My god. Hyung, how can you be such a movie ignoramus? There are so many recent series..."

"Eeeeek!"

Noh Do-hwa was horrified, Seo Gyu was excited, and Sim Ah-ryeon was thrilled. Clearly, everyone was delighted by Kkingkki's cuteness.

I continued driving the safari truck.

"Ah. Ah. Now please turn your gaze to the 9 o'clock direction. There you can see Byojoki, the thirty-third successful gene work horse of our ranch. It walks on all fours, as a horse should."

"Triceratops!"

"Please don't call our Byojoki by such a crude name, Seo Gyu."

"Another dinosaur... What did you do to these horses to make them grow rhino horns on their heads...?"

“Now, look at the 11 o’clock direction. That’s Kongkongi. A horse with a very pretty head.”

“Pachycephalosaurus! Head-butting dinosaur!”

“Oh, Kongkongi seems happy to see us. He’s knocking on the truck. Ha ha. Let’s all wave and greet Kongkongi!”

“Heeeek... The car is shaking...”

As expected, the safari tour was a great success.

Every time I introduced a member of our ranch, cheers erupted.

Throughout my entire regressor life, there hadn’t been a day as rewarding as this one as a host.

“Alright. Now, everyone, isn’t it a bit boring to just watch the horses through the iron bars from the safely protected truck?”

“No!”

“I feel the same as you! So, I will specially allow you to interact with the horses under my guidance.”

“Ahhh! Ahhh...!”

Sim Ah-ryeon wailed. Really, she didn’t have to be so overjoyed.

“In that sense, I will now introduce my top pick, the pride of Idea Ranch, Keongkeongi.”

“Keongkeongi...?”

“A very gentle and good-natured fellow. Everyone, please get off the truck. Ah-ryeon? Come out nicely. If you don’t, I’ll expose you as OldManGoryeo on SG Net.”

“Hick. Hic, hic...”

Following me, everyone got off the safari truck.

“Keongkeongi! Come here!”

With a whistle, I took a goat barbecue from the trunk and threw it into the distant forest.

A moment later.

With a thud, a goat's hind leg flew out of the forest, torn off. Coincidentally, the hind leg flew past Sim Ah-ryeon's face and hit the truck window.

"Kyaaa!"

"Now, Keongkeongi will appear. Everyone, our Keongkeongi is very gentle but still young and lacks composure. So please don't provoke him."

"We agreed to call that [bad temperament]..."

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Keongkeongi emerged from the forest, his majestic figure towering. He was the largest among the horses I had raised so far. His hind legs were exceptionally massive compared to his somewhat slender front legs.

Above all, he had a beautiful head.

Seo Gyu punched the air.

"Of course! A T. rex should make an appearance! And it's even a featherless version! Fuck, who cares about scientific accuracy!"

"Gurgle..."

For the first time in a while, Seo Gyu uttered a curse as SG Man, while Sim Ah-ryeon collapsed next to him.

She must have fainted from overwhelming emotion. It was understandable given how handsome Keongkeongi was.

Grrroooar!

Keongkeongi, seeing his dad, expressed his delight.

“Did you hear that? Keongkeongi is the youngest of our ranch and loves goat meat the most.”

“A carnivorous horse...?”

“Of course. Why do you criticize our boy for eating meat?”

“Aha. Until now, I wondered why the Undertaker didn’t have a family or even a pet. But seeing this today, I realize it’s fortunate you don’t have children or pets...”

Thud! Thud!

Keongkeongi, charging with his powerful hind legs, ran towards me. I, too, raised my aura and hugged Keongkeongi’s head with both arms.

“Oh, there, there. Did you miss Dad a lot?”

Grrroooar!

“That’s right. Don’t spill your food while eating. Here’s the goat hind leg you dropped. Chew it well.”

Grrr! Grrroar!

“How is it? Isn’t our Keongkeongi cute?”

“.....”

Unfortunately, there was no answer from the fainted Sim Ah-ryeon, and Seo Gyu was too busy observing Keongkeongi to respond. So, Noh Do-hwa, who prided herself on being devoid of a soul, had to answer.

“You’re just overpowering a T. rex with brute strength...”

Thus, after decorating the highlight of the safari tour, we returned leisurely to our accommodation. For the record, Sim Ah-ryeon remained unconscious the whole time.

I smiled broadly.

“So, Noh Do-hwa, what are your thoughts after inspecting our ranch’s achievements?”

“Hmm...”

“I think Keongkeongi is the most suitable as the mount for our future cavalry.”

“Hmm...”

“Raising them is not easy, but if you grant us the time and budget, I will surely cultivate 1,000 Keongkeongis to create the world’s strongest cavalry. Oh, and all cavalrymen must blow the horn I made during charges.”

“Hmm.”

Noh Do-hwa also smiled broadly.

It was a rare smile for her.

“Bullshit.”

Why?

Epilogue 1.

In the end, Keongkeongi’s cavalry debut was canceled, but the achievements of Idea Ranch were not entirely ignored.

“Undertaker. Does that huge dinosaur, Byojoki or whatever it’s called, eat a lot...?”

“No. Thanks to the wonders of void genetics, it absorbs most of the energy it needs for biological activity through its skin. And it’s a horse, not a dinosaur.”

“Whether it’s a dinosaur or a horse, that’s good news. From now on, the National Road Management Corps will use Byojoki for transporting goods...”

Additionally, for military mounts for the awakeners, Kongkongi, the head-butting specialized horse, was selected instead of Keongkeongi.

Naturally, I fiercely protested this absurd decision.

“No! The essence of a cavalry unit is to be stylish! What’s the romance in cavalrymen riding Kongkongis?”

“But doesn’t Keongkeongi eat nearly 100kg of meat a day...? On the other hand, Kongkongi requires little food and is docile. I don’t see a reason to hesitate...”

“Damn it! A cavalry unit is not about efficiency!”

“Then let’s call it a mobile unit instead of a cavalry unit, or even a dinosaur unit. Hell, I don’t mind calling the National Road Management Corps by its name...”

How could a person have such an insensitive perspective?

As a result, from the 380th cycle onward, awakeners occasionally rode Kongkongis around the Korean Peninsula. This was limited to the cycles in which I managed Idea Ranch.

I returned sadly and rode alone on Keongkeongi’s back. A red sunset was setting beyond the horizon.

“I’m sorry, Keongkeongi. It seems I can’t make a mate for you...”

Grrroooar.

It’s okay, Keongkeongi replied, saying he found value in philosophical exploration rather than in a romantic relationship.

Ah! How heartbreaking.

Saddened, I blew the horn while riding on Keongkeongi’s back.

Wooooooo!

Grrroooar!

Against the backdrop of a fiery sunset, a man and a horse roared.

Humanity's romance with the cavalry had finally come to an end.

Epilogue 2.

"Seo Gyu, I watched the dinosaur movie you recommended. But I didn't like it."

"Huh? How many did you watch?"

"Six. I watched the final one first since it was the last. The subtitle was Dominion. Why did you recommend such a movie?"

"No, hyung, fuck..."

Footnotes:

Chapter 75

The Invader I

Sinnoa

Since we're on the topic of movies, I might as well reveal my taste: I prefer alien movies the most.

To be more precise, I like movies tagged with #Disaster #Invasion #SF #Apocalypse.

You know, movies like ‘War of the Worlds’ (2005) or ‘Mars Attacks!’ (1996).

Some might find my taste a bit surprising and even question it.

-Why would you enjoy watching movies that mimic the invasion of Earth by anomalies? What's fun about experiencing the same thing in reality and in movies?

But that's a question asked out of ignorance. It’s fun precisely because movies and reality aren’t 'the same.'

It feels like watching a fantasy work.

For one, there are no awakeners in those kinds of movies. That’s already a minor 'historical inaccuracy.'

“Wow... Aliens that suck human blood to refuel and manipulate the environment. That's novel. But the lower body of the alien robots look flimsy. A few clean slashes with an aura blade would bring them down easily.”

“Their strategy is odd too. They can hibernate for thousands of years but didn’t think to scout Earth’s ecosystem beforehand? Why? Even a year of reconnaissance would have revealed all the problems.”

“Because they’re idiots...?”

“Oh. Then I guess that’s that.”

Just listening to Sim Ah-ryeon and Seo Gyu’s comments while watching movies with me would give you an idea of how people in this era perceived SF alien invasion disaster movies.

The inaccuracies are so glaring that they make the movies enjoyable in a fantastical way. Even though that probably wasn't the director’s intention.

Among these movies, if I had to pick one that depicted reality fairly accurately, it would be ‘Annihilation’ (2018). It well-represented how ordinary people perceive the void.

Anyway.

There’s one cliché that’s almost universally and frequently seen in these movies.

‘The aliens, who seemed invincible and drove humanity to despair, actually had a critical weakness-’

This cliché.

Personally, I call this the ‘Achilles Cliché.’

You might argue that Achilles was human, but from the perspective of the Trojans, Achilles was practically an alien.

The aliens in movies die en masse from Earth’s viruses after joining the anti-vaccine movement or their brains explode due to the mysterious waves from country music rhythms. However, the anomalies in reality aren’t that kind to humanity.

But occasionally, very occasionally— just like in the movies, some anomalies appear with an ‘Achilles heel.’

The kindest alien I encountered was during the 98th cycle.

To be honest, I didn’t realize at first that it was an anomaly.

Not because I was stupid, but because it really confused people.

“Meteor shower!”

“There, there!”

“It won’t come this way, right...?”

At first glance, it looked exactly like a ‘meteor.’

The timing of its appearance was also ironic: precisely in the 9th year. At this point, the continent-class anomaly ‘Meteor Shower’ had already ravaged South Gyeongsang Province and was merrily spreading its urine trail across the globe.

Naturally, from my perspective, if something that looked like a meteor fell from the sky,

‘Ick. Meteor Shower is acting up again.’

was the only logical conclusion.

Moreover, this ‘meteor’ didn’t fall inland but in the middle of the East Sea. Not near Ulleungdo, but in the Yamato Basin, near the Japanese archipelago.

I hadn’t heard any news about Atlantis relocating from the Atlantic Ocean to the East Sea, so that area was truly a no-man’s-land.

So, I ignored it. Being a regressor is a busy job; there’s no time to worry about the marine ecosystem.

But the story took a strange turn after the cycle where the Meteor Shower was eliminated.

“Mr. Undertaker, did you see the meteor fall into the East Sea last night...?”

“What?”

“You didn’t know. A meteor fell last night. Haha. I was worried it might be the Meteor Shower again. It was briefly a hot topic on SG

Net. But nothing happened...”

“Ah, there used to be meteors falling into the East Sea around this time. So that was just an ordinary meteor.”

Even though I heard several eyewitness accounts, I lived my life not paying much attention to it.

After all, about 100 tons of rocks fall to Earth from space every day. It just so happened to fall into the East Sea, and it coincided with the Meteor Shower; it wasn’t particularly special.

Then one day.

During the 98th cycle, I happened to visit Kanazawa in Japan.

I had a meeting with the Magical Girl Association, the largest faction in the Japanese archipelago, equivalent to our Awakener Alliance.

For reference, this group is filled with crazies like us, but they’ve evolved their madness in a completely different direction. I might mention them later.

Or better yet, I hope not.

Because the meeting ran late, I ended up walking along the beach at night with the Magical Girl representative.

“So, what I’m saying is, we want you to use your abilities to help us in the Inunaki subjugation.”

“I can help. But as I said before, give me the camera.”

“Look, even though there are only three of those precious items, you know we only have three of those, right? Instead, we’ll offer other rewards... Oh?”

“Hmm?”

Even though it was quite cold, the Magical Girl, who insisted on wearing a frilly goth-lolita outfit and carrying a black umbrella

even at night, pointed towards the East Sea.

This fashion sense might be a rare sight anywhere on Earth, but a more surprising sight was unfolding over the East Sea.

Thanks to being a regressor, my aura training was several levels above others, giving me incredibly enhanced eyesight.

"....."

"Wow! It's a shooting star!"

The Magical Girl hopped up and down excitedly on the sand. I couldn't match her enthusiasm.

Because.

"A disc?"

"Eh?"

"No, that thing falling into the East Sea. It's not a meteor... it's a disc... a saucer-shaped flying object."

"Huh? A UFO?"

With a voice that made me want to strangle her, the Magical Girl tilted her head. Fortunately or unfortunately, I had gotten used to their behavior and could nod in resignation.

That's right. An Unidentified Flying Object (UFO).

It was the moment when extraterrestrial beings made their grand debut.

Since a Magical Girl was present when I witnessed the anomaly, a quick investigation team was assembled.

Because of the power of the word UFO, the Magical Girl Association took the matter seriously.

"We'll deploy the aircraft carrier 'White Blossom' for the

investigation mission. Undateikeo, please join us!”

“Uh, sure...”

For reference, the Magical Girl Association had a total of thirteen aircraft carriers. By the standards of the pre-civilization era, they were on par with the US Navy, making them one of the world’s most powerful naval forces.

Of course, all of these were small fishing boats and cruise ships illegally modified and painted with the word aircraft carrier.

You might wonder what the correlation is between Magical Girls and aircraft carriers. How would I know?

The official name of their headquarters is ‘The Fifth Neo-Tokyo Neo-Kowloon Fortress: Miji Shrine.’ They are complete lunatics. Moreover, they always call me the ‘Undateikeo.’ If it weren't for business, I wouldn’t visit them.

No matter what, this story isn’t about those lunatics. It mustn’t be. Because they... No, never mind.

Anyway, we arrived at the area where the meteor had supposedly fallen and began our search operation.

And.

“We found the spacecraft!”

Seven hours after starting the operation, we found the UFO. Despite their craziness, these friends were competent and accurately located the flying saucer drifting on the surface.

The Magical Girls gathered on the deck and chattered excitedly.

“Wow. Just like the Undateikeo said, it’s not a meteor but a UFO...”

“Observation: It fell from the atmosphere and hit the surface. Assessment: The exterior is relatively intact. Conclusion: It’s a product of a civilization that far surpasses human science and technology.”

“……!”

“Amazing. There are waves on the surface. If we approach recklessly, won’t an alien pop out?”

The UFO submerged briefly with each wave before resurfacing. Like an engine room inside a car’s hood, the surface of the flying saucer was densely connected with complex pipes.

The first encounter with extraterrestrials.

Even I, who had experienced countless battles, felt a slight tension.

“There’s no response for now. Whether we talk or fight, we need to enter it first.”

“Okay…”

“I’ll go in first. Anyone coming with me?”

“Well, after suffering for seven hours, it would be meaningless to back off now. I’ll follow, so lead the way.”

I nodded. Leaving the rear guard to the Magical Girls, I entered the UFO without hesitation. Again, despite their craziness, they were professional anomaly hunters.

Splash, splash.

The interior of the UFO was dark. It had already begun to flood, and water reached our ankles. As soon as we stepped into the corridor, a gasoline-like smell filled our noses.

“Stars—guide the dawn of humanity.”

Flash.

When the Magical Girl chanted, orb-like lights began to float around her, illuminating the surroundings.

As soon as our visibility improved, other Magical Girls also started chanting their spells.

“Presence—detection—visualization.”

“… … …”

“Even though there was no sound—your footprints are imprinted on my heart.”

In an instant, our exploration team was equipped with visibility, radar, sonar, and stealth magic.

This was how the awakeners in the archipelago managed to resist despite the descent of Ya-o-yorozu no kami. It was a different kind of magic compared to Dang Seo-rin’s Cursed Song Incantation.

Cursed Song Incantation’s essence lay in its melody and rhythm, with Latin lyrics merely being an additional preference of Dang Seo-rin. In contrast, their magic was entirely composed of poetic language.

For magic-type awakeners, this ‘poetic magic’ was fundamental. Cursed Song Incantation was a unique school developed solely by the maverick Dang Seo-rin.

[Strange.]

We communicated via the telepathic magic.

[No matter how wide we extend the detection range, I sense nothing. Machines, machines, machines. It’s just full of machines.]

[Hypothesis: Non-living extraterrestrials. Theory: Intelligent beings that have completely replaced their bodies with machines.]

[This place is a complete maze. There’s a high possibility of an ambush, so we must remain vigilant.]

[Truly, I feel nothing. Undateikeo, do you sense anything unusual?]

[No. Wait—]

Thud.

The Magical Girls stopped in unison at my word. Their movements were well-rehearsed. It was excellent that they all waited for my further response without questioning, ‘What’s going on?’ or ‘Why?’

Suppressing my thoughts about how reliable they would be if only they didn’t speak so oddly, I took five steps forward.

Thud, thud.

I tapped the ‘object’ in the corridor ahead with the tip of my sword. Even when I infused my aura, there was no reaction from the object. Only the water at ankle height rippled gently.

“They’re dead.”

There was no need to communicate telepathically, so I murmured aloud.

“What?”

“They’re already dead. All of them.”

The dark corridor of the UFO.

The passage was filled with over 120 alien corpses, melted beyond recognition.

The ‘East Sea UFO Crash Incident’ of the 98th cycle ultimately remained an unsolved case.

Why did aliens with technology far superior to current human civilization perish inside their ship? Were they already dead before crashing into the East Sea?

I couldn’t hide my curiosity about this new anomaly.

After all, it was a mystery related to extraterrestrials. How could I resist?

Thus, in the very next cycle, the 99th, I prepared thoroughly.

This time, instead of searching after the UFO fell, I planned to go to the crash site and wait.

“You want to use an aircraft carrier? No matter how much you’re the Undertaker, we can’t just lend you one of our only seven military resources…”

“I’ll help you with the Inunaki subjugation next time, with no conditions.”

“Deploy the first aircraft carrier, White Blossom!”

Footnotes:

Chapter 76

The Invader II

Sinnoa

The aircraft carrier boasted by the Magical Girl Association (40 tons, equipped with kitchen and rest facilities, formerly used as a fishing cleaning ship before commissioning as an aircraft carrier in 1996) arrived at the target waters in less than two hours.

The Magical Girls immediately took their positions and started fishing. They had the skills of seasoned fishermen.

“Wow—just when we were starting to run low on food, I was thinking about going fishing.”

“By the way, Undateikeo. I heard rumors that there are awakeners in Korea with the ability to foresee the future. Is that true? You're moving with such certainty that an anomaly will appear at sea this time too.”

I shrugged.

“That’s a secret. But at least this time, it wasn’t a prophet. It was a constellation that told me.”

“A constellation...? Oh, those gods that only exist in Korea.”

The Magical Girl nodded in understanding.

It might be surprising, but the awakeners from Japan didn’t question why Constellations were so active only in Korea. They considered them a kind of local deity.

Even though they were now obsessed with their strange Magical Girl cosplay, before the void burst forth, they were all people with strong ‘spiritual senses.’ Mediums, shamans, and the like.

“...!”

While they were enjoying fishing, a quiet Magical Girl perked up her ears and pointed to the sky.

“Nya? What’s wrong, Ciel?”

“Hmm?”

The people aboard the aircraft carrier looked up. Their eyes widened.

A UFO was falling from the sky.

“Nyaaa?! Wh-What is that?”

“...Good grief.”

Boom!

The UFO tore through the Earth's fragile atmosphere as it fell. But from about 600 meters above the ground, its speed slowed dramatically. As if welcoming the alien visitor, the sea’s waves surged violently.

With a roaring sound, the UFO landed, no, splashed down into the sea.

The tsunami caused by the UFO shook our aircraft carrier.

“Nya! Somebody save me!”

“Decelerate—stabilize—defend.”

The ship, which almost capsized, regained its balance thanks to the crew’s magic.

As the water spray slowly cleared, the enormous UFO gradually floated up on the water's surface.

“Unbelievable. Undateikeo was right. An anomaly really came from the sky.”

“...! ...!”

“Amazing. Evidence for the hypothesis that the origin of anomalies might be space. We need to prepare a paper.”

“Even if you publish a paper, there’s no society to review it! Besides, is it even an anomaly? Maybe it's a real alien?”

Wiping the seawater from my face, I calmly spoke.

“Prepare for combat. Whether they're friendly or hostile aliens, we’re about to find out.”

“Hmm.”

“Right. Good idea.”

Shock gave way to caution. I and the others quickly assumed defensive positions.

“Warning. Detecting a presence.”

The blind Magical Girl, specialized in scouting and detection, muttered as steam hissed from the UFO.

Unlike in the previous cycle, where all the aliens inside had been slaughtered, this time there were clear signs of life.

“……”

“……”

Everyone held their breath at the moment that might lead to humanity’s first contact with intelligent extraterrestrial life.

A shadow loomed from beyond the steam and mist.

A whiff of gasoline hit our faces.

The blind Magical Girl muttered.

“Approaching.”

Thud!

As soon as she finished speaking, the figure leapt from the steam and landed on the aircraft carrier.

Such tremendous jumping power. And if the figure intended to engage in friendly conversation, it was certainly not the right approach.

“Enemy!”

“It’s a hostile alien!”

The creature, presumed to be an alien, extended its arms on the violently rocking ship.

Shriek!

Perhaps it was trying to say, ‘Hug me,’ by spreading its arms wide.

However, the alien had not two, but eight arms, and instead of hands, each arm ended in a one-meter-long scythe. Hardly suitable for a friendly embrace.

My subsequent judgment was hardly an overreaction.

“Engage in combat!”

Clang!

I met the eight swinging scythes of the alien with my blade. More accurately, I tried to meet them carefully.

‘What kind of strength is this?’

A heavy blow. Despite expecting it to be at most on par with the Ten Legs, my sword almost flew out of my hand from just one scythe strike.

The strength wasn’t the only surprising thing.

Shriek!

The eight naturally equipped scythes launched a rapid and dazzling assault. Although it was difficult to fully comprehend, there was

undoubtedly a highly developed martial arts system embedded in the alien's scythe strikes.

One blow, two blows, three blows. Just when I thought I had blocked one, another scythe came from the side. I tried to cut off its eighth arm with my aura, but it was to no avail.

“Damn.”

It wasn’t easy to make me, in the 99th cycle, exclaim in such awe.

The alien creature was clearly stronger than the Ten Legs. Not just a little stronger—six, seven times stronger, if not beyond calculation.

“Undateikeo? Are you okay?”

“Not at all! This bastard is strong!”

“Serious. Ciel, turn the ship around. We need to retreat and call for reinforcements. I’ll assist the Undateikeo—”

The Magical Girls made the right call, but just because something is right doesn’t mean others will follow the logic.

Thud! Thud, thud!

Alien creatures rained down from the UFO onto the aircraft carrier. The ship shook uncontrollably, and waves crashed from all sides.

Shriek! Shriek!

I saw seven alien creatures within my line of sight. Their skin was melting like wax. The smell of gasoline was overwhelming, emanating from their melting skin.

“Fuck.”

A cold sweat ran down my neck, a rare occurrence despite my countless regressions. Fighting just one was tough enough, but seven more?

But cold sweat alone wasn’t enough to describe the urgency of the

situation. The memory of the corridor inside the UFO from the 98th cycle flashed through my mind.

The corridor filled with corpses.

‘So, there could be at least 120 of these things?’

A scream erupted from the Magical Girls.

“Aaaah!”

A quick glance showed that the Magical Girls were being overpowered by the aliens.

A flurry of scythe strikes. The limbs of the girl who always said ‘nya’ were severed, soaring into the air along with her black umbrella.

“Damn,”

“…!”

Even in the face of death, the Magical Girls tried to remain calm. Sparks flew, and magic flared. But with each passing second, their bodies were dismembered, scattering blood.

[Undateikeo, escape—]

Thud! The blind Magical Girl who survived till the end had her upper body pierced by a tail, and her voice was cut off. Blood gushed from the alien creature’s sharp tail.

Time taken for total annihilation: a mere 11 seconds.

It wasn’t due to negligence in preparation. The awakeners weren’t lacking in skills.

Though not as experienced as me, they were veterans who had survived in Japan’s anomaly-ridden environment.

Yet they were obliterated. In 11 seconds.

“Goddammit—”

It had been a while since such a harsh curse escaped my mouth. The feeling was familiar yet unwelcome. It was the same damn feeling I had when fighting that damned octopus-head Ten Legs.

“Bastards!”

Somehow, I summoned as much aura as I could and swung my sword. With my comrades wiped out, staying here even a second longer would mean getting surrounded. I had to at least kill the one in front of me.

Shriek!

Pouring all my aura into my blade, I delivered a savage strike. Rather than a slash, it was more of a brute force assault that turned the alien creature into chunks of flesh.

Shriek?

Shriek! Shriek!

The aliens were shocked at their comrade’s death. The dozens of aliens on deck turned to look at me.

They clearly seemed wary.

They slowly, very slowly, began to surround me like hunters cornering prey.

I took cautious steps back, trying to keep the angle of encirclement below 180 degrees.

The aliens clicked and shrieked, seemingly displeased, but didn’t immediately charge. I had been given a moment’s reprieve.

……

The sound of waves echoed quietly. We maintained our distance, leaving the bodies of four Magical Girls and one alien between us, in a tense standoff.

“……”

I could retreat if I wanted to.

The aliens were strong and fast, but I didn't think they could keep up with my speed. The Magical Girls must have sensed this disparity and told me to [run] at the end.

However.

'I can't let 120 of these monsters roam the world.'

I gripped my sword hilt tightly and adjusted my stance. One sentence repeated in my mind.

I'm taking you down with me.

'Rather than that, I'll gather as much information as possible in this cycle and prepare for the next.'

The decisive reason I couldn't commit to retreating was the thought that there must be another entity that had slaughtered all 120 of these powerful aliens.

'I need to see its face. And learn its features and abilities if possible!'

It might be the queen of these aliens, or an entirely different entity. I had no information yet.

It was fortunate that I realized such a powerful anomaly existed. In previous cycles, this anomaly had crashed into the East Sea and disappeared, hiding somewhere without me knowing.

'This anomaly must have a continent-class, or more likely, an ocean-class danger rating.'

I couldn't even begin to imagine how many civilians and awakeners it had killed over the cycles while hiding from my sight.

'No matter how many cycles it takes, no matter how many decades or centuries, I'll annihilate it completely!'

As I steeled myself for a life-or-death struggle,

Shriek...

Shriek, shriek... shriek...?

The alien creatures, which had seemed ready to pounce at any moment, suddenly hesitated. They weren't afraid of my aura... no, that wasn't it.

All eight of their arms were trembling, and their tails were flailing wildly from side to side.

They stretched their necks out like deer, looked up, and shrieked at the sky. They twisted their limbs and scratched their skin furiously.

It looked like they were...

'...In pain?'

One of the aliens flipped over and started writhing on the ground, rubbing its body against the deck of the aircraft carrier like a bear scratching its back against a tree.

The difference was that the bear was in agonizing pain while doing so.

Shriek! Shriek! Shriek!

The other aliens followed suit, each writhing and scratching itself in apparent agony. One even crashed into the control room, while another used its own scythe-arms to peel its skin off.

"What in the world...?"

Just moments ago, these creatures had seemed like the ultimate lifeforms. Why were they suddenly acting like this?

I lowered my sword in confusion. Approaching one of the aliens, I stabbed it in the belly, but it didn't react at all and simply slumped over.

"Ugh..."

On closer inspection, the skin that had been melting like wax earlier was now literally pouring off like chocolate in a fountain.

The flesh was disintegrating. It looked as if they had been doused with acid, as their skin melted away.

Shriek! Shriek!

They writhed in agony, but the melting process only accelerated. Muscles were exposed, thick bones jutted out, and strange organs spilled out.

All of it melted away.

Within just two minutes, the deck of the aircraft carrier was littered with black, slimy remains.

“Gross...”

I went inside the UFO to check, but there was no twist. Just fewer numbers this time, but the corridors were still filled with alien corpses, just like in the 98th cycle.

These creatures, which might have been the strongest species in the universe, were all dead.

And humanity hadn’t even done anything yet.

“.....”

I scooped some seawater into my palm and poured it over one of the relatively intact bodies.

A remarkable thing happened. The alien’s skin instantly melted away.

“Ugh...”

I tested it again, this time with fresh water from the aircraft carrier, and the result was the same. The alien’s skin, bones, and organs turned into a sticky liquid.

“Oh…”

I realized why these powerful creatures had been annihilated and why they hadn’t appeared in previous cycles.

“Their weakness is ‘water’…?”

They should have avoided Earth. Idiots.

I named these alien creatures the 'Warrior Race.' From the 99th cycle onward, I paid no attention to UFOs or the Warrior Race that fell into the East Sea.

No matter how strong the Warrior Race was, no matter how tough they were—even for me, a regressor—it didn’t matter.

Their weakness was water.

As obvious as it sounds, 71% of the Earth’s surface is covered in water. And, amusingly enough, on Earth, H_2O often falls from the sky. Sometimes it rains for days on end.

Oh, don’t you know? Aliens, this is called ‘summer monsoon’—

‘How can a creature’s weakness be water?’

It was bizarre, but considering how rare water is in the universe, it might be that Earth’s inhabitants and its life forms are the strange ones.

“Hey, guild leader! Look over there! A shooting star…!”

“Hmm.”

In some cycles, I saw meteor showers over the East Sea, but I simply watched the night sky with a bittersweet feeling.

The idea that these anomalies, potentially my greatest foes, were diving into the East Sea and dying every cycle was… a bit strange.

‘What if the Warrior Race isn’t actually an anomaly but real aliens?’

What if the UFO was just a small reconnaissance ship and the main force was elsewhere?

What if they realized their weakness was water, developed high-tech waterproof suits, and came back for another invasion?

And if humanity and anomalies alike were wiped out by the Warrior Race's invasion?

"Wish. Make a wish quickly, guild leader. If you make it before the star falls, it will come true!"

With Sim Ah-ryeon's special skill of whining, I raised my hands in surrender.

"Alright, fine. Let's make a wish."

If the aliens launch a full-scale invasion, what can I do? I'll just keep resetting the cycles and deal with it then.

Praying that such a disaster wouldn't happen, I clasped my hands together.

'Please give up on Earth. Aliens. No matter where your home planet is, I guarantee it's less of a hellhole than ours.'

Twinkle—

As if acknowledging my wish, a shooting star twinkled over the East Sea in the 9th year.

Footnotes:

Chapter 77

The Promoted I

Sinnoa

Speaking of wishes, it's more accurate to say that I grant them rather than make them.

[Time Seal].

My unique awakening ability and the reason why my nickname as the Undertaker stuck. It traps the target in their 'happiest day,' forcing them to relive that day for eternity.

-Undertaker, it's too hard. I want to let go of life now.

-Please, Undertaker.

-I want to see my family. Back when the world was still intact, with my family... Please.

-No one in reality will remember me anymore? It doesn't matter. This world is already...

Though they relive the same day forever, those under [Time Seal] never realize it.

Even if, like the soccer player Kim Joo-chul from a previous episode, they somehow notice, it doesn’t matter. They forget again quickly.

People just play all day long in the dreamland amusement park I’ve set up, with an all-day pass.

To the end-of-the-world humanity, I am the ultimate, legally approved final sedative (with narcotic properties).

Naturally, there's a long line of people waiting to get into this amusement park with a free pass.

Today, let me introduce the craziest psychopath standing in that line.

“Vice guild leader.”

“Hmm?”

“My life is too painful.”

Swooosh.

Silver hair fell across the table from the seat opposite me.

That hair was beautiful. Too white to be gray and too shiny to be white. It could only be described as silver.

When an awakener gains their powers, their hair color is randomly dyed. The person before me had lucked out with an SR grade in the tier gacha. (For reference, I got normal-grade black.)

“To be honest, it's too hard to bear sober. I want to end it all.”

“……”

Yu Ji-won.

There’s a person with that name.

In fact, Yu Ji-won has appeared several times in my stories. Some readers might remember, but her first appearance was here.

-Vice guild leader, do you have a moment? A guest has come to see you.

-A guest? Who?

-Yes, the name is... Emim... Schopenhauer? They said they're German.

The day I first met the old Schopenhauer.

The one who first told me a historic moment had arrived, a German

geezer visiting, was none other than the SSS-class hair beauty Yu Ji-won, my secretary and lieutenant.

Yes, my secretary and lieutenant. Long ago, when I was just a lackey for Dang Seo-rin at Samcheon World, Yu Ji-won was my lackey. The lackey of the supreme guild leader's lackey—quite a high rank.

Let me introduce how this one got into the core circle of power, our inner circle, in one fell swoop.

It was during the 5th cycle. Yu Ji-won said something to me then.

“Vice guild leader, do you like Romance of the Three Kingdoms?”

“What? You too?”

“Yes. I got into it when I was a kid with Yokoyama's 60-volume strategy Three Kingdoms.”

My eyes lit up. Such pedigree.

The cool and chic awakener with silver hair moved only her lips to mutter.

“After that, I read Go Woo-young’s Three Kingdoms, Hwang Sok-yong’s Three Kingdoms, Yi Munyeol’s Three Kingdoms, and Jang Yeong-sil’s Three Kingdoms. I briefly got into the niche Three Kingdoms commentary before moving on to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Battle Records and eventually delving into the original historical texts.”

“Incredible.”

I was dizzy with excitement. It was an intoxicating feeling, like a drug.

Is this how a martial arts elder feels when they see a promising disciple?

My voice trembled as I asked, testing if this kid was the successor to carry on my legacy.

“KOEI...? Or, Three Kingdoms: Total War...?”

“Hmm.”

As is common in zen dialogue, Yu Ji-won rested her chin on her hand in thought.

Finally, she lifted her glasses.

“My rational mind calls for Three Kingdoms: Total War, but my young heart cries out for KOEI. And I believe the soul resides in the heart rather than the brain.”

“…Which series do you prefer?”

“Three Kingdoms 3, Three Kingdoms 5, Three Kingdoms 11.”

“Gasp...!”

I had no choice but to acknowledge her excellence. From that moment, Yu Ji-won was immediately selected as my close aide.

Of course, there was one final hurdle.

“Oh, for crying out loud. Kids.”

Samcheon World, which had adopted a global monarchical system over a democratic one, had its own procedures and regulations.

Our supreme leader, the Great Witch Dang Seo-rin, sneered at us.

“Hiring someone as the vice guild leader's aide just because they're a Three Kingdoms otaku? The guild’s management must be thriving.”

“It's ironic coming from a witch otaku and train enthusiast...”

“What did you just say, vice guild leader?”

“Nothing at all.”

“I understand you like her, but you can't promote guild members recklessly without procedure. How will Yu Ji-won feel if she rises

through the ranks without proper process? Her peers will resent her.”

“If I may, Great Witch, can I speak?”

Yu Ji-won said.

As described several times, Yu Ji-won always wore an expressionless face and spoke with discipline. She had a talent for making even the most nonsensical words sound plausible when they passed her lips.

“Hmm? Go on.”

“I wasn't recommended for the position of vice guild leader's aide just because of my Three Kingdoms knowledge. I have other skills as well.”

“What, your awakening ability? The minimap thing? I know that. I value you too. But as I said, organizations need procedure and order…”

“I majored in Latin and can write freely in Latin. Naturally, I can also translate song lyrics into Latin.”

“Promoted.”

Yu Ji-won, appointed to the executive level!

Yu Ji-won’s promotion to the inner circle was thanks to her knowledge of Three Kingdoms and her Latin skills, but that didn’t mean she was incompetent as an awakener.

In fact, she was quite capable.

“Ji-won.”

“Yes, vice guild leader.”

“It’s about time to start the operation. Turn on the minimap.”

“Yes, sir.”

Minimap.

This was Yu Ji-won's awakening ability. Any Korean who had sold their soul to the ethnic game StarCraft would instantly understand what the 'minimap' ability was just by hearing its three-syllable name.

Swoosh-

Yu Ji-won spread a map on the operation table. The scale was 1:50,000. She placed the chess pieces she had prepared on the map.

Amazingly, the chess pieces began to move on their own.

“Vice guild leader, the enemy is gathering in the eastern district as expected. They seem to be planning to use boats to attack us from behind.”

“Hmm.”

The seemingly ordinary chess pieces had red stickers with names like 'Kim Sung-woo' and 'Park Hyun-mo' written on them.

All were names of the enemy leaders we were up against.

The chess pieces imitated the locations and movements of the enemies on the map. It wasn’t just the enemies.

♗ ♕

Yu Ji-won Dang Seo-rin

The bishop labeled 'Yu Ji-won' and the queen labeled 'Dang Seo-rin' also accurately showed their positions on the map.

Dang Seo-rin was impressed.

“It really feels like fighting with a minimap on. This ability is broken. Ever since Ji-won joined Samcheon World, guild wars have become so easy.”

“You flatter me, Great Witch.”

Yu Ji-won, the master of social skills, bowed at a perfect angle—neither too exaggerated nor too stiff.

“My ability has limits. Without your leadership, my ability would be useless.”

“That's too much flattery. Be careful, or I might sew your mouth shut.”

“Yes.”

Yu Ji-won was just pretending to be modest while flattering, but her ‘minimap’ had some flaws.

1. The minimap only displayed targets Yu Ji-won had met and knew by name.

For instance, Yu Ji-won couldn’t display the 'Saintess' on the minimap. She had never met her and didn’t know her name.

2. The minimap only worked in cities Yu Ji-won had physically visited.

For example, in the 5th cycle, Yu Ji-won had never been to Gyeongju. Despite being a cycling enthusiast who toured all of Korea and even Japan, she had never set foot in Gyeongju.

So no matter how much she used the minimap, she couldn’t track anyone fleeing to Gyeongju.

In such cases, the chess pieces would move until they reached the edge of the map and then fall over.

The expression 'set foot in the city' might seem vague, but it had a very clear criterion: visiting a convenience store in the city.

Oddly enough, if Yu Ji-won bought something or stayed in a convenience store in a city for more than a minute, that city was considered 'visited.'

So, cities where convenience stores had completely disappeared couldn't be 'visited.' For instance, in New York, which was devastated by an ocean-class anomaly, there were no convenience stores to be found.

In other words?

"Guild leader, I'll take Ji-won to various guild leader meetings and travel across the country."

"Sure. Please do."

I dragged Yu Ji-won around the country under the pretext of being my secretary, making her familiarize herself with people's faces.

As a result, the 'vast network' that Yu Ji-won built through me was reflected on a map of the entire Korean Peninsula.

"Impressive."

I looked down at the huge map and opened a beer bottle.

The major guild leaders of each city, those with special abilities even if they weren't guild leaders, and anyone who could influence the power dynamics in Korea.

The locations of all these important figures were displayed in real time.

"Thank you. It's all thanks to you, vice guild leader."

"It's your skill and your major that paid off."

"I never expected my Latin major to shine more after the world ended. I used to worry about starving before the apocalypse."

"Isn't it life's unpredictability?"

I slowly poured beer into Yu Ji-won's proffered glass. We raised our glasses to celebrate the completion of the 'national map.'

"Cheers."

“Cheers.”

Clink— The glasses made a lovely sound.

With Dang Seo-rin's leadership, my support, and Yu Ji-won's overwhelming information-gathering ability, Samcheon World continued to prosper.

It would be nice if this invincible triumvirate lived happily ever after... but as you all know, this story is far from a happy ending.

Shortly after we ascended to power in Korea, the situation grew increasingly grim.

In cycles without Noh Do-hwa, the cities were isolated and perished one by one. In cycles without the SwordMarquess, food supplies dwindled rapidly. In cycles without Seo Gyu, the Awakeners lost their communication network. In cycles without Old Man Scho, we lacked the strength to break through the anomaly's onslaught.

Even for the executives of Samcheon, the situation was dire. Maybe even worse.

Dang Seo-rin, the supreme leader in our autocratic system, was a rare breed—a 'benevolent ruler.'

Executives had to set an example at the front lines, and if even one guild member starved, so did the executives.

Dang Seo-rin endured. I endured well.

Yu Ji-won struggled.

Despite her cool and chic persona with silver hair, Yu Ji-won had the words ‘power’ and ‘promotion’ inscribed on her heart. For her, the dire situation was unbearable.

The brutal truth was that Samcheon World was still the best off in Korea.

Yu Ji-won, who needed power and success to be satisfied, was tormented by the environment that refused to fulfill her desires.

If there had been a guarantee of success in another guild, Yu Ji-won might have followed the example of Prime Minister Ye Wanyong of the Great Korean Empire and defected.

In reality, Yu Ji-won had every intention of continuing her ancestors' legacy.

"Vice guild leader."

"Hmm?"

"Could you arrange a boat to Japan?"

I didn't bother to lecture her, 'Why run away to Japan? Aren't you ashamed as the vice guild leader's aide?'

Instead, I sipped my coffee. By this time, I had started to see through Yu Ji-won's true nature.

"I could arrange one, but it would be a one-way ticket."

"What do you mean?"

"Until recently, there were Japanese ships occasionally coming to Busan. But they've all disappeared since three months ago. What does that tell you?"

"……"

We fought bloody battles against anomalies across the country with our guild alliance. Yu Ji-won, as my direct subordinate, was always with me.

"Vice guild leader, what about China..."

"Based on what the constellations said, Shandong is out of the question."

"……"

"And you said your [Minimap] works in Korea and Japan but you've never been to China. Your ability would be useless there.

Are you okay with that?”

“……”

Indeed, betrayal requires someone to accept you, and escaping needs a paradise to run to.

The times were turning her into an eternal loyalist.

Just as talented people born in the wrong era often do, Yu Ji-won finally acknowledged that her desires would never be fulfilled.

She had nowhere to go. Where could she go when the whole world had collapsed?

Actually, there was one last place to run to.

“Vice guild leader.”

“Oh, for crying out loud. Lieutenant Yu! Are you scared? Let’s just die together. Life is short anyway. We’re all doomed soon...”

“Please kill me.”

I turned my head.

My expressionless lieutenant was staring at me.

“Give me a funeral. With your power. Please.”

“……”

I sighed.

There were many who had asked me for a funeral... that is, [Time Seal].

Sure. Some of them were personally important to me.

In short, I was a professional undertaker. I had already experienced sending close acquaintances into eternal caskets multiple times.

And I knew that when people I had seen through and through asked

for a funeral, I could offer a slightly more detailed consultation than usual.

To summarize the consultation in one line:

-I'm a regressor. The wheel of time will turn to the next cycle, and the world will be a bit better. Are you sure you want to be sealed now?

Upon hearing my secret, Yu Ji-won was shocked. Her mental shock lasted exactly six hours.

Less than a day later, my silver-haired lieutenant came back.

“Your excellency, you said this is the 5th cycle.”

“……”

It’s evident she was a tough nut to crack since she started addressing me as ‘your excellency’ the moment she heard I was a regressor.

“Yes.”

“Well, then wouldn’t it be logical to think that the 2nd cycle would be better than the 1st, the 5th better than the 4th, and the 6th better than the 5th?”

“…That’s true.”

My silver-haired lieutenant nodded seriously.

Then she began to say something I had never heard in my entire regressor life.

“Your excellency, I believe getting sealed in time now, in the 5th cycle, would be a significant loss.”

?

Footnotes:

Chapter 78

The Promoted II

Sinnoa

“What?”

“Your Excellency. Upon reflection, I realize I haven’t truly enjoyed my life.”

Yu Ji-won said.

“Even if I were to be Time Sealed and relive my 'happiest day,' I doubt that happiness would hold much objective value.”

Huh… What is she talking about?

“While other ordinary people spend their sealed time happily with their families or lovers, I would be endlessly repeating the day I got accepted into university or the day I topped my class. Imagine that, Your Excellency. Is that truly the most valuable form of happiness? I find it extremely unfair.”

“No… what… So what is it you want to say to me?”

“Honorable vice guild leader, please, in the next cycle, inform me in advance that you are a Regressor and the Prophet who promises the gospel of eternal days. If I know that, this wretched sheep will tirelessly work to create the happiest day I can, to prepare for the heaven I will eventually enjoy.”

“……”

Silence filled the tent.

“So, if I understand correctly, I will Time Seal you, but before that, you want to create a day you will happily repeat forever?”

“As expected, Your Excellency. Your understanding is astute.”

“Are you truly insane?”

"Vice guild leader! I will serve you faithfully until the day this world ends. So please, promise me this.”

“The world has nearly ended! No, Ji-won. I’m sorry. This vice guild leader was wrong. I was lying. It’s unreasonable to think someone like a Regressor exists, right?”

“I have always trusted you, vice guild leader. Isn’t our bond of friendship not so trivial? Of course, in the next cycle, I might be too foolish to recognize you as the Savior. Then just tell me, ‘I know you killed someone when you were fifteen and dumped the body in a celery field in North Korea.’”

“What? You killed someone in middle school? No, wait… Hey! Stop grabbing my pants! Let go! Hey, let go! Lieutenant Yu! You crazy bitch!”

Having lived as a regressor, I had encountered many lunatics, but Yu Ji-won was the first psychopath who actively sought to exploit my regression solely for her own pleasure and happiness.

Even upon reflection after 1183 cycles, there was no one like Yu Ji-won.

The most astonishing fact was… this girl wasn’t just talking; she truly served me with utmost loyalty until her dying breath.

Gruaoorrarrrr!

In the fifth cycle, I lost my head within two minutes of engaging the Ten Legs.

But in that battle, many awakeners died before me, including Yu Ji-won.

"Vice guild leader! Danger!”

Yu Ji-won even shielded me from the Ten Legs’ tentacles. She leaped in front of me and took the hit herself.

I was dumbfounded.

Because even without her intervention, I could have dodged that attack.

If there were an award for 'The Most Pointless Death of the Year,' this would be a prime contender.

If the person who died wasn't my direct subordinate, who had been through thick and thin with me, I might have clapped and laughed.

"Hey… Lieutenant Yu, no, Ji-won… what the hell is this new insanity…?"

"Cough."

Yu Ji-won, with a neat hole in her chest, coughed up blood.

Her blue eyes, shining with a seriousness this world would never see again, looked up at me.

"Next cycle… Your Excellency, promise…"

Thud.

And she died.

"……"

This is driving me crazy.

It was absurd, but I wasn't cruel enough to ignore the last words of someone who died in my place (even a pointless death is still a kind of death, right?).

I regretted not being a bit more cruel, but it was too late. I delivered the message to Yu Ji-won in the next cycle.

"Indeed."

The silver-haired cool chick nodded.

Since the world hadn't completely collapsed yet, resources were still plentiful. Yu Ji-won raided a convenience store with an axe and fortified it.

She claimed she had owned the convenience store for a long time, but I didn't believe her. This girl could lie more naturally than she breathed.

"I understand that you claim to be a regressor. I also understand that you possess the ability known as the Time Seal. But all of this is just unverified claims, isn't it?"

"I also know you're a psychopath."

"That's not surprising. Everyone around me has known that for a long time."

-Kyaaaah!

In the middle of our conversation, a creature crashed through the convenience store window. It looked like a cockroach monster. I charged my staff with aura and pierced its mouth beautifully.

Crash! Yu Ji-won approached and finished it off with an axe to the head. The creature trembled.

Yu Ji-won always had a keen sense for combat. This talent was evident even back then.

We resumed our conversation as if nothing had happened.

"What more proof do you need? I know you like Three Kingdoms and that you majored in Latin."

"What? Hmm. I see. Very interesting, but it's still just unverified claims."

"Damn it, I know you killed someone when you were fifteen and dumped the body in a celery field in North Korea. Believe me, you psycho bitch!"

"…Oh."

Yu Ji-won blinked her eyebrows.

“I understand. Your statement just now greatly increases the credibility of your claims.”

“Why? Because it’s a truth no one else knows?”

“To be precise, because it’s ‘incorrect knowledge.’ It wasn’t when I was fifteen; it was when I was fourteen. And it wasn’t in North Korea; it was in Dobong Mountain.”

“……”

“If your ability was to read minds or uncover secrets, there would be no reason to accept incorrect information. Therefore, you must have received this wrong information from someone else. And I have several reasons to be confident that my murder was never discovered.”

“……”

“Hmmm, regression. And past cycles of me sending letters to myself through a regressor as a courier… very interesting. Few people in life experience something this extraordinary.”

This is driving me crazy, seriously.

I opened a can of coffee from the convenience store shelf and chugged it. Yu Ji-won didn’t stop me.

“Consider this can of coffee my courier fee. I’ve delivered the last words, so I’m leaving now.”

“Ah. Please wait for two minutes. I will come with you.”

“What?”

I was startled.

When I turned around, Yu Ji-won was rolling up the national and city maps spread on the counter and stuffing them into a trunk.

Incidentally, the most striking interior decoration in this convenience store was the ‘Tutorial Fairy’s’ skin. I did not misspeak. This girl had skinned the fairy and mounted it on the wall like a trophy.

I could confidently say she had skinned at least two different beings before.

“Hey, what do you mean, come with me? You have plenty of supplies here. Just hold out here.”

“That’s the worst plan.”

Yu Ji-won pushed up her glasses.

“In the previous cycle, didn’t I eventually leave here and join your guild? If I’m going to leave anyway, it’s better to join now and rise through the ranks faster.”

“It’s not my guild, it’s led by Dang Seo-rin.”

“Ah. I see. I apologize. Please guide and correct me whenever I make mistakes in the future.”

“No, no need for corrections or guidance, just don’t follow me, okay? Hey. Hey! I don’t want this! I don’t like you anymore! Go away, will you?”

Yu Ji-won did not go away.

She clung to me like a parasite. This psychopath’s chosen host was the Samcheon World.

Yu Ji-won demonstrated her dedication to the witch cosplay in the guild by proving she possessed not only the ‘Minimap’ skill but also ‘Dang Seo-rin Favorability.’

“Wow, vice guild leader. Where did you find such a cute kid?”

“It’s the honor of three lifetimes, Great Witch.”

“……”

Yu Ji-won, selected as an early member of Samcheon World, was promoted faster and higher than her 5th cycle self. One could say she made quite a spectacle.

Her official title was Operations Manager, serving as my deputy and special secretary to the guild leader, Dang Seo-rin. In short, she firmly established herself as the third-ranking member within the guild.

Considering she was the third in command of Korea’s top guild, it was equivalent to being the third-ranking executive in the largest corporation before the apocalypse. She could be considered highly successful.

However, our silver-haired psychopath Yu Ji-won was not the type to care about others' evaluations.

“Manager Yu.”

“Yes, vice guild leader.”

“…We’ll be fighting the Ten Legs soon. Shouldn’t we have your funeral first?”

“Ah.”

“Anyway, from what I see, you seem much happier in this cycle than in the last one. While I can’t know what you consider happiness, wouldn’t you be satisfied with the afterlife you’ll have now?”

“Hmm.”

She said, “Hmm.” This girl.

This psychopath just looked around the air and said, “Hmm.”

Visually, her lips formed an exact 'ω'.

"Vice guild leader, I suddenly thought. If I’m happier in this 6th cycle than I was in the 5th… there’s a good chance I’ll be a bit happier in the 7th, isn’t there?”

“Ji-won. What are you talking about, Ji-won…”

“Please, in the next cycle, try your best to make me happier before my funeral…”

“Hey!”

By now, you can probably guess how this story ended.

That’s right. Without needing any epilogue, to cut straight to the conclusion, Yu Ji-won, this damn bitch, used me as a delivery girl for her last words every single time.

From the 6th cycle to the 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th.

Every time I asked if she was finally happy enough for a funeral, she would say,

“Hmm. In the next cycle, I think I’ll be a bit happier.”

She kept postponing her sealing endlessly.

Seriously, who does that?

I’ve read countless web novels and encountered numerous regressor protagonists after the 550th cycle, but I’ve never seen a character who uses an infinite regressor like this.

Even later on… she joined the National Road Management Corps under Noh Do-hwa.

“This Minimap skill is perfect for our Corps. Thanks to it, tracking the members’ locations in real-time is effortless. Wow. Thanks for introducing such a talented individual for free, Awakener Undertaker…”

“……”

And after several cycles, Yu Ji-won smoothly rose to the position of Operations Control Room Chief, just below Noh Do-hwa in the National Road Management Corps.

So, over a very long period, spanning hundreds of years, Yu Ji-won was genuinely ‘climbing the ranks.’

From a regular guild member to my deputy. From my deputy to the third-ranking member of Samcheon World. From a Samcheon World executive to a key figure in the National Road Management Corps.

It was a miracle of creating something from nothing! A living success story!

I couldn’t fathom how such a phenomenon could occur.

A power-hungry monster climbing ranks every cycle? Isn’t that a real anomaly?

More astonishing was that this ambitious monster never once betrayed me in the long history spanning 1183 cycles.

Once, I asked her over drinks why she never betrayed me, and her answer was astonishing.

“Betray you, Undertaker? I would rather die than do that.”

“Why? You’re a psychopath.”

“Please stop stereotyping psychopaths. You’re a regressor with Complete Memory. You remember everyone’s every action and judge them accordingly. So, I must always be cautious not to displease you. Isn’t that common sense?”

Holding a clear soju glass, Yu Ji-won looked up at the full moon in the night sky. Her gaze was wistful.

“I find it hard to understand how someone could be foolish enough to betray you. On the other hand, it’s truly fascinating. Why are so many people so foolish?”

“……”

I really don’t understand this girl…

But on the flip side, no one knew Yu Ji-won as deeply as I did. By

the 50th cycle, I was certain of one thing about her.

Even if everyone else wanted to be Time Sealed, Yu Ji-won definitely wouldn't.

I once thought she was born in the wrong era.

But I was wrong. This girl would thrive in any era. Even in an apocalypse where civilization had crumbled, she remained the ultimate survivor. In fact, she was optimized for this era.

At this point, I felt half-obligated, half-jokingly to ask Yu Ji-won.

"Ji-won."

"Yes?"

"Are you happy now?"

The chess piece on the map toppled over with a plop.

Then my silver-haired deputy, the nearly one-of-a-kind Three Kingdoms club member and the original member of my regression life, the psychopath friend would ponder for a moment, resting her chin on her hand, before giving her answer.

"I think I can be a bit happier next time."

Footnotes:

Chapter 79

The Inquisitor I

Sinnoa

Let me preface this by saying that today's episode contains a lot of questions and answers, a sort of Q&A format.

In that spirit, I'll start by tossing a question to all of you.

Q) What is the most hated anomaly among all the survivors on the Korean Peninsula? (Difficulty: Lowest)

Once, we conducted a survey on this very question on SG Net.

There were many strong candidates, but the top 5 were as follows:

1. The 'Ten Legs.'

2. Because it wrecked all electronics and made life hell. Known as 'Gremlin.'

3. Always popping up at crossroads asking, "Save the right or the left?" 'Trolley Dilemma.'

4. Not much detail can be given, but it's a pink-haired being whose name starts with 'Go' and ends with 'ri.' (Nominated by Seo Gyu under duress and rigged the votes.)

5. The 'Tutorial Fairy.'

The results of the four-day survey were announced.

A) The 'Tutorial Fairy.' - 82.7%

Candidate number 5 won with an overwhelming majority!

Supporters embraced in joy and collectively praised the winner.

-Anonymous: Those fucking fairies.

-[Baekwha] SixthGrader: Uwaaah… Please don’t talk about scary things! ㅠ_ㅠ);;

-Anonymous: Fairies special trait) When you first wake up, there’s a 95% chance a doll-like figure is floating above you. They look cute, but who knew their hobby was harvesting human heads?

Anonymous: Ha, three years ago my boyfriend’s head flew off right in front of me.

-[Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Fascinating.

-Anonymous: In the void I was in, a fairy showed up and ordered us to kill each other until only 30 survivors remained.

-[Samcheon] Officer: Other anomalies don’t even communicate, so you can kind of understand them. But fairies act like they can communicate, which makes them even more infuriating. What do they think humans are?

By the way, 'Officer' is Yu Ji-won’s nickname on SG Net. Just for the record.

The important fact here is that even a born psychopath like Yu Ji-won couldn’t hide her anger when it came to the Tutorial Fairy.

Some of you might think, “Huh? Are fairies really that bad?” given that in my stories, fairies have appeared quite cute and charming.

But it’s time to correct that misconception. Fairies are bastards.

Just remember how our SG Man Seo Gyu died.

Until I saved him in the 50th cycle, he was always decapitated by the Tutorial Fairy.

Back when we were all still immature and naive as awakeners, when the concepts of anomalies and voids weren’t well-defined, fairies unceremoniously embedded us with real, compressed trauma in our minds.

“Gah! There are still too many survivors. If this keeps up, I’ll get

scolded by my seniors for not thinning the herd properly… Eh, I hate getting scolded, so I have no choice! Dropping 50 shadow hounds!"

"As a quest reward, I'll give you rice! But since you cheated to clear the quest, I'll have to cheat the reward too… Here, take this sack of rice mixed with pebbles and sand! Hehe. Before being dispatched here, I studied history and learned this is a specialty of the Korean Peninsula!"

"Hwaaa. Only one survivor left… I failed to balance the difficulty. My seniors will definitely give me a beating… Still, you're a one-man army! Totally elite! Clap clap clap! Fairy number 264 sincerely wishes good luck to the sole survivor at Busan Station, Undertaker…"

How could people not lose their minds?

Who would like being treated like lab rats? Even the rats wouldn't prefer it.

Especially Homo sapiens, who had been lording over all creatures as the dominant species until recently. Unable to accept the sudden change in their situation, curses and intense reactions erupted everywhere.

I too transformed into a violent game protagonist.

"I will kill you all."

"Gah?"

That was in the 2nd cycle.

Back when I didn't have [Complete Memory], I once cursed a fairy out of sheer, overwhelming hatred.

"What you did to us. I will find not just you, but your kin and your superiors, and I will exact my revenge, no matter what."

"Gah… I don't understand…"

My memory might be faulty, but the fairy likely looked at me with a puzzled, innocent expression back then too.

“Bad humans who ignore the guide’s words get punished!”

With a dull thud, my consciousness was severed.

It was the moment I learned that in fairy language, ‘punishment’ means [the act of smashing someone’s skull to the point of spilling its contents outside].

Fairy bastards.

So the regressor caught and punished the evil fairies—

If only it were that simple. Unfortunately, Tutorial Fairies were fierce. They were like level 70 guards in an RPG.

And I was a newbie. Well, to be precise, I lacked combat-related skills.

I confess to you… actually, as an Undertaker, I was more of a supporter than a dealer or a tank.

This was evident from my abilities like [Complete Memory] and [Time Seal], which were all non-combat skills.

This was partly intentional.

Because we had Old Man Scho, a historically unrivaled Swordmaster with the Heavenly Martial Body.

The plan was for Old Man Scho to handle the combat while I, as a supporter, handled all the miscellaneous tasks. It was a perfect blueprint. A flawless plan.

Q) But what happens when the sole dealer suddenly leaves the party? What’s the appropriate expression for this situation?

A) “Damn it.”

I was in despair.

Suddenly, my skill tree, packed with support skills, became the hallmark of a ruined character, and my life genre shifted dramatically towards #regret #despair #obsession. Typically, in web novels, a hero party with a runaway member faces a tragic end.

Old Man Scho, you bastard.

What was left for me now? The exclusive domain of a regressor. Time. An abundance of time.

That was the escape route.

‘Inner energy!’

A ray of hope shone on me, the Bill Gates of time.

‘To survive, I must amass inner energy!’

Yes.

Depending on culture or person, it was called ‘Aura,’ ‘Qi,’ ‘Yoki,’ etc., but in any case, everyone agreed that if you imbued it in a kitchen knife, you’d get praised for cutting fruit beautifully.

This mystical energy, like excrement, grew stronger the longer it stayed in the body.

In martial arts, a ‘Gapja’ was 60 years. A martial artist with 1 Gapja (60 years) of inner energy was revered.

It reflected the East Asian preference for ranking by age.

And who am I, the Undertaker? Not to brag, but by the 30th cycle, I was a man who had been breaking the human lifespan record day by day.

Moreover, I had the [Resume] skill that preserved my muscles and inner energy even through regressions.

In short?

“Hey, fairy. I’ve got a gift for you.”

“Gah? A gift? What is it, dreary human?”

“Punishment.”

“Huh?”

Thunk! Wheeeeeew-!

The Tutorial Fairy’s head was sent flying into the air at a perfect angle.

Had a missile enthusiast in Pyongyang seen it, they would’ve clapped in envy at the propulsion.

“Ah.”

The day I first cut down a fairy with a single stroke, I, unable to contain my emotions, wept openly.

What a long and grueling time of humiliation and oppression it had been!

Having evolved from a muscle freak into an inner-energy freak, the regressor was indeed powerful. I became dissatisfied with merely Busan Station, traveling across voids nationwide, harvesting fairy heads.

“It’s the Undertaker! The Undertaker has appeared!”

“Eeeek? Crazy fairy hunter!”

“Everyone run! If that human bastard catches you, it’s decapitation for you and me both!”

“Run! Run! Ruuuun!”

Superb combat skills? Fancy martial arts? Who needs those?

With 5 Gapjas, 10 Gapjas, or 20 Gapjas of inner energy, there’s not

much you can't do in this world. (Though there are exceptions.)

As the saying goes, highly developed basic attacks are indistinguishable from combat skills.

Without any special techniques, just persistently infusing aura, my brute force meta overwhelmed the Tutorial Fairies.

"Why are you tormenting us like this! Dirty human! Vicious human! What have we fairies ever done…!"

"Hmm. True, you haven't done much. Let's see, aside from discrimination, gaslighting, threats, imprisonment, torture, murder, genocide?"

"We could win a lawsuit against you!"

In which court?

"Anyway, this is all slander! Defamation! We were merely following our sovereign's orders to help you inferior humans adapt to the void as quickly as possible! We should be thanked…! Yes, we should be thanked!"

"Sure. Why do all imperialists say the same things regardless of history or race? Hmm? Wait, sovereign?"

I paused my boiling fairy broth. This was big news.

"Hey, you have a sovereign?"

"Gah! Of course!"

Tied up tightly above the cauldron, the fairy raised its head stiffly and retorted.

"Every society must cede its natural rights, and this is the common will of fairies! Our monarch is the only legitimate ruler as our representative! Stupid humans wouldn't understand!"

"…?"

I didn't know it at the time, but fairy society was divided into republicans and royalists. This fairy was a staunch royalist.

But what did it matter? I always respected my opponent's political leanings.

So, I ignored the fairy's political philosophy and slapped its cheeks several times.

"Gah? Gak! Gah!"

"Hey. Where do you get off shouting? Look, Fairy. See this cauldron boiling here? Huh? I'll use you to make broth and share it with your kin."

"Eeeek? This is barbaric! Call the Fairy Rights Commission!"

"Answer my questions quietly if you don't want to take a dip. Now. Do you have a leader who ordered you to conduct these tutorials on humans?"

"Gah! Leader? Watch your words! Address him with respect and reverence as our sovereign, human!"

"Okay. So they're the one responsible for ruining the world like this."

"Gah? What are you talking about…"

"I want to see the Fairy King's face. How do I do that?"

"Face? Do you, a lowly human, intend to meet the great Fairy King with that vulgar face? Hikhikhik!"

For reference, that weird sound was the fairies' unique laugh. No, really. They laugh like 'hikhik.'

"Too bad, but that's impossible!"

"Hmm."

"Our sovereign is a transcendent being! The sole free will that

unites us! There's no reason for him to descend to this wretched earth and get covered in dust…!"

"Really? What if I make you into fairy soup?"

"Hikhik! Even if you kill me, even if you wipe out all the fairies dispatched to Korea, the Fairy King will never descend before a lowly human!"

"Okay? Then let's test that."

"…?"

Time passed. I, the Undertaker, the inner-energy freak of the apocalypse, returned with exactly 10 more Gapjas of inner energy after several regressions.

And I captured all the Tutorial Fairies remaining in Korea (101 in total).

Footnotes:

Chapter 80

The Inquisitor II

Sinnoa

There's a saying, "Enemies within and without."

Normally, it refers to the extreme pain of suffering from food poisoning while also stepping on a LEGO, tormented both inside and out. But in truth, this idiom has a different meaning.

It's the wisdom that internal worries can be easily resolved by focusing on external enemies.

This ancient wisdom was proven once again when I captured 101 Tutorial Fairies and uploaded the footage to SG Net.

-Anonymous: Is Undertaker a god? Is Undertaker a god? Is Undertaker a god?

-OldManGoryeo: Watching those fairies getting wrecked feels so satisfying, haha.

-Anonymous: Mom, I want to be the Undertaker when I grow up! Mom, I want to be the Undertaker when I grow up!

-LiteraryGirl: Why do we only get to watch this awesome prank on video? Can't we get tickets to see it live?

Anonymous: I think I know where that is. Forming a raid party to cheer on-site.

-[National Road Management Corps] Officer: Truly retribution. Proof that justice is still alive and breathing. Those who run rampant in this apocalypse should watch this video and reflect.

-dolLHoUse: Worry ;;;

-[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquess: Truly, the cinematography is

excellent!

“Hmm.”

I nodded in satisfaction.

The number of upvotes on the post was the highest in my entire life across 89 cycles!

Our awakeners had various personalities and temperaments, but they all shared a common hatred for fairies!

But it was too soon to relax. No matter how well you deal with external enemies, internal problems don’t just disappear. It’s merely a distraction.

My internal worry, the cancer itself, was exuding a pleasant scent beside me.

“Wow… capturing all the Tutorial Fairies from across the country and gathering them in one place. How did you come up with such an idea, guild leader? You’re amazing.”

Pop quiz.

Who was it that just smiled brightly and praised me?

Hint 1: This person called me 'guild leader,' a title few use.

Hint 2: This person has rare pink hair.

Hint 3: It’s the 89th cycle now.

“As expected, guild leader, you’re quite unique. I’m glad I decided to follow you when you invited me at Busan Station…”

The answer: Go Yuri!

If you were a normal person, hearing this answer would make you scream “Aaaah! Nyarlathotep!” and run away.

But I was far from normal, and at this point, I had no idea that the 89th cycle would end in a massacre.

Naturally, I didn't suspect that Go Yuri was a mind-controlling, hypnotic Kadabra (from Pokémon) in human disguise.

"Well, thanks to you joining, running the guild has become much easier. Sometimes I think the guild members like you more than me."

"Ahaha. Guild leader, you're too kind. I don't have the responsibilities or the authority to give orders, that's all."

So, the me of the 89th cycle, listening to the pink shiny Kadabra's laugh, thought it was simply a pleasant voice. What a fool. Run away.

"And honestly, luck played a part in this one."

"Luck, you say?"

"Yes. I may know all the patterns of the fairies left on the Korean Peninsula, but they surrendered too easily."

"……"

Go Yuri smiled brightly.

"You did your best. In the end, it's all down to luck. The fairies were just unlucky, and you, guild leader, should be happy."

"Hmm. You're right."

No! Undertaker, no!

Run away now. Run away immediately!

…But no matter how much I acted out Interstellar on my own, there was no way my voice would reach the me of the 89th cycle.

The only consolation was that Go Yuri's mind control wasn't species-specific.

Her powers worked on fairies as well as Homo sapiens. Thanks to that, the 101 fairies didn't cause much trouble even in prison.

“Gah… Where are we?”

“It’s a strange ceiling.”

Their location was Cheongsong Prison.

Since the apocalypse, Cheongsong Prison had experienced a continuous outflow of population due to its walls breaking down. It had been a long time since it bustled with new arrivals.

“Kidnapping? Is this really kidnapping?”

“We, who were created for clichés, have become the playthings of clichés?”

“That, too, is a cliché.”

“Gah… If I were born 500 years earlier, I would have dominated world literature. I was born in the wrong era…”

“There was no cola, potato chips, or instant noodles in the Middle Ages, so dominating would be useless.”

“I could make all future literati 500 years from now regret not being born earlier.”

“Gah, a fearsome genius…!”

Rustle, rustle-

Leaving 101 fairies alone made it as noisy as a marketplace.

It was time to start the main event.

Go Yuri, as if prepared, smiled and handed me a microphone (which gave me chills). I climbed onto the podium.

“Testing, testing. Hello, fairies. Nice to meet you.”

“Gah. You are…?”

“I am your guide. I understand you must be surprised to be suddenly kidnapped and brought here. But don’t worry. From now

on, I, your instructor, will guide you kindly from start to finish.”

The fairies lying around the auditorium blinked and whispered to each other.

“This sounds oddly familiar.”

“It feels very familiar.”

“These ropes are too strong to untie…”

“Busan Station awakener!”

Eeeeek! A fairy screamed from the middle of the auditorium.

“I’ve seen the footage! That human cleared the nightmare dungeon at Busan Station in less than 20 minutes! It’s definitely him!”

“Gah?”

“20 minutes? That’s the protagonist type awakener the seniors warned us about!”

Rustle, rustle, rustle!

The fairies became noisy in an instant.

But the speaker, believing in his righteousness, was not swayed by mere outside clamor. Like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial, I continued my speech firmly.

“Calm down and listen to me, fairies. When do you think evil arises in this world?”

“Gah?”

“I believe evil arises when one cannot or chooses not to understand the position and emotions of others. Ignoring and refusing to know. In that sense, Socrates' old proposition that ignorance is the root of evil is truly correct.”

“What is this human babbling about?”

“I don’t understand at all…”

“Ah, ah. I have arranged this meeting to save you from the depths of evil. You toy with humans because you’ve never been toys yourselves.”

Question marks appeared over the fairies' tiny heads.

In the now quieter auditorium, my voice echoed like a righteous shout.

“Do you get it now? From now on, kill each other.”

“…?”

It didn’t take long for the bent question marks to straighten into exclamation points.

The Tutorial Dungeon for fairies, start.

“Gyaaaa! Save me, fairy!”

“Gah! A rock! A rock is rolling towards us! Gyaaaa! Gyaaah!”

Full of malicious traps, limited resources, and stages designed to instill paranoia.

All creation is born from imitation.

When building Cheongsong Prison Dungeon, I drew inspiration entirely from the great predecessors in this field. Those predecessors were joyfully frolicking in the architecture their successor had designed.

“How can you do this while wearing a human mask! Do you have no human heart?”

“No, I don’t. Instead, I have a fairy’s heart. Gah- gahaa-”

“……”

“What? What are you looking at, number 76? Did you grant mercy when humans begged for their lives in Yeongwol?”

“Gah! We were just following orders!”

“Were you? I’m similar. I command myself as my own master. Please be as understanding as possible, fairies.”

“Crazy human… Crazy human…”

The fairies trembled.

By the way, all of this was being meticulously recorded by Go Yuri’s smartphone.

“Ah, guild leader. Sorry, you’re not in the frame. Could you move in a bit?”

“Like this?”

“Yes.”

As time passed in Cheongsong Prison, day by day, Go Yuri’s smile evolved from 'bright' to 'beaming.'

As a master of mind control, Go Yuri also excelled at video editing.

Director and writer: Undertaker. Filming and editing: Go Yuri. Starring and supporting: Fairies.

As a result of our combined efforts, the emotional documentary weekend drama [Tutorial Reversed World] hit a 100% viewership rate every time it was uploaded on SG Net.

“Guild leader, you’re truly interesting.”

…Looking back now.

No matter how much the wisdom of internal and external threats was applied, it was difficult to elicit such a consistent response from the crazy SG Net.

Perhaps the edited videos themselves were already imbued with perception manipulation, enough to satisfy even Sim Ah-ryeon or SwordMarquess.

From this point on, it was certain that Go Yuri became seriously interested and obsessed with me.

Of course, my purpose in establishing a prison for fairies wasn't just to avenge the accumulated racial grudges. (That was only about 50% of the reason.)

I looked down at the fairies who had lost a tug-of-war and fallen 60 meters underground.

'I've captured all the fairies left on the Korean Peninsula and made them into clowns. Do you still plan to remain hidden?'

Fairy King.

Yes. The presumed supreme anomaly that managed and controlled the 'Tutorial Dungeons' and 'Fairies' that appeared simultaneously worldwide… a top-tier anomaly.

According to the future classification system of the Library Society, it might be the first to be classified as level 5, outer god-class.

'I've put so much effort into capturing the fairies. I must gather as much information about that guy as possible in this cycle.'

Eeek! The fairies screamed in terror.

Amazingly, even by this point, I still didn't know anything about the Fairy King's true identity.

Not once in 89 cycles had I obtained meaningful information.

That fact kept me on alert.

'Not an easy opponent.'

Unlike typical villains who are eager to reveal their identities in other creations, the fairy boss was a true mastermind.

The only information I had was the two-word phrase 'Fairy King.'

“Hey, butcher.”

“Gah…”

I tapped the forehead of the fairy lying on the ground with my finger.

“Why don’t you start talking about your boss? Do you think I’ll stop wreaking havoc just on the Korean Peninsula? China, Japan, India… well, maybe not India. Anyway, I can wipe out fairies in many places.”

“Gah, I, I can’t tell you…”

“Why? Because you only have one mouth? Would it help if I gave you two or three?”

“Eeek!”

Footsteps echoed. I glanced back to see Go Yuri standing with her hands behind her back.

“Are you interrogating, guild leader?”

“Yeah. It’s not a pretty sight, so don’t film this.”

“Not a pretty sight? It’s such a lovely sight that we should treasure it and keep it away from prying eyes.”

Go Yuri tilted her head.

“Hmm. Are you having trouble because the fairies aren’t talking? If I can help, I’d like to.”

“Huh? If you can help, that would be great, but these guys have pretty tight lips. I appreciate the thought.”

“……”

Go Yuri smiled.

“No need to thank me. What are you asking them?”

“Ah, I was just asking for the Fairy King’s real name…”

“——The Fairy King is the Fairy King.”

Mumble.

I stared at the fairy. Our eyes met. The lips of the fairy, which had remained silent for days, twitched.

“But humans misunderstand the true meaning of our sovereign.”

“…Misunderstand? What do you mean?”

“The sovereign you think of is ‘군주 (君主),’ meaning a ruler whom subordinates serve and are loyal to. But our Fairy King is different. Our sovereign is ‘군주 (群主),’ meaning the master of a collective called ‘fairies.’”

The fairy smiled brightly.

“We are one. One is us. Therefore, we truly say ‘our Fairy King.’ Betrayal is nothing but self-betrayal. We——”

Boom!

The fairy’s lips trembled, and an explosion erupted from within. The fairy’s body swelled like a balloon.

A flash. I quickly raised an aura barrier between the fairies and us. Red liquid splattered against the shield like a windshield.

When the explosion subsided, nothing remained where the fairy had been except for scraps of flesh.

“What the hell is this…?”

“Ah, it seems there was a bomb planted to ensure secrecy.”

Go Yuri muttered beside me.

“Hmm. This is the first one, but… guild leader shouldn’t be too troubled, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“There are still 100 fairies left.”

Go Yuri clasped her hands together.

“You can ask 100 more questions.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 81

The Inquisitor III

Sinnoa

To start with the conclusion, Go Yuri’s solution of "Why don't we just burst the heads of the fairies 100 more times to get perfect information?" did not come to fruition.

It wasn’t because my tender heart suddenly sprouted sympathy, thinking that such cruelty was too much.

Just looking at my brother, Seo Gyu, who suffered from anger management issues and had his head delivered express by the fairies more than 50 times, sympathy was out of the question.

I, the Undertaker, oppose racial discrimination but proudly consider myself a thorough species chauvinist. My emotions only open a two-way street for Homo sapiens.

The reason Go Yuri's solution failed was simple.

"Initiate extermination."

"Initiate extermination."

As soon as we left the interrogation room, a swarm of fairies rushed at Go Yuri.

“What…?”

Fairies appeared from every direction—hallways, ceilings, above, below, everywhere. They all had identical faces and emotionless expressions.

Even though it was quite a cosmic horror scene, my attention was focused elsewhere.

‘The fairies didn’t use their usual speech pattern?’

Good grief. It was a cultural shock.

Is that even legal?

Before my tongue could express its shock, the trained reflexes of a seasoned Regressor kicked in.

“You bastards! From where!”

Bam! Wrapping my thighs and calves with aura, I kicked and shattered the three fairies charging directly at Go Yuri.

But it didn’t end there.

The fairies fell from my kick, but then their bodies swelled like red balloons.

The small bodies of the fairies rapidly bloated with red liquid, and the scene played out in slow motion right before my eyes.

A chill ran down my spine.

‘Self-destruct!’

The aim wasn’t to attack us directly but to close the distance.

I quickly wrapped my entire body in aura protection and pulled Go Yuri into a tight embrace.

“Ah-”

Go Yuri’s lips moved, but her voice was drowned out by the subsequent explosion.

KABOOM!

The entire Cheongsong Prison shook from the explosion. Although it was remodeled to incarcerate fairies, the thick walls couldn't entirely block the blast.

Of course, they couldn't penetrate my barrier either.

“Damn…”

Everything collapsed. Walls, pillars, ceilings, all fell apart.

Concrete chunks pounded against my aura-shielded body.

“Hoo. Go Yuri, are you okay? Can you speak?”

“Yes, thanks to you, guild leader. You’re amazing.”

Despite her words, I could hear her coughing from the dust stirred by the collapsing debris.

Srrr… The surrounding landscape visible through the dust clouds was drenched as if hit by red water bombs. It must have been the LCL liquid expelled from the exploded fairies.

Amid the chaos, one fairy still floated in the air, looking intact.

“You… you bastard…”

“I request a dialogue.”

A fairy spoke as if nothing had happened.

“However, there are conditions. I demand to speak with you alone —”

Boom! I immediately dashed forward and crushed the fairy’s head.

I wiped the sticky, bloody mucus from my fingers.

“Don’t make me laugh. You pull a suicide bombing, and now that I’m still standing, you want to talk? As expected, murderous psychopaths have a completely different mindset.”

-Caution. No questions will be entertained.

Then an astonishing thing happened.

Liquid from the surrounding puddles began to boil and quickly formed the shapes of fairies.

But they were incomplete shapes. From various puddles, only heads, mouths, and fingers of fairies were forming, each twitching

independently. Damn it.

-No demands will be entertained. If anyone interferes with our conversation through filming, recording, or eavesdropping, all terminal entities in this zone and any future encounters will be immediately destroyed.

"……"

-You have 30 seconds.

I frowned and looked to the side.

Go Yuri was giving a mixed smile, both troubled and amused.

"Hmm. It's okay. Don't worry about me, guild leader."

"Really? …Thanks for understanding."

"Haha. Instead, could you take me to Busan next time you go? I'm interested in meeting your friend, Dang Seo-rin."

"Hmm. Sure, let's do that."

There was no reason for me to feel indebted to Go Yuri.

Of course, there was no reason to leave all the other guild members behind and take only Go Yuri on [Tutorial Reversed World] missions. Moreover, it was clear that Dang Seo-rin would hate anyone else joining us on our food trips.

Even if I set all that aside, laughing like 'haha' after witnessing all this chaos wasn't normal. Yet, all I felt was a slight guilt for excluding such a kind girl from the conversation.

Your brain has melted, Undertaker.

Step. Go Yuri's footsteps sounded like a rattlesnake's as they tread over the building debris. Step—her snake-like tail disappeared behind a steel-reinforced concrete pillar, and the fairy spoke.

-28 seconds elapsed.

-We have confirmed your willingness to converse.

“You can speak normally.”

I looked away from the direction Go Yuri left and tried to focus on the fairies. Damn it. There were too many of them bubbling up like pot foam.

“Did you drop the speech pattern because it was a facade all this time?”

-Is that your first question?

The liquid fairies stared at me. Despite their expressionless faces and voices, I could feel a tinge of "Are you serious?" from them. It was slightly fascinating.

“Yes.”

-The speech pattern of the terminal entities was set by configuration.

-Location: Korean Peninsula, Language: Korean, Subject: Koreans, Environment: Apocalypse.

-We chose the speech pattern that would lower human suspicion the most.

“What? That crap? …Well, now that I think about it, it does sound weak and silly.”

-Margin of error.

-Responses to terminal entities vary among individuals due to the average setting.

-Proposal. How about we alternate questions and answers?

“……”

I shrugged.

It was a gesture to indicate that I didn’t mind, but more

importantly, I wanted to test how much “they” could understand non-verbal communication.

-Consent confirmed. To prevent misunderstanding, I’ll clarify that our objective was not to exterminate you.

“So what? You intended to kill my comrades? What’s the point of killing someone with nothing but bones left?”

-It’s our turn to ask a question.

-Why are you cooperating with the pink-haired entity?

Dozens of liquid eyes focused on me.

“Pink-haired entity…? Do you mean Go Yuri?”

-Affirmative and negative.

-The entity has no specific proper noun or defined technical term. To maintain neutrality, we temporarily use ‘the pink-haired entity you accompanied at Cheongsong Prison,’ shortened to ‘pink-haired entity.’

-Please answer the question.

I frowned.

“Entity this, entity that… Why don’t you just use her name? Go Yuri is my guild member. She serves me as the guild leader. Does associating with someone need a grand reason?”

-…….

-…….

The distorted fairy forms, the ‘Fairy King,’ stared at me.

A brief silence followed.

-We understand.

“I’ll ask a question now. You, the so-called Fairy King. Why did you

summon void zones in a perfectly normal world? And why did you force innocent people into survival games through the tutorial?"

-…….

"For fun? Entertainment? Like in many creations, did you want to toy with humans as if we were playthings?"

This was not just my question. It was the question of all awakeners who experienced the tutorial phenomenon, and perhaps humanity as a whole.

I was merely the one voicing it.

I waited for the Fairy King's answer as if I were the first human to question a god.

-We will break down the question.

-First, we need to point out your misunderstanding.

"Misunderstanding? What misunderstanding?"

-We did not summon the entire void into this world. We merely managed the phenomenon called 'tutorial.'

Ah.

Instead of rage towards the Fairy King, disappointment welled up inside me. If so, the being before me wasn't the master of all anomalies.

I, in my 89th cycle, believed I could still return the world to its original state, unlike my current 1183rd cycle self.

-Second, we do not conduct experiments for amusement. Observing survival, literally, is our goal.

"What?"

-We would like to ask you in return.

-If you were thrown into the void environment without any

preparation and without undergoing our ‘tutorial’ process, what do you think your survival rate would be?

“……”

-Calculating within a range of 365 days, your survival rate is only 1.76%.

-Meanwhile, the average survival rate of awakeners in the tutorial is close to 31%.

-If one survives the tutorial, their subsequent 365-day survival rate soars to 69%.

“So, what? Are you saying you prepared this death game parade for us? That’s really generous of you. I’m almost in tears.”

-We have no benevolence. We have no malevolence.

-Please judge whether our ‘experiment’ contradicts your purpose.

At that moment, I sensed movement behind me and quickly turned around. Ten or so fairies, who had apparently regenerated, were creeping towards me.

Our eyes met.

-…….

“Damn it!”

I quickly summoned aura and harvested the fairies' heads. Pop! Their heads exploded like strawberry juice.

“Attacking during a conversation? You’re worse than Nazis!”

-Mission failed.

-Reassessing your threat level.

“You really intend to go all the way with me? Alright then. Let’s see how far this goes!”

-We must correct you. It was not us who initially initiated hostile actions. You kidnapped our entities out of abnormal hostility and subjected them to a highly simplistic experimental environment.

-The environment was poor, and the experiment's purpose was unclear. It was you, not us, who abducted intelligent beings for mere amusement.

"What…? Ha."

The retort, "You were the ones who roasted and tormented humans like anchovies from the first cycle to the 89th," was on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it.

I didn't want the anomaly in front of me to know I was a Regressor. Even the smallest hint could lead to dangerous consequences.

-It is extremely difficult to subdue you with force.

-Establishing an ongoing relationship of mutual interaction with you is preferable.

"Dream on. Who says I'll cooperate?"

-Instead, we will disclose information you haven't asked for. Information directly linked to your survival.

The Fairy King moved its lips slowly, perhaps excessively so.

-The being you[redacted]call[redacted] is[redacted].

A crackling noise like an old radio echoed in my head as the Fairy King spoke.

I frowned.

"…What did you just say?"

-[redacted]. It's[redacted], not[redacted].

The noise grew louder, filling my head with static. The frown on my forehead deepened into a valley.

“Stop it. It’s noisy. If you’re playing a pointless prank, cut it out.”

-…….

Fairies all around, peeking from the debris, looked at each other.

-Failure. The contamination level of the target entity exceeds 99%.

-Abandoning Operation B. Redirecting anger through hostility towards a specific entity is deemed ineffective. Higher-level mental manipulation than the target entity is impossible.

-Commencing Operation C.

“……”

I began to think about how to completely eradicate the collective anomaly known as the Fairy King.

“If you keep ignoring and looking down on humans like this, I’ll—”

-We will share information. Although we did not bring the entire void into this world, it is true that we are among the highest-ranked anomalies.

-Currently, there are seven such highest-ranked anomalies.

I blinked.

Yes, this was the moment I first heard about Level 5 anomalies, classified as “Outer Gods” by the future Library Society.

“Seven highest-ranked anomalies?”

-Indeed. These anomalies exert a strong influence over humans, leading to contamination without their awareness.

-If we compare anomalies to gods, entities that worship them inevitably emerge, whether they are objects, plants, animals, or humans. This phenomenon occurs regardless of whether the entities consciously worship the anomaly.

-No belief is necessary.

-Among these worshippers, some are as powerful as apostles.

-Naturally, as the “Fairy King,” we have human awakeners who serve as our apostles.

I tilted my head.

“Well, that’s interesting information… But why are you suddenly telling me this?”

-There is a high probability that you already know our apostle.

-Cheon Yo-hwa.

I froze.

Numerous fairies, one Fairy King, looked at me from various angles like the eyes of a spider.

-Tutorial Dungeon, Baekhwa High School.

-The survivor there, Cheon Yo-hwa, is the chosen apostle of the “Fairy King.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 82

The Inquisitor IV

Sinnoa

To an infinite regressor, the world could be compared to a bag of potato chips. Among the countless amounts of nitrogen, you have to dig out the rare potato chips.

Similarly, a regressor occasionally encounters exceptions within the endlessly repeating time. Just like I did in the 89th cycle.

"No way, Cheon Yo-hwa…."

I swallowed the name of the potato chip. The president of Baekhwa High School's student council. The necromancer who, alongside Dang Seo-rin's Samcheon, is often cited as one of the most powerful guilds on the Korean Peninsula. I never expected to hear her name here.

-It's not just humans.

By some miracle, this bag of chips had a few more chips than usual.

-As I mentioned, the influence of anomalies affects objects and plants indiscriminately.

-Think of anomalies as a type of radiation.

-The "Butterfly Effect" that you presumably exterminated was also one of our apostles, an entity contaminated by us.

"Wait a minute. Even the Butterfly Effect?"

-Yes. It's the truth.

"……"

My brain was in a state of confusion.

As far as the 89th cycle me knew, Cheon Yo-hwa was a necromancer. The malevolent student council president who occasionally treated the Korean Peninsula to a [Bad Ending: Academy City ENDING].

And the Butterfly Effect was a schizophrenic butterfly that scattered tornadoes everywhere, even when it wasn't bored.

"…They're too different. What do Cheon Yo-hwa and the Butterfly Effect have in common to be your infected… or so-called apostles?"

-It's faster to show you directly.

"Directly? Show what?"

The Fairy King extended its hand.

-This entity.

"……"

-I detect hesitation. Are you afraid? Will you not grasp it?

I sheathed my sword.

Being a regressor was convenient in times like this. Even if it was a trap set by an anomaly and I died, I could carry the information that "the Fairy King is absolutely untrustworthy" to the next cycle.

"Fine. If it's a provocation, I'll accept it. I don't know where you're taking me, but lead the way."

When I grabbed the Fairy King's hand, the unpleasant, squishy feeling of its liquid body spread across my palm.

And in the next moment, I stood in the middle of a prison, completely clean and intact.

"——What?"

But this prison wasn't Cheongsong Prison. I couldn't tell exactly where it was. Iron bars and hallways extended endlessly beyond my

line of sight. There were no people.

“What on earth is this…?”

The Fairy King grabbed my hand tightly as I instinctively reached for my sword.

-Do not let go of my hand.

-You will lose it.

Lose what?

Before the words could be uttered, blink. When I closed and opened my eyes, the prison had turned into a hospital.

“……”

The hallway was lined with oddly clean hospital beds, despite the lack of any patients or doctors. Transparent IV tubes hung from each bed like suspension bridges. The corridor was infinite.

Identical hospital beds, identical IV tubes, identical angles of hanging infusion lines, all in the same shade of white, stretched endlessly down the corridor.

Blink. The school was an old, wooden, abandoned building. The school name Baekhwa shimmered. The sky was blood red. Broken windows, birch trees with white bark protruding into the hallway through the shattered glass. The school was impaled by white stakes, a mess.

The angles and positions of the broken glass repeated every six meters. Each repeated section had old desks and wooden chairs scattered about. The old wooden surfaces, moss-covered and sloping, were all identical.

Blink. A swimming pool. The strong smell of chlorine. Swimming lanes extended to the horizon, a water-filled corridor.

Blink. A movie theater. It was dark. But it was strange. No ordinary theater had such old, wooden chairs like those from an abandoned

school. Transparent IV tubes hung from each chair. The screen displayed scenes of a prison. Iron bars. Hallways. Iron bars. Hallways. An empty prison. The theater screen alternated between scenes of the prison, hospital, school, and swimming pool, then back to the theater screen, the eyes within the eyes.

Blink.

The universe moved.

There were no rules in the movement of the stars. No complementary colors in the hues. The stars danced, stood on their heads, laughed without exhaustion, and fell silent.

As the laws ceased to function, time also released its grip on the world. The colors grabbed the falling fingers. Interlaced hands. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, purple, navy, cyan, lime, gold, crimson. Interlaced fingers. The hands of color held the hands of color and danced in a circular motion. Orange stepped on blue's foot, red killed orange. The Milky Way turned red.

Blink.

And thus, stars were born and destroyed immediately, forms were created and collapsed as soon as they appeared. Like bubbles. Everything in the world was a bubble. Soap bubbles, like those that shimmer with rainbow colors in the sunlight, were rampant. Existence was bubbles, life was color.

Blink.

The universe blinked. A traffic light. As the red light turned to green, time took a breath, a momentary pause.

The colors of the starlight, the bubbles of the planets, the orange killed by red, the dancing color arrays, the theater screen, the chlorine smell of the swimming pool, the wooden chairs of the school, the birch bark protruding into the hallway through shattered glass, the white hospital corridor, the iron bars of the prison, the zebra crossing where black and white interlaced like a carpet.

The entire universe.

Was staring blankly at me.

The universe stood on the other side of the traffic light, staring at me. They opened their mouths wide.

‘Eyes’ ‘Blink’ ‘Gaze’ ‘Watch’.

Like a choir that had never practiced. Voices with inconsistent pitches and tones. Some sounded like church bells, some like water flushing in a toilet, some like insects flapping their wings.

The breath from those mouths barely, through the mouth of the Fairy King holding my hand, ‘reconstituted’ itself.

-Do not blink.

“……”

-You perceive this entity as the Fairy King, the highest anomaly commanding all terminal entities, but strictly speaking, that perception is incorrect.

It felt like my ears were tearing apart. No, my brain.

Every word whispered by the entire universe had a different vocal apparatus. ‘Ter’ ‘mi’ ‘nal’ ‘en’ ‘ti’ ‘ty’. The sound of wind chimes hanging from a temple eave, the scream of a crow being killed by a hawk. Sounds that should not form language and noises that should not form words did.

If I weren’t a regressor who had honed myself over countless cycles— just listening to the ‘words’ of that universe would have destroyed my brain, a fierce intuition surged with nausea.

It wasn’t even a sound insulting humanity.

The world was being violated.

“Incorrect, you say…?”

-Maintaining your identity in this situation is beyond expectations.

-This entity, the ‘Fairy King,’ is an interpreter.

-A priestess.

-A priest. A pope.

-A terminal entity. Command role. Highest priest.

-But far below the god.

-Speaking for a silent god, seeing for a blind god.

-The god has no benevolence or malevolence.

-Only randomness. Rejoice. Your existence is equal.

-Scream.

-There is no difference between a drop of bubble and the Himalayas in the clouds. Laws are not superior to individuals. There is no hierarchy on the ladder of form.

-This entity is merely a terminal born by chance. I am fortune, not misfortune, for you. You need not bear malice towards me.

-We merely experiment. As we were created for experimentation.

“……”

I stared at the universe with eyes that felt like they would burn. So, that was an anomaly.

Outer God-class. Level 5.

The most toxic of all voids. One of the seven most powerful anomalies, the Seven Outer Gods.

The one I… humanity must kill.

The enemy of this world.

“…It doesn’t even have a name. That thing.”

-Unnecessary.

-What we indicate is our god, and what we do not indicate is also our god.

“Infinite Void.”

The Fairy King looked up at me.

“Infinite Hell. Its name is now Infinite Void.”

I spat out like blood. That was the maximum resistance the me of the 89th cycle, who felt like he would be crushed by the void at any moment, could muster.

-As I said, names are unnecessary.

“No, it’s necessary for me. Because I will kill that blind god who has violated our world without permission.”

-……

“Everything in the world has boundaries to protect its distinctions, but you mix everything, leaving no gap between anything. Things become impermanent, existence melts away, making it truly hell. Hence, it is the Hell of No Intervals. You plunder, take, and violate the laws of the world, making it also the Hell of Violations.”

The Fairy King, the fairies——the red light of the traffic light, the stars, the colors, the dance, the theater screen, the school, the hospital, the prison——stared intently at me.

There was a phrase in Laozi’s Tao Te Ching: 寂兮寥兮.

Silent and Solitary.

Before humans distinguished all things, the world existed without division, a world so quiet because no sound or noise was meaningful, was described as ‘tranquil.’

Originally, such a world was void and could not be named.

I named that void.

Pointed at it with a human finger.

-Infinite Void.

-Infinite Hell.

-A proper name.

-An improper name.

-It is also a randomness.

-I can now guess why the pink-haired entity showed peculiar behavior.

A thousand layers of laughter split.

For a moment, the smell of chlorine from the swimming pool wafted. It was the breath exhaled by this universe's Backrooms.

-I will experiment on you, Undertaker.

The Fairy King… no, 'Infinite Void' released my hand.

At that moment, the traffic light's color turned bright blue. Not green or yellow, but sapphire blue, like the wings of a Morpho butterfly. An incomprehensible color.

The presence of Infinite Void surged towards me. Crossing the white-painted crosswalk, traversing the swimming pool, thundering down the hallway, trampling time and tearing space.

In that instant, I lost consciousness.

"Guild leader?"

A voice called out.

“Are you okay, guild leader? Are you awake?”

“Uh… hmm, where am I?”

“Cheongsong Prison. Or rather, what used to be Cheongsong Prison. You said you were going to have a conversation with the fairies.”

“Ah.”

As I came to and looked around, Go Yuri was supporting my head on her lap amidst the rubble of the collapsed building.

Smiling.

Go Yuri looked down at me and smiled.

“Did the conversation go well?”

“The conversation… I’m not sure. I think I saw something, but I can’t remember well…”

“Ah, I see. Hmm, this is a bit concerning. How should I…?”

Go Yuri muttered, tapping her chin with her index finger, showing a hint of concern.

I could only look up at her with my still foggy mind.

“…Right. Do you still remember promising to take me with you next time you go down to Busan?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I remember.”

“Great. Since I stepped aside quietly, a small concession like this seems fair.”

“……?”

“Relax your body for a moment, guild leader. Take a deep breath-exhale. Like that. Yes, good job! You’ve been caught in several explosions, so your body and mind must be tense without you realizing it.”

Pat, pat.

Go Yuri's hand gently stroked the back of my head. Even though it was simply a gesture of touching my hair, my mind cleared up surprisingly quickly.

Most importantly, the memory of observing 'Infinite Void' surged back like a flood.

"Ah…"

"Seems like you're feeling better. That's a relief."

"I don't know if I'd call it feeling better, but my memory… no, it's nothing. Anyway, you took care of me while I was out. Thanks, Yuri."

Despite having named one of the most powerful anomalies in this world, the identity of the being in front of me remained unknown. She helped me up with a gentle pull and smiled brightly.

"Guild leader, are you happy right now?"

"Huh? Well, at least I'm not unhappy."

"Then I'm happy too, guild leader."

It was an exceptionally beautiful smile as always.

There's a very short epilogue.

"Seo Gyu, I'm actually a regressor, and you've had your head blown off by the tutorial fairies at least 50 times. But in a past cycle, I discovered an anomaly that seems to be the boss of the fairies. It's called Infinite Void, a terrifying entity that can kill most people just by being observed. How would you like to deal with it?"

"You're saying there's such a fucked-up bastard? Of course, I need to personally take revenge!"

I took him there.

“Hey, you fucking asshole! You blew my head——ahhhhh!”

Boom! As soon as our SG man stepped into the void of Infinite Void, his head exploded, just like the aliens in Tim Burton’s movie *Mars Attacks!*

“Hmm.”

…It seemed humanity was still far from exacting vengeance.

Footnotes:

Chapter 83

The Accomplice I

Sinnoa

I faced the worst enemy, the Outer God-class anomaly called ‘Infinite Void’, but I didn't respond immediately. Instead, I waited for the right moment. For an infinite regressor, ‘waiting’ is on a different level. Multiply the frustration and anxiety you feel when your food delivery is three minutes late by about 13 times, and you get the waiting experience of an infinite regressor. It truly requires superhuman patience.

During this period, I focused on maximizing my power.

Did I train in martial arts? Of course not. As Old Man Scho said, my combat sense was akin to a beaver's. It would be a mistake to underestimate the combat talent of someone born to be a supporter.

But even for me, or rather, because it was me, there was still a way to maximize my power.

“Master Noh Do-hwa.”

“……”

Noh Do-hwa’s expression was as usual. Meaning, her default expression was already one of utter disgust, so making it worse now would just add to the normality.

“Hey, why are you looking at me like I'm a piece of crap before I even said anything?”

“Because when you call me ‘Master Noh Do-hwa’ instead of ‘Chief Noh Do-hwa’, it usually means you’re about to talk about something personal……. And your personal grief, rage, vendetta, your ‘I’m-human’ pose, and the signal that you alone can recognize my humanity—those things evoke no feelings in me other than annoyance.”

“Master Noh Do-hwa. Haven’t you been working too hard lately? I happen to have some free time, so why don’t we take a vacation? A backpacking trip, just the two of us, like college friends.”

“You bastard…….”

“As expected. I knew you’d like it.”

Thus, Noh Do-hwa and I went on a trip.

If it had been after the 380th cycle when I established ‘Idea Ranch’, we could have traveled riding dinosaurs together (we actually did that later), but unfortunately, we were only in the 100th cycle at this point.

Had I been alone, I would have used something like a lightweight flight technique to move swiftly. If Noh Do-hwa hadn’t been my companion, I would have given her a piggyback ride to enjoy the speed together.

The latter solution was rejected again when Noh Do-hwa shyly remarked, “Oh, if you wanted to see me commit suicide, you should’ve said so from the beginning.” What a bashful person.

Therefore, our means of transportation had to be extremely limited. Finding the best possible solution despite these difficulties proves my dignity as a regressor.

Vroom... vroom...

Noh Do-hwa had a plain expression as she rode the means of transportation with me.

“Regressor Undertaker……”

“Yes?”

“Is this really the best method……?”

“Yes.”

Vroom... vroom...

“No matter how scarce fuel is, shouldn’t there be something more plausible like a dump truck, or can’t you use the National Road Management Corps resources or your miraculous regressor powers? Even a bicycle would be better……”

“Oh, you’re such a joker. We’re traveling for personal reasons, so we shouldn’t deplete the corps’ resources. Bicycles would break quickly on rough roads, making them useless.”

Vroom... vroom...

“But for fuck’s sake……. Seriously. Where the hell did you get this damn yogurt cart?”

Indeed.

We were currently riding the world’s first and only Près Manager exclusive rideable refrigerated electric cart, the 3rd generation model, Coco (Cold&Cold) 3.0.

Also known as the ‘Yogurt Lady Cart’. Its beautiful apricot-colored exterior and ability to seemingly teleport between neighborhoods made it a relic of ancient times.

I was driving while Noh Do-hwa sat on the cart. I had modified it with a top-quality cushion, so her butt wouldn’t hurt.

“Oh. Please refrain from using bad language. This is a ‘Yogurt Cart’ anomaly.”

“Anomaly……?”

“Yes. No matter how rough the road, it climbs without issue and arrives at its destination no matter how remote. Master Noh Do-hwa, have you ever seen a yogurt cart broken down or stranded on the road?”

“No, I haven’t…….”

“Exactly. Most Koreans have only observed yogurt carts being ‘just fine’. Even if it seems physically impossible for it to traverse a certain terrain, this anomaly produces the result that it ‘successfully

made the journey'."

"What nonsense……?"

"Watch."

Vroom... vroom...

An asphalt road appeared before us. The cart bravely advanced on the road, which was so broken it was hard to tell if it was concrete or cookies.

Clunk, the cart's wheel fell into a concrete crack. Noh Do-hwa's complexion darkened.

"Oh, it fell……"

But the cart mysteriously adhered to the concrete surface and climbed back onto the normal track.

"…down?"

Its movement was extraordinary.

Even when the concrete was broken, the tiles were a mess, or tree roots were bulging out, the yogurt cart merely jolted slightly but continued without any problems.

It traveled well even on a national road so damaged that not even cars or most people could traverse it.

Truly the pinnacle of Korean engineering. An SSS-class lost technology artifact.

"Huh? What is this idiotic……?"

"This is the yogurt cart anomaly. Master, feel free to praise me."

"Wait, does this thing move without any power or charging……?"

"Yep. Moreover, the fridge Master Noh Do-hwa is sitting on keeps drinks or food from spoiling. Even meat in a yogurt-shaped container can be preserved for over a year."

“Holy shit. If you had such a great item, you should’ve informed the National Road Management Corps instead of playing backpacking cosplay. We need to collect and distribute these carts nationwide. This could revolutionize logistics in this shitty era, and it could even serve as a wheelchair for the elderly……”

“Ah. There’s only one.”

“…….”

“I tried to test if it could be mass-produced by collecting relatively intact carts, but the only one that exists as an anomaly is this one. So, I’m just using it as my beloved car.”

“Damn……”

Anyway, the two-person party, consisting of the shadowy mastermind and the overlord of the bright side, traveled without incident.

Though Noh Do-hwa grumbled, she enjoyed everything. After all, I luxuriously stocked the refrigerated cart with meats, vegetables, and various carbohydrates, cooking delicious meals each time we stopped.

“Did you know, Regressor Undertaker……?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re utterly useless in my life, but your cooking skills are national treasure level. Without that, I wouldn’t have treated you like a human……”

“……?”

As expected of Noh Do-hwa, who was born with ‘workaholic’ etched into her DNA, she must have been experiencing burnout symptoms while managing the National Road Management Corps.

As our enjoyable camping trip extended from one day to two, then three, and more, Noh Do-hwa’s face became serene. The fatigue and grime accumulated in her heart were washed away.

I was remarkably adept at comforting and caring for weary hearts.

“Hey, you damn regressor bastard. How long are you going to roam around outside? If the Samcheon guild leader finds out, do you want to see me die?”

“……?”

Finally, on the sixth day of our trip, we arrived at our destination.

The Taebaek Mountains, Jeongseon.

Once the most famous mining area for Koreans (now famous for other reasons), Noh Do-hwa showed a typically plain expression.

“What kind of backwater is this……?”

“As you can see, it’s a village.”

A village had formed around the mines in Jeongseon. The terrain was quite unique.

A large cave was hollowed out in the middle of a cliff-like mountain slope, and village buildings grew like mushrooms inside it.

You could call it a mining village. The feng shui only took the first part of the “mountain behind, water in front” principle.

“The houses are made of stone……?”

“They used fireproof materials. Not a bad construction choice.”

“The villagers seem abnormally short……?”

“In this era, being large just means eating more useless nutrition, so they’ve convergently evolved.”

“All the residents have bushy beards……”

“It’s a way to maintain constant body temperature. The villagers have excellent adaptability to the environment.”

“They’re midgets, aren’t they……?”

Hmm.

I nodded.

“They are often called that. But calling them midgets is a bit weird, isn’t it? Please use the term ‘Dwarf’ instead.”

“You said we were going backpacking, but you brought me to a top-tier void where different species exist, you crazy bastard……”

Dwarves. A staple in fantasy genres.

In every story, they are born with a national spirit of being ‘excellent blacksmiths’. Thus, the masterpieces they create are treated as relics of lost technology, much like the yogurt cart we are riding.

Now you can guess why I came to this remote void in the Taebaek Mountains to enhance my power.

That’s right.

I came to get some equipment.

I first discovered this place, the so-called ‘Jeongseon Dwarf Mine’, in the 54th run.

At that time, I had just established the National Road Management Corps and was traveling across the country to complete the updated Daedongyeojido (Large Map of Korea).

The Jeongseon Dwarf Mine looked like it came straight out of fiction.

Sounds of metal clanging and dwarves bustling around could be heard from all directions.

Despite the decline of the mining industry in the Taebaek Mountains, the dwarf village was constantly filled with the noise of pickaxes and hammers.

But the voids of this world are not that simple. This place, too, was not just an ordinary village despite its resurrection as a mining town.

“Hello?”

-…….

“Can you understand me? Hello? Can you recognize me?”

-…….

“A species inferior to elves. Your beard is very ugly.”

Clang!

The ‘dwarves’ hammered the anvil without any reaction, paying no attention to me.

In fact, if you looked closely, these dwarves deviated significantly from the typical image.

They had bushy beards, which was fine. But instead of eyes, they had ‘eye sockets’, and instead of mouths, they had ‘mouth holes’.

This wasn’t a play on words.

It meant they lacked eyelids and lips.

-……, …….

Clang, clang-!

Their arms were abnormally muscular like a statue of Hercules, creating a strangely unbalanced physique. Those muscular flesh lumps made eerie breathing sounds as they continuously hammered.

-O……. Oun……. O… O……

It wasn’t air stored in their lungs and released; it was as if their whole body was a leather drum, and air flowed from inside their bodies.

Not the breath of life but the whistle of the abyss.

“Hm.”

Even for me, the greatest linguistic genius in Earth’s history, Dwarvish seemed a bit challenging. Of course, it made sense. It wasn’t an Earthly language.

I felt regret.

‘If I could request a weapon from the dwarves, I could definitely get an effective sword against anomalies.’

After touring the entire mining village, I found that there were seven blacksmith dwarves, and none of them could communicate.

In the end, during the 54th run, I only identified the void’s location and left without any significant gain.

“Wait……”

Noh Do-hwa interrupted my story.

“Then why did we come to this backwater? They can’t speak, and they don’t make equipment for us……”

“Ah. It’s fine. I don’t intend to request weapons from the dwarves.”

“……? Then why?”

“Oh, think about it, master. Even if normal communication is impossible, if these beings truly mimic the dwarves from creations, wouldn’t their hammering and tanning hold significant secrets? Like how a protagonist can learn great techniques just by watching a swordmaster wield a sword, a great blacksmith could learn much from observing these dwarves’ hammering.”

“Huh……?”

“And the ores they’re hammering, those aren’t earthly minerals. They’re probably called things like adamantium. Naturally, the

technology to smelt these ores into weapons is exclusively held by these dwarves, not modern Earthlings. To smelt these ores, a great blacksmith must learn from the dwarves."

"……?"

"Oh, what a coincidence. Right before my eyes stands the most talented blacksmith in Korean history. In other words, the number one craftsman in Korea. Ta-da."

"……."

"Ta-da-a-an-"

"……."

"……."

"……."

"……."

"So, you want to learn how to work with some non-earthly ore by watching these non-communicative anomaly bastards hammer, and then you want me to craft an SSS-grade weapon for your use……?"

"Exactly."

"Please, just die."

"Oh, you said the same thing last run."

"……?"

"Last time, I just carried you here on my back in less than a day. So you strangled me to death, asking if I thought you were a joke and to see if I'd really die. I didn't expect you to actually kill me, but anyway. This time, I brought the yogurt cart anomaly so you could come comfortably. Didn't I do well?"

"You damn crazy bastard——"

I was strangled.

This time, I didn’t die.

Footnotes:

Chapter 84

The Accomplice II

Sinnoa

Everything proceeded smoothly as planned, except for the discovery that Noh Do-hwa's secret kink was choking play.

SG Net became a bit noisy.

-Anonymous: I heard there's no leader at the National Road Management Corps right now? Is that true?

-[NRMC] Officer: It's true. Our leader is on a long vacation.

Anonymous: ?

Anonymous: ?

LiteraryGirl: That machine has a concept of vacation??

-[NRMC] Officer: Yeah. So all the management officers were shocked. Since the establishment of the National Road Management Corps, there hasn't been a vacation or even a holiday. But this time, she took a bold 21-day long vacation and disappeared without a word.

Anonymous: That person is really unpredictable from head to toe. Really seems like a nutcase.

-OldManGoryeo: ? lol

[NRMC]Officer: What? Why?

OldManGoryeo: She left silently with exactly a 21-day vacation notice? Did she disappear without a trace? lolol

[NRMC] Officer: Exactly. Why?

OldManGoryeo: lolololololololol

[NRMC] Officer: ?

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Hmmm…….

“Hmmm…….”

As I read the comments up to that point, Noh Do-hwa sighed next to me.

I closed my smartphone and returned from the virtual world to the real world.

“What’s wrong?”

“…It’s nothing. This mineral is fascinating. It’s light and strong. Truly, this is something not found on Earth. You called it ada-something…?”

“Adamantium. Be careful not to mistakenly call it mithril even by accident, it could cause a big problem.”

“……? The two words don't sound similar at all……”

Noh Do-hwa took out and put on her monocle. Her left eye had particularly poor vision, but it was also part of her routine to get serious about work. Like soccer players who touch the grass or pray to the gods as they step onto the field.

“Hmmm……”

Noh Do-hwa wandered around the mining village for a long time, observing the dwarves making weapons through her monocle.

Clang, clang!

The dwarves mechanically hammered their weapons, and as soon as they finished, they started the same process again. But the finished products didn’t remain; they melted into the air and disappeared.

Noh Do-hwa raised her hand and touched the remnants in the air.

“Hmmm……. A village where objects disappear right after being created. But I can learn the blacksmithing skills just by watching.”

“How’s it going? Learning anything?”

“I don’t know. You call me a blacksmith, but I’m just a prosthetist, a maker of assistive devices. Even if you suddenly ask me to make a weapon, it’s problematic…….”

Mumbling, Noh Do-hwa extended her right arm toward me while keeping her eyes fixed on the dwarf. I took a hammer and tongs from another dwarf’s grasp and handed them to her. Her white fingers silently gripped the tools.

“Do you think I'm Doraemon? Making prosthetic limbs is tough enough, but now you want roads built, the National Road Management Corps organized, and balancing the guilds’ power struggles, for fuck’s sake. Do you think I'm a vending machine that spits out anything when poked……?”

Clang.

Noh Do-hwa mimicked the dwarf with a sidelong glance. Clang, her hammer slightly missed the mark due to unfamiliarity with the material.

“Hmmm……”

Her lips twitched. She closed her mouth tightly and continued to imitate the dwarf for hours.

By nightfall, a sword was in her hands. Its shape was crude, and its balance was off. But the silhouette it cast in the moonlight was unmistakably that of a sword. Noh Do-hwa’s slender eyes, resembling moonlight, traced the sword’s curve. Her gaze was so sharp that if the two overlapped, the sword seemed like it would get shaved down.

“Hmmm. I don’t quite get it. I should start with something simpler, like a hoe……”

From that day on, Noh Do-hwa almost stopped eating, imitating

each dwarf one by one.

Clang, clang—

I followed her like an assistant, carrying tools and supporting her. We were a perfect match.

“…….”

The shadows of dwarves that remained in place of humans who had fled from the anomalies.

The decayed mining town’s mines.

In a village where there were only the two of us, the clang of metal echoed eternally.

This naturally brought to mind memories from hundreds of years ago.

When Noh Do-hwa called me something other than ‘Regressor Undertaker’.

“I want to apply as an apprentice in your workshop. Please hire me.”

“Hmmm……”

It was the 53rd run.

Up until then, the National Road Management Corps had never been established in my regressor life. It only existed as a paper plan in the palace of my memories.

At this time, I was searching for the right person to become the head of a quasi-governmental organization. In other words, the future leader of the most powerful entity in Korea.

Dang Seo-rin came to mind first, but that was a last resort. My preference was to avoid burdening her further.

I could have done it myself, but I had to run around the front lines fighting anomalies. It was impossible for one person to be both Xiang Yu and Xiao He.

The conditions were fourfold:

-Someone not corrupted by a desire for power. In other words, mental strength or character.

-Someone who knew how to wield power. In other words, competence or instinct.

-Someone who pursued practical benefits as a system rather than individual gains. In other words, beliefs or philosophy.

-Someone willing to tread an untrodden path. In other words, courage or bravery.

Practically impossible conditions.

But 'practically impossible' doesn't mean 'absolutely impossible', and countless hours made me bridge the gap between 'impossible' and 'almost impossible'.

Test commenced.

-Hey, Undertaker! Aren't we the top family in Korea now? Let's show those Incheon bastards……

-What? Connect the road to Seoul? Why would we do that? If we waste our energy laying roads, we're just benefiting other guilds……

-Doc, can you take a break? You're too good, and it's making it hard for me to speak. Just take a short vacation and when you come back……

Eliminated. Deferred. Eliminated.

Countless candidates were considered and discarded. I spent at least 5 years, sometimes 10, being their acquaintance, colleague, friend, or partner.

I gave them power and took it away. I bestowed honor and trampled on it. If necessary, I observed their character across different runs.

The position of the head of the National Road Management Corps, as I envisioned it, required that level of scrutiny.

Like a massive wave, I swept through the people of Korea one by one, raising the stakes each time, until I ended up at a remote alley.

“An apprentice. It’s true our workshop is always short-handed……. But why? From your appearance, it seems you could join any guild and live well……”

Noh Do-hwa.

She was like an island.

If not for being a regressor, I would never have met her in my lifetime.

She was already famous for custom-making prosthetics for those who had lost limbs. I had relied on her in other runs a few times.

But it was my first time trying to establish a close relationship beyond that of customer and shopkeeper.

I bowed my head.

“My father had difficulty walking all his life. I want to do something to help those who struggle with mobility.”

“Oh. Your father?”

“He passed away.”

A lie.

“By an anomaly.”

“Hmmm……”

Noh Do-hwa’s sigh had the same resonance then as it did now. It

was like a tremor that gently touched and outlined a person.

Like a bat mapping objects with ultrasonic waves.

“Well, wouldn’t it be better to seek revenge on anomalies rather than helping others?”

“…….”

“Well, urging someone to give up revenge is as presumptuous as pushing them to pursue it. Alright. If you don’t mind being a temporary apprentice, give it a try……”

If the world were not an island, she would make an island to live on.

The net Noh Do-hwa cast over her world wasn’t wide, but it was tightly knit.

She would pull in and examine everything before deciding what to keep and what to let go.

That was evident in how she treated the other apprentices in her workshop, aside from me.

“Don’t come in tomorrow……”

“Pardon?”

“It means you’re fired. Do you have a metal rod in your ear, making me repeat the same thing? Should I pull it out for you?”

“No, master! Wait a moment!”

The fired employee had grumbled about a young customer who had lost a leg, muttering during lunch, ‘How can a young kid act like the world ended just because he lost a limb? It’s rare to find a healthy person in this messed-up world.’

The fired employee cried, but no one helped. Worker protection? Labor laws? Such Western concepts didn’t exist in this land of propriety.

“Oh dear, sir! You came all this way despite the snow and bad roads. Here, have a warm cup of coffee.”

“Oh, this is precious. Thank you……”

Moreover, I had earned the nickname ‘Little Brother’ even from the crazy Sword Marquess of Korea. Naturally, I had no issues serving the main customers of the workshop, the elderly.

Noh Do-hwa, who probably had ‘Respect for the Elderly’ etched in her skull, must have seen me as an ideal apprentice.

“Apprentice Undertaker .”

“Employee Undertaker.”

“Employee Doc.”

“Assistant Doc.”

Each time my title changed, the staff at Noh Do-hwa's workshop were also reshuffled.

Realizing she no longer needed to lower her standards, Noh Do-hwa awakened as a true bourgeois. She offloaded tedious tasks like managing personnel, customer relations, internal factions, and profit improvement onto me.

“Assistant.”

Eight years.

It took eight years for the title ‘Apprentice Undertaker’ to shorten to ‘Assistant.’

At the rate of dropping one syllable every two years, her personality was indeed hard to get close to.

“Yes, master.”

“Aren’t you evacuating? The northern cities are getting eaten by anomalies and moving south……”

“Master, where else would I evacuate from Busan?”

“To Japan, China, or even Southeast Asia. There are always places to run to……”

“Do you think those places are safe? I’m fine.”

I wasn’t the only peculiar one.

Every time the world ended, I found that many people didn’t run until the end, regardless of the run.

Noh Do-hwa was no exception.

“Did you hear? Samcheon World is forming a last-ditch resistance team to counterattack.”

“Hmmm. Do you think they’ll succeed?”

“It’ll be tough. The problem is even if they succeed, it’s uncertain. The anomalies already won when they formed a ‘monster wave’.”

“Hoh?”

“Anomalies aren’t particularly close to each other. Their types and personalities vary. But if they’ve formed a legion, it means they’ve excluded incompatible types and fused into one organism. Or rather, calling it an organism is misleading. It’s just… a mass of cancer cells. Bugs of the world. Even if we defend Busan, anomalies will continue, without purpose, to spread bugs everywhere.”

“Hmmm……”

Noh Do-hwa smiled.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Sometimes…. I think you know a lot, Assistant.”

“…….”

“Well. It doesn’t matter much……”

The next day, the last resistance team of Korea was swallowed by the tsunami of anomalies.

“Assistant.”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing? It’s 8 o’clock, and you haven’t opened the shop. Do you think you’re exempt because you’re the senior now? Should I help you write your resignation?”

“No, no. Master.”

Click.

I flipped the sign on the glass door from [Closed] to [Opened].

On the day the last city in Korea fell.

Noh Do-hwa's workshop opened for business.

Footnotes:

Chapter 85

The Accomplice III

Sinnoa

The final resistance team included not only awakened ones but also a large number of ordinary people, so right after they were swept away, Busan turned into a ghost town.

Even after hanging the [Opened] sign and looking out onto the street, there wasn't a single passerby. Noh Do-hwa and I sat on the bench in front of the workshop, watching the scenery.

“…….”

“…….”

“Hmm. Would you like some coffee, master?”

“Oh. Yes. Coffee made by my assistant is always welcome…….”

The desolate street scene didn’t feel awkward.

Rather, it felt like the days that had managed to pretend to be lively and normal despite the end times were the ones that had occasionally felt unfamiliar.

The deserted streetlights.

The crosswalk with its white stripes all torn up.

The broad-leaved street trees. The sunlight's aurora. The cicadas, not yet extinct, sounding their sirens to find mates also not yet extinct.

“It’s summer……”

Noh Do-hwa muttered as she sipped her Café au Lait, her breath rising like transparent smoke.

The world seemed to have finally regained its original appearance, peaceful.

At 9 AM, 11 AM, and noon, the menu was steak I had cooked myself. Even at 1 PM, 3 PM, and 5 PM, there were no customers in Noh Do-hwa's workshop, which was usually bustling.

The sun set.

The eyelids of the night sky were the color of dusk.

The world that should have fallen asleep long ago, had spent the last 8 years clinging to a late slumber, finally closed its eyes gently.

'Watching the end of the world together like this isn't so bad.'

It was then.

As the reclining Buddha of the sunset gently nodded off, I suddenly heard footsteps.

My ears perked up.

“Well, it’s about time to close up. Hmmm. Today was a total loss. You must have enjoyed the break… Hmm? What's wrong, Assistant?”

“…Someone's coming this way.”

“Oh…?”

The sound of footsteps grew clearer. But there was something strange about the sound. Step, clack, step, clack, like footsteps overlapped with another sound.

It was the sound of a cane.

“Ah.”

I stood up from the bench to welcome the guest. Sure enough, a familiar old man was hobbling around the corner with his cane, leaning on the summer air.

I hurried over to support the old man.

“Oh, sir! What brings you here today! Did you walk all the way from Bansong-dong?”

“Oh, our young assistant is still in Busan. Huh? Why are you still here? Huh? Oh, and Ms. Noh Do-hwa is still here too. What are young people like you doing here? Huh? What are you planning……?”

“…….”

I supported the old man into the workshop, where Noh Do-hwa was already wearing her white doctor's coat as usual. She adjusted her monocle and picked up a patient chart.

“Is this patient Shin Soo-bin from Bansong-dong? What brings you here?”

“Uh, it’s nothing special. Just, this ankle brace has been creaking since last week. It’s old……”

“Hmph. You've been fiddling with it again, haven't you? I told you not to touch it. Do my words sound like a joke to you?”

“No, oh no. That's not it—”

“And if the brace is misaligned, you should come in for repairs immediately. What could be so important that you waited a whole week?”

“Ah, I’m sorry. Doctor, I feel bad about this. Uh, do you think it will take long? If it takes long, just forget it.”

“No. It will only take ten minutes……”

Noh Do-hwa took out her tools and tapped and tightened the misaligned parts of the assistive device. Then she and the patient exchanged small talk.

Just like usual.

Clang- The sound of the hammer echoed.

“…….”

I sneaked to the entrance of the workshop and looked outside.

A strange noise was mixed into the twilight sky.

Instead of starlight, red spots glimmered like scratches, and instead of the Milky Way, a blue vein throbbed like an artery.

The sky was hollowing. Or rather, beyond the sky, the celestial void phenomenon. It was proof that the end of the world was truly near.

‘…This is not good.’

Even the sunset was being infected in real-time. What started as a mere crimson and yellow sunset was beginning to take on a thick viscosity, like the blood of the black night sky.

If the sky were an experimental beaker, and red liquid were dropped into it, this is what it would look like.

The void was becoming the surface, the light was turning into mucus, the clouds into blades, and the ground into the Milky Way.

If powerful anomalies were left unchecked, they would mix and merge, forming a mass.

The Night Goddess, Nut. At this time, I couldn't even begin to theorize the cause of this anomaly and void. It was a recurring world-ending scenario.

The night of this world was devouring the city step by step.

Soon, the beings on the surface would fall into eternal sleep. In no more than 10 minutes.

“Master, it’s about time—”

“Assistant.”

I turned around. Noh Do-hwa was coming out of the workshop with

the patient.

Our eyes met.

A pair of black islands floating in a white sea stared at me.

“Please take Mr. Shin Soo-bin back home.”

“…….”

A brief exchange of glances and a more substantial exchange of silence followed.

“Do you have a metal rod in your ear? Assistant. Take the patient home. Damn. It’s already rough out there; if he falls, will you take responsibility?”

“Okay, understood.”

“Good……”

Noh Do-hwa faintly smiled.

“As expected of my assistant……”

The old man kept insisting that he was fine and could walk by himself, but Noh Do-hwa was unwavering.

I gently picked up the old man and started walking.

“Oh, I’m really fine. Ms. Noh Do-hwa cares so much about her patients, it’s a problem… Ooh!”

The old man’s soprano transformation at the end was, of course, because I used lightfoot.

The old man looked around with wide eyes. The scenery passed by in an instant. I used my aura to protect the patient’s body.

Tap. Tap. I moved by stepping on the collapsed building walls and traffic lights.

‘If I move as quickly as possible to take the patient to his home in

Bansong-dong… Then return to the workshop, it'll be tight, but I might just make it back in time before the world ends. No, but the timing of the void reaching the workshop is the variable.'

"Young man."

As I used lightfoot, the old man in my arms suddenly spoke.

"Yes?"

"Let me down here."

I blinked. To reach his home, we still had to move for another four minutes.

"No, sir. I will take you home."

"Oh no, that's enough. Does the house matter? The way home does. Now that my ankle brace is fixed, I want to walk the last part on my own."

"Oh."

"I've lived in this neighborhood my whole life. My elementary school was around here, and this was the road home. I've walked this path back and forth for decades. Today, I didn't want to die at home, so I walked out, but there was no one around. I didn't expect Ms. Noh Do-hwa to be at her workshop. She's truly a thoughtful person."

"……."

"Thank you, young man. You're worried about Ms. Noh Do-hwa, aren't you? This isn't your path. Let's both go our ways."

I let the old man down on the downhill path. He muttered as he leaned on his cane and took a step.

It was the first lane road Noh Do-hwa had privately paved in Busan.

The old man, supporting about 30% of his weight on the cane, waved his hand.

“I’m fine now, go back quickly.”

“…Thank you.”

“You’re thanking me for no reason. I’m the one who’s grateful……”

The old man muttered to himself as he slowly descended the hill.

The sound of cicadas filled the air. But from beyond the concrete jungle, their cries were slowly dwindling.

The world’s night was closing in.

“See you next time, sir.”

I bowed my head and turned around. Then I moved even faster than when I had carried the old man.

On the rooftop of the workshop.

When I had first joined, it was a two-story building, but over the past eight years, it had been renovated and expanded to five stories. On top of the building with its uniquely Korean green waterproof paint, showing no sense of interior design.

“Oh……”

Noh Do-hwa stood there, holding a wine bottle and a corkscrew.

She looked at me as if it were natural for me to land on the rooftop like a butterfly. Even though it was the first time I had used lightfoot in front of her.

“You came back faster than I expected. Did you properly see Mr. Shin Soo-bin home?”

“The old man said he wanted to walk the last part himself. I had no choice but to let him down.”

“Oh. Hmm. I didn’t think of that…”

Pop- The cork came out of the wine bottle.

Noh Do-hwa threw the cork and the corkscrew over the edge of the rooftop.

“Wanna have a drink?”

“If it’s from the master’s collection, I’ll gladly drink.”

“Hmph.”

The red liquid, resembling the wine-colored sunset of today’s sky, poured into the glass.

“A toast. To something, anything…….”

“To a toast.”

Clink.

The glass rang pleasantly. The wine in the glass looked like a flower bud of a bleeding heart suspended in the air.

We stared at the sky over the city through our wine glasses. The sky, which had also turned into transparent glass, gave the feeling of looking through glass beyond glass.

Five minutes until the end. Maybe six if we were lucky.

“Assistant.”

“Yes.”

“Actually, I can make weapons…”

I looked at Noh Do-hwa. She wasn't looking at me.

“Pardon?”

“Weapons, weapons. Equipment? Whatever. You know those games where the character gets stronger with new weapons… As you know, my ability is to [make prosthetics feel like natural limbs], but, hmm. This applies to other equipment as well…”

“……!”

My eyes widened.

Indeed, the human limb was the first tool. If Noh Do-hwa could make swords or spears, which could be considered extensions of the arm?

“Body and Sword as One……!”

“……? What’s that……?”

“Oh. Um. It just means it’s amazing.”

It was difficult to convey my amazement to someone who had no connection to subculture and was purely a born and voluntary outsider (this person hadn’t even watched a single Marvel movie).

“…Why did you hide such an ability, master? You’re a born blacksmith. You could have gained recognition from Dang Seo-rin, attracted attention from Cheon Yo-hwa, and made warlords eager to have you.”

“Hmph. You just answered your own question… If word got out that I could make awesome weapons, wouldn’t those annoying awakened ones come even more fiercely to bother me?”

“Oh.”

“But if I knew the world was going to end like this, I would have made at least one weapon for someone. Not that they would spread the word.”

“…….”

The sky turned red.

Then, like the blade of a guillotine, the black night flowed down. Arteries and veins spread across the sky, mimicking the Milky Way's colors.

“…Then, make one for me next time.”

“Hmph. Sure. It's a huge hassle. But if we're going to die anyway,

that’s a hassle I can deal with…….”

“You must.”

“Yes. If I don’t want to, feel free to pester me until I do……”

Clang-

From the rooftop, a sound of something breaking came from near the traffic light intersection. The sound was like steel being crushed.

It sounded almost comically absurd, but the result was not funny. The entire 'scenery' on the other side of the traffic light was swallowed by the night sky.

Clang, clang. Clang-

The crosswalk and buildings were swallowed by the void one by one. Like a bitten apple, the tops of buildings were sliced off.

300 meters, 250 meters, 180 meters, 120 meters. In an instant. The black night sky devoured the space voraciously from all directions.

The world had shrunk to the point where it could only accommodate our breathing.

“Assistant.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you——”

Crash.

The last sound I heard was the sound of the wine glass Noh Do-hwa was holding. Or perhaps it was my wine glass shattering as it was bitten by the night sky.

A crescent moon formed on the glass.

And the world closed its eyes.

Footnotes:

Chapter 86

The Accomplice IV

Sinnoa

Clang—!

The sound of hammering nearby shattered the world behind my eyelids, which had sunk into a dreamlike state.

A daydream. This often happened to me, someone who remembered all past events. The eyes I had just closed in the 53rd cycle were reopened in an instant in the 100th regression.

“Whew……”

A breath escaped me.

It was Noh Do-hwa. Half of her breath bathed in the blindingly bright sunlight of midsummer, and the other half was submerged in the navy blue shadows of the Jeongseon cave's abandoned mine.

“Well, it seems I’ve managed to make at least a kitchen knife. Hmm. I think I’ve made it better than this dwarf-like anomaly……”

“…….”

A mirage slowly danced.

In the breaths people exhaled, dust waves rippled through the sunlight and shadows, and then through the sunlight and shadows again.

It seemed the world needed both light and shadow to dance. In that case, the blink of an eye lightly swimming between notice and blindness must be the first dance of existence.

“Now, it’s time to challenge the next level. Hmm, I think tongs would be just right, Regressor Undertaker. If you find a dwarf

anomaly making something suitable while wandering around the village… Hey. Hey. Are you listening to me…?”

“Yes, I am listening.”

By the way, it took less than three seconds for Noh Do-hwa to turn ‘hey’ into ‘you’ and then ‘you’ into ‘bastard’. It was nothing short of a magic tongue.

Noh Do-hwa mimicked cleaning her ears with a hoe, grinning.

“Do you have a metal rod in your ear? Since I’ve got the hang of it, find something a bit more difficult than this hoe…… Oh?”

She didn’t finish her sentence.

Swish—

The dwarf anomaly, who had been hammering the anvil soullessly until now, suddenly reached out towards Noh Do-hwa.

An obvious anomaly.

Thud, I instinctively hugged Noh Do-hwa and stepped back. Due to the sudden action, she dropped the hoe she was holding.

“Be careful, master.”

“Oh. Well, thank you……. But I don’t feel any hostility……”

“There are many anomalies in the world that don’t harbor feelings of hostility. Just as radiation isn’t malicious but still harms humans.”

-……

For some reason, the dwarf anomaly seemed uninterested in us. Instead, it slowly bent over.

There lay the hoe that Noh Do-hwa had dropped.

“Hmm……?”

The dwarf picked up the hoe and examined it, slowly, like a video playing at 0.5 speed.

-……, …….

Whoosh—

Wind blew out from the pitch-black eye and mouth holes, from the inside out.

And then something strange happened.

As if it had been a being of wind from the beginning, the more wind the dwarf anomaly exhaled through its holes, the more its body shrank.

“Oh?”

-……, ……. …….

The dwarf’s breath fell on the hoe Noh Do-hwa had forged. Like a painter adding layer after layer of watercolor, the dwarf anomaly added a final touch to the hoe with its breath.

Clatter.

The hoe fell again. The dwarf, having exhaled all its breath, shriveled like a balloon and disappeared.

“How interesting. What kind of anomaly is this, Regressor Undertaker……?”

“…I don’t know either. Although I found out about this mining village a long time ago, I’ve never delved into it.”

“Ah. Even after 100 regressions, you couldn’t figure out one village? Isn’t that negligence of duty……?”

“I’m sorry. If someone hadn’t strangled me to death in the last run, I might have figured it out.”

Noh Do-hwa blinked.

“It hasn’t disappeared…”

“Pardon?”

“Originally, anything created in this village disappeared shortly after. The kitchen knife I made this morning vanished the same way. But look. My hoe is still here despite the passage of time.”

“Ah.”

I stroked my chin.

“Indeed. Perhaps the essence of this ‘Jeongseon Dwarf Mine’ void is… a training ground for blacksmiths.”

“A training ground……?”

“Yes. You could call it a place for passing down techniques. Just now, master, you created a hoe and were ‘acknowledged’ by that dwarf anomaly.”

“I see……”

“I think I understand how to clear this void. There are a total of seven blacksmith dwarves in the mining village. Since you eliminated one, there are now six left.”

“You mean I need to be acknowledged by the remaining six masters?”

“Exactly.”

I picked up the hoe. The blade of the adamantium hoe bore strange letters.

An unfamiliar script. An unintelligible language. The closest description I could give would be this:

[Dicentra Spectabilis]

Noh Do-hwa peeked over my shoulder.

“Hmm. What’s this? I didn’t engrave any letters…”

“It’s likely the dwarf anomaly inscribed it with its breath. What else would a blacksmith inscribe on their work? It’s probably its name.”

“Ah?”

Noh Do-hwa took out her notebook. Frowning, she carefully copied down the letters [Dicentra Spectabilis].

“Master, why are you doing that?”

“Hmph.”

Noh Do-hwa didn’t respond.

From that day, our routine was set.

First, we classified the remaining six dwarf blacksmiths by the difficulty level of the items they were making.

A dwarf making a small kitchen knife was level 1. A dwarf making a large greatsword was level 6.

“Well, let’s get started… I want to finish quickly, so Regressor Undertaker, assist me……”

“Wow. Only the Master could make an infinite regressor work as an assistant.”

“What nonsense? You’re the one who mortgaged my life to the National Road Management Corps, making me just an assistant…”

“I’ve got it ready, master.”

“Oh, good.”

Clang!

Noh Do-hwa’s hammer struck, sending sparks flying.

Despite her slender appearance with no obvious muscles, she pounded the anvil like she was demonstrating what true functional muscle was.

Her long hair fluttered in the cave below. From afar, she looked like she was dancing, perfectly synchronized with the hammer.

Sparks and shadows.

A waltz of red and black.

-……, Whoosh……

Seeing the kitchen knife she made, the level 1 dwarf also exhaled deeply.

The breath of the anomaly, probably from another world, allowed the knife to remain in this world. The anomaly left behind its language, an unrecognizable name, on the knife before vanishing.

“…….”

How did these anomalies come into existence? Even with countless regressions, I could only speculate about their secret, never arriving at the answer.

I cooked, prepared bathwater, secured our sleeping quarters, and stayed vigilant against surrounding anomalies, allowing Noh Do-hwa to focus on the 'slaying of anomalies.' That was my role in this void.

It wasn’t a difficult role.

The ‘assistant’ from the 53rd run had already spent 8 years working harmoniously with the skilled artisan before me. That memory was still etched behind my eyelids.

“Hmph……”

Next level. And then the next level.

In just six days, Noh Do-hwa reached the final blacksmith’s gate. The term "talent" must have been coined for people like her.

Yet, for some reason, her expression grew worse with each level she completed. She frowned deeply as she glared at me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Come to think of it, I’m really pissed.”

“……?”

“Isn’t it unnaturally proficient how you assist me? You hand me the tongs exactly when I need them, and hold things at the perfect angle for hammering without me even asking. You’re like a drone delivery service. Every time you do this, it reminds me that you’re a creepy regressor who knows everything I don’t.”

“What are you talking about?”

I was at a loss for words. Was she seriously insane?

“…I’ve never spoken like that in my life, and creepy? Creepy? Me?”

“Hmph. It’s just a figure of speech. Don’t get hung up on one word. You’re like a grandpa who’s at least 1,000 years old, the ultimate elder anomaly, yet you have such a narrow mind……”

“How many times are you going to keep insulting me in a row?”

“Alright, enough.”

Clang.

Noh Do-hwa tapped the hilt of the sword lightly with her hammer —clank, the misaligned notches fitted perfectly.

Level 6. The greatsword was complete.

-……, …….

She finished making the greatsword and the dwarf immediately turned its head, like a salaryman smelling freshly baked bread at a subway bakery.

Then, it reached out to infuse eternity into the master’s piece—

“Ah. Hold on…”

But its hand only swiped the air.

Noh Do-hwa had suddenly tilted the greatsword back.

-……?

“Hmm.”

-……?

The black eyeholes of the dwarf looked up at her, like a cat whose treat had been snatched away.

Noh Do-hwa grinned.

-……? ……?

Hop. Hop. The dwarf, true to its designation as a "dwarf," could only jump up and down, unable to reach the greatsword Noh Do-hwa held aloft.

I too had question marks floating in my mind.

What’s this person doing? Has she decided to torment anomalies because she can’t be satisfied with humans anymore?

Noh Do-hwa grinned mischievously.

“I have no interest in putting you to rest. None at all. I’m not here to be your disciple either. It’s troublesome if you ascend, thinking you’ve passed on your legacy to me.”

-……?

“Honestly, I don’t need these junk tools.”

Noh Do-hwa tossed all the tools she had made—hoes, kitchen knives, daggers, sickles, pitchforks, longswords, and greatswords—into the smelter.

The smelter in the mining village quickly melted the tools back into adamantium. Noh Do-hwa’s hammer immediately struck the softened mass.

Clang—!

The mineral that originally didn't exist in this world began to take shape beautifully. Clang! Clang! Without rest. Ignoring her own sweat, pouring everything into it.

"Small hammer."

"Yes, master."

"Chisel."

"Here it is."

"Sandwich."

"Yes."

Each time she requested, I handed over the tools and moved the cast.

-…….

The dwarf watched our work with empty eye sockets.

How much time passed? Noh Do-hwa, who had never once wiped her forehead during the forging, finally wiped her sweat with the back of her hand. Then she took off her monocle and put it in her front pocket.

"Whew, it's finally finished……"

The appearance of the finished product left me momentarily speechless.

"This is…"

It was a cane sword.

Srrk— Noh Do-hwa drew the blue blade herself. A swordstick, also known as a cane sword.

A weapon that could be used as a cane in normal times and as a

self-defense weapon in emergencies.

“Regressor Undertaker. You asked me to make you a weapon when we came here, right……?”

“…Yes.”

“Hmph. Alright. This is the weapon I present to you……”

A cane. The simplest assistive device for people with walking difficulties. Thus, it bore Noh Do-hwa's touch.

A sword. The most common weapon for killing. Thus, it would bear my touch.

Perfectly reflecting both Noh Do-hwa and me.

“…….”

“Wait a moment.”

Noh Do-hwa held a carving knife against the blade. Screech, the sound of metal sliding.

[Dicentra Spectabilis]

It was the name believed to belong to the dwarf blacksmith who had once breathed life into the hoe.

Noh Do-hwa opened her notebook and carefully engraved the characters from [Dicentra Spectabilis] onto the blade, referring to her notes. A total of seven names. The characters, alien not only to this world but to another, rippled like beautiful tattoos.

And at the end.

Do-hwa (渡河).

The characters pronounced the same as Noh Do-hwa’s name, and the same meaning as her workshop, flowed onto the white blade like raindrops.

“Here it is……”

-…….

-…….

-……, …….

Looking around, I realized that the dwarf anomaly had vanished. There was no more breath of eternity.

Only a deep wind, whooooosh, blew through the mining canyon. The breath of the mountain, descending from the cliffs, swept past us and the sword.

In the wake of the wind, the village vanished. The adamantium ore, the smelters, the stone buildings, and the anvils the dwarves used—all had been blown away.

Only Noh Do-hwa, myself, and a single sword remained at the entrance to the enormous cave.

“…….”

It was a strange phenomenon.

But voids are inherently strange.

Noh Do-hwa paid no attention to the disappearance of the dwarf mining village. Instead, she was handing me the sword.

Evening. The blazing red sunset behind her was imprinting the scene before me onto my corneas.

As I finally reached out and grasped the sword, Noh Do-hwa’s lips, which seemed destined to remain silent, opened.

“Are you really going to take it……?”

“…….”

“It’s a fine sword. One that I can never make again. In your future hunts and slaughters, this sword will play a significant role. Do you understand? Regressor Undertaker. From now on, part of your

achievements, your feats, your successes and failures, your killings —half of them will belong to this sword. In other words, by taking this sword, you are accepting it as your accomplice……”

“…….”

I nodded.

I grasped the sword.

“I will name the sword Do-hwa (渡河).”

“…Hmph.”

Noh Do-hwa chuckled softly.

The sunset cast a red hue on her smile.

“The share is fifty-fifty……”

What a harsh profit-sharing contract from someone claiming not to be an exploitative employer.

There’s an epilogue.

When the regressions reset, everything should return to its original state, but the sword 'Do-hwa' was an exception.

From the 100th cycle onwards, Do-hwa was always embedded at the entrance of the cave midway up the Taebaek Mountains. In subsequent regressions, Noh Do-hwa never made me another sword.

“…….”

It was a phenomenon that could only be described as an anomaly. In place of the original void of the ‘dwarf mining village’, the sword Do-hwa seemed to be fixed in time, immovable like a fixed coordinate.

Perhaps the ‘mining village’ had truly come from another world. And the flow of time in that other world was different from ours, causing 'Do-hwa' to be fixed in place, outside the normal flow of

time.

Or, instead of the mining village, the sword Do-hwa itself had become a void and an anomaly.

In any case, the mining village disappeared, along with the small veins of adamantium, forever. I would never uncover the secrets of that void.

In addition to the Silver Bells I always farmed at Busan Station, I had now acquired another ‘exclusive item.’

“Hmm? Wait a moment, Regressor Undertaker……”

“Yes?”

“Show me that cane.”

Noh Do-hwa almost snatched Do-hwa from me, examining it closely.

“Hmph…”

With her monocle on, she scrutinized the sword, repeatedly drawing it from the scabbard and sheathing it.

A long sigh escaped her lips.

“…Regressor Undertaker. This sword. Where did you get it……?”

“Oh. I received it as a gift from the greatest blacksmith in Korea.”

“The greatest in Korea? Hmm, that seems right… Very well. If they crafted such a masterpiece, they deserve to be called that. But who is this Korean?”

The shadows of Noh Do-hwa's eyes, heavy with dark circles, burned intensely.

“Why? Are you interested?”

“Well… Anyone with such skills should be recruited into the National Road Management Corps or somewhere, to be used as an

unpaid slave for life.”

How could I not burst out laughing at this?

Noh Do-hwa frowned deeply at my laughter. A pair of twin black islands, no longer lonely, glared at me.

“Hah? You’re laughing? What’s so funny? Do you want to die?”

“No. Absolutely not. I’ll tell you. Master, the person who made that sword is my—”

Footnotes:

Chapter 87

The Breakdown I

Sinnoa

They mocked me, calling me a decrepit old monster over a thousand years old, but their assessment was utterly mistaken.

Originally, Noh Do-hwa was the type to describe raindrops falling beautifully in autumn from a stormy sky as, "Huh, these H_2Os are committing mass suicide (he actually said this)." He's a caustic critic with a twisted tongue and a crooked spine.

Why should I be bothered by the reviews of such a wretched scum?

Referring to me, the Undertaker, with ageist terms like old man or decrepit monster is entirely inappropriate. There's no need to even mention curses filled with hatred and contempt for humanity, like old geezer or boomer.

More neutral titles like 'sunbae' or 'teacher' would be much more appropriate.

A sunbae refers to someone walking ahead.

As a regressor, I, the Undertaker, am always one step ahead of others. It's not about seniority, but quite literally, I'm the sunbae to all humans. Why? Am I wrong?

The same applies to 'teacher'.

Biologically, there are plenty of people older than me. But in terms of mental age, who is older than me? As Noh Do-hwa said, I'm well over a thousand years old. Thus, I am the teacher of all humans. How about that? Am I wrong?

"What are you talking about, you damn boomer bastard...?"

"....."

However, very few people actually used the titles 'sunbae' or 'teacher' for me.

No, it's not just rare. There were even more old people who persistently called Noh Do-hwa 'teacher'!

Oh, what a pity.

How can I not lament? That scum being called a teacher? Even in this land once called the country of courtesy, the three bonds and five relationships are torn apart.

But just as heroes appear in times of chaos, there are also sages in times of confusion.

"Oh, doc sunbae!"

A necromancer of the Korean Peninsula, who insists on wearing a white sailor uniform like the white-clad folk rather than black.

The almost only person who calls me 'sunbae', and the 113th student council president of Baekhwa Girls' High School, and the guild leader of Baekwha Guild.

"Sunbae!"

Occasionally, while walking down the hallway of the National Road Management Corps headquarters, I would hear someone calling me, and every time, the owner of the voice would run up with energetic footsteps and greet me with a big smile.

It's a pleasant sight.

Even in the cycle where zombies were rampant on the Korean Peninsula, in the cycle where 'Academy City' was established, and even in the cycle that led to the end of the world, she always had that same smile.

A smile fixed somewhere. A stuffed expression.

"Undertaker sunbae, where are you going~?"

"....."

This is a story about names. About the time it took for the title 'sunbae' to change to 'teacher'.

Let's talk about the Apostle of the Outer Gods, Cheon Yo-hwa.

If I had to pick the two people I least wanted to get involved with on the Korean Peninsula, the first would undoubtedly be the Sword Marquess of the Mount Hua Sect, and the second would be Cheon Yo-hwa.

Go Yuri? First, we need to define whether she's even 'human' or not, so let's exclude her.

If it weren't for the information obtained from the Fairy King in the 89th cycle, I would never have approached Cheon Yo-hwa.

-Tutorial Dungeon Baekhwa Girls' High School.

-The survivor there, Cheon Yo-hwa, is the chosen Apostle of the Fairy King.

I felt like Sherlock Holmes hearing the name James Moriarty.

Or like a general witnessing Cao Cao's preferences for married women. Suddenly, I realized, "Oh, I've lived my life to hunt down this bastard."

Moreover, in terms of villainy, Infinite Void was a cut above Moriarty.

Unlike Moriarty, whose demonic nature was immediately exposed by Sherlock Holmes' clairvoyance, Infinite Void never revealed itself until the 89th cycle. I didn't even have a name to call it, so I gave it the name Infinite Void.

Cheon Yo-hwa was the only continuous suspect among these teacherminds of teacherminds, villains of villains.

The little detective inside me couldn't help but eye her intently.

And of course, my detective skills were far superior to those of any British drug-addicted hedonist. That guy can’t even turn back time.

"Seeing your hair color, you must be Cheon Yo-hwa? I've heard a lot about you from the others."

"Oh..."

In the 109th cycle, as I described before, I went to 'Baekhwa Girls' High School Tutorial Dungeon' six months after it opened and met Cheon Yo-hwa.

"I heard a very smart and quick hubae got elected as student council president. The news spread through our alumni network. By the way, I also worked in the student council and am now the alumni president."

"....."

Cheon Yo-hwa, captured!

Thanks to this necromancer, several good things happened, such as the development and nationwide distribution of the 'AI Judge' on the Korean Peninsula... but there was one minor problem.

Actually, it wasn’t minor at all. It was quite serious.

"Yo-hwa."

"Yes, doc sunbae!"

"Are you perhaps close with fairies?"

"Eh?"

"You know, the fairies from the tutorial. Or maybe you've connected with some greater being through such fairies. If you have such experiences, please let me know."

"....."

Blink. Cheon Yo-hwa blinked her eyes.

"Fairies? Sunbae?"

"Huh?"

"Is that some kind of code? Or a novel? Oh, come on, sunbae. There’s no such thing as fairies in the world. You’re teasing me too much—."

"...No, what are you talking about. In Baekhwa Girls' High School, the tutorial dungeon occurred. Naturally, there were tutorial fairies. You guys cleared the tutorial after struggling without any external contact for 11 months..."

"11 months? Um... Ahaha. Sorry, sunbae. I have no idea what you're talking about. Huh. Could it be, sunbae... Are you involved in some cult or something?"

"....."

"Oh my! No way! My family has also been entangled with cults a lot, so I know this well. You must never, under any circumstances, get involved with those!"

Highly developed physiognomy was indistinguishable from clairvoyance.

To my eyes, which had studied physiognomy for over a thousand years, Cheon Yo-hwa didn’t seem to be lying.

My academic achievements hit the mark.

"Kyaaah! A goblin appeared!"

"...? Sunbae, why do people call wolves goblins?"

"Ten Legs is invading! Let's fight back!"

"Aaaah! E-Earthquake! Sunbae, it's an earthquake! Get down—!"

"....."

Cheon Yo-hwa couldn’t perceive anomalies as anomalies.

Goblins looked like 'wolves', and the rampage of Ten Legs was understood as an 'earthquake'.

The same went for other anomalies. Once, I even captured a fairy and brought it before her eyes.

"Wow! A cat! So cute!"

She hugged the fairy and rubbed her cheek against it. Even when the fairy said, "Heck" "Let me go!" using language, it sounded like a cat's hiss to Cheon Yo-hwa.

Her brain, her perception system, was broken.

It was as if the part of the brain that recognized anomalies had been surgically removed.

"...I see. No wonder I can't get meaningful information about fairies or Infinite Void from you."

"...? What did you just say, sunbae?"

"Nothing."

I frowned at Cheon Yo-hwa, who suffered from selective auditory impairment like a protagonist in an outdated light novel.

Maybe even that 'perception contamination' was manipulated by Infinite Void.

Indeed, a true mastermind, unlike those attention-seeking pseudo-villains in fiction who scream "Notice me!" to everyone.

I investigated Cheon Yo-hwa as much as possible.

I found out that her family was located in Sejong City, was quite famous as a local gentry, and that their mansion was enormous.

Magnificent tile-roofed houses.

The land size was 14,990 square meters. The mansion was nestled on the slopes of Mount Wonsu, overlooking the government

complex of South Korea.

The aboveground preserved the traditional Korean house style from the Joseon era, but the underground, not open to the public, hid modern buildings.

However, there were no significant gains. Some documents remained in the mansion, but there were no survivors or witnesses.

The best I could deduce was that Cheon Yo-hwa's father was on the board of directors of Baekhwa Girls' High School.

It seemed that Baekhwa Girls' High School itself was built with the support funds from this family.

So Cheon Yo-hwa was not just an ordinary student or student council president, but rather equivalent to the 'young lady' of a private school foundation.

Other than that, the discovery of a pile of Taoist scriptures, including Laozi's "Tao Te Ching," in the underground facility was noteworthy.

Still, I couldn’t escape the maze with just this information and circumstances.

"One last question, Yo-hwa. I briefly investigated your family. Your father's surname is Cheon (千), but you use the surname with the other Cheon (天). Do you know why your surname was changed?"

"Eh? No? This is the first time I've heard of it... I have no memory of my family at all. Besides, investigating my family? That's a bit scary, sunbae..."

...A strategy revision was inevitable.

Meeting Cheon Yo-hwa after she broke out of the tutorial dungeon by herself was ineffective. Too much information had been lost.

I needed to meet Cheon Yo-hwa from before that time, when she was still wandering in the dungeon called Baekhwa Girls' High School.

An impossible feat without traveling back in time.

"Got it. Yo-hwa, see you next time."

"Yes? Yes, sunbae! See you next time!"

And fortunately, I was capable of such acrobatics.

As I, the first human to uncover it, had found out, the 'Tutorial Dungeon' was an artificially created void by Infinite Void, essentially a human laboratory.

Like other laboratories, the tutorial dungeon also strictly controlled external access to prevent incidents that would raise a graduate student's blood pressure, such as virus infiltration, computer theft, or data loss.

Therefore, the tutorial dungeon remained closed until it was cleared.

Even the 'clairvoyance' of the Saintess couldn't inspect this closed space. It was impossible for an external person to forcibly open and enter the lab.

Yes, 'a person' could not.

"Let's go, fairy number 264."

"Hooey! Yes, following the Comrade Leader’s orders...!"

Even if the lab was sincere about blocking physical viruses, it was a different story when it came to mental viruses.

Fairy Number 264, infected with the strongest virus in human history, marched vigorously towards Baekhwa Girls' High School.

Creak-

Even the gate of Baekhwa Girls' High School, which no human could cross, couldn’t stop our advance. Like the barricade in Paris in 1832, the gate recognized the revolutionary comrades and opened softly.

(Congratu) Seo.,; University 2 Admitted! (lations)

A worn-out banner fluttered. As someone who firmly opposes academic elitism and educational background society, I always left the possibility open as to whether it was Seoul National University, Sogang University, or Seokyeong University.

Maybe a fierce battle had already taken place. Not only the banner but also various parts of the school gate were destroyed.

The name plaque, which should have been elegantly inscribed with the school name in Chinese characters, was partially damaged, leaving only '■■女子高等學校'.

"Comrade! The vanguard has opened the blood path!"

"Hmm. Let's advance."

The flowerbeds surrounding the academic buildings were filled with blooming red spider lilies, also known as Lycoris Radiata. Beyond the hill of spider lilies, white birch trees formed a forest.

The fairy shouted towards it.

"Full speed ahead! Perish the oppression of the bourgeoisie! For the Comrade Leader, I will lay down my life!"

The moment we set foot inside the school.

"Heeek?"

Bang!

Sensing the intruder, the security chief hurriedly ran out from inside.

Of course, the real security guard was lying dead near the gate, and this was just a new fairy wearing an armband in the 'Baekhwa Girls' High School Tutorial Dungeon'.

The opposing fairy, upon seeing us, was shocked and her eyes widened.

"Fairy? Human? Heek? Why a human?"

"Hoek! To distinguish fairies and humans by race! Beings can only be distinguished by ideology...! That one is surely a lackey of the bourgeoisie!"

"Heek? Heek? Heek?"

The opposing fairy was confused.

"I-I am fairy number 16, responsible for this tutorial! It's highly suspicious to intrude with a human without prior notice...! State your rank and name!"

"I am number 264! My number is revolutionary as bestowed upon me by destiny! Despicable bourgeoisie lackey, surrender your head to the guillotine!"

"Heeek! Rebellion! It's a rebellion! Guards! Guaaardsss!"

The moment fairy number 16 pulled out a magic wand to kill us, our number 264 also grabbed her magic wand.

"Where do you think you're going—"

"Heek!"

Bang!

The fairies exploded simultaneously. The explosion was perfectly timed.

There was a sad story behind this. Originally, all fairies were created with exactly the same combat power.

When fairies decide to fight each other, the outcome was destined to end in mutual destruction. If this were a martial arts novel rather than modern fantasy, the protagonist might not be them, but they could certainly be listed among the "Top 10 Memorable Side Characters Who Died Elegantly." If it were the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, they could be brothers who kept the Oath of the Peach Garden.

‘Now, Infinite Void's surveillance of Baekhwa Girls' High School would be temporarily gone.’

From now on, speed was of the essence.

First, I stripped the uniform off the guard's corpse and stuffed it into a leather trunk. Then I entered the school building.

I was already familiar with the building’s structure from previous cycles, but indeed, as expected of the void, the geography was constantly twisting in real time.

-Uoooooo...

-Hee, hee, hee, hee.

See? Just setting foot at the entrance, all sorts of bizarre sounds warmly welcomed the visitor.

This place was no longer Baekhwa Girls' High School.

'School Ghost Stories'.

Whether it’s toilet ghosts or the seven mysteries, all the anomalies related to the ‘school’ were realized in this labyrinth.

There were 750 people trapped in the void 'School Ghost Stories'. All were students of Baekhwa Girls' High School.

After 11 months of struggle, only 19 would survive... and two of them would soon jump off the roof to commit suicide. Considering that in 'School Ghost Stories,' suicides were virtually murders by ghosts, those two should also be counted as victims.

A survival rate of 2.26%.

The worst tutorial dungeon on the Korean Peninsula.

But... no matter how strong the anomalies and void are, or rather, the stronger they are, the more room for maneuver exists.

I call this the pain point of anomalies or voids. So-called weak

points.

The difficulty of the void varies greatly depending on whether you know these weak points or not.

The old adage 'Knowledge is power' by Bacon became even truer at the end of the century.

So here's the question.

What is the most suitable weak point that an outsider, especially an older man compared to Baekhwa Girls' High students, can exploit in 'School Ghost Stories'?

What disguise should I use to navigate this place without appearing 'suspicious' in the void?

"...Alright. Found it."

The answer was written on the document I held in my hand.

[Baekhwa Girls' High School Guard Shift Schedule]

I quickly wrote my name in the last slot with a pen I brought from outside.

Then, I hurriedly changed into the guard uniform taken from the school gate. Hat on the head. A nameplate reading 'Guard Undertaker' pinned on the chest.

Disguise complete.

"...Ah, this cold and heavy feeling. It's been a while."

Lastly, I held the must-have item for a guard, a 'flashlight,' in my left hand. My reflection in the duty room mirror was perfect.

Now, this Undertaker would be working as a school guard in this cycle.

The strongest job in 'School Ghost Stories' had arrived.

Footnotes:

Chapter 88

The Breakdown II

Sinnoa

Once you have identified an anomaly's weak point, what becomes important next?

It's the spirit.

In refined terms, it’s 'vitality' or 'mental strength,' and in common terms, it's 'stubbornness' or 'guts.' By unifying your mental state with a marine's, you must push through with sheer determination.

This is no joke.

Let's briefly recount the story from the 90th run when I operated a convenience store under the Sixth International.

Although I haven't mentioned it before, not only human customers but also 'non-human customers' frequented the store.

One night, the bell rang. I immediately turned my head. The digital clock by the door showed 01:59.

"Welcome, custo——"

-Uwooooh...

"——mer. Hmm, take your time browsing."

A stench of rot wafted through the air.

A pitch-black ghost approached, dripping shadows. Its gait was so distinctive that I wondered if I had laid out a red carpet in the convenience store.

'Damn.'

A highly rational judgment was made.

Do you know the Pokémon Muk? Or the sludge spirit from Spirited Away?

The ghost, which resembled those, was gliding around the store before reaching the counter.

My mind was about to go crazy. Just five minutes ago, I had meticulously cleaned the store floor, which was now beautifully coated with the ghost's filth.

-der-taaaakerrrr...

The customer spoke.

"Yes?"

-der-taaaakerrrr, one. Kidney... two. Heart, one... Lung, one. Three fingers... One eyeball... please...

"....."

I was a small business owner with a strict moral code embedded in my frontal lobe.

This meant I had the mental fortitude to never forget the seven-letter word 'service' even when dealing with a problematic customer.

Therefore, I could smile brightly without a trace of confusion.

"Customer, do you want to get hit?"

-.....?

"Do you want to get hit? Do you want to get hit?"

The ghost flinched.

I slammed the counter down and took a step toward the ghost.

"Do you see the floor here? Huh? I can't check if you have eyes."

-Uwooo...?

"It's all black like a sewage backup. The smell? We sell food here, but your stench has spoiled everything. Are you going to take responsibility? Will you take responsibility, customer? Why aren't you answering? Huh?"

Indeed.

If there's an anomaly called a 'problematic customer,' then there must also be a 'crappy store owner' to balance the world.

"What? Stomach? Kidney? Heart? You gotta be kidding me, customer bastard. Pay up. Cleaning fee for making the floor dirty. Mop replacement fee for using the mop. Compensation for the spoiled food corner. And above all, laundry fee for your stench on my uniform. It's your existence fee, bastard."

-Uwooo...

"No money? You have no money but come in and make a mess? Ah, damn! Hey! Call the police. Call the police! No! From now on, I am the police, you filthy bastard!"

-Uwooo...

Sliiide.

At that moment, the anomaly disappeared. The filth and stench it had spread around the store also vanished.

The digital clock still showed 01:59.

The lesson from this story is simple. Even the most powerful anomaly, strong enough to make time pause, can be defeated with knowledge of its weak point and a fiery spirit.

I, the Undertaker, unlike a certain regressor who took a long vacation claiming he was starved for love, always had an overflowing spirit to give the middle finger to anomalies.

In this story, to help you pave your own paths, I'll introduce a more

detailed 'anomaly strategy guide' by an expert who breaks through the void.

Step by step, I walked out of the duty room in a guard uniform.

In my left hand was a flashlight, and in my right, a trunk.

I also had earphones and a small microphone attached. It was my full gear set for tackling anomalies.

At this moment, I felt like Liu Bei, wielding the peerless sword that could make even the mighty Lü Bu tremble in fear under the right conditions.

-Uwooo... ...,

-Hi, hi, hi, hi...

As soon as I stepped onto the first-floor hallway, the ghosts that were lingering subtly retreated.

It was natural.

'Ghosts' are fundamentally anomalies based on human forms. Some ghosts possess a degree of intelligence, and most have the instinct to recognize a strong person.

No matter how difficult the 'Baekhwa Girls' High' tutorial dungeon is, I am a Regressor of the 117th cycle. To the anomalies, it would be a catastrophe akin to Cthulhu suddenly descending upon a beginner’s village.

However, not all ghosts ran away.

Some simply couldn't flee due to their settings.

Therefore, my first destination was the school's boys' restroom.

"Hmm."

Splash-

The soles of my shoes squished. The bathroom floor was flooded with about 0.5 cm of water.

Looking around, I detected a faint bleach smell mixed with a peculiar stench. It was the smell of soaking a bunch of human hair in water.

The faucet was off.

'This is undoubtedly a haunted spot.'

No hesitation.

There were four toilet stalls in the restroom. I knocked politely on the third stall.

"Hanako-san, are you there?"

-.....

"Hanako-san?"

Silence.

I tilted my head.

"Hmm."

-.....

It was a very suspicious silence.

My well-honed sixth sense as an anomaly hunter in the 117th cycle whispered, 'There's definitely a ghost here.'

They may have hastily locked the faucet, but it was too late once the tiled floor was already flooded.

As someone who generously trusts himself, the answer was one of two things: either the ghost couldn't understand Japanese because it was originally from Japan, or it was deliberately ignoring me.

In this global era, the former was impossible. My instinct said it was

the latter.

"Oh. I almost forgot. In some versions, just knocking isn't enough to trigger the appearance conditions."

-.....

"Alright. Let's start spinning now?"

Clack. I locked the bathroom door and began to spin in place inside the stall.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven."

-.....

"Eight, nine, ten, twelve, thirteen. Done."

I knocked on the door again.

"Hanako-san, let's play. Hanako-san, are you there?"

-Yes.

A reply came immediately.

This is the fate of anomalies. They have their own 'rules' they cannot escape from.

Because anomalies exist in this world only through those rules.

Anomalies like Ten Legs have immense physical destructive power but have the weakness of being 'physically destructible.'

The convenience store ghost can 'appear as a customer in any convenience store at 2 AM.' It seems to transcend spatial limitations but has the weakness of 'only existing as a customer.'

The same goes for the toilet ghost Hanako.

Hanako exists as 'a ghost in the third stall of an empty bathroom anywhere.' A kind of earthbound spirit.

Therefore, to anyone who enters the third stall, especially if they chant the incantation, Hanako must 'appear.'

If it doesn’t respond? It acknowledges that it doesn't exist in the third stall. Exorcism complete.

The toilet ghost murmured in a trembling voice (though it sounded like a ghostly voice to me).

-Red paper or blue paper...?

"Ah. It's the case where it's combined with the red paper blue paper ghost. Not that rare."

-Purple paper...?

"Oh."

The anomaly proposed a compromise.

According to some ghost stories, asking for 'purple paper' made Hanako retreat. A kind of strategy, an exorcism method.

But just now, the ghost proposed the truce without me even reciting the strategy.

I was slightly moved. What a considerate ghost.

"Purple paper isn't bad. But what now."

-.....?

Screech!

I unzipped the leather trunk bag I had brought. This trunk was also an anomaly, but that story is for another time.

What’s noteworthy now is that the trunk contained both 'red paper rolls' and 'blue paper rolls.'

"I brought both red paper and blue paper?"

-.....

"It's the post-corona era. In these times, carrying personal hygiene items like toilet paper is necessary for peace of mind. Right? Hanako. Do you want one too? Red paper? Blue paper?"

-Purple paper...

"I don't have purple paper, you bastard!"

Bam!

I immediately generated aura and stepped forward. The toilet shattered, white porcelain fragments flying everywhere.

Water overflowed, but it wasn't just H_2O. A ghost, resembling a girl in a red cape, sprang out.

I grinned.

"Found-you."

-.....!

The ghost's form trembled violently.

This was the advantage of ghost-type anomalies compared to other types.

Strong against the weak and weak against the strong. Most ghosts had this very human characteristic of being strong against the weak and weak against the strong. The more human-like the ghost, the more pronounced this characteristic.

Most ghosts also had the troublesome trait of being 'immune to physical attacks,' but it didn't matter. Physical immunity could be bypassed if done right.

For example, like this.

"Got you."

-.....! .....!

With a flick of my wrist, I wrapped the ghost's head with the red

paper in my right hand and the blue paper in my left.

No matter how free a ghost was from physical force, 'Hanako' caused physical changes, i.e., death, through the words 'red paper' and 'blue paper.'

This is how you use weak points.

There are no one-way streets in the world of anomalies. Everything is two-way. If they can interfere from that side, we can do the same from this side with the same methods.

The result was the scene before me. The toilet ghost, dangling helplessly, bound by a vice grip in both my hands.

-.....! .....! .....!

"Red paper or blue paper?"

-.....

"The correct answer is both. We're having a buy one get one free sale this month, customer."

Crunch!

The ghost's face turned blue and then burst. The whole body melted away into a red liquid, losing its shape.

Even if it was an anomaly resembling a human form, I felt no sympathy at all.

The reason was revealed immediately after the toilet ghost was exorcised.

The water that had pooled on the tiled floor turned red, revealing corpses submerged like a village under a dam.

"....."

There were seven corpses just in this restroom.

Adding up all the other restrooms, it would easily reach dozens. The

students trapped in the 'Baekhwa Girls' High Tutorial Dungeon' without knowing anything would have been deliciously weak targets for the anomalies.

I gathered the corpses in one place. They probably wouldn’t rot until the void was broken.

"Hmm...?"

While organizing the corpses, I found something suspicious.

"...Talismans?"

Talismans were hidden throughout the restroom. Behind the toilet where the red paper blue paper ghost had emerged, in the cleaning supply closet, under the sink. There were three in total.

If it had been me after the 200th cycle, I could have deciphered the meaning of the talismans completely. But at this time, although I had read the Analects, Mencius, Great Learning, and Doctrine of the Mean, I hadn't yet fully interpreted the I Ching.

Still, I knew enough to distinguish between talismans for prayers and those for curses. The intent of the characters on the talisman was too obvious to miss.

死. 死. 死. 死.

Even amidst the water bomb in the restroom, the red characters on the talismans gleamed vividly like snake skin.

"Hmm."

It was quite ominous. Even the fortune tellers selling curse talismans usually only wrote '亡' but rarely '死.'

I examined the talismans closely, scratched the red characters with my nails, and even sniffed them.

"...It's real human blood."

Talismans made with human blood. The most dangerous of curses.

Why were such talismans hidden in a school restroom?

I set aside the question and, after storing it in my mind's closet, burned all the talismans.

Then I took out some paper and tape from the trunk bag and stuck a sign on the first-floor boys' restroom door.

[Patrol Completed]

It was a kind of 'safe zone' marker.

I didn't know how many students were wandering around, but it would provide a hint for survival.

"Alright."

I moved again.

There was a reason I exorcised the toilet ghost immediately after entering 'School Ghost Stories.'

Since ancient times, the place where people urinate was considered a kind of taboo.

While a shrine for rituals is the center of light, a restroom is the center of shadows. It's an unavoidable place for humans, but still avoided because it’s considered dirty.

This is why 'places to urinate,' along with 'places to eat' and 'places to sleep,' always hold significant ritualistic meaning in voids.

One of the core pillars of 'School Ghost Stories.'

In contrast, dismissing ghosts in the science lab, art room, or music room as unimportant isn't an overstatement.

‘I’d like to join Cheon Yo-hwa and the survivor group right away, but it's difficult to determine the exact location in such a distorted void...’

Step. The light from my flashlight swept across the pitch-black

corridor.

The school space had elongated, duplicated, and twisted bizarrely. The sky outside the windows was dyed blood-red, and white birch trees shattered the glass, poking out into the hallway.

Countless anomalies must be lurking in those white shadows.

I nodded and adjusted the [Guard Undertaker] name tag on my chest.

‘Until I join Cheon Yo-hwa, I’ll just have to deal with all the anomalies I encounter along the way.’

Brrrr...

Maybe it was just my imagination, but at that moment, I felt the void of 'School Ghost Stories' tremble.

Footnotes:

Chapter 89

The Breakdown III

Sinnoa

I was, after all, a storyteller, refining my experiences into tales for you all, a so-called peddler of stories.

Thus, unless my brain completely lost it and I mistook myself for an omnipotent god, my stories inevitably adhered to the first-person narrative.

However, even I sometimes envied the wholesale storytellers—those third-person narrators or the first-person-rewrite method.

Imagine it. How delightful it would be to slander and defame Noh Do-hwa from an omniscient perspective!

Unfortunately, I lacked the skills like [Evolve into a God in the Final Chapter of the Story] or [Possession], so describing events from a third-person perspective or immersing in another's first-person view was impossible for me.

But… what if the targets felt no guilt no matter what I did?

For instance, wouldn't it be possible to ‘distort history’ about anomalies as much as I wanted?

So, I tried it.

-The guard is coming! The guard is coming!

The anomalies trembled in fear (of course, such conversations probably never happened) and shouted from the shadows.

-How shameful for an anomaly to feel fear towards a mere human!

-Stop! Don't go! Those who rushed in couldn’t return!

-Long live the anomaly! For the glory of the Infinite Void!

-The ghost of Agrippa from the art room, defeated! Lost! No signs of life detected!

-Foolish one. Made of marble without any physical immunity, what was he thinking?

-This can't be. The ghost of Beethoven's portrait in the music room isn't responding. The words [Symphony Only] were written on Beethoven's portrait when it died! Blood is flowing from Beethoven's mouth!

-The ghost of the anatomical model in the biology room was also found with all its internal organs shredded! The heart had [Arrhythmia], the kidney [Diabetes], and the tongue… [Noh Do-hwa]? Unidentified characters were written like curses!

-No! This makes no sense! We are the strongest tutorial dungeon, School Ghost Stories, on the Korean Peninsula! But our ace members are being annihilated without resistance?

-Enemy shadow, approaching! It's coming this way! Ah! The flashlight! That light! Our eyes!

-Stop it! Hold the line at any cost!

-The guard is coming! The guard is coming!

-Aaaaah! Iyaa! Iyaa!

That was a fun session of historical distortion.

But no matter how much I distorted history, the truth didn't disappear.

Here, the truth was that I had cleaned out almost all the ghosts from the 1st to the 3rd floors of the school building.

On the second day of exploration,

After exorcising the 'student left alone in the classroom after school'

ghost on the 3rd floor, I set up a notice board on the stair landing for easy identification.

[Patrol Completed]

Thus, the lower floors of the school building all turned into safe zones. In the void of ‘School Ghost Stories,’ it had reverted back to the reality of ‘Baekhwa Girls' High School.’

“The truly important place is... the 4th floor.”

I murmured. When traversing the void alone, constantly talking to oneself like this was quite useful.

“It’s a way to check one's self-awareness.”

If a murmur I didn’t intend slipped out or felt like ‘my words,’ it was a sign that a mind-control-type anomaly had appeared nearby.

Of course, there were drawbacks to talking to oneself.

“Heading to the 4th floor is very dangerous, but it’s probably where the most captured survivors are.”

“Yes. I expected you to show up.”

Crack!

I immediately infused aura into my cane sword ‘Do-hwa’ and struck my shadow.

-Aaaaaargh!

Just like now, excessive self-talk could attract doppelgänger-type anomalies.

But if you had pre-arranged countermeasures, you could intentionally keep murmuring to bait the doppelgängers.

The shadow pinned to my cane writhed and squirmed.

-How? How? How?

“It’s thanks to modern conveniences, anomaly.”

Swoosh, I removed the earphone from my left ear. A small microphone was attached to the collar of the guard uniform.

I had been eavesdropping on my own murmurs in real time through the earphones. The microphone and earphones were connected to a smartphone, and I deliberately reproduced my voice at a low quality.

If ‘a completely different voice, recorded at a different distance or quality, played back through the earphones’? It would be proof that a mental-control-type anomaly had appeared nearby.

And the method to exterminate doppelgängers was simple.

“Say the Saintess's name.”

-.....? .....?

“You can’t answer. You are not me.”

Bubbling, bubbling, bubbling-

The shadow boiled up and then popped! The bubbles burst, and my shadow returned to normal.

After hearing the Saintess's true name in the 36th cycle, I never exchanged names with her again. A doppelgänger living only in this cycle had no way of knowing the Saintess's true name.

Thus, ‘you’ and ‘I’ were different. Denying identity. The anomaly, whose weak point was exploited, couldn't maintain its existence and collapsed.

“What a dull fellow. If you want to brainwash me, bring someone like Go Yuri.”

But it wasn’t over yet.

I reattached the earphone and microphone. Then, I took out a walkie-talkie from my pocket.

“Alright. This is Guard Undertaker. I am heading to the 4th floor after covering the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd floors. No abnormalities. Continuing the night patrol.”

-Roger……

“Gotcha.”

Confirming the presence of the anomaly through the walkie-talkie, which couldn’t return my response.

Immediately, I played the recorded phrase, ‘No abnormalities. Continuing the night patrol,’ on my phone in an infinite loop.

But I increased the speed, tenfold.

Of course, the walkie-talkie, which had to respond to my words, also became urgent.

-Roger, roger, roger, roger.

“Oh, it’s holding up well?”

I increased the speed to twentyfold.

-Roger, roger, roger-roger, ra-ra-ra, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la.

Boom!

The walkie-talkie exploded on its own before 60 seconds passed.

A ‘walkie-talkie unable to return a proper response’ had no reason to exist.

“This is Guard Undertaker. I am heading to the 4th floor. No abnormalities on the stairs. Continuing the night patrol.”

-……

There was no response from anywhere. Just to be sure, I glanced at the school speakers on the wall, but they were silent too.

Extermination complete.

This meant most mind-control-type anomalies had been cleared.

“Hmmm.”

From the silent stair landing, I glanced upstairs.

The 4th floor.

The 4th (死) floor.

In a void with stairs or elevators, it was the most dangerous zone along with the ‘13th floor’ and ‘basement 4th floor.’

Scoffing at the idea that it's just a pun on the pronunciation of ‘four’ (사) meaning ‘death’ (死) could lead to having your brain dribble out of your nose like an Egyptian mummy.

‘Wordplay in this world’. This linguistic act is the essence of being human.

Wordplay using homophones forms the basis of comedy and poetry. For the human race, which tries to dominate the world with language, it’s a stepping stone for magic.

Astute readers may have already realized.

Yes. This is why I insist on calling myself the Undertaker and never mention the Saintess’s true name.

Simply revealing a true name carries the risk of being used for curses.

For figures like Noh Do-hwa or Dang Seo-rin, who operate openly, it might not matter. But for beings like the Saintess and me, who are truly free only when our identities are hidden, we must conceal even our names under aliases.

“Now then.”

I opened the trunk bag and took out 'money.'

There were two main types of money.

One pouch was filled with gold and silver coins. The other was bundles of various countries' banknotes, two hundred each.

I laid the coins and banknotes neatly on the stairs leading to the 4th floor, using them as an altar. I also bit down on a silver coin.

Then, I quietly closed my eyes and joined my hands in prayer.

"....."

Whoosh.

A chilly breeze brushed my cheek. When I opened my eyes, all the money on the stairs was gone.

"Ptooey—"

The silver coin in my mouth, however, remained intact. I spat out the coin and stuffed it back into the trunk bag.

"Well, the ferryman sure took a hefty toll."

To enter the realm of death, the 4th (死) floor, the 'afterlife,' without incident, I had to show my sincerity.

That was the toll.

The type and amount of toll varied greatly depending on 'what kind of anomaly' ruled the realm of death.

The money I placed on the altar included not only banknotes but also coins from various countries, including Greek silver coins and Venetian gold coins.

However, the 'afterlife' in this 'School Ghost Stories' void took all the toll without asking for nationality or origin.

It was a sign of an anomaly drenched in greed.

But this wasn't bad news.

On the contrary, it was very, very welcome news.

“Then let's see the value of the toll you’ve taken.”

It was a simple transaction.

The more toll the anomaly took, the more 'benefits' it had to give in return.

Charon, the ferryman of the underworld, standardized the fare to one silver coin per person to avoid protests calling for his resignation over fairness issues.

But the 'anomaly of the afterlife' here had taken a toll worth over a hundred million won, even excluding the historical value of the gold and silver coins. From a living person who wasn’t even dead yet.

This was a bribe and embezzlement scandal of a scale that would get them fired in any religious or mythological system.

As a citizen of a staunchly democratic society, I couldn’t help but smile broadly. I confidently walked towards the most dangerous area in the 'School Ghost Stories.'

Step.

Step.

The moment I reached the 4th floor, as expected of the worst area, red fleshy tendrils immediately squirmed and rushed towards me——

-.....

——but couldn’t reach me. The red tendrils stopped abruptly right in front of me.

As if an invisible shield surrounded me.

Click, click, click...

A gold coin rolled from the dark hallway, clinking as it hit my foot.

I smiled broadly.

“Not accepting it.”

-.....

“No refunds.”

-.....

Click, click, click, click, click.

Gold and silver coins rolled in one after another from the corridor. Over time, countless coins piled up at my feet, but I paid them no mind.

“I said I won’t accept money. You probably demanded limbs or lives from humans who couldn’t pay, right?”

-.....

“The interest rates are steep these days. Let’s see how high the usury gets later.”

Step. Ignoring the refund request, I walked on, and the illusion of red fleshy tendrils around me disappeared.

It was just an ordinary school corridor.

The ‘afterlife’ hadn’t been completely exorcised yet. The red-stained windows and blood-stained handprints scattered around were proof.

But for a while, I would be protected from the ‘afterlife’s curse.

Maybe that’s why.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap—

The wooden hallway echoed. Lively footsteps, yet grounded with a sense of weight. The breath of the body and the muscles of the flesh in a rhythm unique to living organisms.

Footsteps of a human, not an anomaly.

“Hyahaaa—!”

The rhythm of that living being was confirmed by the voice. A human in a white school uniform dashed down the wooden hallway and jumped, aiming a right kick at me.

Excellent jump. Splendid kick.

I lowered my head and caught the opponent’s shoe. A black-red Air Jordan basketball shoe halted.

The kick carried the full weight of Cheon Yo-hwa’s charging body, but I skillfully handled it with the aura in my palm.

“Haaah?”

The opponent was surprised. Orange ponytail swayed in the air.

For a moment, our eyes met.

“——A, human? Ah? An adult?!”

Instead of slamming the opponent into the floor, I gently landed them so their back wouldn’t bend.

“Ugh! Ugh! Ack!”

The opponent stumbled and eventually fell in the hallway, but seemed uninjured since I had absorbed all the impact.

“Ow, ow, ow... Wait. An adult? Really an adult? Uh, so... sir, you're human, right?”

“Hm.”

I nodded.

“Yes, I am human.”

“Aaaah...! Finally! You've come to rescue us!”

A hopeful expression appeared on their face.

Although the impression was quite different from when we first met, the name tag attached to the front pocket confirmed that the person before me was indeed the one I was looking for.

An awakener who would later grow into the strongest necromancer on the Korean Peninsula.

A former runner-up in the last national high school basketball championship. Main position: point guard.

The 113th student council president of Baekhwa Girls' High School. The only witness connected to the Outer Gods' 'Infinite Void.'

Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化).

Heaven (天), Lonely (寥), To become (化). A child with solitude hidden in her name.

Finally, I had encountered my target in the worst tutorial dungeon.

Footnotes:

Chapter 90
The Breakdown IV

Sinnoa

At this point, it must be emphasized once again that while a weak point is indeed a way to defeat anomalies, it is never a one-way street but always a two-way street.

"Come to rescue you? Student, what do you mean? I'm also caught here."

I replied this way to the kid in front of me not because I was a nasty sadist, nor because I was the eldest of the Gatchaman.

"What?"

"Do you see my name tag? I'm a guard here, a guard. Geez. When I came to my senses, the school had become very strange."

"Oh... So, you're the guard..."

I felt sorry for the kid, but I had no intention of deviating even 1cm from my guard role-playing.

The reason I could rampage through the 'School Ghost Stories' was firstly due to the experience I accumulated as a regressor, and secondly because of my role as a 'guard.'

As a guard, it wasn't strange for me to wander around the school without issue. That was the job of a guard.

As a guard, it wasn't strange for me to know how to handle strange incidents occurring in the school. That was the skill of a guard.

In other words, the moment my mask as a 'night patrol guard' was broken, I would lose all the advantages I had enjoyed so far.

I had to help the stranded students of the 'School Ghost Stories'

within the boundaries of my role-playing.

And for a skilled regressor like me, such restrictions weren't even a penalty.

"Student, why do you look so haggard? Are you eating well? Here, have some of this."

"What? ...Oh, chocolate?"

It wasn't just any ordinary chocolate. It was the world's most powerful dessert. Crunchy chocolate wrapped in beautiful golden foil.

"Really? Can I really eat this?"

"Of course. I'm giving it to you to eat."

A moment later.

"Wow!"

The effect of the crunchy chocolate bar was remarkable.

"We, we didn't do anything. We just woke up in the dorm and came to school, and suddenly, sniff. Suddenly ghosts appeared, and the teachers were all gone. The ghosts chased us... in the classroom, the bathroom, the playground, the cafeteria, the rooftop, everywhere... so many friends died..."

"There, there."

"I, I'm the student council president, sniff. I should be helping the kids, but I was too busy running away. I was scared. I'm sorry..."

Cheon Yo-hwa of the 117th cycle was undoubtedly the same person as the Cheon Yo-hwa of previous cycles, yet completely different.

Her mind was overwhelmed.

Her emotions were intense.

In other words, she lacked experience.

"It’s okay. Whether you’re the student council president or not, you’re all just young students. Surviving alone is already a big deal."

"Sniff..."

To level up to the 'complete Cheon Yo-hwa,' several more years of suffering and patience were needed.

The kid in front of me was destined to lead the group of survivors until the 750 students were reduced to 17.

But there were definitely advantages that an incomplete version had compared to a complete one. That was why I had personally dived into the ‘School Ghost Stories.’

"There’s plenty of chocolate, so take your time eating. How have you been escaping from the ghosts?"

"Sniff. A strange fairy periodically gave us quests? Some kind of missions. If we completed them, we were guaranteed food and a place to sleep for a short while... Originally, I moved with the other kids, but as soon as the latest quest started, we were forcibly scattered by the fairy..."

"I see."

I responded casually, but my heart was pounding with excitement.

What Cheon Yo-hwa had just said contained the situation I had longed for.

‘...As expected. This version of Cheon Yo-hwa still perceives anomalies correctly.’

Not just the ghosts of the ‘School Ghost Stories,’ but also the fairies of the tutorial.

Originally, the Cheon Yo-hwa of previous cycles couldn’t even perceive the fairies. Brainwashing. Or the effects of perception distortion.

But the current Cheon Yo-hwa showed no signs of any abnormality. She was seeing the anomalies as they were.

‘Then, there’s some trigger that makes her unable to perceive anomalies in the future... What could it be?’

I had to find that out now.

I gave a benevolent smile.

"You've really had a hard time, student. You must be very hungry. Do you want to eat this too?"

"Sniff... Oh, cup noodles!"

"Of course. And there are different flavors too."

"Jajangmyeon flavor and mala flavor!"

"Now, I’ll connect the portable battery I carried for power outages to the kettle, and just wait a bit... There, it’s done."

"Wow! Wow! Yummy!"

For a while, we enjoyed a moment of happiness.

"Guard ahjussi, I realized something. Life... Life is worth living if you can just eat delicious food..."

Cheon Yo-hwa showed a sage-like expression.

If Siddhartha Gautama had tasted modern factory-made jajangmyeon cup noodles under the Bodhi tree, he might have acknowledged that 'life isn’t that painful.'

"Of course. Even in such a world, those who live must continue living. I’m going to look around for other students, so stay healthy."

"Oh."

I turned on my lantern and started to move. Then, Cheon Yo-hwa hesitantly put down the cup noodle container and followed me.

"W-Wait. Guard ahjussi, can’t you take me with you?"

"Hm? You, student?"

"Yes! I, um, I was kind of like a leader before we were forcibly separated. There are many good kids, but there are also some who are mentally stressed... um. When they see the supplies you have, they might get bad ideas..."

I inwardly smiled.

It was a welcome suggestion. My goal from the beginning was to accompany Cheon Yo-hwa.

But there was a big difference between offering help and receiving a voluntary decision. I had slyly cast a line, and she had bitten it admirably.

"Are you saying you'll protect me?"

"Haha... Protecting is a bit much. Seeing you earlier, you seem really strong. I can just help you to avoid unnecessary troubles."

Her playful imitation of throwing one-two punches was amusing, and I couldn’t help but chuckle.

"Are you following me just because you want to eat more cup noodles?"

"Huh, caught... But, um, in such a situation, I think it’s important to move as a group. I’ll always walk ahead!"

"Hm."

Walking ahead in a void meant taking the most dangerous role and trusting me with their back. It meant she would be in a position where betrayal was impossible.

"Alright. If the student council president says so, I should believe you. Let’s move together for a while."

"Yes! Thank you, ahjussi!"

We walked along the 4th-floor corridor.

Suddenly, the back of Cheon Yo-hwa's head caught my eye.

A gauze bandage stained with dark, crusted blood.

A trace of betrayal. A mental trauma.

"....."

"By the way, guard ahjussi, do you have any news from outside? We know nothing except the sparse information the fairy gives us."

"I don't know exactly either, but the radio in the guard's office sometimes picks up outside news. It's no different here. The country collapsed, the military was wiped out, that's all."

"Ugh... So, there's no rescue team coming for us?"

"There won't be."

"I figured..."

Cheon Yo-hwa's shoulders drooped visibly.

"Although it's unfortunate, you should also prepare for the worst regarding your family outside. The world is very broken."

"Well, I'm not too worried about my family. They were all brainwashed by a cult and did strange things anyway."

"Hmm. A cult."

Step. Step.

Aside from our footsteps and voices, the entire school was eerie.

But there was no time to get bored.

"The flow of time itself is different between this school and the outside."

"What?"

"How long do you think it’s been since you were trapped here?"

"Um, let me see... Including the days I missed, at least 390 days..."

"Outside, it hasn’t even been three months."

"No way! Really?"

Cheon Yo-hwa's reactions were always exaggerated and varied.

Unlike the necromancer of previous cycles who smiled like a doll.

‘She was originally like this.’

It felt novel.

Despite having lived 117 cycles, there were still wells of human experience I hadn’t yet explored.

"Ahjussi."

Cheon Yo-hwa lowered her voice.

Human voices were fascinating. Surprisingly, simple vibrations and titles could convey a lot of information. I immediately focused on the front.

Thump, thump, thump, thud.

A ghost was opening a classroom door and coming out from the other end of the corridor. But not with its feet, but with its head.

Not a handstand, but moving its head with thumps. Each time it moved, the ghost’s head shattered, spilling blood around.

Thump, thump, thump, thud.

But the shattered skull pieces and blood quickly gathered back into the shape of a head. So, the ghost was repeating death each time its head hit the ground.

"Oh... Thump-thump-thump ghost..."

Cheon Yo-hwa whispered quietly.

"Do you know that ghost?"

"Yes, kind of. I've encountered it a few times. It's slow, so it's easy to escape. But if you let your guard down and get too close, you suddenly get transported to the rooftop and fall into the playground."

"You sound like you've experienced it."

"No, I saw a few kids fall from the rooftop... At least 17 kids died from falling that I saw. So, we call it the thump-thump-thump ghost or just the suicide ghost."

Thump, thump, thump, thud.

The ghost was getting closer, entering the classroom backdoor and exiting the front door.

Defeating the anomaly here was simple. Four exorcism methods immediately came to mind.

But the command I chose was 'wait.'

Cheon Yo-hwa had just joined my party. It was customary to test the newbie's skills.

"Alright. Please wait a moment."

Cheon Yo-hwa didn't refuse this implicit test. A deep breath echoed in the dark corridor.

"... not. af..., sts..."

Murmuring sound.

I enhanced my hearing to listen in.

"...I am not afraid. Cheon Yo-hwa is not afraid of ghosts. Cheon Yo-hwa has strong courage..."

Darkness gathered around Cheon Yo-hwa's outline, tightening.

Thump, like a stretched rubber band snapping back, Cheon Yo-hwa dashed forward.

Her movements were as agile as they had been during our first encounter.

It wasn't the kind of patronizing compliment like 'good movements for an ordinary person.'

Cheon Yo-hwa was no ordinary person. She was an Awakener.

And she had survived 390 days in a tutorial dungeon of unprecedented difficulty.

Cheon Yo-hwa, with 'good movements even for an awakener,' quickly closed in on the ghost.

When she was about 4 meters away, she started to slow down. Then, swish, like a gymnast, she smoothly went into a handstand.

Thump, thump, thwack!

Cheon Yo-hwa's legs spun like windmills. In the upside-down position, her skills were good enough for a breakdancer to recruit her on the spot.

The ghost wobbled under her kicks. After two, three, and four hits, its balance was bound to break.

-Uwooooh...

"Hyahaaa!"

Cheon Yo-hwa grabbed the ghost by the hair and jumped up. The ghost, whose hair was wholly grabbed, had no choice but to be pulled up.

-Oh, oh, oh, oh.

"Hoh."

I almost whistled.

The ‘ghost that had to move with its head’ was standing upright. Its weak point had been struck.

Whether Cheon Yo-hwa instinctively grasped the exorcism method or stumbled upon it didn’t matter. In a fight against anomalies, results mattered.

Thud—

The ghost, whose hair was grabbed by Cheon Yo-hwa, turned into chunks of flesh from the toes up and fell.

In less than 7 seconds, its legs, body, upper torso, and head shattered and scattered across the corridor. The last bits of hair slipped through Cheon Yo-hwa's fingers.

Cheon Yo-hwa shook her hands in disgust.

"Ugh, gross... Anyway, how was that, guard ahjussi? I fight pretty well, right?"

"Not just well. There’s a reason you were picked as the leader. I’ll rely on you from now on."

"Hehe. Yes!"

The outcome of this battle wasn’t just about confirming Cheon Yo-hwa's combat abilities.

Anyway, that kid would eventually become one of the strongest awakeners in Korea, along with Dang Seo-rin. Her potential was already verified.

The real achievement lay elsewhere.

‘That kid. She just brainwashed herself.’

The secret to Cheon Yo-hwa's strength.

Right before she charged at the thump-thump-thump ghost, Cheon Yo-hwa had definitely murmured to herself.

-I am not afraid.

-Cheon Yo-hwa is not afraid of ghosts.

-Cheon Yo-hwa has strong courage.

It wasn’t merely reciting a prayer to boost her courage.

Because Cheon Yo-hwa's ability was necromancy, more precisely, ‘the ability to input the thought processes and behavioral principles of NPCs.’

‘She was slowly changing her own thought processes and behavioral principles to be advantageous for survival and combat.’

I entered the classroom where the thump-thump-thump ghost had emerged. I glanced at places where it was hard to notice, like the underside of the teacher’s desk, inside the school desks' drawers, and the locker.

死. 死. 死. 死.

Sure enough, there were talismans. Just like the ones found in the restroom. All were curses written in human blood.

The attendance book on the teacher’s desk had, coincidentally, the name Cheon Yo-hwa, suggesting this was her classroom.

"....."

"Ahjussi, it seems there’s no one around here! Let’s try over there! I’m sure some kids hid to escape the thump-thump-thump ghost!"

The sky outside was red. Through the broken windows, white birch trees were bleeding onto the corridor. The entire corridor was blood-red, like it had been pierced and torn apart.

"Alright."

In the middle of such a corridor, I lightly waved back at Cheon Yo-hwa, who was brightly waving her arm at me.

How had that kid come to be unable to perceive anomalies? Why had she attracted the interest of the Infinite Void and become its apostle?

And why were there so many curse talismans in Baekhwa Girls' High School?

I felt the answers were slowly forming in my mind.

Footnotes:

Chapter 91

The Breakdown V

Sinnoa

After that, the operation to exterminate the 'School Ghost Stories' proceeded smoothly.

Cheon Yo-hwa and I continued to patrol the school. Whenever we found survivors, we immediately transferred them to the 'safe zone.'

The survivors shed tears of gratitude.

"The ghosts... aren't coming out?"

"We can use the bathroom freely!"

"Thank you, guard oppa!"

"Oh, but there are corpses... Well, we've seen plenty of corpses by now, so it doesn't matter."

"Shit, these cup noodles taste fucking amazing..."

Since the first to third floors were largely declared 'safe zones,' there was plenty of space for the students to stay.

The main concern was providing food and maintaining hygiene for hundreds of survivors... As for hygiene, I had plenty of supplies packed in my trunk, so that was covered.

The real problem was food.

Although my trunk, obtained in the 115th cycle, boasted a capacity comparable to a subspace, it was only as large as an ordinary library. It wasn't the romantic, mansion-sized library often seen in fantasy novels.

Fortunately, Korea had experience overcoming food shortages,

having once been one of the poorest countries in the world (though this applied to only 50% of the country). Therefore, we were quite adept at quickly resolving food crises.

"We'll use the cafeteria."

"Ugh."

Cheon Yo-hwa was horrified. She had a natural talent for expressing words like 'dislike' and 'contempt' with just her facial muscles.

"You mean the cafeteria on the first floor? That's... I've only been there once, but there are so many ghosts."

"Of course, there are many. Didn’t you know? Ghosts always gather the most in bathrooms, bedrooms, and kitchens."

"No, I didn't know..."

The dominant anomaly haunting the cafeteria at Baekhwa Girls' High was the 'Human Flesh Restaurant.'

1. The cafeteria served meals daily.

2. However, the meat used in the meals was actually mixed with human flesh.

3. Those who ate the human flesh became rapidly addicted and started craving more, eventually turning into cannibals who could only consume human flesh. If they didn't eat human flesh for even a few days, they went insane.

Anomalies related to human flesh often appeared in the void.

Especially in voids where 'massacres' had occurred, these anomalies were highly likely to appear. It was no exception in the 'School Ghost Stories,' where hundreds had already been slaughtered.

The void was a harsher environment than the South Pole. When faced with the dilemma of "Will you starve to death tomorrow, or go insane after one to three months?" even the most seasoned awakeners would weep and resort to cannibalism.

However... the 'School Ghost Stories' were a bit different.

"Student, the school's meals weren't that great, were they?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Dinner was alright, but breakfast and lunch were really bad. It made living in the dorms hard."

"Then what are you worried about? The meals are all served separately on stainless steel trays, right? Even the serving dishes are all separate."

"What?"

"If you only eat the side dishes that are clearly vegetables, you're safe. From now on, breakfast and lunch will be the main meals for the students."

If eating human flesh makes you go insane, then just eat everything else but the human flesh, right?

In most voids, it was hard to circumvent the 'Human Flesh Restaurant' anomaly with such tricks.

Korea was notoriously tough on vegans. The void restaurants in Korea specialized in dishes like spicy pork stir-fry, hot pot, and pork cutlets, targeting animal protein lovers.

Unless there were dishes like aglio e olio, which didn’t include meat, or hamburgers where the patties could be easily removed, it was quite difficult to separate meat from the menus of most void restaurants.

However, 'schools' and 'military' were different.

These two institutions, unlike other regions, respected life so much that they were genuinely considerate of vegans.

In my view, the 'Human Flesh Restaurant' anomaly in Baekhwa Girls' High was merely a convenient nutrient source.

"You could use anomalies this way..."

Cheon Yo-hwa was astonished as she received meals from the shadowy cafeteria ghosts.

"If you shed your prejudices, you'll find that many anomalies can be quite useful."

"Ugh, is that so... Oh. Stir-fried anchovies taste good. It’s so good it’s scary! Guard ahjussi, are you sure this is okay?"

I glanced at Cheon Yo-hwa’s profile. The student council president was staring at her meal tray with a complex expression.

Suddenly, I recalled our first meeting, specifically the conversation we had at the school gate in the 5th cycle when I recruited Cheon Yo-hwa.

-Cheon Yo-hwa’s abilities are very powerful. Whether it’s turning dead bodies into zombies or living people into zombies, I’m not sure.

-...Bodies?

Back then, Cheon Yo-hwa couldn’t properly recognize the word 'bodies.' Probably the same for 'human flesh.'

Brainwashing for survival.

If you think about what the 17 survivors had to eat to stay alive for four years, it’s a simple issue.

In reality, the Baekhwa Girls' High guild members were all addicted to human flesh, going mad if they didn't consume it at least once every four days.

"...My idea isn't that great. If more time had passed, the students would have reached the same conclusion."

"Ugh. Us?"

"Of course. And this solution isn’t permanent. Eat as much as you can while you can. I’ll also keep as much long-lasting food as possible."

"...?"

My prediction was spot on.

A week later, the menu in the school cafeteria began to change slightly.

"Huh? Ahjussi. Doesn't it seem like there are more meat dishes?"

"Hmm."

Anomalies lived and moved.

In terms of life's pace, anomalies were much more urgent and desperate than humans.

While humans took thousands or tens of thousands of years to slowly evolve, filtering out mutations in the web of time, anomalies could mutate as a species in just a single day.

As a result.

"Oh no. Two-thirds of the dishes are meat..."

The side dishes on Cheon Yo-hwa's stainless steel tray were exceedingly luxurious.

Chicken drumsticks, beef soup, meatballs, boiled pork. The only non-meat dishes were vegetable curry, white rice, and salad.

In the past, such a meal could have been posted online with the title [The level of high school meals these days, real or fake?] garnering praise and jealousy from the older generation.

"Throw away everything except the vegetable curry, rice, and salad."

"Yes... Sniff, what a waste!"

Cheon Yo-hwa looked teary-eyed as she threw away the side dishes into the waste bin.

"Yesterday, someone couldn’t resist the cheese pork cutlet and took

a bite. I scolded them harshly, but I understood their feelings..."

"One bite might be fine. But if you keep eating two, three bites, it’s over. At least we have curry for now. Soon, there'll be nothing but plain rice."

"Ugh. The nutrition is terrible. It’d be great if we had protein supplements..."

It was clear that the food situation would deteriorate quickly.

But we hadn't been idle during this time.

We increased patrols and searched the entire void, resulting in the rescue of over 150 survivors.

The 'School Ghost Stories' were almost exterminated. The school building, which had oddly expanded to 13 floors, returned to its original four-story structure. The playground and dormitory were also restored.

...But over 500 corpses were found as well.

Compared to the future of previous cycles where only 17 survived, the route of the 117th cycle was significantly better.

Thanks to accurately identifying the victims' locations, future cycles fared even better.

But let’s focus on the story of the 117th cycle for now.

"Ahjussi, is the funeral over?"

In the playground, wooden desks and chairs were piled up and burning like a campfire. The wood wasn’t the best for a bonfire, so the smoke was thick. But the flames were well-controlled, rising straight into the sky.

It was a decent rope to guide the souls to heaven.

"Yes, it just ended."

"Hehe. Did many of our kids cry again?"

"Crying is good. Just like laughter knows no borders, tears have no nationality."

Cheon Yo-hwa stood next to me with her hands behind her back. The sky over Baekhwa Girls' High School, tainted by the void, was always blood-red.

The red spider lilies surrounding the school buildings were equally red. The only things that escaped the redness were the white birch trees, which formed white iron bars imprisoning the school.

No matter how many anomalies we exterminated, the spider lilies and birch trees never disappeared.

"Yeah. Holding a funeral seems to have eased their minds. You even collected all the ashes. These days, I see kids wearing necklaces with their best friends' ashes inside."

"To give to their families when they meet them?"

"Yes. Even if they can’t deliver them, the talisman still has meaning."

"It must be hard for kids your age to care about the dead's feelings. You’re commendable."

"Ha ha... Oh, here, take this!"

Cheon Yo-hwa handed me a rice ball. It was white rice with stir-fried anchovies wrapped in seaweed.

The number of 'non-meat side dishes' had drastically decreased. So, some students had formed a cooking team to recreate meals from the cafeteria.

"Thank you."

Of course, this was still a grand feast for me.

By tomorrow, even the stir-fried anchovies would be gone. The day

after, the rice would turn into Bolognese pasta.

While we had stored food with relatively long shelf lives, there was a clear limit. At most, it would last four days.

The hourglass of the 'School Ghost Stories' was rapidly building a pyramid in the desert.

Cheon Yo-hwa looked up at the blood-red sky.

"Ahjussi, when can we finally get out of this hell...?"

"Tomorrow."

Cheon Yo-hwa's eyes turned towards me.

"Tell the other students to wait near the school gate, ready to escape at any moment. Yo-hwa, come with me."

"....."

"By tomorrow, we'll cut out the heart of this void."

We searched every corner of the school: dormitory, academic building, old building, playground, auditorium.

Naturally, we slaughtered all the anomalies.

The total number of anomalies exterminated by me and some students was 99. Exactly 99.

It was a near-miraculous achievement, but the blood-red sky of the 'School Ghost Stories' still remained. This meant there were still anomalies hiding somewhere.

And I had a good idea of where this secret hideout was.

"It's underground."

Cheon Yo-hwa blinked.

"Underground? There isn't really a basement in our school... There

are some semi-basements used as small storage rooms, but that's it."

Indeed, there were no stairs leading from the first floor to the basement in any building.

Yes, stairs.

As you all might have guessed by now, the premier means of transportation in the void wasn't stairs.

"Yo-hwa, we're going to take the elevator."

"Elevator? Where is there an... Oh. No way?"

It was the 'no way.'

Cheon Yo-hwa and I packed supplies and moved to the old building. Although it was called the old building, it was still used as a club building and wasn't that old.

There was a service elevator installed in the old building.

Dumbwaiter, lift. There were many names for it, but students just called it the service elevator.

It wasn't built for people, but it was still a good 'elevator,' wasn't it?

"Okay, you go in first."

"No. I always thought about what it would be like to go in there whenever I saw it... Ah! Ahjussi, no! It's too small! It's so small! Really small... Oh? Surprisingly spacious..."

"In the void, physical space means little."

Thud, clunk.

After squeezing into the elevator and turning on the flashlight, I saw something surprising: elevator buttons.

[B001] [B005] [B009] [B013]

[B002] [B006] [B010] [B014]

[B003] [B007] [B011] [B015]

[B004] [B008] [B012] [B016]

Twitch—

One wall of the elevator was covered in buttons.

As the flashlight shone on it, Cheon Yo-hwa wriggled behind me.

"B-Basement level 16? Are there 16 floors underground that we haven't explored? No way! That’s impossible! Ahjussi, this can’t be done in a day or two..."

"Ah, don’t worry. In such cases, it’s the form, not the numbers, that matter."

"Yes?"

"Look at the buttons. There are four rows vertically and four columns horizontally. This is just a way to represent the number 4."

"Oh..."

"Press one. Anywhere is fine."

"O-Okay. I'll try."

Cheon Yo-hwa extended her finger and pressed the button for the 12th floor.

Clunk! The elevator jolted. Cheon Yo-hwa let out a small scream and grabbed my shoulder. Clunk, clunk...

At that moment, the elevator buttons blinked red.

[死444] [死444] [死444] [死444]

[死444] [死444] [死444] [死444]

[死444] [死444] [死444] [死444]

[死444] [死444] [死444] [死444]

The red light from the buttons filled the entire elevator with a bloody hue.

"....."

Cheon Yo-hwa swallowed hard.

Though it was just regular LED lights, the red light seemed to ooze like a viscous liquid. The red light from the buttons seeped down and stuck to both of us.

Clunk!

The elevator rattled like an old ship docking at a pier.

Then, the door slowly descended, revealing not the false fourth floor above ground, but the 'fourth basement floor,' the true meaning of the 'underworld' in the school ghost stories.

"Come out slowly. And every time I take a step, make sure to take a step. Don't take more or fewer steps."

"O-Okay. This place is..."

Cheon Yo-hwa cautiously stepped out of the elevator, looking around.

There was no need for long observation.

"A hospital...?"

Because every scene was identical and endlessly repeating.

The white hospital corridors and ceilings. There were no patients or doctors, and the hospital beds, eerily clean, lined the corridor. Every bed had a clear IV line hanging like a suspension bridge. The corridor was infinite.

——I had seen this exact scene before, albeit briefly, in the 89th cycle.

‘Infinite Void.’

Yes.

The 89th cycle was when I witnessed the Infinite Void.

The prison, school, hospital, swimming pool, movie theater—scenes from the screen chaotically intermingling and overlapping. No, a scene of madness.

‘...So this is the main base.’

The main body of the Apostle of the Infinite Void.

It had nested in the fourth basement floor of Baekhwa Girls' High School, in the Infernal Hell.

Footnotes:

Chapter 92

The Breakdown VI

Sinnoa

Baekhwa Girls' High.

To be more precise, there were quite a few signs indicating that 'School Ghost Stories' was the nest of the Infinite Void.

First, the school's scenery was a decisive piece of evidence.

Once, in the 89th cycle, my consciousness briefly touched the Fairy King, allowing me to glimpse the Infernal Hell, and the sight was exactly like this.

[The school was an abandoned wooden building. The name Baekhwa (百話) wavered ominously.]

[The sky was blood-red. Broken windows, with white birch trees scratching their pale skin against the shards of glass, peered into the school's corridors. The school was a wreck, pierced through by white spikes.]

No matter how you looked at it, it was just like School Ghost Stories.

Of course, there were differences as well.

For instance, the school name.

Originally, Baekhwa (白花) meant 'white flower.' Although the characters '白' and '百' looked somewhat similar, they were clearly different in Hanja.

However, as I had emphasized before, wordplay, 'playing with words in the world,' was the basis of magic.

My theory was as follows.

In Baekhwa, the 'white' (白) referred to the white birch trees. These white birches were evident throughout the school's corridors, seen through the broken windows of both the new and old buildings.

They embodied the concept of 'white.'

As they transformed into birch trees, the empty spot left by the white (白) was filled by the homonymic white (百).

A simple wordplay.

Then what about the flower (花) in Baekhwa?

This was also simple. Despite exterminating 99 anomalies, only two things in Baekhwa Girls' High School had not returned to their original state.

The birch trees, standing like prison bars. And the red spider lilies blooming everywhere.

These red spider lilies had taken over the meaning of flower (花).

Reality had its words stolen by anomalies, transforming 'white flower' into 'red flower,' and the world was overtaken by the void.

Thus, no matter how many anomalies were exterminated, the name 'Baekhwa' itself... the last magic of the anomaly remained intact.

"That's my interpretation."

"Wow... I never thought of it like that. I always wondered why the birch trees and spider lilies stayed the same while everything else went back to normal..."

Step. Step.

We walked through the empty hospital. The ceiling, pillars, and floor were all bleached white, extending endlessly.

Where we were. When we were.

We kept our consciousness clear, which was becoming blurry from

the lack of any fixed coordinates, by continuing our conversation.

“No matter how far we walk, it’s the same corridor repeating. Is there no exit...?”

“Just hang on a bit longer.”

This was why a duo was important. Even if Cheon Yo-hwa was far inferior to me in combat power, being in a pair in the void was much more advantageous than being alone.

The basic unit that made up a person's world wasn’t an atom but rather the duo of ‘someone else and myself.’

“Hmm. Oh, right! How do we get rid of the birch trees and spider lilies? Can’t we just cut them down?”

“Tried it, they just grow back.”

“Ew...”

“They may look like trees and flowers on the outside, but they’re actually anomalies. While most anomalies can be exorcised through brute force, some can’t be harmed physically. You have to exploit their weak points.”

“Weak points...”

In fact, that was why I used school desks as firewood for the funerals instead of birch trees.

Burning the bodies of anomalies for a funeral pyre would be too ominous. The toxic substances from the smoke were far less harmful.

“Hmm. But thinking about it that way... The weak point of the ‘Baekhwa’ anomaly is still unclear, right? It doesn’t move around like other ghosts, we don’t know its true nature. Oh, is the weak point hidden in the basement?”

“Close enough.”

Step. A lighter step echoed after mine.

Following the instructions when we first entered, Cheon Yo-hwa moved precisely in sync with my steps.

“Stop here.”

“Ah, okay.”

“We can take ten more free steps. Get comfortable now if you need to. Make sure you take all ten steps.”

“...What’s the point of this?”

“If we take ten more steps, that will be exactly the 4,444th step.”

“……”

I opened my trunk bag. Then I took out candles one by one and set them around.

Before long, a hundred candles stood in a formation like a birch forest. I sat in the middle, with Cheon Yo-hwa across from me.

Snap—

With a snap of my fingers, the hundred candles all lit up with a whoosh. It was an application of aura.

“Ahjussi, this is...”

“Yo-hwa, we’re about to perform a ritual.”

“……”

“Did you take all ten steps?”

“Yes.”

“You asked earlier what the weak point of the ‘Baekhwa’ anomaly was, right? The ritual we’re about to conduct will be that weak point. The ritual is simple. Have you ever shared ghost stories with friends during summer outings?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Good. It’s the same as that. We’re going to talk about all the ghosts we’ve exorcised so far, you and I, alternating. Every ghost, making up a total of 99. We’ll talk about them one by one.”

“……”

“Why don’t you start?”

“Ah, yes. Um, let’s see. A ghost I saw personally, while walking on the fourth floor of the school, I heard a faint knocking sound…”

Quietly.

Her voice flowed gently as she began the ghost story. Flicker, flicker. The hundred flames swayed, and the white hospital lights hummed.

Between the red flames from the ground and the white flames from the ceiling, Cheon Yo-hwa stared blankly at me.

“… That’s the end of my story.”

“Good.”

Snap.

When I snapped my fingers, one candle flickered out. A thin gray smoke rose to the ceiling.

“Ah…”

“Now it’s my turn. From my own experience, there’s a Hanako ghost in the third stall of the boys’ bathroom at Baekhwa. If you spin thirteen times in that stall…”

One. Two. Three. Four.

The candles went out one by one. Each time, a wisp of smoke rose as an offering to the sky, and the dried wicks emitted a black stench. Cheon Yo-hwa’s shoulders twitched.

Flicker—

Cheon Yo-hwa realized the anomaly around the fortieth flame.

“Ahjussi, look. The corridor lights...”

“I know. Don’t worry.”

The hospital corridor lights were going out.

From the far end. One by one. One meter at a time.

There was no exit or window in the infernal basement. The infinite hospital corridor, once the lights went out, was pitch dark.

“Let’s continue. It’s your turn.”

“...Okay.”

Flicker.

The darkness exhaled, closing in. From both sides. Each breath matched our own, as if our breaths drew it closer.

“My friend told me this story, about a ghost named Crash, who was just a head with dangling guts...”

Flicker. Flicker. Flicker. Flicker—

We picked up the pace in our storytelling. The darkness quickened in response. Each light going out made Cheon Yo-hwa flinch.

“My story... ends here.”

The surroundings had grown cold.

Before the ritual, the hospital corridor had seemed endless. Now, only a narrow strip remained.

“.....”

“.....”

Flicker—

Only one light remained.

One candle struggled against the encroaching darkness, its flame weakly sputtering.

“Good. Now it’s my turn...”

“Ahjussi.”

Cheon Yo-hwa suddenly spoke up.

“You’re not actually our school’s security guard, are you?”

“.....”

“It felt odd. I’ve lived in the dorms, so I know most of the guards’ faces. But I’d never seen you before. I was too out of it when we first met, you were in uniform and had a flashlight, so I thought maybe you were new. But none of the others recognized you either. Still, you kept helping us...”

After a moment’s thought, I nodded.

“No, I’m not.”

“Knew it. So... why did you help us?”

“To eradicate the void here. The School Ghost Stories. The Infernal Hell.”

“Infernal Hell...”

“But I’ll explain my true identity tomorrow. For now, let’s focus on exorcising the anomaly that’s been killing you. Can you trust me?”

“.....”

Cheon Yo-hwa’s orange ponytail bobbed like a candle flame.

“Yes. Of course.”

“Good. Now, it’s time for the last story. This is a Japanese ghost story. Have you heard of the Hundred Tales?”

“The Hundred Tales?”

The Hundred Tales.

In Japanese, it’s called Hyakumonogatari, a collection of yōkai stories.

“To summon this ghost, people gather and light a hundred candles, each telling a ghost story, extinguishing a candle with each tale.”

“……”

“Just like we’re doing now.”

The last candle flickered.

“According to the tale, when all hundred candles go out, the storyteller of the last tale dies.”

“Dies…”

“Or a ghost appears. We’re already in the underworld. A person in the underworld can’t die again, so a ghost has to appear.”

“……”

“Here’s the interesting part. In the original tale, the ghost is called Aoandon, appearing when a ‘blue lantern’ is lit.”

Flicker.

I pressed the flashlight button. A blue LED light swept through the darkness.

“But the ghost that will appear here isn’t Aoandon.”

“Then who…?”

“The name of this school is Baekhwa, meaning ‘white flower.’ But remember I said the name was stolen?”

I pulled out a brush pen and wrote on the white floor of the corridor.

“The void is an empty space. It takes over the original world, making it a void, and then it imprints itself. So the letters of Baekhwa were stolen, and the new letters are...”

百話.

One hundred stories (百) and tales (話).

“.....”

“In Japanese, the concept of a story is expressed with two characters, ‘monogatari’ (物語).”

I continued writing.

“For example, the famous ‘Arabian Nights’ is called ‘Thousand and One Nights’ monogatari’ (千夜一夜物語) in Japanese. But in Korean, it’s simply translated as ‘thousand nights’ tale’ (千夜一夜話). So, the Japanese use two characters for a concept expressed with one character in Korean.”

“Then... the ghost story called ‘Hundred Tales’ in Korean would be...”

“Baekhwa (百話).”

Literally.

The anomaly that consumed Baekhwa Girls’ High.

The true name of the entity we’ve been calling ‘School Ghost Stories.’

The alternate identity of the entity I once referred to as the Void.

“The leader of the Hundred Ghosts (百鬼夜行) that controls the other ninety-nine ghosts. The one that took the original name of this school, turning part of the world into a void. Baekhwa (百話) is the final ghost of this infernal hell.”

Snap—

The candle died.

The lights went out.

The darkness laughed. The thick smoke smell was the breath of the endless maw of darkness.

Flicker.

Time moved in the darkness. The universe was originally darkness, so it was the original color of time and space's hostile intent.

The hundred extinguished candles grew into a white forest in an instant. A forest of birch trees.

The white skin of the trees caught fire, and the flames bloomed into red spider lilies. The red flames turned into fairy faces, and a hundred fairies laughed. Their laughter went like this:

Flowers (話) bloom into bigger flowers (花), which burn into fire (火). Burn, burn. All things are infinitely equal. So, shall not a hundred stories become a hundred flowers and a hundred flames...?

Coordinates. Time. Space became abstract, and existence twisted.

"Ahjussi—"

"It's alright."

I grabbed Cheon Yo-hwa's hand.

"I'm here."

"....."

Cheon Yo-hwa gripped my hand tightly.

Thus, the coordinates were fixed.

In that moment, the colorful flames of the universe paused, and the fairies stopped laughing. The Milky Way flowed. Hundreds,

thousands, millions, billions of eyes stared at us.

I called out its name.

“Infinite Void.”

The universe shuddered.

-Unexpected contact.

-A possibility not previously calculated.

-Infinite Void.

-Infernal Hell.

-A correct name.

-An incorrect name.

-Another random variable.

Colors breathed. Starlight danced in a round.

-What are you?

-A massive variable.

-How did you perceive our existence? How did you understand our identity? How did you locate us?

The entity that saw the world as a vast laboratory, creating fairies as terminals and sending them to the tutorial grounds, questioned.

I raised my head.

“Are you alright, Yo-hwa?”

“Yes. A bit dizzy, but surprisingly fine. Actually...”

Cheon Yo-hwa let go of my hand and bent down. The laces of her red and black basketball shoes tightened.

“I feel great. Right now, I could sprint at full speed for forty minutes. Anyway, that weird Milky Way is the culprit behind all this, right? I’ll kill it.”

“Wonderful. Let’s show the combat power of a former school guard.”

Boss battle.

Anomaly: Infinite Void

Threat level: Lv.5 Outer God-class.

Begin Subjugation.

Footnotes:

Chapter 93

The Breakdown VII

Sinnoa

——How should I write the tale of the battle that took place that day?

I think I've managed this story quite well so far.

But now, as I reflect on the moment when I first exterminated an Outer God-class anomaly, I feel a sudden, renewed difficulty in narrating it.

I always wish to be as truthful as possible with you. If I stammer while singing a poem (詩), it's not to perform tricks for you, but because there are nights in the heavens that can only be expressed through poetic words.

Starlight poured down.

Those stars had the viscosity of water rather than light. Swoosh—the red starlight poured down, speaking with the voice of a waterfall.

Like a sudden tsunami crashing onto the beach, the water-like light surged towards us, ready to drown us.

Cheon Yo-hwa quickly turned towards me. We were still holding hands.

"Ahjussi! Give the order!"

"Never dissolve into your surroundings. That anomaly will try everything to test and experiment on you, eventually turning you into a set object, a lab rat. Various illusions and visions will swallow your life like a tidal wave. Don't get influenced by them; keep yourself grounded."

"Okay!"

Swoosh. The red waterlight quickly rose to our waists. I stared unshaken at the 'Infinite Void'.

The distance between us and the Infinite Void was either just 10 meters, or 100 meters. It could have been 4,444 meters as well.

It was the distance between samsara and nirvana. It was both the Infinite Void and the Infinite. From that extreme horizon, the anomaly's unending laughter echoed.

Kya-hahaha-hahaha-ha-ha-ha—

In ancient India, if 13 kilometers were referred to as a yojana, it was one yojana and also 20,000 yojanas.

In Buddhism, it is said that the hell of sentient beings lies 20,000 yojanas below the surface. In other words, hell was 260,000 kilometers underground.

The diameter of the Earth was 12,700 kilometers. The distance from Earth to the Moon was 385,000 kilometers.

The Moon, from ancient times, was the closest otherworld to Earth.

Hell was located at a distance that was sufficient and overflowing to traverse this world but woefully inadequate to reach another world.

Ka-ha-ha-ha ka-ka-ka-ka—

The middle point between samsara and nirvana. The realm where beings could no longer stay in this world but lacked the energy to reach another world.

Thus, in the land of reincarnation where the wheel just spins idly, only the sound of laughter mocking humans endlessly squeaked and tore.

It was the scorn of the anomaly that isolated humans from the world.

"Yo-hwa. In the realm of that anomaly, both time and space can deceive you. But the fact that 'you are being deceived' will remain unchanged."

"……."

I held Cheon Yo-hwa's hand a little tighter. The distance between us was the smallest unit of distance a human could have.

"...Yes."

"The main culprit, the figure, the existence mocking you the most from the forefront. That is the nail holding the illusion in place. Understand? Everything else is normal, but there will be something uniquely abnormal. If you pull out and eliminate that nail, the illusion will disappear."

"Aah! Oh, I totally get it! It's like scenes I've seen often in comics. Okay. Ahjussi, just leave it to me—"

Blink.

The light surged to our chins, submerging us completely. The sensation of our clasped hands blurred as it was engulfed by the water's undulations.

Clunk, a sound echoed. It was like the noise of an elevator falling or the sound of a worn-out wheel rolling.

Perhaps it was the sound of time.

The world before my eyes changed completely.

Blink.

"——Undertaker. Undertaker, what's wrong?"

The smell of summer was in the air. The leaves, soaked by a recent shower, exuded a scent as rich as green tea.

It was a cedar forest. The cedar roots spread in all directions, and

on those stiff legs, the blue hydrangea petals stretched out once more.

Amid the stretching of the green trees and the blue young petals, a mischievous old railway snaked like a serpent.

"Really. Phew. Be careful. If you keep getting distracted like that, you're going to bite your tongue."

On the railway, a miniature train was perched like a toy. It was a three-carriage mini steam engine, the kind you'd see in an amusement park.

Dang Seo-rin, wearing a witch's hat, was grumbling as she rode the train.

"……."

"Ah- Ah- the railway is broken again. The world might have ended, but aren't the KORAIL employees doing their jobs too carelessly?"

Uhtcha, Dang Seo-rin jumped off the locomotive.

She stretched with a long "Uhtaaa-" following the surrounding cedar trees and hydrangeas.

Well, it's been four hours since we boarded the train. I could sit still for 40 hours without any problem, but a frail wizard like Dang Seo-rin must have felt her whole body getting stiff.

"...Try to understand. The KORAIL employees probably all ended up unemployed. The world is too harsh to demand passion pay."

"Kids these days have no tenacity, none. Phew. I'll connect the railway; you check the wheels. The train has been wobbling strangely for a while now."

"Alright. Leave it to me."

"Okay."

I grabbed some tools from the cargo hold and inspected the wheels

of our steam locomotive... the 'Hogwarts Express'.

Please don't criticize the train's name. In this crazy plan to travel the world on a mini steam train, my authority was quite insignificant.

The planner of this trip, who loved Harry Potter so much as a child that she wore a witch's hat all year round, twirled her wand.

"Disassemble-Reassemble."

A two-line song casually slipped from Dang Seo-rin's lips.

Clink-clank, clink-clank—

The rails we had just passed separated and floated in the air. Then they moved themselves to the broken part of the railway ahead.

Clack!

The broken railway was instantly repaired. Of course, the railway behind us was now broken, but what of it?

It's hard to believe there are any other crazies in the world besides us who would embark on such a mad journey.

"Done! How are the wheels? Broken?"

"No, just a few loose screws. I tightened them with all my strength, so there shouldn't be any issues for a while."

"That's a relief. Then let's get going again!"

Clatter.

The express train moved. The locomotive let out a loud whistle and vigorously puffed out steam.

By the way, that's not real steam from burning coal. It's just an 'illusion magic' Dang Seo-rin cast.

Not just the steam; the entire express train we rode was imbued with Dang Seo-rin's 'illusion magic' that she spent 30 days

meticulously designing.

In this crazy world, we were slightly crazier than others, with Dang Seo-rin being the most uniquely crazy among us.

"We're about to cross into North Korea."

Dang Seo-rin unfolded a map.

A map covered with fingerprints. It was colored with red and yellow markers here and there. The map trembled like a maple leaf from the train's clattering.

"After North Korea, we'll reach Duman River Station, cross over to Hasan Station, and then it's Russia. From there, we just ride the Trans-Siberian Railway all the way up."

"……."

"Ah, I've always had the Trans-Siberian Railway on my bucket list!"

Clatter, clatter.

"It's ironic that I only get to travel after the world has ended. Life is truly mysterious. Anyway, after Moscow, we'll head to Belarus, Poland, Germany..."

"Yeah."

"Yes?"

I murmured softly.

"Yes, this is my dream."

"……."

"To someday travel the world with you, Seo-rin. Riding this strange, uniquely modified train that suits your tastes."

"……? What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

Dang Seo-rin tilted her head while holding the map.

"We're doing it now."

The cedar forest swayed in the wind. I looked up at the sky. Thick steam rose, following the sky's breath.

"One car on the train belongs to you, Dang Seo-rin. It's only natural; you wouldn't give up the first car to anyone else. That one car is also your room. You'd decorate it just like a caravan camper to your heart's content. Skulls, crystal balls, wands, brooms... You might even keep an owl."

"……."

"The second car is my room. It would start off neatly organized, but as the travel days go by, your belongings would slowly invade my space. You're always collecting trinkets, so one car wouldn't be enough for your stuff."

Clatter, clatter.

"The third car is the dining and resting space. The fourth car is storage. I have a magic trunk bag, so there's actually plenty of space. If the railway breaks, you use magic and song to fix it, and if an anomaly attacks, I defeat it. Like that, we can go anywhere, as far as we want. We can travel forever."

"……."

"But not yet."

Clatter.

"Seo-rin. On the night we defeated Ten Legs, when I first revealed that I was a regressor, and when you died. I swore. I would restore this world to its original state before traveling with you."

"...When do you think we can leave?"

"Sorry. Honestly, it's still far off."

I chuckled softly.

"But... I always remember, Seo-rin. And you need to get stronger too."

"Me? Why?"

"Because we're going to cross the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by train. You have to freeze the seawater in real-time to create an ice railway. Even if we reach the beach and find a lonely telephone pole standing in the sand, our journey won't end."

"Oh my God. Are you crazy? Do you know how much mana it would take to keep freezing the sea continuously?"

"Listen. Not just crossing the sea, but we're going to follow the route of the Titanic!"

"Oh my God. Are you crazy? That's a fantastic idea."

We chuckled softly.

"...I see. Undertaker, you have the [Complete Memory] ability. No matter how many illusions, you won't lose the coordinates."

"Yeah."

Dang Seo-rin looked up at the sky.

"Ah- Ah- The promise of a journey we made centuries ago is being postponed again?"

She sighed, dangling her legs outside the train like a locomotive puffing out steam.

"What's a few centuries? It's almost a thousand years now. Seriously, what kind of friend makes a travel promise for a thousand years later and then postpones it again?"

"Sorry. Mostly Old Man Scho's fault."

"Pft. Yeah—haha! That's right. It's that old man's fault. You're a supporter, but it's the damage dealer who ran away alone who's at fault."

Dang Seo-rin laughed heartily.

Then she looked at me.

"I'm probably just an illusion of the anomaly. An AI-like existence created to replicate 'Dang Seo-rin' as closely as possible using your memory. Yet, why do you still treat me as a friend?"

"Don't say something foolish. Life is just a dream. There's no need to dismiss it as a delusion just because you're dreaming within a dream. I'm just grateful that you follow me in any dream."

"……."

My companion was silent for a while.

Then she smiled at me.

"...I'm looking forward to the journey. It makes my heart race."

"Me too."

"I'll be waiting. Even if it takes a thousand years."

Clatter—

The wheels moved.

What is engraved in childhood leaves its mark for life. For Dang Seo-rin, it was magic and the existence of wizards.

Then, the first shape a person sees after being born is a circle, a circle (圓).

The pupil of a person's eye.

The eyes of mother and father. Someone's eyes. Black islands floating in an infinite white sea.

Those islands were not solitary; they were twin islands.

For humans, the most perfect shape was a circle, and a circle (圓形)

was always a prototype (原形).

The archetype of a human stared at me.

"——Hah! Ah, ahjussi?"

"Yes. I'm listening."

"Just now... Wow, it's true. Just as it is... It's unbelievable. I just entered elementary school and spent over five years! Wow, really... Wow."

"It took you quite a while."

"Such—such goosebumps. Seriously, is it possible to have such an anomaly? How...?"

I smiled.

"Who was the nail in the illusion?"

"Ah—well, my mother. She passed away when I was in fifth grade. Our family is quite filled with cultists. My mother was the only sane one."

"I see."

Squeezing.

Looking around, it was still a galaxy filled with thousands, millions of colors. Schools, hospitals, prisons, movie theaters, screens, cityscapes intersected ceaselessly.

Ka-ha-ha ka-ka-ka—

The anomaly laughed.

But the universe was definitely a little smaller than before.

The size of a void was the capacity to contain a mind.

"You swam out well. But it's not over yet. Until we reach the core of that anomaly, illusions will infiltrate us with every step we take."

"……."

"Calling it an illusion might not be right. It's practically another life. You could call it a route."

"A route..."

"Replacing your time, your life, your existence with a 'substitute existence'. By doing so, the anomaly steals your place. Just like it turned Baekhwa (白花) into Baekhwa (百話)."

"...If I can't swim out of the route."

"In this reality, you will disappear, replaced by something else wandering around as 'Cheon Yo-hwa'."

"……."

Cheon Yo-hwa nodded.

"...That's something I don't like. Yes. I don't like it."

"I feel the same."

"But still... That anomaly, it still seems so far away. I feel it's closer than before, but still far."

Cheon Yo-hwa stared at the Infinite Void.

"How much further... I mean, how many more routes do we have to swim through? Honestly, having just woken up after spending three years in elementary school, I'm still dazed."

"In this void, distance has no meaning. It's always about the anomaly's own rules, the laws of its existence. And in this case..."

Step.

I took Cheon Yo-hwa's hand and took a step forward. In the world, two footfalls, two black twin islands were engraved.

"Three steps forward."

Four (死).

A spell to turn the anomaly personified as death (死) back into the reality of four steps (四). A strategy.

As it was a ritual for death, I called it a funeral.

I was the Undertaker.

"Let's go, Yo-hwa. It's alright. As long as two people don't let go of each other's hands, they can do anything."

"...Yes! Ah shit, the National Sports Festival finals were way, way harder! Bring it on!"

Blink. Clatter.

The archetype of a person blinked, and the wheel of the universe turned.

The wheel of time moved.

From nirvana to samsara.

Three steps forward.

Footnotes:

Chapter 94

The Breakdown VIII

Sinnoa

Step.

The next footstep belonged to Noh Do-hwa.

On an island where a single bridge allowed only one person to pass, Noh Do-hwa set up her workshop. I worked as her assistant.

Noh Do-hwa didn't ask for much in life.

Sunlight. Water. A piece of land. Sand from the beach. Leaves, plenty. Flowers, a few.

A hammer. The number of people she could handle and the volume of wounds she could endure. Hot coffee, regardless of the bean type.

She desired summer, autumn, winter, and spring. Instead of footsteps, she wished the sound of rain falling on the garden stones would wake her.

If she were to die someday, she hoped the old winds of late summer would give her a sky burial, rather than cremation or burial.

Unlike Dang Seo-rin, who always wanted to leave, Noh Do-hwa never wanted visitors from anywhere.

Therefore, she was the person who desired the most from life.

"Assistant..."

"Yes?"

"Pack your bags for a short trip. Ugh. There are so many old folks who can't come to the island, you see..."

"Oh, yes. Understood."

When the winter ended and the last snow melted, Noh Do-hwa left the island. The bridge hadn't been repaired for a long time, so the railings were shaky in places.

The sea playfully blew its breath.

"Be careful, Master. A lot of snow fell this winter, so the bridge is quite damaged. We should repair it when we get back."

"....."

"Master?"

As I tried to turn back after walking ahead on the bridge, Noh Do-hwa lightly placed her palm on my back.

It was a pressure I could ignore if I wanted to.

I didn't ignore it.

I stopped mid-turn.

"Master?"

"I do not..."

"Pardon?"

"Assistant. I do not need ideals. Utopias. Ideal lives. Ideal endings. Ugh. Living every day mortgaged to such things is not my way of accepting the world..."

"....."

"I do not take pride in denying reality. I graduated from such hobbies at twelve. Assistant. You must know. I immensely, immensely dislike leaving debts with anyone..."

Thud.

Noh Do-hwa lightly pushed my back.

It was another gesture I could ignore if I wanted to.

I didn't ignore it.

The shaky railing couldn't support my weight and creaked before breaking.

Just before falling off the bridge, I looked up at Noh Do-hwa. The shadow of the sun concealed her face.

Only a smile, like a shadow, was drawn.

"Go to hell..."

Noh Do-hwa's face rapidly receded.

Splash—I heard the sound of falling into the seawater and couldn't help but think.

Dropping someone on the way from the island to the land, from nirvana to samsara.

That was truly a Noh Do-hwa-like murder.

Blink. Clatter.

The wheel of time moved.

Two steps forward.

Step.

The next footstep belonged to the Saintess.

"....."

"....."

Surprisingly, the two of us sat on the silver moon. We faced each other on chairs carved from stone, with a table in between.

The world held its breath.

The Earth on the other side of the universe was still, and the sun illuminating such an Earth did not move either.

A white world.

The endpoint of time. Or rather, a pause.

A Saintess who fully bloomed her ability to its extreme inevitably reached this terminus—

"Mr. Undertaker."

Not an ocean-class anomaly.

Maybe even another Outer God-class anomaly.

The being who, as an awakened Saintess, bore the name 'Executioner' as an anomaly, opened her lips.

"You know, Mr. Undertaker, you could always face such an end."

"...Eternal rest?"

"Yes. Not the occasional vacation you take as a joke... but truly letting go, thus rest. The world has stopped, and people no longer move. No sins are committed. No misfortunes or tragedies."

Like reciting a small song, the Saintess imbued her voice with telepathy. In other words, the full transmission of a Constellation.

[Of course, no regression either.]

"....."

"All beings become like inanimate objects. They drift as specks of dust in eternal and instantaneous moments. If this world ever stops, why shouldn't it be today?"

"Saintess, you know you can't persuade me."

"....."

The Saintess drank her coffee.

It was coffee laden with sugar and creamer, no different from convenience store products.

As a barista, I had nothing more to offer than a Maxim packet, torn and stirred. Yet the Saintess claimed my stirred coffee tasted different.

I wondered if she knew I secretly added half a spoon of cinnamon powder.

"Why? Do you believe you can escape eternity someday?"

"Of course."

"Do you know? Emit Schopenhauer, who gave up on everything and fled to a world with just him and his lover by the 23rd cycle, was actually the sane one."

"....."

"Even 23 cycles were already too long and painful. Mr. Undertaker, your hope is too strong."

The Saintess voiced.

"This world is hell."

The sound in the void was absent, so her voice and breath were the moan of her transparent aura.

It was the only noise in the universe.

Therefore, it was the universe's only scream.

"The world is hell, yet no one takes responsibility for it. No effort is made to change it, or it's too slow."

[If you can't move time forward, then it must be stopped.]

"Why is there a torture chamber in some basement? Have you ever seen a child not even ten years old die?"

[The child, sold to a 'factory' at a young age, was destined to die

from torture on their tenth birthday.]

"Why are the mine slaves born in rock and swamp mines, living their entire short lives in narrow crevices without knowing of a broader world?"

[Why do humans feel relieved that there are more unfortunate people instead of being happy for those happier than themselves?]

"If one excuses such base tendencies as not their decision but something forced by their environment and world."

[Fine.]

"What reason could there possibly be for me to allow time to continue in a world like this?"

"....."

"Hell is said to be 20,000 yojanas below the surface. But that's impossible."

A breath flowed into the universe.

[One layer.]

The starlight of the Constellation flickered.

The shadow of Pythagoras's Earth deviated from harmony, causing a creak.

"Just one layer below the surface of that planet... it's all hell."

"....."

We were silent.

It wasn't because we had nothing to say. It was because our words were predetermined.

I knew a single sentence that could kill the Executioner of time, the Saintess. And like a murderer with a shred of conscience, I slowly drove the knife.

"Help me, Saintess."

"....."

"I want to help others."

"....."

Blood flowed through the universe.

According to Pythagorean tradition, the universe consisted of ten celestial bodies, one of which was invisible to human eyes.

The shadow-Earth.

It always moved in the same direction as Earth, perpetually in darkness as if in a permanent eclipse.

The shadow planet orbited with the other nine celestial bodies, making sounds like heartbeats, like harmony. Hence, Pythagoreans believed the universe was filled with the song of the celestial bodies.

To them, the world was beautiful.

But humans, having heard the universe's song from birth, found it a mere 'background', never truly listening to it.

One layer.

One layer of eyebrows obscured not just hell but also this world's beauty, making it a fatal curse to the Saintess.

"The Infinite Void is..."

The Constellation of shadows, always in the shade and turning its gaze with the people's direction, opened its lips.

"...It descended upon Baekhwa Girls' High School as the Hyakki Yagyo. It exists as the leader of 99 ghosts. In other words, the Infinite Void has divided its existence into 99 pieces."

"....."

"My original ability was merely to stop the world. But as my power grew stronger, I could move around freely in the frozen world. Just like that... Cheon Yo-hwa's ability can surely become stronger."

"What do you mean?"

"Imprinting behavioral principles on humans and controlling them like NPCs. That's Cheon Yo-hwa's awakened ability. But maybe, if she develops it, she could use it on anomalies, not just humans."

"Oh."

My eyes widened.

"Being able to control anomalies at will! Amazing! That's an incredibly powerful ability!"

"...Yes. At least for the anomalies that appeared in Baekhwa Girls' High School, or rather, the School Ghost Stories, she can control them."

The Saintess nodded.

"Cheon Yo-hwa is an apostle of the Infinite Void. She can interfere to some extent with the anomalies the Infinite Void controls. You, Mr. Undertaker, know why she was chosen as the apostle better than I do."

"Indeed..."

A strategy emerged.

The Saintess warned me.

"But Cheon Yo-hwa, who has consumed the Infinite Void's Hyakki Yagyo, will become immensely powerful. She will be no different from an anomaly herself... much like you see me in this illusion."

"....."

"Even with just the Infinite Void, this much. As you subdue anomalies, more anomalies will gather around you, Mr. Undertaker.

Dang Seo-rin, Sim Ah-ryeon, eventually. ...It would be nice if we could simply call it fighting poison with poison, but ultimately, you'll just be transplanting the world's poison into yourself. If you give up, the backlash will be incomparable to Schopenhauer's. So, please..."

I held the Saintess's hand.

"I know."

The Saintess looked at me.

"Fall into hell with me."

"....."

Creak—

The previously frozen wheel of the universe creaked. The Sun, Earth, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn clattered as they moved. Ten wheels aligned in a straight line.

Grand Alignment. The most majestic constellation the universe could pronounce.

At that final line, the shadow stood.

"Yes."

The shadow smiled before my eyes.

[To wherever.]

Blink, one layer of life closed its eyes.

Clatter, the ten Constellations played a soundless melody.

Before I knew it, we were holding hands, inverted, diving from the moon's glassy surface to the ground— to hell.

Endless descent.

We tightly embraced each other.

The universe's song was time.

Blink. Clatter—

The wheel of time moved.

From nirvana to samsara. From the closest otherworld to the farthest reality.

One step forward.

"——Ahjussi! Ahjussi!"

I thought about why people are born with two eyes.

It's because the world is always made up of two layers. Hell spread out under the sunlight and beauty hidden in the shadows.

Blindness and clarity. Extremes. Gaps.

Existence as a non-void space.

I slowly opened my eyes.

"Yo-hwa?"

"Yes, ahjussi! Ugh. So... is it really you? I mean, do you remember us wandering through the School Ghost Stories?"

I looked around.

Ding-Dong-Dang-Dong.

A bell rang. This was the School Ghost Story... no, it was Baekhwa Girls' High School. The bell echoed under a blue sky, not a red one.

An infinitely normal school.

There were no grotesque birch forests or red spider lily gardens. It seemed to be lunchtime, and students were gathering in small groups, crossing the playground.

"...Yes, I remember. We were walking the four steps to defeat the Infinite Void. Now, only one step remains."

"Oh! Right! But why are we both in the same illusion this time?"

"It seems this is the fourth step."

Step.

Cheon Yo-hwa's and my footsteps overlapped.

A world where anomalies, voids, and endings had no room to intrude, only peacefulness.

That was our final stop.

Footnotes:

Chapter 95

The Breakdown IX

Sinnoa

After patrolling the school once with Cheon Yo-hwa, we reached a conclusion.

"This is... a peaceful world."

A world where humanity had not perished.

The 'Gates' of voids appeared here and there, but they were not as serious as in reality.

As the name suggested, the voids in this place looked like gateways. If left alone, 'monsters' would steadily emerge.

Conversely, if we succeeded in sealing the Gates, we could minimize the damage.

-Last time, a Gate appeared centered around Sadang Station in Seoul, right? It was rush hour, and the crowd was huge, so significant damage was expected.

-This time, the 4th exploration team finally succeeded in clearing the Sadang Station Gate. Most of the missing people were rescued thanks to Dang Seo-rin, the team leader...

-Meanwhile, with 212 deaths, this incident has set a new record for Gate casualties, prompting demands for government accountability...

Newspapers, news, YouTube, and social media were filled with stories about Gates.

Civilization had not collapsed.

Humanity, which had endured typhoons, tsunamis, earthquakes,

famines, and plagues since ancient times, had merely added 'Gates' as a new item on the list of disasters.

Humans still called themselves the rulers of all creation.

Some people feared Gates and monsters as signs of the apocalypse, but our perspective, having truly experienced 'the end,' was different.

"...I'm envious. If our world were only at this level."

"The cunning of the Infinite Void is evident in that it didn't show us a completely peaceful world."

"Why?"

"We already have trauma from anomalies. In an excessively peaceful world, we would only be conscious of our abnormality. We would be obsessed with the fear that the world could end at any moment. ...But here, monsters appear just at a manageable level. In this world, you and I can live as 'normal' people."

"Oh... Wow, such detail?"

"Yes. It’s an Outer God-class anomaly. It's not to be underestimated."

That was not all.

In a completely peaceful world, where anomalies didn't exist, Cheon Yo-hwa's and my awakened abilities would be no different from strange tumors.

But in a world where monsters existed?

The abilities, knowledge, and instincts we had accumulated would translate directly into accomplishments. Countless guilds would clamor to recruit us with countless handshakes.

"A world where we are not denied but rather infinitely affirmed, where we can climb to the top of the pyramid. And we could believe that our success is due to our own talents, efforts, and free will, not the grace of the Infinite Void. This place is a model garden

designed solely for the two of us."

"....."

Cheon Yo-hwa's shoulders slumped.

"...It's scary, the nature of anomalies."

"Yes, it is. But on the flip side, it means we've pushed the Infinite Void to this extent."

Four steps. The distance from nirvana to samsara. Our steps traversing that infinite instant were not in vain.

The Infinite Void was undoubtedly collapsing.

Dang Seo-rin's journey. Noh Do-hwa's seclusion. The Saintess's contemplation. Each route, imbued with eternity, was trampled upon.

The illusions carefully selected by the Infinite Void, no matter how sweet, were denied by our will to return to reality.

"Yo-hwaaa!"

"Let's play basketball!"

Students from the playground looked our way, waving their hands.

Startled, Cheon Yo-hwa held her breath for a moment. After about three seconds, she cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, "Sorry! I'll skip today—"

Eh, eh—

The cicadas buzzed relentlessly, their wings emerging from the bark of the wisteria trees in summer. The leaves rustled against each other in the wind. On the school playground, the laughter of children and the cries of cicadas echoed.

"Are those your friends?"

"...Yes. Classmates and roommates."

A sigh flowed downward, too weak to reach the desert.

"Both of them died during the first week of the school ghost stories."

Cheon Yo-hwa tapped the ground with the tip of her shoe. Tap, tap. The weight of one person knocked on the Earth.

"Um, ahjussi. Suddenly, I have a thought. Well, I've had it before, but now I really want to ask. Why can't we stay here? I mean, it's not that I want to. I'm just genuinely curious. Isn't there nothing much if we go back?"

"....."

"Every time we go to the bathroom, we have to check for ghosts. We have to pick out every piece of meat to avoid eating human flesh. When we wake up, someone's always missing. From what you've told me, it's not just our school that's ruined, but the whole world. How can you decisively say we must return to reality?"

"Hmm."

"For instance... why don't we just invite everyone else to the Infinite Void? Then this place becomes reality. Or do you think a world that's not real has no value...?"

"No, that's not the reason."

"Then why?"

"My alias is Undertaker."

Cheon Yo-hwa looked at me.

"Just as you have the ability to manipulate targets, I have several abilities too. One of them is Time Seal... which I personally call a funeral."

"A funeral."

"I can make a person relive the happiest day of their life forever."

"....."

"To be precise, it's not even repetition. That person won't realize they're reliving the same day. This ability is why I got the name 'Undertaker.'"

The sound of cicadas from the trees, the bouncing of a basketball in the court, and the long honk of a truck beyond the school wall.

"Yo-hwa. Do you think there's no unhappiness in this world?"

"...No."

"Right. There is. A lot. Just yesterday, 212 people died while sealing a Gate. No matter how optimized the Infinite Void made this setting for us, it's still far from ensuring everyone's happiness."

The traffic light at the school gate flickered.

"The reason I don't entrust my life to the Infinite Void is very simple. It's a matter of comparative advantage. This world is just... not convincing enough to be the final hell."

"....."

If the world is hell, people live to find a level of hell they can accept. Until then, they can defer their lives.

After a long silence, Cheon Yo-hwa nodded.

"...I understand. Ahjussi, you're the final stop where people can always return."

"It turned out that way."

"So the question I need to ask myself is if I want to give up and rest. But... I'm fine. I'm not tired yet."

Our eyes met.

The sunset embraced the desert. Orange was the color of sand mixed with red. Cheon Yo-hwa's hair also held the scent of the

desert and the aroma of oranges.

"Tell me what to do, ahjussi."

I followed the strategy the Saintess suggested on the moon.

——Seize control of the Hyakki Yagyo, consisting of 100 ghosts, from the Infinite Void.

If we could implement this strategy, the power of the Infinite Void, descended as the leader of 100 ghosts, would be significantly weakened.

"For this plan, Yo-hwa, you need to brainwash all of the ghosts of the Hyakki Yagyo, one by one."

"Brainwashing anomalies."

"Yes. No matter how long it takes. The ultimate goal is to make the ghosts follow you, not the Infinite Void."

"Yes, I'll try."

I captured and threw the suicide ghost to her. I tied a rope around its neck and hung it from the ceiling to prevent it from banging its head on the floor.

Cheon Yo-hwa secluded herself in the student council room, like closed-door training, living alone with the ghost.

Brainwashing an anomaly.

It had never happened in any of the cycles, but I was confident. Cheon Yo-hwa could do it.

A day, two days, three days, a week passed, but Cheon Yo-hwa couldn't brainwash the ghost.

The smell of decay from the ghost permeated the student council room. Cups of instant noodles, cans, and the trash Cheon Yo-hwa left while being reclusive piled up in a corner.

"It's okay."

Cheon Yo-hwa's eyes glistened like those of a madwoman.

"I think I can do it. It's summer vacation anyway... I want to focus for a while, so you don't need to clean up."

While Korea's only necromancer continued her closed-door training, I briefly traveled around the country.

In Busan, Mayor Jung, a professional traitor, conducted his official duties as usual.

His hidden daughter, the Puppeteer Lee Ha-yul, graduated early and joined a large guild.

Dang Seo-rin led an exploration team with her three younger siblings. I saw Dang Seo-rin's family, whom I had only heard about, from a distance.

At Hongik University, Sim Ah-ryeon, having no friends to eat with, was slurping shoyu ramen (with lots of bean sprouts) alone at a ramen shop.

Noh Do-hwa walked out of the rehabilitation hospital's prosthetics center right on time for her shift to end.

In Yongsan, the Saintess stayed home all day except for her daily evening walks.

A world where humans still called themselves the rulers of all creation, not anomalies.

...Even a certain old man from Germany, visiting Korea for his wife's academic lecture, was still alive.

"Excuse me. Do you know where the auditorium listed here is?"

Old Man Scho.

The elderly man in a casual suit asked me in English in the middle of Seoul National University.

Seeing Old Man Scho's intact head rather than a Dullahan was quite a sight after so long.

I was torn between wanting to punch his bearded chin and just giving him a hearty hug.

"...You can ask in German, sir."

"Oh? Well, I didn't realize a young man like you spoke our language so fluently! Did my English sound too German?"

"I majored in German language and literature, so I have some German friends. I was just heading to that auditorium myself, so follow me."

"Oh, thank you. My wife is giving a lecture here today. Do you know her? Adele Schopenhauer..."

"Wow. I was actually on my way to her lecture."

"Oh! What a coincidence!"

That day, I met Old Man Scho's wife at Seoul National University's cultural center. I had seen her in photos before, but this was the first time I saw her in person.

Seeing Old Man Scho's face, smiling brightly as he hugged his wife after her lecture, was also a first.

So this is what he was like.

It was a good proof that when the Infinite Void created illusions, it didn't just use my personal memories but also its accumulated data about the world.

"By the way, Adele. While I was lost here, a kind young man guided me... Huh? Strange. He was just with me a moment ago—"

Without a word, I left a route there and returned to the school.

No one doubted my presence. Thanks to Cheon Yo-hwa's 'settings,' I was perceived as a long-time guard at Baekhwa Girls' High School.

So when I set foot on the wooden corridor of the old school building, the world flipped without any warning.

"……!"

Airborne. My position was at the top of the old school building.

I immediately spread my aura in all directions. Other awakeners might have been appalled at the waste, but for an infinitely regressing former supporter without combat skills, this was a perfectly rational strategy.

Gray waves surged in the air.

Echolocation. My senses, honed over centuries, specialized in perceiving the contours of objects with aura. Like a dolphin navigating with ultrasound.

In that fall, I sensed something wrong. At that moment, I locked eyes with Cheon Yo-hwa, who happened to be at the window.

Cheon Yo-hwa was smiling.

"____"

Her lips moved.

'Stop.'

The sky flipped again. The floating sensation vanished, and my feet were suddenly on the old school's corridor.

Cheon Yo-hwa smiled before me. She was holding an hourglass with something inside it.

Squirm—

It was a ghost. A tiny ghost, with a rope around its neck, dangled inside the glass.

An hourglass. I was secretly impressed. Could there be a more fitting prison to confine ghosts?

Trapping the world in her grasp. Plunging a barren sandpile into a whirlpool of time, entirely under her control.

The sunset shining through the corridor windows struck the hourglass's glass.

Like showing off or tormenting a new pet, the student council president of the school ghost stories playfully shook the hourglass.

"How is it? Ahjussi."

"The hourglass is impressive. Can I touch it?"

"Ah-hah—yes!"

The first instance of humanity enslaving an anomaly.

By the end of summer vacation, Cheon Yo-hwa had successfully subjugated 43 ghosts in total.

Footnotes:

Chapter 96

The Breakdown X

Sinnoa

Cheon Yo-hwa's ghost monster collection progressed quickly. By the end of summer vacation, her collection rate was already approaching 80%.

Victory was already assured.

The only problem was that every time a ghost was imprisoned in an hourglass (used as a substitute for a monster ball), the world seemed to become a bit more distorted.

“What? The world is shrinking?”

“Yes. It’s easier to show you directly.”

I took Cheon Yo-hwa on a flight.

It was a modified Savioa S-21, the seaplane flown by Porco Rosso, now with a backseat. Originally a Japanese anomaly, I brought it over whenever I felt bored.

“Wow, double wings! So cool!”

“You know a thing or two.”

“Hehe. Yes! My mom taught me to lavish praise if someone proudly shows off something that's actually quite mediocre!”

“...?”

The aircraft flew over Jeju Island and reached the East China Sea. Cheon Yo-hwa, who had been chattering excitedly, suddenly pointed at the horizon and exclaimed.

“Ahjussi! What is that?”

Where she pointed, a giant wall of fog loomed.

It was a fog so dense it could have been from the movie "The Mist." It covered the sea and sky entirely along the horizon.

“That is the boundary of the world.”

“B-Boundary?”

“I realized it not long ago. My guess is that every time you take control of a ghost from the Infinite Void, the world itself shrinks a little.”

“Hieeek…”

“Let’s get closer.”

Tr-tr-trr! The engine hiccuped.

My aircraft approached the 'fog wall.'

“Wow. You can't see anything...”

“I already tried entering it, but you can’t go through. It feels like hitting an invisible wall. A few days ago, we could go farther, but since you sealed another ghost, the range has shrunk to here.”

“Wow. But how does trade work? You order international deliveries all the time, but the news hasn't mentioned anything.”

“That’s the interesting part. Look.”

Sss—

A massive ship’s bow emerged from the fog. It was a container ship, gliding smoothly out of the fog wall’s edge.

“Eeeek?”

“See? Everything in this world, except for us, functions without any issues. It’s just within the 'fog wall’s' confines.”

“Uh, I'm a little confused... So, this world inside the fog wall is the

only one that actually exists, but it’s made to look like the outside is functioning normally?”

“Probably.”

The aircraft skimmed the fog wall.

“This world is similar to the illusion created by the Infinite Void.”

The ghosts of the Hyakumonogatari that Cheon Yo-hwa was sealing weren't just separate anomalies. They were fragments of the Infinite Void.

Taking them from the Infinite Void was like taking parts of its existence.

“For a human, it's like taking away memories; for a computer, it's like stealing data. My interpretation is that the resources the Infinite Void uses to create this world are gradually depleting. Now, only the area around the Korean Peninsula remains.”

“I see...”

“It also proves that everything in this world is just shadows imitating true existence.”

“.....”

Cheon Yo-hwa became quieter. Seeing such an anomaly was naturally overwhelming for people.

“...Let’s go back, ahjussi. It’s cold.”

“Wait a bit. There’s one more thing to show you. You’ll regret not seeing it.”

“...?”

“Now.”

I pointed to the sky.

The sun was setting. The sun descending in the west was likely not

real, but an illusionary sphere visible only in this confined world. As the false sun tried to cross the fog wall, the sky and sea turned entirely red, stained by the sunset.

A short gasp came from the backseat.

“...It’s beautiful.”

The sunset, instead of a few scattered clouds, used the entire boundary of the world as its mirror. It was magnificent. The fog wall drank in the blood shed by the dying sun.

The western world was entirely sunset.

And within five minutes, the sun completely sank beyond the fog wall. The sunset disappeared as well.

Those who witnessed the sun's quiet suicide were left with a lingering feeling, like a vapor trail.

“Why does such a sunset occur? The fog wall isn't real fog, just an object.”

“Who knows? Even in this illusory world, the sunset on the fog wall is particularly unreal. But it’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“...Yes, very.”

“One illusion is merely a dream but dreaming within a dream is something we humans find beautiful.”

“.....”

The engine roared. Cheon Yo-hwa remained silent on the way back to Baekhwa Girls’ High School, lost in thought.

She only spoke once we returned to the dormitory.

“...Thank you, ahjussi. I think I know which ghost I need to capture last.”

It was summer.

The cicadas in the trees fell and died. Anonymous birds and insects picked up their corpses scattered on the ground. In the slow, dying summer, the world was a crime scene of mass murder.

It was autumn.

Over the corpses that died in the summer, maple trees shed their blood-red leaves like shrouds. We promised to call this season autumn, this grand funeral.

And then.

“Delivery—”

I went to the school gate to receive the delivery food in a plastic bag.

The delivery man, who had probably priced his day's work, adjusted his sky-blue helmet and got on his motorcycle.

Brrrr—

The engine purred as the motorcycle slid onto the road outside the gate. And disappeared.

Beyond the fog wall.

“……”

The world was now the size of the school grounds.

Wherever I looked, the sky was wrapped in white fog. In the morning, the teachers’ cars slipped out of the fog wall, and in the evening, they vanished back into it.

A day later, the distance from here to there, from samsara to nirvana, was the size of the school playground.

The end of space. The stilling of time. There should be nothing there. All things appeared and disappeared silently on the surface of the water, splashing about.

For a moment, the water droplets splashed by a child’s hand were the weight of existence. In each splash, the sunset of the world was embedded.

I stood silently for a while, staring out the student council room window, looking at the white glass wall separating me from nirvana.

“How many are left now?”

“Two.”

It was winter.

Snow fell for the first time. Since this world was created in summer, this snow was the first snow.

Thud, the snowflakes hit the window. The quietest knock. Looking out, the view was already entirely white with snow fog.

The world's area was now the size of a 10-pyeong studio apartment.

The universe’s size had shrunk to the student council room, where two people barely breathed.

-.....

-Groan... groan... groan.....

-Oooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh.

Clatter. Occasionally, the sound of ghosts thrashing came faintly from the shelves. The remaining space of the world, covered in fog, was confined within 98 hourglasses.

The last remaining ghost.

Cheon Yo-hwa stared at it.

“You must obey me.”

-Sorry, but that kind of brainwashing doesn’t work on me.

The same voice as Cheon Yo-hwa's.

The voice came from the full-length mirror opposite her. In the mirror sat a being with the same hairstyle and school uniform as Cheon Yo-hwa, sitting properly in a chair.

-You know. No matter how much you try to brainwash me, it ends up as you ordering yourself to obey.

A doppelgänger.

An anomaly that could only live as someone’s shadow. That was the last fragment of the Infinite Void left by Cheon Yo-hwa.

“Why are you me? You’re just a ghost trapped in a mirror. I’m outside. You can't move around, but I'm free.”

-Ah. Nowadays, do people call moving around in a 10-pyeong world freedom? Sorry. I didn't realize. I thought the freest place on Earth was a prison.

“Are you stupid? A 10-pyeong room in prison would be a luxury hotel.”

-Ah, right. Enjoy your 5-star hotel stay. So jealous.

“I don’t like you.”

-I don’t like you either. We’re the same after all.

Cheon Yo-hwa sighed. Maybe it was time to intervene.

“Take a break and have some coffee.”

“Oh! Did you make it yourself, ahjussi, instead of ordering it? Wow. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. It’s my little hobby.”

Among my many hobbies, being a barista was my favorite.

Nothing was more satisfying than perfectly capturing someone’s taste and bombarding them with caffeine.

After many trials, it was clear that Cheon Yo-hwa's tongue struck a balance between the 'coffee should be bitter' camp and the 'coffee should be sweet' camp.

Espresso? Is this coffee? It's herbal medicine. Macchiato? It's sugar water.

Cheon Yo-hwa declared the great unification of left and right camps and founded a new party.

Naturally, she was doomed to be criticized by both sides, but like all third-party advocates, she brimmed with baseless confidence. The party's name was 'Double Espresso Cream Latte.'

Ice cream-like cream. Thinly sliced chocolate on top. Chocolate with at least 70% and less than 90% cacao. She mixed the cream while drinking, so a straw or spoon was necessary. Done.

"It's delicious..."

Cheon Yo-hwa smiled with the world's happiest expression.

"When coffee is made well, it feels so fulfilling... Ahjussi, can you make this for me every morning? Lately, if I don't have your coffee, my head feels foggy by lunchtime."

"Thanks for the high praise. I'd love to, but it's not easy."

"Why?"

"Here, civilization is intact, so it's easy to get beans, cream, and chocolate. Once we return to reality, I can only make it occasionally."

"Hing. Another reason I don't want to go back to reality..."

-Hey. How good is it? Can I have a cup too, ahjussi?

"Shut up."

Cheon Yo-hwa snarled.

The room's temperature dropped a notch.

"Before I really kill you."

-.....

Clatter, clatter, clatter.

The 98 hourglasses on the shelf shook slightly. In the center of the table, the stainless electric kettle boiled water, trembling.

Hooo. Cheon Yo-hwa blew on the coffee-warmed breath, quietly restoring the room's temperature.

"Thank you, ahjussi."

"Hm? Making coffee is my hobby..."

"Not just the coffee. Everything."

"....."

"I know you have many secrets. But one thing is certain. No matter what happens to our school, you could have ignored it and left us alone."

Snowstorm raged.

"I sometimes imagine what would have happened without you. With time to spare, I often indulge in such hypotheticals."

"I see."

"I've been afraid of ghosts since I was young."

From the white fog, white snow emerged and struck the white window. After striking, the snowflakes were swept by the wind and disappeared beyond the fog. They existed because they were white, and they disappeared because they were white.

Existence was a white flower (白花).

"My father is like the leader of a cult. Actually, he is a leader."

“……”

“Did you know? Our house is really big. There’s a facility like a church in the basement. Hundreds of people gather there monthly, chanting strange incantations... My family name is Yeongyang Cheon, but my father insisted I use the character Cheon (天) for 'heaven' both at home and school. Weird, right?”

“……”

“Ahjussi, you saw those strange talismans at our school, right?”

“Yes. I saw them.”

“This school is run by our family. The chairman is a relative, but it’s practically my father’s. Most of the kids here are from the cult.”

“……”

“So when the sky turned red and ghosts appeared, I just... somehow accepted it. Ah, it’s divine punishment.”

Snow stuck to the window, blooming into snow flowers repeatedly.

Existence was a white flower (白花).

“But I couldn’t let the kids die.”

“……”

“This is probably my family's fault. I don’t know how it happened, having half-run away, but still... I’m the student council president. They called me ‘lady’ in the cult. I have to take responsibility.”

In a 10-pyeong room enveloped in the scent of white flowers, Cheon Yo-hwa’s story flowed.

Footnotes:

Chapter 97

The Breakdown XI

Sinnoa

Cheon Yo-hwa.

天寥化.

——A long time ago, when I first saw the characters of her name, I might have sensed an omen.

Heaven (天). Lonely (寥). To become (化).

Simply put, it means 'to become lonely.'

It's a rather strange name to give to a beloved child, isn't it?

But '寥' (Yo) doesn't just mean 'lonely.' It also means 'empty,' 'void sky,' 'quiet.'

Have you ever seen writers use the word 'serene' instead of just 'quiet' in passages where merely saying 'quiet' would suffice?

The '寥' in 'Yo-hwa' (寂寥, serene) is the character in this child's name. If interpreted as 'to become serene' rather than 'to become lonely,' it doesn’t seem too strange.

Yes. If only interpreted that way.

Attention.

From here on, this is a secret I haven’t even told Cheon Yo-hwa, information known only to me in this world—a postscript-like TMI.

It’s purely my personal conjecture, so you may take it with a grain of salt. I’m merely sharing pieces I’ve gathered from various cycles.

First piece.

Everyone probably knows that I traveled to China with the Sword Marquess during the 108th cycle.

While the Sword Marquess was busy planting red flowers on Mount Hua, I wandered around the vicinity.

If I transcribe what I described at that time, it would go as follows.

The range of my anomaly hunts gradually expanded. It extended not only to Shaanxi but also to Henan.

‘Tutorial dungeons’ occurred globally, not just on the Korean Peninsula, but an epic-level dungeon happened to appear in Yingyang Town in Henan.

Adding to the chaos were Taoist cult terrorists, making it seem like the end of the world.

In Henan, there is a place called Dengfeng, famous for being the location of the Shaolin Temple.

A bit further west lies Yingyang Town.

Yeongyang Cheon Clan.

The ancestral home of Cheon Yo-hwa's family.

Second piece.

The Yeongyang Cheon Clan of Korea originated from a Ming Dynasty general who was dispatched to Korea during the Imjin War.

The general not only brought himself but also his family, who naturalized in Korea.

Most of their descendants perfectly adapted to local life without issues, but according to my hypothesis, a very small portion of the family continued to maintain their ‘traditional faith.’

The traditional faith of China is Taoism.

Laozi, the founder of Taoism, hailed from Huainan Province and was a native of Luyi County. Laozi is said to have worked in Luoyang, Henan, and authored the Tao Te Ching at Hangu Pass in Henan.

Yingyang Town, the hometown of the Cheon family, lies on the route between Luyi County and Hangu Pass.

The birthplace of Taoism. A region long under the influence of the faith.

However, at some point, the faith of Cheon Yo-hwa's lineage, who had moved to the Korean Peninsula, became corrupted.

Whether it was always like that or changed later, I do not know. There are no records.

They built a grand mansion in Sejong City with an area of 14,990 square meters. Hidden underground were religious facilities. They established Baekhwa Girls' High School and enrolled the children of their faith.

Cheon Yo-hwa's father, the high priest of this cult, changed his daughter's surname from Cheon (千) to Cheon (天). To this family, their roots had already lost all meaning.

They called upon their own god.

Who they wanted to descend, I had no way of knowing. It might have been a mere scam by a cunning cult leader.

But in the end-times void, magic was not an illusion but a reality. Especially the magic performed by hundreds of people offering hundreds of children.

Some existence on the other side of the void heard their prayers and responded.

Thus, the Infinite Void arrived.

Third piece.

Serene and silent.

The Tao Te Ching contains such a phrase.

Before humans distinguished all things, before the forms and names of all things were created, before heaven and earth were clearly divided, the world existed.

Laozi called such a world ‘serene.’

The next phrase goes something like this.

‘I do not know its name.’

That serene world, the serenity of that world, was something that existed before all things took shape, and thus ‘has no name.’

Now.

Let's reexamine the name of the student council president before us, Cheon Yo-hwa.

Interpreting it purely based on its superficial meaning, it translates to ‘to become serene,’ which could be taken to mean, ‘Oh, her parents hoped she would become a recluse when she grew up.’

However, the parents, especially her father, were high priests of a corrupted Taoist cult. They couldn’t have been ignorant of one of the most famous phrases from the Tao Te Ching.

Therefore, if you interpret the name Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化) knowing the root of '寥,' it becomes quite bizarre.

To become lonely.

To become serene.

The heaven. To become empty.

To lose its name.

Anonymous. Nameless. The serene sky with no form or name. Abandoning oneself and one's true name, returning to a world where nothing is distinguished.

A play on words with her name.

…What a wicked curse it was.

Cheon Yo-hwa. An ominous resonance. Not a name to give a beloved child.

It was a name more fitting for a living offering to an evil god.

The more sinister truth is that the curse succeeded.

Far beyond the expectations of the one who cast it.

An Outer God-class anomaly full of forms yet formless. The Infinite Void and Hyakki Yagyo, the Night Parade of One Hundred Ghosts (百鬼夜行). Baekhwa (百話).

…Or, Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化).

She was the living offering, and Baekhwa Girls' High School was the altar. Baekhwa Girls' High School was the offering for her, and she was the altar for the god.

This is the answer I have deduced thus far.

Why the Outer God-class anomaly, the Infinite Void, had no choice but to descend upon Baekhwa Girls' High—a regressor's annotation.

However.

The conclusion of this story was not mine.

"Thank you, ahjussi."

Cheon Yo-hwa said.

"I wouldn't have been able to overcome it alone. Even if I had won, I would have undoubtedly lost myself."

Still, you saved 16 of your friends. Always. From the 1st cycle to the 117th, continuously.

Cheon Yo-hwa said.

“Even though it was an illusion, thank you for letting me meet my mother again. I was able to say the words I couldn’t before. The flight was fun. Thank you for showing me the sunset. The coffee you made was delicious.”

The only necromancer on the Korean Peninsula. The student council president of Baekhwa Girls' High School. She started playing basketball out of rebellion against her family but genuinely came to enjoy it. When she escapes the prison of void, she wouldn’t even remember her original name and past. From the 1st cycle to the 117th, she had never once been called by her name. The living offering and altar of this Infinite Hell.

And someone who likes a slightly bitter, slightly sweet cream latte.

Cheon Yo-hwa said.

“——So, I can’t hand myself over to an anomaly like you.”

-……

“You are not me. You don’t know the vapor trails I passed through. You don’t know the name of the sunset I saw. You don’t know the feel of the coffee I like. You don’t know me. I’ve gone, am going, and will go beyond what you know.”

-……

“I am Cheon Yo-hwa (千謠話)1. I will sing a thousand stories. Do you think I’ll be satisfied with just a hundred stories? I will live ten times your volume, size, and color. Because—I am not alone. There are people who helped me. There are people I will help. So—— you, go back to your narrow glass sky. Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化).”

Blink. Clunk.

A snowstorm raged. There was no window. The table, the electric

kettle on it, and the coffee cup were all engulfed in white snow.

The wheel of time turned.

From nirvana to samsara.

Zero steps left.

-Ah.

The Outer God, the Infinite Void, Baekhwa.

In the white world, Cheon Yo-hwa smiled. Though her lips didn’t move, the snowstorm shattered with sound.

-Oh, how beautiful this is—

The snowstorm rushed toward me like a tidal wave.

The moment I felt certain this was its final struggle, I drew my cane sword.

A longsword forged in a dwarven forge that no longer existed. Do-hwa.

A single stroke.

My ink-black wave split the Infinite Void’s white snowstorm.

For the Infinite Void, which had gathered almost all the data of the world, this 'sword' was an unexpected irregular.

Because Do-hwa was a piece crafted for me by the workshop master in a different cycle.

A masterpiece made by the greatest blacksmith in the otherworld, taught by the greatest blacksmith in Samhan. Already a weapon like an anomaly in itself.

Even though it was my strongest weapon, I had not used Do-hwa in this cycle. Not even once. I kept it sheathed for this moment alone.

-————

The snowstorm split and split again.

The being once called the Infinite Void couldn't finish its sentence and was imprisoned in a glass prison.

The world's whiteness turned entirely into a snowstorm. The snowstorm transformed into white grains of sand.

The sand of the desert swirled and swirled, eventually settling into Cheon Yo-hwa's palm.

An hourglass.

The world of glass walls filled only with white sand was held in Cheon Yo-hwa's hand. The transparent barrier glimmered. A wheel made of two glass compartments.

The Infinite Void was confined within time.

"Ah."

Cheon Yo-hwa looked up.

There was no fog. There was no red sky of the school ghost stories. No thorn-like birch forest, no shadow-laden peony flower hill.

The sky was red.

Not the red of anomalies but the red of reality. The color emitted by the sun hitting the earth's cornea. Sunset. Proof that this world was still alive and bleeding.

In the middle of the playground, Cheon Yo-hwa looked up at the sky, surrounded by 98 scattered hourglasses like petals. That was Cheon Yo-hwa's Hyakki Yagyo. Her Night Parade of a Hundred Ghosts.

(Congratu) Seo.,; University 2 Admitted! (lations)

Flap.

A tattered banner fluttered at the school gate. Beneath the flag that

once honored civilization, the echo of the wind resounded.

“Yo-hwa!”

“Security guard ahjussi!”

The students of Baekhwa Girls' High. The children saw us and waved. Their gestures splashed in the sunset.

It seemed quite a distant scene.

But it was not as far as the distance from nirvana to samsara.

“…Ahjussi.”

I looked at Cheon Yo-hwa’s profile. The sunset light brushed through her auburn hair.

“Come to think of it, I forgot to ask.”

“Ask anything.”

“Why did you come to save us?”

That was probably the final moment.

The moment I could decisively brainwash Cheon Yo-hwa, who awakened with the ability to brainwash others. The moment she received a name. The moment to determine the direction of her life.

It was absurd, but if I said, ‘I received an oracle to help you,’ Cheon Yo-hwa would have become a fervent believer. If I said, ‘The state won’t abandon you,’ she would have become the ultimate patriot.

She was ready to accept any answer and prepared to accept any direction.

I thought for a second, then returned the answers I had long thought of.

“Because you are useful to me.”

“…….”

“The Infinite Void was an anomaly I couldn’t defeat alone. I needed the help of a human selected as the shaman of the Infinite Void. The reason you could command the Hyakki Yagyo was that ‘Cheon Yo-hwa’ was somewhat identified with the Infinite Void. Recruiting you to subdue the Infinite Void was the best strategy given to me, in fact, the only strategy.”

“…I see.”

Cheon Yo-hwa’s expression lightened somewhat. She probably accepted my answer as a ‘setting’ for her life path.

“Yes, then——”

“And I was curious about how the worst tutorial dungeon in the history of the Korean Peninsula was created.”

“……?”

“I also wanted to thoroughly track the real nature of the fairies I had been dealing with for so long. I wanted to test if I could truly defeat an Outer God-class anomaly. Oh, and I was purely curious about what kind of person a crazy person who had completed self-brainwashing at Baekhwa Girls' High School originally was.”

“Um, ahjussi? What are you talking about…?”

“Yo-hwa.”

I smiled.

“Finding reasons to live is good. That alone is already great. But I hope you live with as many reasons as possible, not just one.”

“…….”

“If a single drop of rain can make a person decide to die, a single line of music can give them a reason to live. When helping someone, try to create several reasons instead of just one. Gain. Goal. Curiosity. Self-examination. Simple amusement. Curiosity. Those thousand reasons can be reasons to kill someone and at the same time reasons to keep you alive.”

That was exactly what Cheon Yo-hwa had declared to the Infinite Void.

Even if it is the truth, a person always needs someone else to tell them the same thing, but in a different way, to be convinced of their own words.

Click.

I opened the trunk and took out the neatly stored file.

“That’s…”

“A gift. You can consider it a dungeon clear reward. Originally, the tutorial fairy would take care of it, but I got rid of the person in charge here. Here.”

Words were written in neat handwriting on high-quality paper rarely seen in this era. It was my handwriting.

I took out a brush pen, added a few words, and handed it to Cheon Yo-hwa.

———————————

[Graduation Certificate]

Name: Cheon Yo-hwa (千謠話)

This person has completed the full three-year high school curriculum and demonstrated outstanding academic ability, hereby awarded this graduation certificate.

———————————

“…….”

Cheon Yo-hwa accepted the diploma with both hands and looked down at it. Her shadow standing still sank into the playground floor.

The name section, left blank until just now, gleamed like a bright

shadow.

“Congratulations on your graduation, Yo-hwa.”

Describing Cheon Yo-hwa’s reactions in detail at this point would be unkind.

I just want to note that it's perfectly normal for a high school student to cry during a graduation ceremony.

Boss battle.

Anomaly: Infinite Void.

Aliases: Infinite Hell, School Ghost Stories, Hyakki Yagyo, Night Parade of One Hundred Ghosts, Baekhwa (百話), Baekhwa (白化), Forbidden Four Characters, Heraclitus’ Wreath, Backrooms, Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化).

Threat Level: Lv.5 Outer God-class

Subjugation complete.

There is an epilogue.

Actually, there are many epilogues. The stories related to the Infinite Void are numerous, but those stories can be saved for later.

Today, I’ll briefly describe an event that happened not long after the ‘graduation ceremony.’

It was while I was walking down the corridor of the National Road Management Corps headquarters.

“Ah! Teacher!”

An energetic voice came from behind, followed by rapid footsteps.

When I turned around, the former basketball team ace quickly closed the distance and skidded to a stop, playfully saluting.

“Yo-hwa. What brings you to the Management Corps?”

“Hehe— I thought it was time for our guild to be recognized for its exclusive control over Sejong City. I’m on my way back from a meeting with the director!”

“I see.”

Incidentally, Cheon Yo-hwa was still wearing her white sailor uniform. Not only Cheon Yo-hwa, but the entire Baekhwa Guild... the group formed by Baekhwa Girls' High School graduates all wore it.

Well, uniforms have always been effective in fostering a sense of solidarity among members. There was no reason to abandon the powerful identity of ‘Baekhwa Girls' High.’

Or maybe it’s just like how Dang Seo-rin was obsessed with her witch cosplay, and Noh Do-hwa was hooked on the uniform cosplay. Magic-related awakeners tended to have strong fetishes.

I tilted my head.

“But why call me ‘teacher’? Why not ‘ahjussi’ as usual?”

“Hehe… You’re someone who was born before me and experienced more than me, right? So I want to call you teacher out of respect! Why? Don’t you like it?”

“No, I don’t dislike it. It’s just a bit strange to switch from being a security guard to a teacher all of a sudden.”

“Haha. What are you talking about? You even gave me a diploma!”

Cheon Yo-hwa put her hands behind her back and looked up at me. The smile on her face was distinctly different from the expressions of the 'Cheon Yo-hwa' from before the 117th cycle.

A lively and cheerful smile.

“Please take care of me from now on!”

I couldn’t object to Cheon Yo-hwa changing her title for me. Because, as I mentioned at the beginning of this episode.

“——My teacher!”

This was the story of the time it took for the title of ‘sunbae’ to turn into ‘teacher.’

Footnotes:

1 - 千謠話 means a thousand folk tales, it’s a different interpretation of her name.

Chapter 98

The Savior A I

Sinnoa

The Infinite Void was exterminated in the 117th run.

That marked the grand debut of Cheon Yo-hwa, the awakener who 'led the Baekwha guild', 'sealed the anomaly of the Outer Gods', and 'commanded hundreds of guild members'.

From then on, awakeners on the Korean Peninsula had to make more discerning choices.

-OldManGoryeo: Hmmm... Honestly, the strongest guild on the Korean Peninsula now isn't Samcheon but Baekwha...

Public opinion on SG Net changed immediately.

-OldManGoryeo: Baekwha features) The guild leader is stronger than all the other guild members combined. Guild members are all high school students, so they wear school uniforms. Not cosplay.

-OldManGoryeo: Samcheon features) The guild leader is stronger than all the other guild members combined. Guild members all have to wear witch hats. Every day at 2 PM, they have a mandatory 'broom maintenance time'. Cosplay.

-OldManGoryeo: I believe there's no longer any need to explain which of the two guilds is superior...

Anonymous: As expected, the fact is godly lololol

[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Fuck you, bastard.

Anonymous: I'm a Samcheon guild member and this is true.

-Anonymous: So the Baekwha guild leader and Undertaker are dating?

□dolLHoUse: Not easy.

-Anonymous: Why do they insist on witch cosplay regardless of age and gender? Really don't know.

-[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquess: Oh lament! These days, the young disciples are so obsessed with the dark arts that they neglect their mental and physical training. How lamentable it is.

□Anonymous: Please leave.

□Anonymous: (Said by someone who would've been dead if not for their skill)

-[National Road Management Corps] Officer: Objectively comparing their strength, Baekwha does seem stronger than Samcheon ㅇㅇ

-CookingQueen: Interesting.

-Anonymous: So are the Baekwha guild leader and Undertaker dating?

□dolLHoUse: Not easy.

As seen, Dang Seo-rin, who was revered as the top idol on the Korean Peninsula, was shaken.

Coincidentally, Dang Seo-rin's headquarters was in Busan, while Cheon Yo-hwa was based in Sejong. With Seoul's unprecedented drop in real estate prices, these two cities had become symbols of the Korean Peninsula.

"I really don't understand."

Dang Seo-rin's stress level followed the curve of the consumer price index before the end times.

"If you're summoning spirits, you're a Necromancer. Although it's black magic, you're still a mage, right? So why don't you wear mage-like outfits and instead walk around in school uniforms?"

"It's a symbol of belonging. Even if the world ends, it means we're

still from the same school."

"I don't like it."

"Hmm. Then how about thinking of it as Hogwarts uniforms? They're mages too, and they wear uniforms."

I thought I gave advice perfectly tailored to the other's taste, but Dang Seo-rin scowled.

"Are you crazy, Undertaker? Hogwarts uniforms are not sailor uniforms. Really—not at all. Sorry, but never utter such nonsense in front of me again."

"....."

As awakeners of the magic branch, Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa created a new competition as 'white mage versus black mage'... but I'll talk more about that later.

For now, let's dive into the story that unfolded during the 126th run.

One day, at the headquarters of the National Road Management Corps, Noh Do-hwa spoke.

"Awakener Undertaker. I don't usually want to say such things, but..."

"Yes?"

"Don't you think you two are spending too much time together...?"

Noh Do-hwa looked at me with a default facial expression that seemed to be carved into her face. It was like she was glaring at rotting garbage left in the summer heat.

Noh Do-hwa had a knack for making her opponents wonder if they were actually centipedes rather than Homo sapiens. If she wasn't so good at managing the organization and winning people's hearts, she wouldn't have lived long.

But at this moment, I had no words to refute Noh Do-hwa's 'eye violence'.

"Hehe, teacher..."

After all, Cheon Yo-hwa was clinging to my left arm like a koala, in a display of excessive affection.

Cheon Yo-hwa was naturally affectionate and often engaged in physical contact, but this was crossing a line.

"I'm honestly at a loss."

"At a loss, my ass. You're actually enjoying it but pretending not to, just to show off to others. You can't fool my eyes. Your shady and sinister instincts are obvious."

"Chief Noh Do-hwa. I've told you before. It's time for you to get new eyeballs."

"Oh, just like your conscience is easily replaceable..."

"Oh lament! You have blurred vision like Liu Bei who couldn't recognize Zhuge Liang even after seeing him thrice."

"Fuck, old man. How many times have I told you not to make those shitty Three Kingdoms analogies...?"

"What? You want references from the Chu-Han Contention instead?"

"Do you really want to die...?"

"This is an anomaly. A mental derangement anomaly."

Blink.

Noh Do-hwa looked at my face closely and then turned to Cheon Yo-hwa.

"Hehehe, teacher... Teacher saved me. Teacher. My light, my life, my sin, my soul, my lolita."

"Hmm."

Noh Do-hwa took out her glasses cleaner and meticulously cleaned her glasses. After putting them back on, she nodded.

"This is definitely an anomaly..."

"Right?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, Awakener Undertaker. I thought you were helping people and then trying to establish a mental power hierarchy and turning that relationship into romantic feelings. I didn't mean to offend."

"It's fine. You don't have to apologize for existing. That's offense enough."

After exchanging pleasantries, we got into a serious strategy meeting.

"When did the Baekwha guild leader start this nonsense...?"

"Exactly a week ago. She suddenly came to my hideout without any guild members and clung to me."

"Hmm. They say she handles the hundred ghosts like Pokémon. It's natural for a human to be mentally corrupted when dealing with anomalies..."

"If it were only Yo-hwa, I might have thought so too, but..."

"...?"

Noh Do-hwa tilted her head.

"There are not just one but two entities clinging to you? Where? I don't see them..."

"Ah, you can't hear it—the [voice] of that person."

"Fuck. Here he goes again..."

"If you can't hear it, I have no choice but to translate it myself as the only one who can converse with that person."

"Why does this lunatic act normal around others but becomes such a shitty brat around me...?"

Ignoring her, I wrote on a piece of paper.

[Mr. Undertaker, I can't imagine a world without you.]

[Mr. Undertaker, ethics are societal norms, and society is formed by at least two people.]

[Mr. Undertaker, in that sense, you have become a bridge for me, who was alone.]

The words continued to flow.

"Huh? What is this...?"

Noh Do-hwa's face darkened as she watched.

[Mr. Undertaker, without a regressor in this world, countless lives would have been sacrificed by the Ten Legs.]

[Mr. Undertaker, even if no one else acknowledges it, I know.]

[Mr. Undertaker, I'm sorry for always burdening you.]

[Mr. Undertaker, you are saving the world.]

"....."

Noh Do-hwa's mouth hung open. If Noh Do-hwa's expression were made into a gacha game skin, it would be at least UR rank for its rarity.

"Is this... the Saintess...?"

"Yes."

"Haaaah...?"

"Surprising, right?"

"This is the most shocking thing I've experienced..."

"And she sends these messages in real-time, about one every ten seconds."

"....."

"This is after I begged her to reduce it. A week ago, it was one per second. I never expected telepathy to be used as infinite KakaoTalk. My mental state is like melting chocolate now."

"Hmm..."

Noh Do-hwa groaned. The meeting room fell into a quiet silence (although I was continuously receiving messages from the Saintess, so it wasn't very quiet for me).

Of course, Cheon Yo-hwa kept giggling 'hehe' beside me, providing background noise.

"I get it. So... do you have any idea what kind of anomaly this is...?"

"Yes. We just need to find the common thread between the two showing abnormal symptoms."

Cheon Yo-hwa was clinging to me because I 'saved her.' The Saintess kept praising me for 'saving the world.'

'Savior Syndrome.'

Or 'Savior Narrative Syndrome.'

That was the name of this bizarre anomaly.

Salvation.

A common narrative in genre novels where the protagonist appears just in time to save characters who are persecuted by the world, generating infinite gratitude and affection from those saved.

Naturally, the saved character feels infinite gratitude and affection toward the protagonist who saved them.

Why is that natural? Because, well, try giving 1 million won to a gambler who lost everything at Kangwon Land without asking anything in return.

The difference between a saved character and a gambler at Kangwon Land is that the latter's life doesn't change much in reality, whereas the former, thanks to the help, genuinely escapes the abyss of despair as depicted in fiction.

To pinpoint the essence of a salvation narrative with a simple example:

'Aah! I was originally the daughter of a noble family, but due to the machinations of evil people, my family fell, and I was sold to a slave trader.'

'If you hadn't helped me, I would have become a demon, filled with hatred for all humanity, serving as a minion for the Demon King's army, leading to the worst bad ending. (Point 1)'

'But thanks to your help, I escaped the bad ending route, discovered unknown talents, and awakened to a much stronger existence. (Point 2)'

'You didn't spare any effort or sacrifice for a mere slave like me. You were wounded and bled. You could have ignored me like everyone else. You could have just walked away. Why did you do so much for someone like me? (Point 3)'

'Being with you, I realized you are inherently such a person. A person who sacrifices themselves to save others. Thus, I will assist you from behind. Even if it costs me everything. (Point 4)'

Of course, this cliché has many variations. Just like popular restaurants attract countless 'original' clones next door.

For example, Point 4 could be changed to 'Being with you, I realized you are kind only to me. You treat only me specially. So, I will dedicate everything to you' instead.

The core point is one: to the saved character, the protagonist holds a value comparable to 'the world itself' or bears the 'weight of the

world' alone in place of others.

Thus, the protagonist 'deserves to be praised.'

No matter how much you praise the protagonist's achievements and attitude, it is still not enough. Because the world's misfortune is endless, the protagonist continues to bear that infinite misfortune, constantly getting 'wounded.' (Point 5)

"——So, one of our National Road Management Corps employees, well-versed in genre literature, summarized it for us..."

"Impressive."

If I had met Oh Dok-seo (awakened version) by then, I could have figured it out myself, but the 119th run me was still a bit distant from genre literature.

Noh Do-hwa? She hadn't even watched The Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter movies?

We, mere ordinary people, were satisfied with reading the [Analysis of Savior Narrative] report perfectly prepared by our management team.

In short, it was similar to office supervisors who, reading a well-summarized report by their subordinates, feel they've mastered a field they've never encountered before, thanks to their superior brains and extensive social experience.

"So the solution is simple."

"Oh, what is it...?"

"Ultimately, it means the person who saved the characters should be 'not so noble,' right? For example, I secretly bully cute fairies or do something petty. This way, the 'Savior Syndrome' won't hold, and the anomaly will lose its effect and disappear."

"Oh..."

"Let's start tormenting fairies today. Then the notion of sanctifying

me will quickly collapse, and the anomaly will lose its power."

"Indeed, Awakener Undertaker. Your character is vile, but you grasp anomalies better than anyone. A real scumbag."

"Thank you. I'm still far behind compared to you, Chief."

"Hmmm..."

We confidently praised ourselves, assured of victory.

I reiterate, Noh Do-hwa and I were not experts in genre conventions.

Yet, we were the authorities governing the yin and yang of the Korean Peninsula. Under normal circumstances, the Saintess, who would have appropriately played the role of a supervisor, had completely lost her mind.

History repeats itself.

The combination of lack of expertise and collapse of absolute power surveillance had been amply demonstrated by humanity over thousands of years.

The tragedy was thus foreordained.

Footnotes:

Chapter 99

The Savior A II

Sinnoa

As I had declared to Noh Do-hwa, from that day on, I began behaving like a complete jerk.

I kicked fairies for no reason and bullied shop clerks. Whenever I had the chance, I spread rumors about others.

I even started a series on SG Net called [Luxury Series Enjoyed in the Apocalypse], where I insulted all the awakeners on the Korean Peninsula. At first, I did it anonymously. But I subtly hinted that the posts were from "ZERO_SUGAR."

-Anonymous: Breaking news! Evidence that ZERO_SUGAR = LuxuryKing.jpg

-ZERO_SUGAR: Oh no, I've been found out.

Finally, I pretended that my identity had been unintentionally revealed, completing the charade.

I smiled with satisfaction.

Anyone could now call me a jerk without hesitation...!

"Hmm... 6 points."

"...?"

Sim Ah-ryeon, an expert in this field, glanced at the monitor beside me.

"If it were me, I wouldn't just hint at the same identity anonymously. I'd change IPs constantly while praising and commenting on LuxuryKing. Of course, I'd manipulate the upvotes..."

"...!"

"The pinnacle of socializing is when your posts, no matter how trivial, dominate the popular list on the board with a flood of upvotes..."

"...!"

"Yes. You need to create a signature nonsensical post that's uniquely yours. The Luxury series is too well-made to be considered nonsense... It even provides vicarious satisfaction. That's not good. It has to be utterly useless nonsense, so everyone knows it's just manipulated upvotes. Try beatboxing, singing, or posting consistently about something nobody cares about..."

"...!"

三人行必有我師 (Three people walking together must have at least one teacher among them).

Indeed, I learned from Sim Ah-ryeon and transformed into a perfect jerk in the apocalypse.

-OldManGoryeo: ZERO_SUGAR < < If you like this bastard, upvote lolol

OldManGoryeo: Starting with me lmao

Anonymous: Just upvoted, you bastard

Anonymous: Just upvoted, you bastard

OldManGoryeo's social circle (surprisingly, a group of followers who revered Sim Ah-ryeon as a named figure on SG Net) began supporting.

If there are those who like you, there must be those who dislike you to maintain balance in the world. Normal SG Net users started to hate me.

-[Samcheon]WitchJudge: What's up with ZERO_SUGAR lately? Is he crazy?

-LiteraryGirl: Fuck, why is half of the popular posts just socializing bullshit? SG Net is ruined. I'm leaving.

Anonymous: See you tomorrow!

-dolLHoUse: Oppa...

-[National Road Management Corps] Officer: It's not pleasant to see a few people who are nothing but a handful disturbing the whole board.

-CookingQueen: Interesting.

The result was perfect.

Now, it was time for those infected with Savior Narrative Syndrome to come to their senses——

-[Baekwha] SixthGrader: Upvoted hehehe

That moment never came.

When Cheon Yo-hwa, the absolute leader of Baekwha Girls' High, pressed the upvote button, hundreds of Baekwha guild members automatically followed suit.

[Mr. Undertaker, I am not very interested in SG Net activities.]

[But sensing your desire to become a named figure, I have captured and exposed the personal information of four awakeners who tried to slander you.]

[Please continue your activities without worry.]

Why?

I turned to Cheon Yo-hwa, who was evolving from a koala to a sloth, and asked.

"Yo-hwa. Isn't my behavior jerk-like?"

"Huh? No. You must have hurt your brain while overexerting yourself to save us. Don't worry, teacher! Even if the whole world

criticizes you, I never will!"

"....."

"We'll take care of you forever!"

My pupils trembled. Responsibility? Forever? Students taking care of their teacher? It felt like one of those gacha games before the apocalypse.

The tragedy didn't end there.

"Undertaker! Did you hear?"

Dang Seo-rin burst into my hideout.

"What?"

"Sorry! For not recognizing it sooner...!"

Suddenly, Dang Seo-rin, like a character from a hot-blooded youth drama, ran over and hugged me tightly.

I was flustered. Dang Seo-rin was not one for physical affection.

"Not recognizing what? Suddenly, what...?"

"They said you hurt your brain dealing with anomalies! And that you were infected with a mental anomaly called Attention-Seeker Syndrome...! Why don't you ever care about yourself and only think of others?"

"...Shit."

"Oh my! Even Anger Management Disorder. I'm sorry, Undertaker. Am I too late? Don't worry. Even if you burn the whole world, I'll always be on your side..."

I was screwed.

"Wait, Dang Seo-rin. That's a misunderstanding. Who fed you that fake news?"

"Huh? The constellations told me?"

"...That's a lie. Think logically. Who's more trustworthy, me or the constellations?"

"Huh? Of course, the constellations."

"...Actually, constellations don't exist. It's all a masquerade controlled by one person."

"Oh."

Dang Seo-rin's eyes softened. She stood on tiptoes and patted my forehead.

"I see. Yes, yes. You're right. The constellations are all lies... Don't worry. You don't need to worry about anything..."

This is insane.

A chill ran down my spine. Cheon Yo-hwa and the Saintess, and Dang Seo-rin were among the strongest awakeners on the Korean Peninsula.

It was no exaggeration to say that half of Korea's power had fallen to the anomaly since all three were simultaneously infected with Savior Narrative Syndrome.

With the other half, including me and Noh Do-hwa, we held another emergency meeting.

"Chief, we're screwed."

"Crazy..."

Noh Do-hwa sighed and then opened her eyes wide.

"No, wait. Isn't it just you who's screwed? I have no problems..."

"Hey."

"Think logically, Undertaker. What harm does this anomaly bring to us? It's just that some powerful awakeners are mentally dependent

on you, but wasn't that already the case? Does anyone die? Is there any material damage? Do I get tired? No. The more I think about it, the more I feel like I can just sit this out..."

"If you get infected too, you'll cling to me and cry, 'You were indeed the savior of the world...'"

"Fuck..."

"You know I have [Complete Memory], right? I swear here and now, if you don't help me, I will someday hone my artistic skills to a hyper-realistic level, like a photograph."

"Artistic skills...?"

"Yes. I will draw you clinging to me in excruciating detail. The title will be [Noh Do-hwa Worships the Savior]. I'll post the high-definition picture on SG Net, forever. In every run."

"What the fuck is this crazy bastard talking about...?"

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The conference room door shook violently. Despite being designed to withstand a nuclear explosion, voices beyond the steel door were clearly heard.

-Teacher! Open the door!

-Hyung! Are you there, hyung! I made all your posts popular using my admin privileges!

-Oh, what to do... The guild leader seems scared to come out. He's so hurt, mentally collapsed... From the start, the sacrifice was too much for one person to handle...

-Oppa. It's Ha-yul. Sorry. I should have realized when you asked me to install an unbreakable security system from outside. Regret, deep regret.

-We were wrong, Undertaker. Sorry. So please smile like you used to, okay? Please?

Goosebumps rose.

It was pure terror.

Honestly, in recent centuries, no anomaly had scared me this much. It was more frightening than the Infinite Void.

I muttered seriously.

"Should I kill myself?"

"Oh, that's a great method. I'd love to say hurry up and die, but can you guarantee that Savior Narrative Syndrome won't appear in the next run? Are you going to kill yourself every time this anomaly appears...?"

"That's a cheap shot."

"Come up with a plan. I don't want the current run to be ruined by such a stupid anomaly. Aren't you an anomaly expert...?"

Crash! The steel door shook like a piece of paper.

I spoke urgently.

"Chief, how about this?"

"Go on..."

"Let's pretend that the reason I helped those people was because I had ulterior motives. In other words, I approached them with sinister intentions. If it turns out that what they thought was 'salvation' was actually my selfish desire, the foundation of Savior Syndrome will collapse. What do you think? I just came up with it, but isn't it perfect?"

"Don't do it, you bastard..."

"...?"

"Just don't. Do you want to watch Korea crumble? When I said say anything, I didn't mean spout nonsense, you crazy bastard..."

If this were the 555th run, after meeting Oh Dok-seo and getting into web novels, I could have analyzed the situation more coolly.

...This anomaly, which started with 'Savior Syndrome,' triggered guilt in the people around me by my 'sudden strange actions.'

Especially hiding in Noh Do-hwa's secret bunker was the worst move.

By activating the plot of 'the protagonist with mental wounds shuts themselves away,' the guilt of those around me intensified, and the 'salvation' narrative deteriorated into the 'regret·obsession·ruin' genre.

If I chose 'suicide' here, it would be the worst.

This anomaly might evolve beyond my regression ability into a narrative where 'the protagonist died sacrificing for us,' maxing out the guilt. My life's genre would drift into ruin, creating the worst anomaly I couldn't defeat with regression.

In short, the true nature of this anomaly wasn't 'Savior Syndrome.'

It was a 'cliché'. That was the anomaly's true form.

Genre literature had settled into the cliché of avoiding, twisting, and overturning clichés.

Even my rebellion against the salvation narrative was a cliché, making it a much tougher anomaly to tackle than I initially thought.

Thanks to Noh Do-hwa preventing my suicide, I avoided the worst bad ending.

‘What should I do? Making myself look like a jerk isn't working? But I can't just kill innocent people or commit evil deeds.’

For the record, if I had committed real 'evil deeds' back then, the situation would have worsened with side effects. That's prime material for a ruin genre plot.

‘What should I do...’

Crash!

Finally, the steel door was crushed. Familiar faces reached through the gap.

"Teacher." "Hyung." "Guild leader..." "Oppa." "Undertaker."

Noh Do-hwa was terrified.

"Do something. Anything but the crazy plan you just mentioned..."

"Ah."

In that moment, an inspiration struck my mind like lightning.

It was divine providence.

An act the protagonist of a salvation narrative would never do. Not just that, an act that no work in the world had ever established, thus never considered a cliché.

An act that wouldn't give the impression of 'suddenly becoming a different person' while inherently being unlikable. Something I'd always had as a characteristic.

A strategy like a miracle, and I had only one.

Crack!

The steel door completely crumpled, revealing the exit.

People approached, swaying like a horde of zombies. Indeed, the underground bunker of the National Road Management Corps, the last bastion on the Korean Peninsula, had fallen.

Yet I did not retreat. Like Zhang Fei of Changban, I stood before the salvation zombies.

And I shouted.

"Who wants to talk about [Three Kingdoms] with me!"

Stop.

The salvation zombies hesitated.

"If Wei Yan's plan at Ziwu Valley had been accepted by Zhuge Liang? If Ma Su hadn't climbed the mountain? If Liu Bei hadn't lost the Battle of Yiling?"

"....."

"Was Jiang Wei's Northern Expeditions justified? Was Liu Shan really a foolish ruler? Does anyone here support Cao Cao? The Xuzhou Massacre was an unforgivable crime!"

"....."

Hesitation. Hesitation.

The salvation zombies took steps back from me. My eyes sparkled.

It worked! It really worked!

I shouted even louder and approached the salvation zombies.

"After all, only Shu-Han carries on the true lineage of Han! Wei supporters are psychos, and Cao Cao was just a deranged attention seeker!"

"....."

"Cao Cao killed his father and massacred the people of Xuzhou, but in Wan, he lusted after a widow and caused his son's death! What hypocrisy! This led to the succession of Cao Pi, an unprecedented sociopath, and brought disaster! Cao Cao is the enemy of the world and should be stoned! Dang Seo-rin!"

"W-What?"

"Let's talk about the Three Kingdoms!"

"Uh... sorry. There's a big issue in my guild. That's why I came to see the Chief. But she looks busy. I'll come back later."

"Yo-hwa!"

"Y-Yes?"

"Want to talk about the Three Kingdoms?"

"——Sorry, sunbae! I have a basketball game with the kids soon! I must go!"

"Ha-yul! Seo Gyu! Ah-ryeon! You guys like the Three Kingdoms, right? Let's go to Mount Qi this weekend and see why Ma Su climbed the mountain!"

"Kyaaah!"

Starting with Sim Ah-ryeon's scream, known for its high pitch since the first run, the salvation zombies fled.

The salvation narrative anomaly was defeated.

Only Noh Do-hwa and I remained in the conference room.

"....."

"....."

I turned to Noh Do-hwa.

Noh Do-hwa's expression was indescribable with words.

Despair. Relief. Contempt. Annoyance. Disbelief. Pity. Annoyance. Discomfort.

Only by mastering hyper-realistic painting could I convey the complex emotions Noh Do-hwa directed at me.

"...Chief."

"Yes..."

"Want to talk about the Three Kingdoms?"

Silence.

Noh Do-hwa mumbled.

"...Sure. Whatever."

"..,,,,."

"Fine, let's do it..."

Confession: That response hurt more than anything else. The end.

Epilogue.

"——Such things happened in the 126th run, Chief Noh Do-hwa. That's why I bring up the Three Kingdoms whenever I can. It's not because of my old-fashioned taste, but to protect the peace of the Korean Peninsula and the world's safety. As a preventive measure, I bring up the Three Kingdoms. It helps prevent Savior Narrative Syndrome. Do you understand? Will you acknowledge my noble self-sacrifice?"

"Bullshit."

Footnotes:

Chapter 100

The Shareholder I

Sinnoa

You might find yourself wondering as you listen to my stories.

"Aren't these people a bit too noble?"

Indeed, even if we set aside the Saintess, who has reached an almost inhuman level of sanctity, people like Dang Seo-rin (excluding her witch cosplay) and Noh Do-hwa (excluding her personality), as well as those around me (excluding Sim Ah-ryeon), are quite virtuous.

But this suspicion is misplaced.

-How is it that everyone around this person is so noble and capable? (X)

-Oh, this person deliberately associates only with noble and capable people! (O)

I, too, have a history of painful betrayals. Rotten personalities, people always ready to backstab, dirty and incompetent characters...

After filtering out such individuals, I finally arrived at my current relationships.

“By the way, mister.”

“Hmm?”

So one day during the 669th cycle, Oh Dok-seo asked me a question that left me a bit flustered.

“Now that I think about it, you don't hang out with the early members much anymore, right? You only meet people like Dang Seo-rin or Noh Do-hwa.”

“Early members? Who are you talking about? If you mean Old Man Scho…”

“No, no. You meet the Swordmaster in the 6th run. I mean the real early members. Jung So-hee, Kim Si-woon, Uehara Shino.”

“Oh.”

“In [Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint], those people only appear in the early parts, and then they're never mentioned again. Why don't you meet them nowadays?”

“……”

I felt an unfamiliar sensation, as if hearing the names of elementary school friends I'd long forgotten.

“I don't remember.”

“Huh?”

“I don't remember. I gained [Complete Memory] in the 5th run, but I mainly interacted with them in the 4th run. From my perspective, that was thousands of years ago.”

“Oh…”

“It seems that the novel you read includes stories from before the 5th run.”

“Yeah, well... The stories from the 1st and 3rd cycles were very important. It got serialized up to the point where you enter Baekwha Girls' High and encounter the Infinite Void.”

“Hmm.”

So this meant that Oh Dok-seo at this point had 'read' my life up to the 117th run.

From my current perspective, this run was the 669th. For Oh Dok-seo, it meant she observed 'me up to the 117th run.'

In other words, Oh Dok-seo was trailing my life with about a 500-cycle gap.

'This is the longest time-lag adaptation in the world.'

[Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint] was an irregularly serialized work. Just because I moved onto the next run didn’t mean it was regularly updated like modern web novels.

It wasn’t because the author, claiming a slump, took five days off, causing an outrage among working readers with his stress management skills.

The serialization simply had different 'conditions' from other novels.

'When major anomalies are defeated, [ORV] especially increases in serialization.'

Ten Legs. Udumbara. Meteor Shower.

Particularly, when the Infinite Void was defeated, [ORV]’s serialization volume skyrocketed. Naturally, the knowledge of Oh Dok-seo, the sole 'reader' of [ORV], also increased.

Compared to the Oh Dok-seo of the 555th cycle, who thought the Ten Legs was the final boss, the Oh Dok-seo of the 669th cycle possessed an overwhelming amount of information.

Of course, she still had many gaps compared to me. However, Oh Dok-seo had knowledge I didn’t possess.

“On the contrary, I want to ask you, Dok-seo, what happened between me and those early characters.”

“Huh?”

“I don't remember anything properly. I roughly know who they are, but I don't know what happened in the 4th run. No one, including myself, knows unless you tell us.”

“Uh... Should I tell you then? I only read the early parts a month ago, so my memory is a bit fuzzy…”

“It doesn’t matter at all.”

“Then... Okay, got it. Wow, telling the protagonist his own story feels really strange. It's fascinating. I don’t think such a scene has ever appeared in any creative work.”

Oh Dok-seo cleared her throat.

“Hmm, alright. So, what happened was...”

“Wait. You don’t need to tell me now.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll ask you in the next run. There’s a much better way to know than just hearing it from you.”

“...?”

Oh Dok-seo tilted her head.

“Mister, what are you talking about?”

This was what I meant.

“You fucking asshole! What are you talking about!”

“Hoeee…”

Next run. The 670th run.

In the waiting room of the 'Busan Station Tutorial Dungeon,' SG-Man Seo Gyu's loud cursing echoed as usual.

The face of fairy number 264, who received the insult directly, was still blank. The expressions of hundreds of civilians were no different.

A place more familiar, though not nostalgic, than my birthplace, which I could barely remember—a home for the infinitely regressing.

I approached Oh Dok-seo and greeted her with the latest MZ-generation trends.

“Hi-ru. Bang-ga-bang-ga. Hewwo.”

“Eek! M-Main character…!”

Of course, the MZ generation included both Millennials (born in the 1980s and 1990s) and Generation Z (born in the 2000s and 2010s), so my greeting was indeed up-to-date.

There used to be controversy over how to lump together 30 years, but personally, I found it puzzling. What’s the problem?

I grouped my life in 1,000-year intervals.

Honestly, isn’t 30 years just a moment?

But it seemed sudden to Oh Dok-seo.

“W-Why are you coming to me!”

“Calm down, reader. I know you have read [Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint], where I am the protagonist. But that's a lie, a means of an alien seizing control of your mind…”

“…?”

“My name is the Undertaker. Known as the Duke of the Black Library in the secret society, the Library Society. You must trust me completely…”

“…!”

The most fun game in the world, that is, teasing Oh Dok-seo, lasted about ten minutes.

During that time, SG Man's head exploded (sorry, Seo Gyu), Sim Ah-ryeon proved she was the scream queen, and 398 survivors scattered in all directions.

Oh Dok-seo and I were left alone. While everyone was too shocked

by the murder they witnessed to notice, the convenience store, souvenir shop, and vending machines in the waiting room were great points to gather supplies.

I scoured the convenience store and shop, taking just enough, as always.

I didn't forget to grab Silver Bells from the souvenir shop and put them in my pocket. I also emptied the vending machines of all drinks, spending all my money.

"Now then…"

Oh Dok-seo invested all her money in the vending machines too. After hearing the whole truth from me, Oh Dok-seo glared at me with a fierce expression.

"So, in an earlier run, I formed an alliance with you? Now, in the 670th cycle, you seek my cooperation to experience something as close as possible to the 4th cycle?"

"That is correct."

"…Mister, I'm confused about many things, but let me ask this first. Why did you play such a prank earlier?"

"Hmm. Reader, imagine you're living your life, and someone comes along, claiming that this world is actually a novel, and they know all its developments. Isn't that fascinating? Don't you feel like teasing them?"

"I don't get it at all…"

Well, expecting a deep understanding from a severe web novel otaku with terminal Gen Z disease and chuunibyou was too much.

"But… isn't it already too different from the 4th run just by hanging out with me like this? I'm an extra whose name isn't even mentioned in [Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint]."

"Ah, an extra, you say. Nonsense. That's because 'that novel' hasn't reached the 555th cycle yet. The 555th run in the novel starts with

you as a main character.”

“Oh…”

“Anyway, I don’t want the exact same progress as the 4th cycle. Just something similar is enough. I want to experience the lost memories.”

“Well, in that case… Ah, they’re coming.”

Oh Dok-seo murmured nervously.

Footsteps echoed from the other side of the waiting room. Seven people.

Leading the group was a man in his twenties wearing a Hawaiian shirt and holding a wooden stick. He scowled when he saw us.

“Oh? What the hell, people are here?”

Lee Baek.

He was a person who, if left alone, would be eliminated later in the tutorial. His awakening ability was also E-rank, not much different from an ordinary person.

That’s all I remembered, but Oh Dok-seo seemed to know more. The kid whispered urgently to me.

“That’s Lee Baek. He leads the biggest and fiercest group at Busan Station. Because of him, you had a hard time from the very first cycle.”

“What? Me?”

“Yeah. He always incited people, created hierarchies among them… When he noticed you, he divided your group to betray you. He caused all the early stress-inducing developments. You seriously considered quitting because of him.”

“Oh.”

I couldn't imagine being manipulated by an E-rank ordinary guy. It was so surprising that it was more interesting than unpleasant.

"What are you two whispering about?"

Lee Baek seemed annoyed by the sight of Oh Dok-seo and me whispering. He approached, waving his wooden stick.

The rest of his followers also looked menacing. They probably knew each other from before being summoned to the tutorial dungeon, mainly from back alleys.

"How did I act in the 4th run?"

"You waited by the vending machine until Lee Baek approached, then you slit his throat immediately."

"What? Just killed him?"

"Yeah, it was the first cathartic scene in [ORV]. Without it, I would've seriously quit."

"The 4th cycle me was quite a savage…"

"Hey, you in the T-shirt! And the kid in the hat! Can't you hear me?"

As soon as Lee Baek stepped within five paces, I took a step forward, standing right in front of his nose.

"Can't hear——you?"

Tap. I chopped his throat with my hand, knocking him unconscious. I didn't kill him. He just experienced the sorrow of a split vocal cord.

"Huh?"

The remaining followers widened their eyes, but they didn't need to suffer from dry eyes for long. It took just three seconds to destroy their vocal cords and knock them out.

"…Wow."

Oh Dok-seo's delayed exclamation came.

"Are they dead? All of them?"

"No, I only destroyed their vocal cords. They'll live as mutes for the rest of their lives. As you said, he's good at inciting and politicking, so sealing his voice is enough of a penalty."

"Wow, seriously. Wow. You've really been through hundreds of runs. The genre has completely shifted to a munchkin story. Where did that wimpy, stress-inducing character from the early parts go…?"

"Hey, that's harsh. Anyway, what's next?"

"Oh. You got injured in the arm dealing with these seven? At Busan Station, only Uehara Shino and Sim Ah-ryeon can heal you. But Sim Ah-ryeon…"

"Her healing is barely at the level of a burn ointment, considering the current situation."

"No, even so, it's much better than ointment. Anyway, compared to Uehara Shino, her performance is indeed lacking, so you recruit Uehara as an ally…"

Following Oh Dok-seo's guidance, I enjoyed a nostalgic journey.

'Come to think of it, I used to rate Uehara Shino higher than Sim Ah-ryeon.'

It was a novel experience.

Chasing after a long-forgotten past, now just a mirage of déjà vu, step by step.

Even with [Complete Memory], making me remember everything, there was still an unknown past. This feeling wasn't bad at all.

It must have been a mysterious experience for Oh Dok-seo as well.

“Ew. Mister, why are you so good at Japanese?”

“Huh?”

“You just spoke Japanese with Uehara Shino. Originally, you couldn’t speak it and used a smartphone translator… Oh, right. You said you’ve lived for thousands of years. So you’d be good at foreign languages…”

“…?”

Uehara Shino watched our conversation with a puzzled look. She was an alchemist who, in the distant past, I considered an S-rank awakener but would now be classified as a B-rank at best in this run.

A naturally eliminated past connection. A remnant of time.

“……”

“Undertaker-san, is something wrong?”

“No, nothing. By the way, we’re challenging the mid-boss tomorrow, so get some rest.”

“Oh, okay.”

We cleared the tutorial following the 4th run’s order.

Rallying the survivors, demanding food and medicine from the fairy as mid-rewards, and killing the seven bosses one by one.

Even though I knew how to forcibly open the ‘exit,’ it was a perfect waste of time, but it was also a time journey.

Of course, there was a crucial difference from the ‘original’ 4th cycle. A past history that could never be repeated.

“Hmm, originally, from today, I was supposed to meet the survivors and use [Time Seal] for those who wanted it…”

Glance. Oh Dok-seo looked at me cautiously.

“…I can’t follow this. Because everyone you used [Time Seal] on is now trapped in a crystal monument.”

I stared blankly at the Busan Station food court. It had been a long time since I visited this place.

Gravestones.

Crystal monuments that only I could see lined up along the food court corridor. To me, it looked more like a cemetery than a food court.

The remains of people sealed in 'the happiest day of their lives' by my power.

I silently put my hands in my pockets. Jingle, I felt the touch of Silver Bells.

Oh Dok-seo asked carefully.

“Hey, mister… Can you see them now? The monuments.”

“Yeah.”

“Can you tell me exactly how many there are?”

“Well. I’d have to count the ones in this food court, but I can tell you the exact number of monuments in the entire Busan Station dungeon. I memorized that. 101.”

“……”

Here, a total of 101 dreams, 101 afterlives, and 101 gravestones were sleeping.

Indeed.

The original number of civilians summoned to the ‘Busan Station Tutorial Dungeon’ wasn’t an ambiguous 399.

500.

It started with 500 survivors.

Among them, 101 people were sealed in time by me.

Footnotes:

Chapter 101
The Shareholder II

Sinnoa

The world was an endless hell.

The reason I attached the word “Infinite Void” to the first otherworldly entity I encountered was because that term labeled it correctly in my subconscious.

“Hoee! This stage has seen 31 casualties!”

“……”

“Not a bad number, but compared to other dungeons, it's a poor performance. A bit more effort is required! With such results, the rewards I can offer you are quite insignificant... Hoi.”

“...This is.”

“It's Pig Slop! I heard it was often eaten by residents during the war here!”

Not many immediately understood that the war referred to the Korean War.

None of the survivors knew that Pig Slop was made from food waste and cigarette butts salvaged from American soldiers' trash bins, boiled without distinguishing between garbage and food.

“The smell is terrible, but I’ve removed the deadly toxins for you... Though the rules strictly forbid such favoritism and partiality, I decided to make this small concession after witnessing your efforts...!”

“……”

“Anyway, enjoy this meal, your first in two days!”

The fairy vanished. In the basement of Busan Station, on the 6th floor, where a restaurant shouldn't have existed, 56 survivors and 56 bowls of Pig Slop remained.

Even those who were repelled by the smell gradually moved their hands. There were no spoons. Given that all 56 shared the same miserable scent, swallowing food with a similar odor wasn't difficult.

Cries occasionally echoed.

Eating couldn't be a sin.

If eating were a sin, life itself would be a punishment.

An article in the Kyunghyang Newspaper on May 20, 1964, contained such a sentence. The writer's name was Shin Young-gak. The column was titled "Hungry Crowd."

The 56 starving individuals hastily devoured the food to alleviate two days' worth of hunger.

Maintaining historical accuracy, the bowls were actually aluminum cans. The sounds of fingers scraping and rubbing the cans echoed through the cheap aluminum.

Eating couldn't be a sin...

If eating were a sin, life itself would be a punishment...

Hell was a place where condemned sinners lived, so the world was hell.

Occasionally, gagging sounds briefly interrupted the restaurant's atmosphere. These sounds were less about the food and more about the misery of life. Things that couldn't be swallowed or digested traveled down people's throats.

Afterward, sounds like "Mom" or "Fuck" were probably just burps.

Jingle.

The sound of a bell rang out. People who had finished eating turned to look at me.

It was my bell. I couldn't remember if I used my aura to make the bell sound louder before the 5th cycle.

This Silver Bell was an item I farmed in every cycle, even during vacation cycles.

I remembered the farming location clearly. The souvenir shop in the waiting room. Turn left from the entrance, seventh shelf, fourth row from the top.

Even after looters ransacked the shop, this useless bell, which only made noise and attracted monsters, was always left behind.

I needed it.

“It's Undertaker…”

“Where's Jung So-hee? He's alone...”

“Shh, don't look at him.”

“He'll drag you into the abyss.”

People in the restaurant whispered. Among them were faces I still remembered, and others that had vanished from reality.

Kim Joo-chul, the football player sealed in time during the 4th cycle, would have been among them.

I continued to recall. If this were the 3rd cycle, the number of survivors in this stage would be 11, not 56, and Lee Baek would be among them.

“Hey, Undertaker! Plague!”

Lee Baek would have stood up and shouted.

“Did you come begging for Pig Slop? Sorry, but we don't have enough food to share with a plague like you! Everyone! Don’t share

your food with him. We don't have the luxury to support a solo player like him!”

In a voice like that. With lines like those.

Reconstructing the novel Oh Dok-seo read, as if restoring an old newspaper, it seemed Lee Baek said those things to me.

According to Oh Dok-seo’s analysis, Lee Baek said such things to 'consolidate his power over the survivors,' 'select an outcast to isolate,' 'make eating Pig Slop a privilege,' and 'appear to bear the burden of harsh words for the group's sake.'

My response was simple.

“Does anyone want to escape this hell?”

“……”

“Anyone who wants eternal peace? Anyone?”

The restaurant fell silent.

Even Lee Baek for a moment.

I looked around. Lightly enough not to be intimidating. Thoroughly enough not to miss a single face.

“Shut up and get lost!”

If it were Lee Baek, he would have swung his stick, angry that he hesitated even briefly.

“Um, I...”

In another cycle, someone would have cautiously raised their hand.

“Me too...”

There would have been more hands in the 4th cycle than in the 5th, more in the 3rd cycle than in the 4th, and even more in the 1st cycle.

These hands had scooped Pig Slop, killed monsters, and murdered other humans.

An elderly woman knew she no longer had grandchildren or family to caress with those hands.

“Young man. Do it for me. The funeral, was it?”

“With my ability, if you enter the dream, others will lose all memories of you. No one will remember you.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

The elderly woman muttered.

“It doesn’t matter, that stuff.”

A transparent tombstone appeared.

Whether I was in Busan Station or beyond, tombstones lined my path. I couldn’t remember exactly, but at least 500,000 tombstones had been erected.

Even when the cycle restarted, the tombstones never disappeared.

At the beginning of each new cycle, hundreds of thousands of humans 'vanished in an instant.' No one knew about their disappearance.

Except for one person.

The world was hell, and the bell always rang in that place.

I was the death row inmate who killed the most humans in this hell.

Thousands of years later.

“Mister. I am undoubtedly your only true understanding.”

A cheeky kid boldly declared this.

Hairstyle? Short red bob. Weapon? Baseball bat. Fashion? Rapper-

style cap, jacket, and jeans with three tears.

Signature pose? Chewing ordinary gum like bubble gum, blowing it until it popped, covering her whole face in gum.

Oh Dok-seo.

In short, an idiot.

This girl, who clearly needed psychological treatment, dared to claim:

“I’ve read the novel [Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint], which contains your entire life story. I’ve read your innermost thoughts and monologues. I know you better than you know yourself.”

“Really. Should I sue you for invasion of privacy?”

“Huh? No… So, please save me. My shield’s about to break.”

Bang bang bang bang!

Oh Dok-seo crouched down. A transparent shield formed around her, with three goblins enthusiastically beating it.

-Screech! Screech!

-Eek, quack! Kheek!

These were regular monsters in the tutorial dungeon.

Three-on-one. It was a textbook scene of a gangbang, and Uehara Shino, now part of our party, was stomping her feet.

“Um, Undertaker-san. Shouldn’t we help her...?”

“No. This is part of her training.”

“Ugh. Go for it, Dok-seo-chan! Ganbare!”

“Ganbare my ass! Help me, dammit!”

Bang clang bang clang!

Initially, the goblins found the transparent drum amusing, but now they treated it like an instrument. Bang! Clang! Bang! Their Dionysian rhythm turned this place into a rock festival.

By the way, Dionysus's followers had a tradition of tearing people apart and eating them after festivals. Judging by the goblins' eyes on Dok-seo, the festival's sacrifice was already decided.

-Keeheeheehee!

"Eek?! M-Mister! Please save me! Only 30 seconds left on my shield!"

Absolute Defense.

She called it the [AT Field]. A shield that nullified attacks.

It was one of Oh Dok-seo's abilities.

I believed it reflected her mindset of seeing herself as a 'reader dropped into a novel world.' Her skill manifested her way of separating herself from this world.

It was an overpowered skill with a fatal flaw: she could only use it once a day, for just one minute.

"Dok-seo, I've told you many times. No matter how OP your skill is, it's useless if you don't train yourself."

"But I've already killed 11 monsters today! I'm exhausted! I'm tired! We've been walking for six hours since dawn. Please help me! Eek? It's cracking, I heard it crack, it's really cracking!"

"Stop whining."

Smash— The shield shattered, and the goblins' clubs rushed in. Oh Dok-seo screamed bizarrely and swung her bat.

"Hiyaaah!"

The bat glowed red with aura. Thwack! A goblin's head burst. Foul.

-Screech?

-Eek?

The goblins, thinking they were up against a KBO batter, were bewildered by the sudden Major League swing.

Regardless, Dok-seo executed the moves I taught her in the past few days, striking with her bat.

“Hyaah! Die! Die! You monster bastard, dieee!”

-Squeegh?

Foul. Foul. With two strikes, no pitchers on the opposing team. The goblins were disqualified, leaving Dok-seo victorious.

Dok-seo dropped her shoulders and bat, panting heavily.

“Huff, wheeze— Huff, wheeze...”

“See? You can do it. These days, kids lack perseverance, whining before even trying…”

“I’ll kill you!”

Dok-seo swung her bat at me, but such a slow swing couldn’t hit me.

Swing and a miss. Out.

For daring to attack her master, I gave her a flick on the forehead. My dark aura reverberated through her skull with just the right amount of pain.

'Just the right amount' meant, hmm, like getting kicked in the balls for a guy?

“Arghhh!”

Dok-seo threw the bat (throwing a bat after an out, such poor sportsmanship) and rolled on the ground.

“I’m dying! I’m really dying! My head is shattered! Ahhh! I’m dying!”

“You’re not dying. It’s not shattered. Get up and eat. Uehara, please set up the mat. Let’s have lunch.”

“Ah, yes.”

Uehara Shino, the porter, set up the mat expertly.

This was quite different from the 4th cycle. We didn't have the luxury of carrying a mat back then.

We cooked the retort foods we took from the convenience store deliciously. No need for fire. We used aura to heat, cook, and boil the food. It was the most luxurious cooking method in the world.

Uehara twirled pasta on a fork, her expression melting.

“Wow. It’s delicious…”

“The pasta is perfectly cooked, right? I noticed Uehara likes slightly undercooked, al dente pasta.”

“Oh, yes. It’s exactly to my taste. Your cooking is better than what I’ve had at professional restaurants!”

“Thanks.”

Then, from behind a pillar, the fairy peeked out.

“Hoee. Smells good…”

“Hmm? What? Are you going to eat too?”

“Eek. I am an impartial judge. I cannot accept bribes from the participants…”

“This isn’t a bribe; it’s a gratuity. It’s a gift from the people to the vanguard striving tirelessly for the world revolution.”

“Hoee! Food made from the people’s blood and sweat… Ignoring it would be bourgeois behavior. As a staunch revolutionary, I cannot

refuse…”

“Here. I made salmon steak.”

“Hoee! Truly revolutionary taste!”

Japanese and fairy laughter bloomed on the mat. True harmony between past and present enemies.

“Ugh…”

Only the chuunibyou otaku lay sprawled next to the mat, groaning.

“Me too... I’m hungry…”

“Do you have no hands or feet? Get your food from the mat and eat it.”

“Why are you so cold to me?”

Dok-seo whined.

“You make me fight monsters alone! Make me train aura alone! What did I do wrong, huh?”

“It’s because I expect much from you, kid.”

“Ugh. I can’t live like this. I’m so upset... Damn, why is the pasta so good? It’s retort food.”

“Um, Dok-seo-chan. That was mine…”

“Hoee. This BLT rye sandwich is also revolutionary! You deserve the Cooking Hero Medal!”

The balance of protein, carbs, and fats was perfect. It was an overly luxurious lunch for beginners in a tutorial dungeon.

Ultimately, our 4th cycle exploration turned into a luxury trip... But that’s fine. I hope these kids enjoy luxuries when they can.

We stood up, neither too full nor too hungry, with our stomachs nicely coated.

“One more floor down, and we’ll reach the boss room. Once we defeat the boss, the tutorial dungeon ends.”

“Yeah. You’ll defeat the boss, right?”

“No? Veterans shouldn’t steal newbies’ experience. You’ll clear it alone, Dok-seo.”

“…?”

“…?”

As we continued our cheerful conversation, stepping onto the stairs to the 13th basement floor, I felt a strong presence from the opposite corridor.

“Wait. Everyone, stop.”

Our group looked at me. It was amusing that fairy number 264 was included, but my mouth didn’t smile.

“People are approaching.”

“Approaching? How many?”

“One hundred seventeen.”

“……”

“All the remaining survivors. Get ready. Dok-seo, come to my side. Uehara, to the back.”

I positioned myself in the middle of the corridor.

“We’ll stand our ground here.”

After saying that, something strange happened. My right hand instinctively moved to my waist.

To the empty belt, as if weapons like fire axes should have been hanging there.

My fingers groped the air.

“……”

A bizarre sense of déjà vu enveloped me.

A very long time ago, thousands of years past, it felt like I had experienced this exact scene.

Footnotes:

Chapter 102

The Shareholder III

Sinnoa

-We will prepare here.

A very old version of myself said this, holding a fire axe.

The party members murmured in the corridor before the last set of stairs.

-Here? Why? The fairy said the final stage is just a bit further down.

-.....

-Jae-hee, don't doubt him. The savior will guide us.

Lee Jae-hee, Uehara Shino, Jung So-hee.

Their professions were swordsman, alchemist, and zealot, respectively.

Just looking at the classes, you might think it was a doomed party. Yet, these were original members who had been with me since the 3rd run, maybe even longer.

They looked at me with their dirty, unkempt faces, having not properly washed for days.

A mess. But these were the best the "Busan Station Tutorial Dungeon" had to offer.

-.....

I made eye contact with them one by one. The version of me in their memory was much more gaunt than I was now.

-Three days ago, there was a scout secretly watching us.

-A scout...?

-It must have been sent by Lee Baek. The only other survivor group that made it down here is his.

The party members flinched.

-They intentionally let us clear the monsters on our path. But to get credit for defeating the final boss, they have to kill it themselves. So, they're waiting for us to weaken ourselves in the boss fight before attacking.

-What a complete asshole.

-If we defeat the boss first, their plan is meaningless. They'll know this and are probably running here at full speed. Hide below the stairs. We'll attack them when they're tired.

-.....

-I will lead.

"I will lead."

The déjà vu disappeared in an instant, like a wave briefly touching and then retreating from a beach of old, white pebbles.

Then, something squirmed beside me.

"....."

It was Oh Dok-seo.

The kid, barely tall enough to reach my collarbone, had a baseball bat slung over her shoulder, still stained with goblin blood.

"What are you doing, Dok-seo? Step back."

"No."

Oh Dok-seo chewed her gum loudly.

"I killed 14 monsters today. You? Eight. Isn't the hunter's world based on merit? I don't follow orders from anyone weaker than me."

"....."

Sometimes, something was so absurd that it made me laugh. Before my laughter could fade, footsteps thundered down the corridor.

A group of over a hundred people. Predictably, Lee Baek was at the forefront.

"You bastards. Missed me?"

The surprising thing was that Lee Baek could talk. How? His vocal cords had been shredded like a pizza.

"Uh, uh...."

The answer lay with Sim Ah-ryeon, who crouched beside him, looking dejected.

Despite being a healer, Sim Ah-ryeon was wrapped in bandages (made of cloth), with bruises on her cheeks and shoulders.

It wasn't hard to deduce the situation.

'She refused to heal and got beaten up by Lee Baek, now reduced to a slave who needs permission even to heal herself.'

It was pitiful. Poor Ah-ryeon, a potential S-rank getting bullied by an E-rank... What a waste.

Even the followers who should have been suffering from 'vocal cord pizza syndrome' were talking normally.

"That's the guy! He crippled us as soon as he saw us!"

"They took all the supplies in the waiting room!"

"Fuck, look how clean they are. Just three of them hoarding all the supplies... bastards. We're struggling and splitting food..."

"It's a fairy! There's a fairy over there!"

As the instigators stirred the crowd, someone screamed and pointed at the fairy.

Lee Baek seized the moment, stepping forward with a sly smile.

"Those bastards are with the fairy!"

With that, his voice echoed through the corridor, loud enough for over a hundred people to hear clearly.

That was his ability.

[Lion's Roar], or [Amplifier].

"They're not on our side! They're with the fairy and betrayed us! Look! They're with the fairy! Traitors! Traitors!"

Though it merely amplified his voice, in a tutorial setting where everyone was of similar level, it was quite useful.

The saying "the loudest voice wins" held true in emergencies.

While other survivors mumbled, he alone shouted into a megaphone, seizing control.

His ability was useful not just for politicking but also in combat. In chaotic fights involving dozens of civilians, simple commands like 'Attack!' or 'Retreat!' were often missed, but his [Lion's Roar] ensured his orders were heard.

A useful skill, especially in the tutorial.

"Traitors...?"

The tutorial refugees murmured.

"It's true, there's a fairy."

"So Lee Baek was right. Those bastards took all the supplies and sided with the fairies..."

"Bastards. Instead of working together, they live well alone..."

I understood them.

People who had just fallen into the apocalypse—hungry, cut off from the outside world, worried about their families, stressed from having to form groups with strangers, fighting monsters, and witnessing people die before their eyes—such people were easily swayed by Lee Baek's [Amplifier].

Maybe if Seo Gyu were here, he would have yelled back, 'What bullshit, you fucking asshole!' while raising the dungeon's average decibels.

'What! Bullshit!'

Imagining Lee Baek and Seo Gyu shouting curses at each other made me laugh. I had to try it someday.

"Huek. Th-This is bad. If they find out I favored specific players, it's execution! We need to retreat...!"

Poof. Fairy number 264 disappeared in panic, not through teleportation but by turning invisible.

To the survivors, it seemed like the fairy had vanished. Those traumatized by fairies saw it as a sign.

Lee Baek shouted.

"The fairy disappeared! Everyone! Now's our chance! Attack them! Take their supplies, regroup, and let's get out of this damned dungeon! Let's go see our families!"

"Uwooo—"

As the crowd roared and tried to muster courage, I took a step forward.

Dark aura spread from my footprint like a tidal wave, brushing past the 117 opponents in an instant.

"———!"

"...? ...!"

Silence.

The people who were about to charge looked around in confusion. No sound came from their open mouths.

The underground corridor fell silent.

When aura mastery reached its peak, such tricks were possible.

"Oh, OP MC..."

Oh Dok-seo muttered beside me. I ignored her and spoke.

"Sim Ah-ryeon."

"....!"

"Stop hiding. Come here. We're stronger. We'll save you and won't beat you for not using your healing ability. We'll provide three meals and a comfortable bed. Switch sides."

"....."

"You have three seconds."

One admirable thing about Sim Ah-ryeon was her decisiveness in such moments. Before Lee Baek could react, she dashed to my side.

Lee Baek and the survivor group scowled.

"Heal yourself."

"Yes, yes. Oh, I can speak..."

People pointed and yelled at the traitor, but the corridor only echoed silent screams.

It was excellent anger, giving Sim Ah-ryeon ample experience as an 'Aggro-Drinking Bird.'

Smiling warmly, I took another step forward.

"Lee Baek, I'm sorry."

"....."

"I wasn't considerate enough. Knocking you out too quickly didn't properly demonstrate our power difference. So, I'll give you a chance."

"...?"

"See this red-haired kid?"

I put my hand on Oh Dok-seo's shoulder.

"Fight her one-on-one. If you win, we'll give you all our supplies and let you fight the boss first."

"...!"

"Don't worry. No traps, no backstabbing. But if you refuse, I'll permanently take your voice this time. Or are you too scared to fight the kid?"

"....."

Voices were strange. Regardless of right or wrong, the 'last person to speak' always seemed justified.

Having enjoyed the magic of his voice countless times, Lee Baek had no rebuttal. The survivors, intrigued by my words, stared at him.

Silently, 116 pairs of eyes bore down on him.

"....."

Lee Baek scrutinized Oh Dok-seo. Perhaps he thought it was manageable. He stepped forward, clutching his stick.

"Hmph."

Oh Dok-seo glanced up at me.

"Fine. I thought a hundred times while reading the novel that I wanted to punch that guy."

She could have asked why I was making her do this, but she seemed to find it fun, swinging her bat as she approached.

In the one-on-one duel, many people watched from a distance as the two faced off.

I nodded.

"Accept the outcome, whatever it is. Anyone who complains afterward will lose their ankles. Begin."

As soon as I finished speaking, Oh Dok-seo charged.

Lee Baek's expression turned fierce, surprised that the smaller kid would attack so fearlessly.

This bitch—his silent mouth seemed to say.

Using his superior reach, Lee Baek swung his stick. The nails in it aimed for Oh Dok-seo's head.

Kaang—!

They only aimed. His stick bounced off an invisible shield.

"……?"

Absolute Defense.

Not only human attacks but also monsters' invasions were repelled by her shield. Oh Dok-seo swung her bat.

The metal bat glowed faintly with a red aura.

For the past few days, I had personally tutored Oh Dok-seo on aura control. It was a special lecture not available anywhere else in the world.

I snapped my fingers, withdrawing the aura around Lee Baek. Sound was unmuted. My disciple should enjoy the victory.

"Die, you potato bastard!"

"Fuck...?"

Unfortunately, Lee Baek couldn't scream properly. The bat shattered his stick and hit his jaw precisely.

It was a home run.

"Ogh, ugh... uhoook..."

Lee Baek fell, clutching his jaw. White corn scattered around.

Oh Dok-seo belched long and loud, like a weight had lifted off her.

"Wow. When Jae-hee died because of him in the 3rd run, I threw the novel. Bastard. Shithead. Fucking asshole."

"Ugh..."

"Shut up, bastard."

Oh Dok-seo kicked Lee Baek, who swam on the floor. He collapsed, unconscious.

Late to react, Lee Baek's six followers charged.

"Uwaat!"

"Hey, attacking a kid all at once?"

But that broke the rules. I swiftly used my aura to slash their ankles.

"_____!"

"...! ...!"

All six fell simultaneously, their screams silenced.

Fear mingled in the survivors' eyes. Some in the back were already running.

Sim Ah-ryeon watched the seven writhing on the floor with a

strange look, like a bird spotting a worm.

"...Ah-ryeon. Don’t play with them, threatening to heal or not just to feed your ego."

"Oh, yes... Huh? W-Wait. How did you know my thoughts? Could it be... mind-reading?"

I had a mind-reading skill, but rarely used it. Fun at first, it quickly lost its appeal.

But mind-reading had led to new connections.

From the 555th run, I took on a red-haired disciple, watching her approach now.

"See? Don't worry, mister."

My reader and disciple spoke fearlessly.

"I'll make sure you reach a happy ending."

"....."

"You're the original protagonist, and I'm the one who possessed a character in the novel. We have two protagonists. We can do anything together. Even if you're different from the novel's image, you're still my favorite character!"

I chuckled.

"Alright. I trust you."

"Yeah!"

Hurry, Dok-seo.

I'll always be here, waiting.

Epilogue.

"Hueeek? M-Mister! Save me! Please! Really save me! I used my

skill on Lee Baek, so I don't have my shield! Hooook? It grazed me! It really grazed me! I'm going to die to the tutorial final boss! Mister! Misteeerr! Protagonist, save meee!"

"Undertaker-san, shouldn't we help Dok-seo-chan?"

"....."

I sighed.

It seemed like this chuunibyou otaku kid needed a lot more time before I could rely on her.

Footnotes:

Chapter 103

The Pedestrian I

Sinnoa

There is no such skill as [Teleportation] in this world.

The fairies of the Tutorial do pop out of thin air, but as mentioned in the last episode, that is merely invisibility magic.

Anomalies like the ‘Isekai Truck’ appear suddenly beyond the horizon. However, the trucks do not actually [Teleport]; they merely ‘generate’ from blind spots out of human sight.

To reiterate, there is no such skill as [Teleportation] in this world.

However, phenomena that come quite close to [Teleportation] do exist.

[Mr. Undertaker, it seems you need to urgently head to Busan.]

“What? What’s going on?”

[Well, it’s hard to explain…]

The Saintess hesitated.

The mere hint of hesitation was enough to make me extremely anxious. The Saintess was a near-obsessive perfectionist who always paused time to rehearse her lines before talking to me.

But I only discovered this secret in the 713th cycle, and this was only the 141st. So I asked without much thought.

“What’s the matter?”

[…A tunnel has appeared in the sea off the coast of Busan.]

“What?”

[Quite literally, an undersea tunnel has appeared. I think you should come see for yourself, Mr. Undertaker.]

Have you ever heard of the ‘Korea-Japan Undersea Tunnel’?

It doesn’t matter if you haven’t. It’s a structure that doesn’t exist in reality anyway.

The blueprint for ‘connecting Korea and Japan with an undersea tunnel!’ has been suggested continuously for a long time, but its practical benefits, which would outweigh astronomical costs, have not been proven.

The originator of this project was no ordinary person.

Later, he became the Prime Minister of Japan. His notable achievements during his tenure included the Battle of Leyte Gulf, the Battle to Recapture the Philippines, the Tokyo Air Raid, the Battle of Iwo Jima, and the Battle of Okinawa.

The fact that the ‘Undersea Tunnel Collapse Disaster’ was not added to his illustrious lineup was perhaps his one stroke of luck.

A fanciful paper plan.

So when I received the Saintess’s urgent message and arrived in Busan, I couldn’t help but be dumbfounded.

“No way… It really is an undersea tunnel.”

There were no seagulls off the coast of Busan.

Instead, there was a tunnel.

More precisely, a tunnel had popped up on the coastline where the old Sinseondae Pier once stood.

But there were several differences from the original plan. As often happens with grand projects when they compromise with reality, the originally conceived ‘railroad tunnel’ had significantly shrunk.

It had shrunk a lot, to be honest.

It was so narrow that not even a freight truck could pass through properly.

“Ah, you've arrived, sir?”

Yellow "Do Not Enter" tape was already draped around the tunnel entrance.

While members of the National Road Management Corps were busily moving around, Noh Do-hwa greeted me with her morning coffee in hand.

“Thanks for your hard work. I came immediately after receiving the Saintess’s message. What’s going on?”

“Well, as you can see, a pedestrian tunnel popped out of the sea. The first report came in at 5 a.m. A crazy road management officer who likes to jog early in the morning was the first to find it…”

“Is it really connected under the sea?”

“We had divers do some snorkeling. They reported that coral has appeared in the waters off Busan because the tunnel slopes down like a… you know, into the seabed.”

“Sexual harassment? I'll sue you.”

“Ha, a 1,000-year-old geezer saying that. So, Undertaker, what do you think this is?”

“It’s an anomaly.”

I looked up at the plaque at the tunnel entrance.

“It’s also a Void.”

The tunnel was dirty with graffiti and doodles, but it wasn’t hard to identify its name.

犬鳴隧道.

Inunaki Tunnel.

This wasn’t a Korean anomaly.

It was Japanese, from across the sea off the coast of Busan.

I had to be on edge because an area-type anomaly without legs or wings had crossed the sea into another country.

Its danger level was continent-class. It was an anomaly comparable to the World Tree ‘Udumbara’.

“…You didn’t order the road management officers to explore inside, did you?”

“Ha. Of course not.”

Noh Do-hwa smiled brightly.

“I sent death row inmates…”

Behind her, Yu Ji-won was waiting. On a makeshift folding table, a nautical chart titled ‘Straits of Korea and Surroundings’ was spread out.

“How’s it going, Captain Yu? How far have the death row inmates gone?”

“Surprisingly, they've already passed Tsushima. Ah, welcome, Mr. Undertaker.”

Click. Yu Ji-won, who possessed the [Mini-map] ability and was the Operations Control Room Captain of the National Road Management Corps and a psychopath, saluted me.

She did this in front of her immediate superior, Noh Do-hwa. What a remarkable brat. Every time I saw her, I couldn't help but be amazed.

But right now, it was more important to focus on the report than on Yu Ji-won’s personality.

“They passed Tsushima?”

“Yes, Your Excellency. Look.”

On the nautical chart, chess pieces marked ‘Kim Jeong-rip’ and ‘Lee Eun-joo’ were moving inch by inch. They must have been the names of the death row inmates.

Dozens of pawns (♟) were scattered around the chart.

“You sent two people into the tunnel?”

“No, Your Excellency. We deployed 72 death row inmates in 12 teams of 6 each. Half of them, 36 people, were given bicycles.”

“…So you just cleaned out the prison of the National Road Management Corps?”

“It was the order of the Corps Commander, Your Excellency.”

“That wasn’t a criticism. Given the continent-class danger level of the anomaly, it was the right decision.”

“I also judged that the order was extremely appropriate, Your Excellency.”

This brat…

Anyway, right now, Yu Ji-won’s personality wasn’t the main issue. Excluding the parts of her brain that dealt with morality and ethics, Yu Ji-won’s intelligence was quite exceptional.

“When did you deploy them?”

“We started the exploration operation at 07:10 today. It has been 3 hours and 16 minutes since the operation began. The two surviving ones are among those given bicycles, and considering the environment of the Void, their movement speed is quite good.”

“…If they are people the National Road Management Corps kept on death row, they must be somewhat familiar with the Void?”

“That’s correct. Out of the 72 death row inmates, 69 have at least one experience of exploring the Void.”

“But they were annihilated in just 3 hours.”

At that moment.

Click-click! The chess piece that was passing the northern tip of Tsushima suddenly crossed the sea.

“Huh?”

“…?”

Both Yu Ji-won and Noh Do-hwa, along with me, looked at the nautical chart at that strange movement.

The chess piece labeled ‘Kim Jeong-rip’ swiftly moved to the vicinity of Fukuoka. Specifically, to the center of the map marked Hisayama-machi and Miyawaka-shi.

Regardless of how far the distance from Tsushima to there was, it was certainly not a speed any human could achieve.

Thud-

While everyone was gaping, the chess piece for ‘Kim Jeong-rip’ fell limply.

“……”

“……”

The surroundings fell silent.

There were only two cases where a chess piece controlled by Yu Ji-won on the mini-map fell over.

Either the person corresponding to the chess piece went beyond the map’s boundaries, or they died.

Noh Do-hwa muttered.

“Fuck, what is this…?”

Click-click!

Now it was the turn of the last remaining chess piece, ‘Lee Eun-joo’. That piece also suddenly moved from Tsushima to near Fukuoka.

As if being dragged by something.

Click! Clack! The chess piece darted back and forth around the northwest and northeast of Kyushu. This way, that way, now southward. Like a ping-pong ball, the chess piece bounced, then thud-

It fell over.

Silence ensued for a while.

“…With all due respect,”

Yu Ji-won spoke up.

“There is nothing wrong with my ability, Your Excellency.”

It was indeed with all due respect.

“…Ji-won. Didn’t you say you had cycled across Japan?”

“Yes? Yes, I did.”

“If you have a map of Japan in your trunk, could you get it out? Preferably a large one.”

“Understood, Your Excellency.”

Yu Ji-won opened her ever-present trunk bag.

The trunk, fully opened, was a testament to her psychopathic obsession with neatness or perhaps an extremely efficient organizational ability.

Maps of the entire Korean Peninsula, city maps, nautical charts, and world maps were stacked in layers.

Yu Ji-won pulled out a map of Japan in less than 10 seconds.

“Spread it out. Make it connect to the nautical chart of the Korean Strait.”

“Yes.”

Although the scales were different, the two maps overlapped.

Then something strange happened.

Thud-

The chess piece for ‘Lee Eun-joo’ was dragged. No, that wasn’t all.

The chess pieces scattered around the table, dozens of corpses, started being pulled somewhere as if by a magnet.

Thud- thud- thud- thud- thud-

“……”

“……”

Fukuoka, Kumamoto, Hiroshima, Okayama, Kobe, Osaka, Kyoto, Nagoya, Shizuoka, Tokyo, Sendai…

The locations where the corpses moved were all different. In other words, the bodies of 72 people were scattered all over Japan.

Among them, the chess piece for ‘Kim Jeong-rip’ was particularly strange.

Rattle, rattle, rattle!

The chess piece that had fallen near Fukuoka trembled violently. It was an inexplicable phenomenon. Then, in a moment.

Crack-

The chess piece broke in two.

The pawn’s ‘head’ remained near Fukuoka, while the ‘body’ rolled

and stopped near Osaka.

The silence grew longer.

This time, Noh Do-hwa spoke.

“Hmm. Should I go get more death row inmates…?”

I shook my head.

“I will upgrade the threat level of the anomaly ‘Inunaki Tunnel’ to continent-class. We’ll contact the Magical Girl Association in Japan. They are the experts. A joint investigation team will likely be formed. Be prepared, Noh Do-hwa, Corps Commander.”

“Are you talking about the Inunaki Tunnel? That place is really fucked up nyan.”

As expected, Japan’s awakened ones were already well acquainted with this anomaly.

A former shrine maiden who received divine power from the Cat God by swearing to always end her sentences with ‘-nyan’ or ‘-nya’ until her death. Now, a magical girl.

The golden-haired awakened one called Manyo Neko responded earnestly to our inquiry.

“There are quite a few mountains around here and there, right? Unless you’re a pervert who gets a strange pleasure from climbing mountains, it’s convenient to drill a tunnel nyan.”

But who could have predicted?

The location of the tunnel, once the lights are off, easily transforms into a space that is ‘dark, damp, and feared by people’ all year round, and this location condition is a hotspot for anomalies.

Unfortunately, the officials of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport did not have the ability to foresee the future. In fact, their ability to perceive reality wasn’t that great either. As a result,

tunnels were drilled all over Japan like earthworm holes.

Then came the Void.

“Keyotaki Tunnel. Ikoma Tunnel. Inunaki Tunnel. They were all famous haunted spots from the old days.”

The places renowned as the top three haunted tunnels in Japan.

“But after the advent of the Void, these tunnels started to ‘fight’ each other nya.”

“Fight? The tunnels?”

“Yap. I’m telling you this specially because you’re Undateikeo…”

The magical girls in Japan referred to me as Undateikeo. It meant the same as the ‘Undertaker.’

“There was a perfectly normal tunnel in our area. But one day, when we woke up, the signboard had changed to ‘Keyotaki’!”

“……”

“Keyotaki Tunnel is quite far from our area. A year passed, and then suddenly, the signboard changed to ‘Inunaki’ nya!”

A territorial competition among anomalies.

A fight to determine which among the three haunted spots was the true ‘tunnel anomaly.’

“It wasn’t just our area. Tunnels all over Japan, including underpasses, all turned into ‘Inunaki Tunnel.’”

“…It’s been infected. The concept of ‘tunnel’ was completely consumed and destroyed by ‘Inunaki Tunnel’.”

“Exactly. It’s fucked up nyan.”

The magical girl added, ‘That’s why no one in Japan uses tunnels anymore nyan.’

In fact, Inunaki Tunnel not only occupied Japan but also began to invade foreign lands.

Even the ‘Korea-Japan Undersea Tunnel,’ a fictional tunnel that never existed in reality, was devoured and made its own.

Manyo Neko sighed.

“Originally, the real Inunaki Tunnel was at most 150 meters long nyan. But now it has consumed all the tunnels in Japan, and according to Undateikeo, it has even devoured a fictional undersea tunnel, so its total length is…”

The longest anomaly in history.

That was the continent-class anomaly I had to deal with in the 141st cycle.

Footnotes:

Chapter 104

The Pedestrian II

Sinnoa

The subjugation was not a choice but a necessity.

If this situation was left unattended, tunnels worldwide would sequentially become infected by the ‘Inunaki Tunnel.’

The awakeners of Korea and Japan agreed to unite their forces. Even in this apocalyptic era, where distribution networks had collapsed, losing the tunnel routes altogether was unacceptable.

But what kind of people are the nations of East Asia?

“Now that an undersea tunnel has appeared off the coast of Busan, let's just do the subjugation in Busan…?”

“Nyaang. I appreciate the suggestion, but cleaning up one's own mess is the proper attitude of an adult. Our Magical Girl Association will take the lead in the Inunaki subjugation, nya!”

When three East Asian countries hold a meeting, Koreans call it ‘Korea-China-Japan,’ Chinese call it ‘China-Korea-Japan,’ and Japanese call it ‘Japan-China-Korea.’ Such is the etiquette of East Asia.

Questions about whether nations have long since fallen are meaningless. People always come first, and nations follow.

Even though the nations had already fallen, or perhaps because they had, those who claimed to represent each region clung to their authority even more.

“Ha. Your spirit is commendable, but I've heard things are not going well on your end lately… We’ve just had an undersea tunnel suddenly pop up, but hasn’t your entire nation turned into an anthill? We're always ready to help….”

“Nya haha. Thank you for your concern. If we had an extraordinary awakener like Undateikeo, it would have been much easier, nya! Alas, it's just bad luck compared to our neighboring country. How sad, nya!”

Their friendly conversation seemed so entertaining. Even the Chinese awakeners, who had not yet been infected by Inunaki, subtly hinted, ‘Hey, hey? What are you doing? Why are you having fun without us? Can’t we join in? Huh? Let’s play together.’

As both sides’ faces began to sour, I intervened politely.

“The lead in this subjugation will be neither the National Road Management Corps nor the Magical Girl Association. It will be me, Undertaker, personally. I want to invite each of you, awakeners I know personally, to form a temporary party. I would appreciate your attendance, considering our connection.”

“Hmmm….”

“Nyaang.”

This was also in line with the Korean tradition of ‘volunteer soldiers.’ Respecting traditions, my proposal was easily accepted.

Under the premise that participation was voluntary and in an individual capacity, a multinational party was formed. The party members were as follows:

- Korea: Undertaker (Party Leader), Saintess (Secret Participant), Yu Ji-won (Deputy Party Leader)

- Japan: Manyo Neko (Deputy Party Leader), Phantom Blade

Some might think that the team was too small considering the grand plan for a joint Korea-Japan subjugation, but this was more than sufficient.

Frankly, I, the Undertaker, was like a walking army. I only needed talents to cover areas I couldn’t handle alone.

As for the Magical Girl Association, well. Since we said, ‘We can

manage with two or three people,' they could only match that number.

"Excuse me."

"Nya! Feel free to stay, nya!"

While leading us to a high-end ryokan in Japan, Manyo Neko whispered to me.

"Undateikeo, Undateikeo."

"Yes?"

"I know that Yu-san is the Operations Chief of the National Road Management Corps, but who is that woman with the blue hair? I've never seen her before, nya…."

The person she pointed at was the Saintess. Even in Korea, only Noh Do-hwa and I knew her true identity, so it was natural for the Magical Girl Association to be clueless.

"She's my girlfriend."

"…!"

"We've been dating for two months. She insisted on coming along because she was worried about me going to Japan. She'll stay here until the operation is over, so please take care of her."

"Wasn't your girlfriend the diva of Samcheon World, nya?"

Damn it. How did that rumor spread across the sea?

"…That's completely unfounded. She's my first girlfriend."

"Ah, I see, nya. My apologies. Among the Magical Girls, a few are from Walpurgis… Anyway! Since she's your girlfriend, we'll treat her as a VIP, nya!"

The Saintess tilted her head, confused, as she watched our

whispering. She was the only one in our group who didn't speak Japanese.

After settling into the inn, we began the formal meeting.

"The subjugation will proceed in Japan. However, if this operation is successful, I will expect compensation from the Association."

"Compensation? What do you mean, nya?"

"A spirit camera."

"Ah…"

"Specifically, a Polaroid OneStep. The 1977 model."

"Nya haha, Undateikeo, you're really fixated on that item, nya?"

Manyo Neko scratched her cheek.

"I'd love to give it to you, but it's one of the three rare treasures we have, nya… I'll try to get approval from above, nya."

As the name 'Magical Girl Association' suggests, the hierarchy among Japan's awakeners was not strict.

Each shrine had a Magical Girl blessed by the gods, and these girls managed their own territories.

Although the Association's headquarters were located in the Noto Peninsula, it was more nominal compared to the status of the National Road Management Corps in Korea.

In other words, it was more accurate to say, 'Three Magical Girls who own spirit cameras are members of the Association,' rather than 'The Association owns three spirit cameras.'

Unless they were persuaded individually, it was unlikely they'd part with such a rare item.

Knowing the Association's workings well, I made a difficult request first and then subtly backed off.

“Then, could you at least tell me where the Polaroid camera was initially found?”

“Nya?”

“I’m a huge fan of that item. Please understand my collecting passion. If I can’t get the actual item, I’d like to gather as much information as possible.”

So I could grab it myself in the next cycle.

Manyo Neko’s expression brightened.

“Nyaa! If that’s the case, I’ll make sure to get the information, nya! Leave it to me, nya!”

Although it would typically be confidential, we had declared our intention to exterminate Inunaki in Japan, not Korea.

Sure enough, a few days later, Manyo Neko returned with good news.

“I found out the farming location, nya. And…”

“And?”

“Tadaa-nya!”

Manyo Neko dramatically revealed what she had hidden behind her.

“Gasp.”

It was a camera. A Polaroid OneStep (Land Camera 1000) released in 1977.

It was the item I had been eyeing for dozens of cycles, now in the hands of the cat Magical Girl.

It was the same camera that would later prove useful when Sim Ah-ryeon and I went on a vacation to the Tower of Sauron.

My eyes widened.

“No way, Manyo Neko, you…”

“Nya haha. Even though the Undertaker came to our country with his girlfriend and confidant, it wouldn’t be right to just tell you the farming location and leave it at that. So… Ahem. The owner agreed to give up the camera under the condition that we exterminate Inunaki Tunnel, nya!”

“Manyo Neko. We’re friends now.”

“Yay! Tomodachi, nya!”

We high-fived.

The morale of the subjugation team was at its peak.

The Saintess stayed at the inn while Yu Ji-won, Manyo Neko, Phantom Blade, and I set out—the first official joint operation party of Korea and Japan.

Upon arrival at the destination, the two local Magical Girls stepped onto a podium (rock).

“Nyaang! Thank you for deciding to help with this subjugation, nya!”

“……”

Manyo Neko pointed with her umbrella. There lay Inunaki Tunnel.

The entrance was about 90% blocked by a stone wall, covered in all sorts of colorful graffiti and scribbles.

“This place was originally the Soroji Tunnel, nya. But as you can see, it’s been infected by Inunaki, nya!”

“……”

“Since it wasn’t a busy path, we just left it alone, thinking people could take a detour. Nya haha. Actually, the god I serve resides in a shrine nearby, so it’s been bothering me nya.”

With a flourish, Manyo Neko opened her umbrella.

The umbrella was strange. The outside was painted gold, but the inside was black, like a night sky dotted with stars.

It wasn't just a fashion item; it was Manyo Neko's sacred artifact. All Magical Girls had such treasures.

"Thanks to Undateikeo and the Korean awakeners, we can challenge the surgery to remove this tumor from our land again, nya! Let's do our best, nya!"

"…! …!"

"We also look forward to working with you. Although we haven't been working together for long, misunderstandings may arise. In such cases, please stay calm and we will explain. I hope you will also understand."

"Of course, nya!"

"…! …!"

At that moment, Yu Ji-won, who had been quietly holding her trunk bag next to me, raised her hand. By the way, Yu Ji-won was also fluent in Japanese.

"I have a question."

"Nya?"

"Why does the awakener next to you keep saying '…! …!' without making any sound? Is she mute?"

Our eyes turned to the person next to Manyo Neko.

There stood a lone figure, trying hard to make their presence known, unable to join our conversation.

Indeed, all the '…' dialogues in the conversation represented this mute Magical Girl's attempts to express herself.

For the record, this Magical Girl was not only mute but also had no arms. If there was a god in heaven, it was good evidence that the deity was a sadist who found pleasure in torturing humans.

“Ah. Phantom Blade, did you forget to use the telepathy spell? We can’t hear anything, nya.”

“…!”

At Manyo Neko’s remark, the mute, armless Magical Girl jumped. Then a voice started to echo in our minds.

[Oh my, I’m so sorry. Undateikeo-san, Yu-san. I mistakenly thought I was already sending telepathic messages? Haha, I thought you were deliberately ignoring me. How foolish of me.]

Her way of speaking was archaic and didn’t match her cute appearance at all.

Phantom Blade.

The ‘Armless Swordswoman,’ literally.

I was used to her manner of speaking. Keen readers might recall that Manyo Neko and Phantom Blade were the Magical Girls who fought alongside me against UFO aliens in the 99th run.

They were the Japanese awakeners I trusted the most.

“Hmmm…”

On the other hand, Yu Ji-won seemed to see the Magical Girls as a bunch of crazy lunatics. Her expression was peculiar.

It was an undeniable fact.

Yu Ji-won whispered in Korean.

“Your Excellency. Why do all the magic-type awakeners have mental issues? Witch Cosplayer Dang Seo-rin, School Uniform Cosplayer Cheon Yo-hwa, and now Magical Girls? Even the awakeners from the neighboring country are a mess.”

“Indeed… I didn't realize [Mini-map] was a magic-type ability.”

“…?”

I looked around.

“Alright. Although we are only four, each of us is a hundred warriors strong. Today, the deepest known void in Japan will be exterminated. Manyo Neko, are you ready?”

“Nyaang! From today, Inunaki Tunnel will be renamed Nekonaki Tunnel, nya!”

“Phantom Blade?”

[Yes! The Magical Girl Association has attempted the Inunaki subjugation four times before, and all the data is stored in my head. We are fully prepared!]

“Yu Ji-won.”

“I will follow your orders, Your Excellency.”

I glanced at the sky. As if on cue, the Saintess’s voice echoed.

[I’m ready, Mr. Undertaker.]

Perfect.

Rarely did I feel so confident before tackling an anomaly. We moved forward with a very positive atmosphere.

‘I have a good feeling.’

We boldly broke down the stone wall at the entrance and entered the tunnel. The tunnel’s comforting darkness enveloped the four of us.

---

66 minutes later.

The joint Korea-Japan awakened party was annihilated like dogs.

Again.

The 142nd run.

“Nyaang! From today, Inunaki Tunnel will be renamed Nekonaki Tunnel, nya!”

“Good spirit. Excellent. But before that, we need to check something first.”

“…Nyaa?”

I made a serious face in response to the party member’s cry to boost morale, lowering the surrounding temperature by about one degree.

Of course, I didn’t suddenly awaken to a temperature manipulation ability. Literally, the temperature around the entrance of Inunaki Tunnel was dropping in real time.

“That damn anomaly has already noticed our approach. Manyo Neko, did you bring the spirit camera?”

“Nya? I did bring it…”

“Take it out and take a picture.”

“…Got it, leader.”

Sensing the shift in my demeanor, Manyo Neko’s face also turned serious. Without a word, she took out the camera from her backpack.

Yu Ji-won, familiar with my attitude, remained expressionless. Phantom Blade stayed calm.

Manyo Neko carefully lifted the spirit camera, one of the only three in Japan, with one hand.

“Where should I take the picture, nya?”

“The tunnel entrance. Include the surrounding scenery in the shot.”

“Roger, nya.”

Click-

The flash went off. The instant camera soon printed a film with a faint whirring sound.

The five of us—Yu Ji-won, Manyo Neko, Phantom Blade, the Saintess (who wasn't physically present), and I—looked down at the photo.

Phantom Blade's expression hardened.

[This is…]

In the spirit photo.

Bodies were nailed to the cedar trees lining the tunnel, like columns of a temple. The bodies wore elaborate costumes, decorated with frills and ornaments, which would be quite burdensome for ordinary people.

They were the bodies of Magical Girls.

"Do you recognize them?"

[…Yes. Although the photo quality isn't great, judging by the costumes, they appear to be colleagues who went missing in previous subjugation attempts. Some of them I haven't seen in seven years.]

Just as I thought.

I maintained a calm expression. The leader of the subjugation team had to remain steadfast.

The question was asked by a team member instead of me.

"What the heck, nya? How…?"

"It's a provocation. As I said, that anomaly has already noticed our approach. It's challenging us to come closer."

"But… That makes no sense. Neither I nor Phantom Blade are weak

in spiritual power. How could we not notice anything until we took the picture…?”

[Wait a moment.]

We turned our heads.

Phantom Blade was staring at one corner of the faint instant photo.

[Look at these bodies. The ones hanging next to the stone wall.]

“Nyaang?”

[Although it’s blurry… Don’t they look like us?]

“……”

The sound of cicadas filled the air.

The Japanese called this sound ‘kanakana’ (カナカナ). But like all languages, it was a unique sound that couldn’t be fully captured in writing, a wheezing that couldn’t be called a cry. The sound echoed from the cedar forest surrounding us.

“Take another picture, Manyo Neko. This time, focus on the stone wall.”

“Got it, nya.”

Click.

The flash went off.

At that moment, the sound of cicadas stopped throughout the forest. It might sound strange, but it felt like thousands of insects were staring at us all at once.

Bzzzz—

The Polaroid camera slowly printed the photo with a bit too much noise.

We looked at the photo again.

“……”

The bodies in the photo had become lighter.

They were the same as in the first photo but now hanging from the cedar trees without heads and arms.

No, upon closer inspection, there was another change.

On the stone wall at the tunnel entrance, covered in various scribbles and graffiti, a bright red word that hadn’t been there in the previous photo was now visible.

-Welcome back (おかえり).

Footnotes:

Chapter 105

The Pedestrian III

Sinnoa

Inunaki Tunnel was cursed in every way imaginable.

The very location of the tunnel induced fear. Urban legends, vengeful spirits of workers buried during construction, murders and disappearances occurring within...

I had underestimated the difficulty of dealing with an anomaly that had reached across the Korea Strait. We stepped back from the tunnel entrance to resume our strategy meeting.

“Is it impossible to destroy that tunnel from the outside?”

“Probably impossible, nya.”

Manyo Neko sighed.

“Our Association also attempted to destroy the tunnel physically when we decided to attack it, nya. We even used bombs from the old Self-Defense Forces to blow up 72 tunnels simultaneously, nya.”

“And the result?”

“We observed that Inunaki Tunnel was restored within as short as four minutes and as long as four days nya. We speculate that the only way to subjugate it is to walk through it from the entrance to the exit, nya.”

“I see.”

There were sometimes anomalies that couldn't be subjugated by physical force alone.

The outer god ‘Infinite Void’ was one such anomaly. To briefly summarize the method of exterminating Infinite Void:

1. Seal the 99 ghosts of the Hyakki Yagyo at Baekhwa Girls' High School.

2. Descend to the 4th basement level and place 100 candles at the location reached after walking 4,444 steps.

3. Two or more people must exchange ghost stories about the sealed ghosts.

4. Approach the Infinite Void that appears and have someone capable of playing the role of a ‘shaman’ seal it.

5. Help the shaman by striking an unpredictable blow to Infinite Void, using a special sword like ‘Do-hwa’ made by Noh Do-hwa.

…This method was insane enough to make anyone wonder, ‘Did they really expect us to beat this?’ Even the Saintess, upon seeing this strategy, muttered with a frown, ‘…That’s really something.’

But turning the tables, even an anomaly that defied the world’s rules, like the outer god Infinite Void, could be subjugated with enough effort.

So, there was no need to even mention Inunaki Tunnel, a continent-class anomaly.

Even if physical force was ineffective, anomalies always had a weak point.

“Got it.”

“...Nya, but why are you standing up with your cane-sword, Undateikeo?”

“If there’s an anomaly that can't be subjugated by physical force, I tend to wonder if it’s because we didn’t use enough firepower.”

From that day, Inunaki Tunnel entered a season of severe trials.

“Secret Art: Tunnel Destruction.”

Boom—

I unleashed my aura, collapsing the tunnel entrance.

As Manyo Neko had mentioned, the tunnel structure was restored in less than 40 seconds (likely stronger and with increased restoration power than in the past). However, my blade didn't care about such trivial resistance.

"Secret Art: Tunnel Destruction but I keep doing it."

Boom! Bang! Boom!

Every time Inunaki Tunnel restored itself, I bombarded it relentlessly. Not just the entrance, but the entire mountain ridge the tunnel passed through was blown away.

"Nyaaa! What are you doing, nya! This whole area is dedicated to our god, nya!"

"Calm down. This is just collateral damage."

"How is it collateral damage when our shrine's property is being destroyed, nya?"

Although Manyo Neko was jumping up and down, there was some progress.

After 40 seconds, with the mountain completely gone, the tunnel stood alone in the barren wasteland. It was like a bald scalp with the tunnel structure clearly exposed.

"Just as I thought."

As expected, Inunaki Tunnel was an anomaly that parasitized the tunnel. The void it controlled didn't extend beyond the tunnel to the surrounding mountains.

Seeing the exposed tunnel structure, Phantom Blade admired it.

[Oh, indeed, Undateikeo-san. Impressive power. The tunnel is fully exposed.]

"The fear of a tunnel is concentrated in its darkness. It's the vague

fear of not knowing how far you have to walk to find the exit and the hopelessness of being surrounded by concrete with no way out. But look.”

I climbed onto the tunnel’s outer wall and walked to the middle. Then, I slashed through the tunnel’s middle like tofu.

“When the structure is exposed, if an explorer gets lost, they can be rescued from the outside like this. Although the wall will restore in 40 seconds, if they are rescued within that time, there’s no problem.”

[Ah… Certainly. Thinking that way, it doesn’t seem so scary.]

“Anomalies are mold that feeds not only on the void of reality but also on the gaps in our hearts. If we can eliminate even a bit of unconscious fear, we should use every means possible.”

[Hmm. Truly golden advice.]

“Well, it’s understandable since actual gold has flown away, nya! Oh my nya, oh my nya!”

Click—

I took the spirit camera from Manyo Neko and photographed the tunnel entrance again.

Now. I had responded to the anomaly’s provocation with a provocation of my own, but how would it react?

Soon, the photo developed. Last time, it had hung torsos from the cedar trees, but now, since the forest had been completely cut down, it had nailed heads to the stone wall at the tunnel entrance.

This time, only the heads.

The severed heads were pinned with tiny nails, fixing their lips and eyelids. The nails forced the heads into grotesque smiles.

The writing ‘Welcome back (おかえり)’ remained on the wall, now written in the blood dripping from the heads of the Magical Girls.

"…It's still taunting us."

No matter.

"Nyaa?"

"Just talking to myself. You don't need to look at the photo. It's just playing with the bodies of your fellow Magical Girls."

"……"

Manyo Neko nodded slightly.

I picked up the radio. Although the radio itself had no special functions, I had deceived others into thinking it was a 'cursed radio' to avoid suspicion.

"Saintess."

[Yes.]

"Please contact Commander Noh Do-hwa and ask her to start the operation."

[Understood.]

A moment later.

"Your Excellency, the chess pieces are moving."

Yu Ji-won said, standing by the table at the tunnel entrance.

"The first group is entering the Busan Undersea Tunnel."

"Good, keep me updated. Saintess? Please keep monitoring the death row inmates' vision. Share their reactions, dialogue, and actions with me. It's crucial for devising the strategy."

[Yes.]

Click. Click.

The 72 chess pieces on the table slowly moved. These were the

death row inmates we had lost in the previous cycle.

Me, Noh Do-hwa, the Saintess, and Yu Ji-won. The strongest support team began to control the numerous chess pieces.

This time, the prisoners' lives would be used more valuably.

A real tunnel is a passage you can enter from the entrance and walk to the exit.

Meanwhile, a void tunnel is a maze where you can never reach the exit, even if you enter from the entrance.

To defeat a tunnel anomaly, one must enter and safely exit. This proves, 'This place is no longer a void but reality.'

Here's a guide to safely passing through Inunaki Tunnel, or more accurately, the communication records exchanged during our operation to establish the guidelines.

These records will later be registered in the [Library Society's Encyclopedia of Anomalies] on SG Net.

Although the survival rate of those entering the tunnel is never high, if you follow the 'strategy' diligently with a clear mind, you can survive.

On the record.

[Mr. Undertaker, all exploration teams have been equipped with radios. I introduced myself as the team leader of the National Road Management Corps and instructed the explorers to follow my orders.]

[Advance party entering.]

[Destroying the stone wall is deemed to attract unnecessary attention from the Inunaki Tunnel. The explorers climbed over the wall.]

1. When death row inmates climb over the wall, they will

immediately smell a foul ‘garbage odor.’

It resembles the stench of decaying leaves soaked in summer rain all season long.

The musty smell of the damp cave will cling to your body like mites, but do not panic.

In fact, the presence of that smell indicates a ‘safe zone.’

[Two explorers reported an unbearable stench.]

[6th inmate reported that it smells not just like a cave but like abandoned corpses. What should we do?]

“Tell them to find the bodies.”

[Understood.]

1-1. If you smell ‘blood’ or ‘rotting corpses’ instead of garbage or moss, immediately turn back and climb back over the wall.

However, if you have already taken more than ‘seven steps’ after entering the tunnel, do not attempt to return. In this case, your torso will be severed as soon as you climb over the wall.

Do not attempt to locate the corpses emitting the smell.

Ultimately, you will realize that the smell comes from inside your own body.

Five death row inmates were required to draft Strategy 1.

[An explorer has died.]

[The remaining team is slightly confused but there are no issues with continuing the operation.]

[Requesting to deploy the next team as planned to Commander Noh Do-hwa.]

[Proceeding.]

[Advance.]

2. Never walk past the middle of the tunnel on the right side. Always move along the left side.

[Mr. Undertaker, I've relayed this instruction to all explorers, but why must they use only the left side of the passage?]

"Ah. In the last cycle, the four of us walked side by side in the passage. But Phantom Blade, who walked on the far right, and Yu Ji-won, who walked in the center, suddenly died."

[What?]

"Ah, Yu Ji-won, you don't need to listen to this part. Just focus on watching the mini-map. Anyway... They started gasping for breath, as if they were completely submerged in deep water, and soon after, they collapsed."

[…….]

"When we examined their bodies, their esophagus and lungs were filled with filthy water. They died of drowning."

2-1. If you smell 'water' or 'sewer' while walking, it means you are leaning too far to the right.

Immediately shift a bit more to the left.

If you find it difficult to breathe or feel a strange difficulty in walking, also move to the left. In such cases, mimic the movements of swimming rather than walking.

To be safe, wear a life jacket when entering the tunnel.

No death row inmates were needed to draft Strategy 2.

[No issues. I'll instruct them to continue advancing.]

"Yes, thank you."

3. The inside of Inunaki Tunnel is covered with various graffiti and

scribbles in vibrant colors.

The walls are painted from top to bottom. The graffiti is as dense as shells clinging to seaside rocks.

The scribbles may look like Latin letters, but they resemble no language on Earth.

If the graffiti seems to wriggle when you look at it or if you smell ‘blood’ from the red parts of the graffiti, immediately avert your gaze.

The deeper you go into the tunnel, the more vivid and complex the graffiti becomes.

As long as the graffiti still looks like ‘scribbles,’ the area is safe. But if the graffiti starts to appear as beautiful ‘art,’ especially ‘beautiful creatures,’ immediately look away.

This phenomenon is presumed to be due to the confusion of the ‘corridor’ of the tunnel and the ‘corridor’ of a gallery.

[Mr. Undertaker, some explorers are showing excessive interest in the graffiti.]

“Are any unusual behaviors detected?”

[Yes. They are approaching and moving away from the graffiti as if admiring artwork in a museum, muttering phrases like ‘beautiful,’ ‘pretty,’ ‘exquisite.’]

[Ah.]

[14th inmate is showing abnormalities. He keeps repeating, ‘The colors here could be a bit deeper.’]

[The surrounding explorers are trying to stop him, but it doesn’t seem to help.]

[14th inmate confirmed to be self-harming.]

[He’s cut open his abdomen and is using his blood to paint the

graffiti.]

“I see. Saintess, make sure you don’t look at the graffiti.”

[Understood. I’m changing my view periodically. The 14th inmate has gouged out his eyes and smeared them on the graffiti on the tunnel wall.]

[Confirmed deceased.]

3-1. If someone stands in the middle of the tunnel admiring the graffiti and shows no reaction, immediately kill them.

If tattoos appear clearly on their arms or neck, you’ve already missed the window to kill them. Escape from them as quickly as possible.

Individuals infected in this manner are referred to as ‘observers.’

If you no longer smell blood and instead detect moss, basement, or cave scents, you’ve entered a safe zone.

3-2. If you feel an observer is chasing you, use a knife to cut off a finger or toe, draw tattoo-like patterns on your face, and hold the severed part in your mouth.

Press yourself against the tunnel wall without making any sound.

Even if you hear footsteps, do not look down the tunnel’s corridor. Do not make any noise. Remain pressed against the tunnel wall until the footsteps have completely disappeared. It is recommended to hold your breath for at least 30 seconds.

Eleven death row inmates were required to draft Strategy 3.

[An explorer has died.]

[No issues.]

[Advance.]

Footnotes:

Chapter 106

The Pedestrian IV

Sinnoa

The 'strategy' continued to unfold.

It was like a chaotic chess match on the board.

Black was the anomaly. White was humanity.

But unlike a typical game where the number of chess pieces is fixed, Inunaki Tunnel had an innumerable amount of pieces.

It had devoured all the tunnels throughout Japan. This meant it had monopolized all the fear and urban legends associated with those places. There were more than enough chess pieces to put on the board as there were stories.

On the other hand, we, the human side, had only 72 pawns. However, I was not in a hurry.

After all, my chess pieces were replenished with each new cycle. Even if we failed this time, I could press the 'Retry' button and keep playing the game with more knowledge and a richer strategy.

[An explorer has died.]

[No issues.]

[Advance.]

Cycles 141, 142, 143, 144, and 145.

Over five cycles, I strategized against Inunaki Tunnel. However, I didn’t invest all my time solely in Inunaki Tunnel.

Leisurely, I also exterminated other anomalies, consuming only the 72 death row inmates.

As the cycles accumulated, the strategic game increasingly favored me. No more death row inmates died at the tunnel entrance. Fewer were enchanted by the graffiti.

The records of the strategic battles between the anomaly and me, the chess game logs, remained as the strategy.

Thus,

[The exit is visually confirmed.]

[Mr. Undertaker, inmate 66 died approximately 20 meters from the exit. Right before death, the inmate looked back.]

I grabbed the radio.

“Did they exhibit any other peculiar behavior besides looking back?”

[No.]

“Then it seems the myth of Orpheus has been intertwined. Seeing the exit of the cave and looking back, resulting in the lover being dragged away and dying… It’s common for myths to be distorted and applied to anomalies.”

[Ah.]

“We need to add to the strategy that you must never look back once you can see the exit. Saintess, that was the last explorer, right?”

[Yes. There are no more available death row inmates. Should we postpone to the next cycle?]

I shook my head.

“No. With only 20 meters left, let's finish it this time. It’s better for the operation’s overseers to go through this last part to validate our strategy.”

I glanced back.

“And for the Association’s dignity as well.”

Yu Ji-won, Manyo Neko, and Phantom Blade, the three awakened ones, were looking at me.

“Yu Ji-won. You stay here and keep watching the map. It’s okay if you just stare at the map.”

“Yes, Your Excellency. I will keep my eyes fixed on the operation map without blinking.”

“There’s no need to go that far. Anyway…”

I locked eyes with the two Magical Girls. Their gazes held a mix of emotions.

Anxiety. Wondering if they had almost entirely handed over the subjugation to the Korean awakened ones.

Excitement. Hoping the chance to deliver the final blow to the anomaly that had tormented Japan might finally come.

Sadness and guilt.

These emotions didn’t need explaining. They weren’t feelings directed at us or living humans.

“Let’s go. Manyo Neko, Phantom Blade.”

“……”

“Let’s avenge your fallen comrades.”

Their eyes turned cold.

Soon, the final exploration team set out.

“We were too complacent during the first subjugation, nya.”

Tap. Tap.

The sound of human footsteps trickled down the tunnel's dark walls

like rainwater. Mud splashed onto the Magical Girls' shoes.

“Well, because it remained quiet without spitting out anomalies or causing havoc, nya. Compared to other anomalies that wreak havoc on villages and cities, it seemed weak, nya?”

[Five shrines around Nagoya and Kyoto formed the first subjugation team. We didn’t expect it to become the ‘first,’ though.]

“My childhood friend was part of that team, nya.”

[She was also my close friend.]

Tap.

Outside, the cicadas’ noise from the distant hills was almost deafening, but inside the tunnel, there was a malevolent silence.

Each step echoed off the walls, making the strange graffiti wriggle like glowing worms. But no one looked at the patterns.

“Stars—guide—the dawn.”

As the darkness deepened, Manyo Neko lightly shook her umbrella. The outside of the umbrella glowed faintly blue.

It was magic. Before the unparalleled witch Dang Seo-rin developed Cursed Song Incantation, it was the only known method of casting spells in this world.

It was spellcraft, assembling words to manifest the caster's imagery, with the number of phrases interwoven determining the mage’s caliber.

“Though the second, third, and fourth subjugation teams were organized afterward, the results were similar, nya. Ah, look at this, nya.”

Manyo Neko pointed her umbrella at the floor.

On the relatively unblemished concrete floor, Japanese characters were engraved. Though mostly damaged, some were decipherable.

-Die.

-No. I don't want to be here anymore. Where did everyone go? Why did they leave me, die. LCNA. 1199.

-To future explorers or Association members, I leave this message. Never walk down the center. Do not listen to the sounds from the center, and if you sense a presence.

-Please save me.

Manyo Neko raised her umbrella, and the letters on the floor were swallowed by the eternal darkness again.

“They are all traces of previous subjugation teams, nya.”

[This must be Gamma Point, right?]

“Yes. We left markers in relatively safe zones from Inunaki Tunnel’s erosion, nya.”

They, too, had attempted to create a strategy. Like I did.

“But ‘relatively safe zone’ isn’t the same as ‘completely safe zone,’ nya. The fourth subjugation team was annihilated following these guidelines, nya.”

“…Document corruption, then.”

“Exactly, nya. That damned thing did nothing during the third subjugation, but when the fourth team arrived, it started playing tricks, nya.”

It was not rare for anomalies in the void to mimic human language. They mimicked not just language, but voices, behavior, and appearance.

Just like now.

-Manyo Neko!

-Phantom Blade? Phantom Blade, is that you?

-You really came to save us!

-My student, well done. I always believed in you.

Phantom Blade's cold smile surfaced. The mute Magical Girl did not voice her derision, but the smile's chill was unmistakable.

[Bullshit.]

"Do you know them?"

[Ah, comrades and my mentor. She was the leader of the fourth subjugation team. They said her lower body was found at Gamma Point. I'm glad her voice is intact.]

Tap.

The Magical Girls continued walking without looking back.

Suddenly, their footsteps felt like muted screams.

The anomaly pulled out all sorts of trap cards, but none deceived us. The 'Inunaki Tunnel Strategy,' recorded from 1 to 77, guided us to the exit.

When the light of the exit began to appear in the distance,

-Manyo Nekooo.

Suddenly! A forearm shot out from behind us as if to embrace us.

The wrist was adorned with a dainty bracelet. The sleeve had frills.

-What's wrong? Take my hand.

-Didn't you come to save us? The Association? Did headquarters abandon us?

-Let's go back together, Manyo Neko. No, Rika.

The stoic expressions of the Magical Girls showed slight cracks.

-We promised to gather again when the first snow fell this year,

remember? On Mount Yahiko.

“…….”

-I still remember our promise, Rika.

Manyo Neko halted her steps.

She and I both knew that looking back now would end everything.

But I chose not to remind her. Phantom Blade didn’t use telepathy either.

“…This is truly fucked up, nya.”

A mutter echoed through the tunnel.

“That promise was made seven years ago, nya. But you didn’t even set a clear criterion for the first snow before you left for the subjugation, nya. Is the first snow the one in Hokkaido? Or is it the one in the village we were in? That was the shittiest promise ever, nya.”

-…….

“So when it snowed in Hokkaido, when it snowed in the village, when it snowed in your hometown, I climbed Mount Yahiko three times, nya. It was hell, nya. And you were never there. I thought I’d die from the cold, nya.”

-…….

“I was wondering where you died that they couldn’t even find a piece of your body, but here you are, trying to lure harmless humans into this shitty tunnel? Where did your vow to serve the gods and protect people go? You’re a real bastard, you know that?”

I could never forget what I saw then.

The ‘hand’ that had emerged from behind us, which had merely flailed in the air, gently held Manyo Neko’s hand.

Interlocking fingers.

-Gomen. Let’s go back together.

“…….”

-Rika.

Human voices trickled down the tunnel's dark walls like rainwater. The rain poured heavily.

Tap.

We walked.

The light came closer and closer. The mossy and corpse odors that plagued our noses gradually gave way to the scent of fresh leaves. By the time the muted screams had changed to cicadas' cries,

[We’ve arrived, Mr. Undertaker.]

We exited the tunnel.

Without exchanging words, we instinctively turned back. The exit of the tunnel. The plaque once inscribed with ‘Inunaki’ now bore a different name.

Soroji Tunnel.

This was the tunnel’s original name before it was consumed and corrupted by the anomaly.

Under that name, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of corpses were strewn beyond the tunnel.

“…….”

[…….]

Most of the bodies wore the extravagant attire of Magical Girls. However, their dresses were rotting from the dark mud of corpse poison and the ravages of time.

Manyo Neko knelt before a corpse missing one arm.

I later learned that Manyo Neko was part of the first subjugation team but had survived because she was assigned to wait outside the tunnel.

Anomaly: Inunaki Tunnel

Aliases: River Styx, Hell Gallery, Orpheus's Underworld Path.

Threat Level: Lv.3 Continental-class.

Subjugation complete.

Epilogue one.

All the tunnels in Japan returned to normal one by one, but for some reason, the undersea tunnel crossing the Korea Strait remained intact.

Of course, 'intact' meant it could only be used if the strategy was meticulously followed. All the dangers that the Inunaki Tunnel once possessed remained within the undersea tunnel.

Noh Do-hwa frowned.

"How strange. The undersea tunnel was a fictional structure to begin with, so it should disappear, shouldn't it?"

"Well, I don't know. Even though I'm an anomaly expert, I don't know everything."

"Hmmm…"

Noh Do-hwa squinted at the undersea tunnel peeking out from Busan's coast.

"Well, if it comes down to it, it's not bad to have another means of exchange with the other side…"

The story related to this undersea tunnel will be told in the next

chapter.

Epilogue Two.

From the 145th cycle onward, I decided to visit Japan early whenever possible.

The purpose was simple. To exterminate Inunaki Tunnel in advance before the Association suffered heavy casualties.

And also to farm my precious spirit camera.

So in the 146th cycle, after obtaining the camera and arriving at Inunaki Tunnel, I sensed a familiar presence approaching from afar.

“Hunya? We have an early visitor, nya?”

It was Manyo Neko.

A slightly younger and less mature face than in the previous cycle.

Thus, instead of an umbrella, Manyo Neko was holding something else.

“What should we do, You? The High Priestess told us to block the tunnel entrance.”

“Shouldn’t we just warn them to retreat for now?”

“Yes, but that person looks really powerful, nya… Ah. It seems they’ve noticed us, too.”

“It’s dangerous, so stay back, Rika.”

I raised my hands to show I had no hostile intentions and approached.

Contrasting with the golden-haired Manyo Neko, a black-haired Magical Girl stared at me.

“Who are you? Never seen you before. You’re not from the village, right? This place is off-limits to civilians starting today. A missing

person report has been filed.”

“I’m an awakener from Korea.”

“Korea…? What brings you here from Korea?”

Hmmm.

Her eyes were filled with distrust and wariness. But as the Undertaker, I was a seasoned regressor adept at forming relationships.

About four minutes of conversation and four packs of snacks later,

“It’s delicious, nyaaa!”

“Chocolate after so many days… The genuine richness of cocoa’s flavor…”

“Ah, I’m melting, nya…”

“So, are we friends now?”

“Yay! Tomodachi, nya!”

The Magical Girls eagerly wrapped the tunnel entrance with sacred ropes. They repeatedly emphasized not to enter, then leisurely departed.

The sun was setting. I watched the two walk away, holding hands, for quite some time.

“…Should I take a picture?”

Click.

It was purely on a whim that I raised the spirit camera and photographed Inunaki Tunnel.

I wanted to capture this moment as a keepsake.

Zzzzz— The photo developed. Since Inunaki Tunnel hadn’t yet devoured all the tunnels in Japan, the photo was much calmer than

before.

There were no Magical Girls' bodies, nor were limbs or heads grotesquely displayed.

Just the stone wall blocking the tunnel entrance.

On it, bright red letters were written.

-Welcome back. This is the seventh time, isn't it?

I froze momentarily with the camera raised.

Cicadas sang from the cedar forest.

…It wasn't just chilling because it seemed like the anomaly knew I had been regressing repeatedly.

Such a trick could simply be a hallucination showing what the opponent feared. An anomaly with advanced illusion abilities, like Inunaki Tunnel, could easily do that.

The problem lay elsewhere.

The first time I encountered Inunaki Tunnel was in the 141st cycle. 142, 143, 144, 145… I had returned to confront the tunnel in the 146th cycle.

Six times in total.

Yet Inunaki Tunnel welcomed me as if this was the 'seventh' time.

Where did the remaining encounter disappear to?

Footnotes:

Chapter 107

The Tenant I

Sinnoa

There has been a long-standing question that has plagued me for ages.

‘How should I build a hideout to receive praise for it?’

A hideout. My personal secret base.

As everyone knows, I have one major trauma.

It happened in the 89th cycle when a pink-haired alien named Go Yuri raided my base in one fell swoop.

Since that incident, a corner of my brain has been perpetually haunted by the ASMR full voice of Go Yuri saying, ‘A pathetic ♡ infinite regressor raided with just one hypnotic beam ♡ pathetic hideout ♡.’

Of course, there’s no way Go Yuri actually spoke like that. If she knew about my trauma, she’d probably tilt her head in confusion. It showed how severe my mental scars were, to be tormented by such fantasies.

I needed a solution desperately.

Hence, today's story revolves around an episode about my sweet home.

Though I hadn’t mentioned it directly to everyone until now, the truth is that I had explored my own El Dorado across many cycles.

There were various kinds of utopias.

I tried setting up a luxury yacht as a mobile sea fortress and even

started a life on an uninhabited island.

Skyscrapers, underground bunkers, subway tracks, railguns—if people could imagine a form of a hideout, I had tried it.

Yet, none of these hideouts ever completely satisfied my aesthetic sense.

2%. It was always missing 2%.

“Oppa’s standards are too high.”

Puppeteer Lee Ha-yul grumbled.

Of course, her lips were tightly closed. She spoke through the maid marionette she always carried.

Lee Ha-yul, the daughter of a notorious traitor (former mayor of Busan), had a talent for pulling puppet strings from under her fingernails.

Her puppet strings were almost superconductors in the realm of aura, capable of transmitting aura with almost no loss to the tip of the string. This miraculous superconductor was very useful for hideout security.

In constructing an impregnable hideout, her cooperation was not optional but essential.

Not just me, but Noh Do-hwa and Cheon Yo-hwa also always hired her when renovating their base buildings.

Even such an expert showed difficulty with my requests as the building owner.

“Tell me honestly. Without lying. What is your ideal guild building?”

“First and foremost, it should be able to withstand prolonged physical attacks from the outside.”

“Like an underground bunker?”

Lee Ha-yul nodded.

“Possible. That’s what all guild leaders want. What else?”

“I’d also like it to be able to adequately deal with intruders who use non-physical means.”

“Possible. We can make it difficult to enter, like a maze.”

“But guild members should also be able to deploy quickly. There need to be many secret passages.”

“……?”

“And I don’t want to force harsh living conditions on my guild members. They should be able to lead a more affluent life than members of other guilds. For example, if they want to take a walk along the Han River, they should be able to do so immediately, and the view should be nice if possible.”

“…….”

Lee Ha-yul closed her notebook and looked up at me with her golden eyes.

“Oppa. Where is your conscience?”

Surely, it was a shameless demand.

To completely block the invasion of the alien Go Yuri, perfect security was needed.

But security and convenience, once they surpassed a certain level, were difficult to coexist. It’s like expecting five-star hotel room service on a nuclear submarine.

If I just treated Go Yuri as a non-existent entity—ah! In my head! The pink voice in my head! Iä! Iä! Become one with me, guild leader!

In the end, the days of suffering from the echo of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra’s chorus continued.

Then, one day in the 196th cycle.

I was brooding, sitting at a table by the Han River, staring blankly at the water.

At that moment, a man I had never seen before approached on a mountain bike. He had two pistols at his waist, a backpack, and a rifle slung over his back. It was the latest fashion in the apocalypse.

“Huh…? Is this not the place?”

The biker stopped about 600 meters away and looked around.

“That’s strange. SG Net definitely said it was here…”

The mention of SG Net piqued my interest.

At this time, I had given up on security entirely and built my hideout under the Han River. It was near the convenience store where I first met the Saintess.

And in the vicinity, there were no buildings except my hideout. The so-called ‘Summer of Seoul’ incident had devoured most of Gangnam south of the Han River along with Old Man Scho’s wife.

In other words, the place the biker was looking for was most likely my guild hideout. As the owner, I had to inquire about his intentions.

“What’s the matter?”

“Eek!”

The biker flinched. I had approached and spoken to him while masking my presence.

The man reflexively reached for his rifle but soon decided against it, realizing it would only provoke me.

“Ah, well, I heard there’s a café around here that serves fantastic coffee…”

“A rumor?”

“Yes. Um, do you know SG Net? I’m an awakener. SG Net said there’s a famous café along the Han River. This is the only building that looks like a café.”

“A café?”

I tilted my head.

…It was only later that I learned by searching SG Net that the culprits behind this rumor were none other than Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa.

They had posted about it competitively on the forums.

-[Baekhwa] FourthGrader: Hwee (>_<)! The cream latte while looking at the Han River is the best (>_<)!!

(Certification shot. No face, just holding a cream latte cup in her left hand, toasting towards the Han River)

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: The preciousness of tasting coffee with more flavor than before the world fell apart. Magical autumn.

(Certification shot. Only a witch hat and a coffee cup on the table, taken with the Han River in the background)

Occasionally, Dang Seo-rin or Cheon Yo-hwa would visit my hideout. Since my hobby was being a barista, I naturally served them coffee.

Their competitive posting of these on SG Net caused a rumor to spread that ‘there’s an amazing café in Gangnam!’

-OldManGoryeo: Morning Coffee.jpeg

The final blow was delivered by my direct guild member, ‘Bird Drinking Aggro.’

-OldManGoryeo: I can’t function without my morning caffeine fix.

-OldManGoryeo: Today's Café Mocha.png

-OldManGoryeo: Surely, there's no one in SG Net too poor to drink coffee, right? If there is, your presence lowers the forum's class, so kindly commit suicide at your earliest convenience ㅇㅇ……

-OldManGoryeo: This hyung's barista skills.jpg

The composition of the photos posted daily by Sim Ah-ryeon overlapped suspiciously with the certification shots by Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa, increasing the credibility of the 'Gangnam café' rumor among SG Net users.

Our biker had been lured in by this rumor and had come all the way from Gangwon-do to Seoul.

"There's no café around here. As you know, all proper shops in Gangnam are gone. There's only the Tower of Sauron over there, but that's a void."

"Oh… I see."

The biker's expression darkened.

He looked barely in his early twenties.

I smiled.

"But I can make some coffee. It's a coincidence that we met, so how about a cup?"

"Pardon?"

At first, he hesitated, but after I insisted, he couldn't hide his joy and accepted.

As a result,

"Wow, this is… really good. Wow, sir. This tastes way better than that Gangnam café must have…"

"Thank you."

“Wow, really, thank you so much! This is incredible!”

“It’s nothing. If you ever get coffee beans, feel free to come by. I’ll make you some then, too.”

“Ah. Thank you so much…!”

The biker tried to offer me bullets and emergency rations as thanks, but I politely declined. They were of no use to me.

He left, bowing repeatedly even while mounting his bike.

As his bike glided over the scarred asphalt road, I realized that today’s unexpected encounter had been quite enjoyable.

“Ah.”

At that moment, enlightenment struck.

I finally understood what kind of hideout I wanted and why I had always been dissatisfied with the ones I had tried.

‘A café. It’s a café!’

Indeed.

I had always wanted to run a café.

After a long time, the passion in a regressor’s heart burned brightly.

“Oppa. So, you mean you want to run a café alongside the guild hideout?”

“Yes. A café-style hideout.”

“What the hell is that, you otaku?”

Lee Ha-yul did not understand my idea at all, but I was not disappointed.

Pioneers are always scorned by the ignorant masses.

The café I intended to create had never existed in the history of the world. It could only be born from my design, from start to finish.

“It’s unpleasant. Cafés are shops. Accessibility is everything for a shop. Don’t you agree?”

“Hmm.”

“What you want is physical security. Plus, security that can never be breached by mental or hypnotic means. How? How can a café and a hideout coexist?”

“Ah, Ha-yul. You’re too bound by conventional thinking. In this world where anomalies and voids run rampant, we can’t cling to such outdated approaches.”

“…I’ll let you in on a secret. Sometimes Noh Do-hwa, when she’s drinking, calls me over to rant about you. For three hours straight.”

“……?”

“Her drunken habits are a hassle… But, recently, I might be starting to understand her feelings.”

“……?”

Ignoring the unreasonable slander, I presented my solution.

“We can achieve a two-for-one with an anomaly.”

“An anomaly?”

Lee Ha-yul blinked.

“…How?”

Like this.

That day, I took Ha-yul and headed to Busan. The last remnants of the Japan-Korea undersea tunnel, Inunaki Tunnel, remained in the waters off Busan.

Inunaki Tunnel. This anomaly was the master key to achieving both

a café and a hideout with accessibility and security.

Click. First, I took a picture of the undersea tunnel entrance with the spirit camera.

-Welcome back. It’s already the 57th time?

Though it had been a while since I last took a photo, Inunaki Tunnel continued to update the number of our meetings.

I didn't understand the mechanics, but it seemed a continuous relationship was being maintained.

Wouldn't it be possible to communicate as well?

“Can you understand my speech?”

Click. I asked the question aloud and took another picture.

-Welcome back. It’s already the 57th time?

Unfortunately, there was no change in the spirit photo.

I attempted communication again.

“Inunaki. If you understand me, leave a different mark at the tunnel entrance. I have an interesting proposal for you.”

Click.

-Welcome back. It’s already the 57th time?

“Hm.”

Ordinary communication was a failure.

No matter how much some anomalies seemed to use human language, they didn’t think like humans.

But who was I? A regressor who successfully bred dinosaurs in the void by crossbreeding horses in the 380th cycle.

“…Oppa, I’m genuinely curious. Why are you making giant

dumplings?"

"Just wait and see. It's all a meticulously designed process."

That day, I embarked on finding a way to communicate with Inunaki Tunnel.

Day 1: Given that it seemed to have an abnormal preference for decapitated heads, judging by how it killed magical girls, I prepared meat-filled dumplings like Zhuge Liang did in the southern lands and offered them in front of the tunnel.

(No reaction.)

Day 3: Thinking it might have a secret hobby of tearing apart human bodies, I prepared human-shaped dolls and placed them deep inside the tunnel.

(I found them thrown outside the entrance the next day. Response confirmed.)

Day 5: Suspecting that it had a preference for magical girls, I collected pre-apocalypse magical girl figurines and displayed them in the middle of the tunnel.

(They were torn apart and ejected from the entrance. Communication success.)

"Look! It's responding! Ha-yul! Anomalies have their own ways of communicating, and humans can discover them!"

"…No, it just seems angry."

Day 10: Since the 'magical girl figurine strategy' worked, I brought in numerous posters of old magical girl series. The Magical Girl Association cooperated actively. I plastered the tunnel walls with posters.

(The graffiti came alive and tore the posters apart as soon as they were put up. Real-time communication success. The Saintess urged me to stop.)

Day 17: With the help of the National Road Management Corps, I continued plastering the tunnel with posters using death row inmates. Additionally, I recorded magical girl anime OSTs and played them through radios at the entrance, midpoint, and exit of the tunnel.

(The graffiti throughout the tunnel wriggled. Noh Do-hwa was displeased.)

Day 25: Alongside the previous efforts, I requested help from the Baekhwa guild leader Cheon Yo-hwa and released the hundred ghosts into the tunnel.

(Flooding was confirmed throughout the undersea tunnel. The graffiti not only wriggled but also moved fiercely as if screaming. Cheon Yo-hwa was displeased.)

Day 30: Finally, a change was observed in the inscriptions on the stone wall at the tunnel entrance.

-Don’t come (来るな).

-Go away (帰れ).

I was thrilled by this great progress.

Of course, it was hard to say that the anomaly understood the semantic meaning of the language, but it seemed to remember the human reactions to certain words.

The most common and frequent sounds heard in the void were ‘Help me!’ and ‘Save me!’ for the same reason. They had learned these words were effective in luring humans.

Click. In the spirit photo, alongside ‘Don’t come’ and ‘Go away,’ countless other words were realized.

‘Bad guy,’ ‘Noise pollution,’ ‘Why,’ ‘Die,’ ‘Nuisance,’ ‘Incomprehensible,’ ‘Curse,’ ‘Stop,’ ‘Annoying,’ and ‘Hate,’ among others.

What a dazzling discovery!

It was worth the contemptuous looks from many people to pursue communication with Inunaki Tunnel.

Couldn't we further develop this method of communication?

Inunaki Tunnel was a Japanese-born anomaly. Japanese, like Korean, had a culture of honorifics.

In Eastern Asia, it was a virtue to remember the character for respect (禮) even in personal friendships.

Day 60: The number of posters on the tunnel walls was increased by fifteen times, and the anime song playback was extended to 24 hours.

The Magical Girl Association expressed reluctance, saying they had no more posters to export, but I did not underestimate Japan's potential. Since the depletion of silver from the Iwami mine, Japan's main export product was otaku culture.

Using not only death row inmates but also ordinary prisoners, I plastered the tunnel. No matter how much Inunaki tried to tear the posters, it was futile. The humans plastered posters faster.

The undersea tunnel connecting Korea and Japan had become a comic market in terms of interior design.

(Lee Ha-yul, Noh Do-hwa, the Saintess, and Cheon Yo-hwa visited me together, requesting I halt the operation.)

Day 70: The radios playing anime songs placed throughout the tunnel were destroyed. I requested cooperation from the Magical Girl Association again and held a magical girl concert in the middle of the tunnel. The live music echoed grandly underwater, a level above recorded sound quality.

(Manyo Neko and Phantom Blade were displeased.)

Day 77:

The inscriptions at the entrance changed.

-Please don’t come (来ないでください).

-Please go back (帰ってください).

-I’ll do anything (何でもするから).

-Please (お願いします).

I shivered with excitement.

Finally, even the anomaly had engraved the concept of respect. I was now certain that this was a worthy companion for serious interaction.

“Ha-yul, you’ve waited long. I finally succeeded in persuading Inunaki Tunnel. Now, we can create a hideout with perfect security.”

“Sorry, can it wait until tomorrow? I have a dinner appointment with Noh Do-hwa unnie tonight. Drinking.”

“Of course. Have a great time!”

“…….”

Next cycle.

A neat sign hung at the entrance of Inunaki Tunnel, replacing the messy graffiti.

[Café Hideout]

[New Opening Soon!]

Footnotes:

Chapter 108

The Tenant II

Sinnoa

As everyone knows, navigating the Inunaki Tunnel is exceedingly difficult.

Even as a regressor, I had to sacrifice hundreds of lives across five runs to finally conquer it.

At that moment, I thought,

‘...Isn't this the best security facility?’

It was a complete reversal of thought.

From the perspective of an intruder, the Inunaki Tunnel boasted an incredible level of difficulty, but from a defender's viewpoint, it was an impregnable fortress.

Moreover, this ironclad security applied only to intruders. For those who had already mastered the ‘strategy,’ the Inunaki Tunnel was just a slightly tricky path.

Thus, starting from the 197th run, I did not fully disclose the tunnel strategy on SG Net.

Instead, I posted warnings such as "Entering without caution leads to certain death," "No entry," and "Even the most skilled Void explorers can't avoid instant death." A guilty conscience? None at all. It's not a lie.

After conquering Inunaki alone, I set up a guild hideout in the underwater tunnel. I then sent ‘invitations’ only to a select few trustworthy acquaintances.

The invitations, of course, kindly detailed the walking method for the Inunaki Tunnel.

Now, without an invitation, no one could visit my café hideout.

“A shop that only accepts customers by invitation? Is this a VIP golf course or something...?”

Noh Do-hwa turned the invitation over and over, making a sour face.

“The insane idea of privatizing an anomaly and using it is just what I'd expect from your filthy brain... But this means you're not planning to do business with the general public, right?”

Noh Do-hwa fluttered the invitation.

“Now, I see that our Undertaker is becoming quite the noble. Soon, you'll want to be king? Shall I hand over the position of National Road Management Corps Chief to you? Hoo, great. I've been wanting to quit this shitty job anyway. Congratulations in advance, Your Majesty...”

“Oh. Don't worry too much about that part. Corps Chief, do you see the number written at the top of the invitation?”

“Hmm...?”

Noh Do-hwa re-examined the invitation.

[Invitation - Café Hideout]

[Depth 1200m]

Noh Do-hwa tilted her head.

“Depth? 1200 meters? What does this mean...?”

“It’s the grade of the invitation.”

“Graaade...?”

“Yes. I have prepared invitations in segments of 100 meters, 200 meters, 300 meters, and so on. For instance, a 100-meter invitation contains only enough strategy to safely cover the first 100 meters of

the Inunaki Tunnel.”

“Hmm...?”

“The 1200-meter invitation is the highest grade, containing the complete strategy for the Inunaki Tunnel. The 100-meter invitation is the lowest grade. And I will make all 100-meter invitations public on SG Net.”

I took Noh Do-hwa into the Inunaki Tunnel to show her an example.

“This is the 100-meter point.”

“Oh...?”

Noh Do-hwa looked around.

“This is... a café.”

Noh Do-hwa's observation was spot on.

From now on, I hope you’ll listen to all my descriptions in the voice of a friendly home shopping host.

Instead of always damp mold where water trickled from the cracks in the wall, a tiny artificial waterfall had been installed, showcasing its aesthetic point.

Where moss once flourished, there were now colorful aquatic plants. These plants weren't ordinary vegetation but had mutated in the void, thriving without sunlight.

Amidst these artificial waterfalls and planters were antique-style sofas and chairs.

Above all, the chairs sought comfort. Tables of perfect height for sitting were arranged, with small lamps adding to the ambiance.

Victorian-style tables from the 19th century were minimal in number, while the other tables revealed the natural beauty of the wood.

Of course, the lighting was indirect. The overall space was enveloped in a cozy darkness, but the faint outlines of tables and chairs added an edge even to the shadows.

A true space starts with vision and ends with hearing.

From one end to the other, the sound of water trickling from the artificial waterfall filled the air. If sunlight is the mirror of the eyes, darkness is the mirror of the ears. The sound of water flowing beyond the darkness completed this space as the pinnacle of Baroque aesthetics.

If you went up to the tunnel wall, you'd find unexpected graffiti on the concrete surface, adding a unique charm without traditional framed pictures.

The touch of the soft wood of the table and the comfort of the chair. The auditory experience of a Baroque space. And the hidden visual art of graffiti.

If the old-fashioned aroma of coffee were added, it would appeal to the senses of smell and taste——a café that satisfied all five senses, complete.

Even more, the fact that this unique scenery was in the middle of an underwater tunnel stimulated the imagination of the guests.

As the Undertaker, I was confident that even if it weren't for the apocalypse, this place could aim to be the best café in Korea.

Home shopping broadcast, over.

"...There's no natural light, yet the space doesn't feel cramped."

Noh Do-hwa touched the table.

She seemed quite shocked.

"Was this really an anomaly that devoured hundreds of people...?"

"Hehe."

“Even that ridiculous regressor's laugh sounds different now. I'm surprised. Undertaker, I didn't expect you to have this talent...”

Considering Noh Do-hwa's personality, this was the highest praise. But there was more to surprise her.

“Noh Do-hwa, Corps Chief.”

“Yes...?”

“Do you see those thin strings next to the bookshelf? They are puppet strings leading to the tunnel's deepest part. I had Hayul set them up. Just a slight tug on them...”

Ting- The string vibrated pleasantly like a cello's string.

“Even just by infusing aura, the vibration reaches my private room at the deepest part of the tunnel.”

“Oh...”

“Then I can immediately respond knowing there's a guest. No matter how far the distance, I can reach here in an instant.”

“Indeed. This is... quite something.”

“The treatment for the 100-meter and 200-meter levels is different. The deeper the depth, the different the interior, and the more diverse the menu will be. In other words...”

“Yes. It might be a small motivation for the awakeners. There aren’t many enjoyments these days... Hmm. Being isolated from the outside world might actually be a good thing. If one can momentarily forget the ruined outside world and enjoy a cup of coffee...”

“Exactly. So, Noh Do-hwa, Corps Chief, I have a proposal.”

“Hmm? What is it...?”

“As you can see, operating the café seriously requires a lot of coffee beans. My reserves will soon run out. So, I plan to ask the Sword

Marquess, that old man, to create a coffee farm...”

“.....”

“Can’t you make it happen?”

Noh Do-hwa's face filled with worry.

The Sword Marquess was essential for current agricultural endeavors. He was busy cultivating food.

Proposing to use some of that precious land for coffee, a luxury item, was bound to trouble the practical-minded Noh Do-hwa.

Of course, I could persuade the Sword Marquess to cultivate coffee without Noh Do-hwa’s consent, but that would result in Noh Do-hwa resigning.

“But we barely have enough farmland as it is...”

“The world needs luxuries too.”

I whispered.

“Think about it. Adding a new attraction to Busan will elevate the status of the National Road Management Corps compared to other major guilds...”

“Isn’t it impractical to grow coffee in Korea? It seems inefficient...”

“No need to worry. I’ll plant various coffee trees from the void and eventually create a variety suitable for the Korean climate. I am a void expert, after all.”

“Hmm...”

“There’s also the matter of security. Isn’t it better for me to manage the underwater tunnel than leave it unattended?”

“Hmm...”

“Moreover, Corps Chief, imagine waking up with a cup of coffee every morning. The headquarters is just a short walk away. Think of

it as a 30-minute morning walk.”

“……”

“It would boost the morale and welfare of the management team.”

“……”

Contemplation. Consideration. Agony. Deliberation.

Finally, Noh Do-hwa muttered softly.

“Well, if it’s just a small garden…”

“You’ve made a wise decision, Corps Chief! You truly understand me. Since you’ve agreed, I’ll start building the café from the next run.”

“……”

“Don’t worry. You won’t regret this decision. You always complain, but when I earnestly ask, you always help. I know how deeply you care for me…”

“Shut up.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The café hideout was a grand success!

Naturally, the café hideout received enthusiastic support.

Despite the unease of stepping into the jaws of a continental-class anomaly for a delicious cup of caffeine, brave challengers never ceased.

The segmented access levels of 100 meters, 200 meters, etc., sparked a peculiar sense of competition among the awakeners.

-Anonymous: (300m) At 100 meters, you can only get espresso and Americano, but here, you can also have café latte lol.

-Anonymous: (400m) Ice coffee lovers must reach at least 400 meters. The barista said ice coffee is available from 400 meters onwards.

Anonymous: I like espresso too, though?

Anonymous: (400m) Yeah, right lol.

Anonymous: Espresso is a sophisticated taste, you idiot.

CookingQueen: (100m) Everyone, please don't argue over this. We should be grateful just for the existence of the café, shouldn't we?

-dolLHoUse: Pathetic.

-Anonymous: (100m) But I heard Baekwha Girls' High Guild members start at 200 meters by default. Is that true? If it is, isn't that unfair?

FourthGrader: (1200m) (>_<);;

Many subculture worlds assign grades like A and S to awakeners, but in reality, Korea had no such system.

I found the terms S-rank and A-rank problematic. How much stronger is an S-rank compared to an A-rank, exactly?

An evaluation based on precise figures is far more intuitive than playing with letters, in my opinion.

The invitations I issued were easily perceived as a form of 'grade' or 'level' among the awakeners.

-WitchJudge: The deep sea at 1,200 meters. The voice of the waves conveyed through the tunnel's walls. In an era where nature has been reduced to mere danger, it's a time to appreciate the value of 'viewing nature.'

(Certification shot. A photo of a coffee cup placed on a table with an 'invitation - depth 1200m' subtly displayed.)

The majority of awakeners received the '100-meter grade'

invitation, and among them, only those proven in skill and character gradually updated their depth.

The grading criteria were entirely based on my judgment.

But judgment built over hundreds of runs, spanning thousands of years, becomes reliable data.

I was confident that this ‘depth’ system was more trustworthy than any other standard.

-OldManGoryeo: (1000m) The poor bastards comparing their dicks are cute lol.

-OldManGoryeo: (1000m) I tried an affogato for the first time. What’s with the coffee and ice cream combo? You kids enjoy your school meals lol.

-OldManGoryeo: (1000m) Those with 100-meter grades can only use the café once a week. Honestly, I respect that. They seem like worms that would wriggle and survive no matter how tough the world gets. This brother would rather kill himself than go without daily coffee lol.

Hmm.

Let’s ignore a few exceptions.

Sim Ah-ryeon regularly whined to raise her grade from 1000 meters to 1200 meters, or at least to 1100 meters, but I firmly refused.

It wasn’t because I discriminated against her. She had the spirit of a mountaineer in her heart, and once I started accommodating her, she’d climb endlessly like she was ascending Mount Everest.

I will discuss the stories related to this ‘awakener grade’ in more detail in the next story.

When the café operation had somewhat stabilized, I sent an invitation message to the Saintess via constellation talk.

[Is this... an invitation?]

“Yes, Saintess. Remember I asked you not to use your ‘Clairvoyance’ to observe the scenery at a depth of 1200 meters no matter what?”

[Ah, yes. So, I have not gathered any information about that place at all.]

“I kept it a secret because I wanted to show you directly. You’re always at your home in Yongsan, aren’t you? Think of it as a short outing.”

The Saintess was silent for a moment. In that silence, I strongly sensed the INTJ vibes of a lifelong hikikomori.

[...But isn’t it too far from my home to Busan? Even if I could arrive quickly on your back, that’s a bit...]

“Oh. It’s okay. I’ve dug a tunnel to your place as well.”

[What?]

This was another reversal of thought.

As everyone knew, the Korea-Japan Undersea Tunnel was a fictional construction, yet it was completely devoured by Inunaki.

Then, wouldn’t it be possible to create a ‘man-made’ tunnel and have it infected by Inunaki?

The result of my idea was located at the southern end of the Han River submerged bridge. I took the Saintess there.

“...My goodness.”

The Saintess, wrapped in a white coat, opened her mouth slightly.

“Why is there a tunnel here...?”

Indeed.

Beyond the ruins of the convenience store where we first met, a small tunnel led down into the Han River.

This was the so-called ‘Han River Submerged Tunnel.’

“I’ll lead the way. Please follow me.”

“...Wait a moment, Mr. Undertaker. Did you create an anomaly artificially?”

“No. There were several tunnels planned for the Han River. Some were never completed. I superimposed multiple tunnels and ‘asked’ Inunaki to infect them.”

“‘Asked’...”

“It’s a communicative friend. Well, it’s a kind of loophole, so I can’t expand these ‘portals’ recklessly. The limit was creating emergency exits in only three places.”

One in Gangnam, right here. Another in the coffee farm in Kyushu, Japan. The third location will be mentioned in another story.

Hearing my explanation, the Saintess was astonished.

“A limit? Even so, isn’t that incredible?”

We entered the submerged tunnel.

All Inunaki Tunnels were connected.

However, to travel from the ‘Han River Submerged Tunnel’ to the ‘Korea-Japan Undersea Tunnel,’ one had to follow several specific procedures precisely.

For security reasons, I won’t detail them, but from the Saintess's perspective, it only took five minutes to walk leisurely.

After walking through the tunnel.

“.....”

The Saintess paused.

“...Here.”

“Depth 1200 meters. This is the deepest part of my hideout café. Welcome, Saintess.”

Before us was an underwater tunnel.

But it wasn't made of concrete; it was made of glass.

The tunnel stretched 400 meters from a depth of 1200 meters to 1600 meters, all constructed like an aquarium's underwater tunnel.

Colorful fish swam in the azure water.

"....."

The Saintess's eyes widened. She stared blankly at the glass tunnel.

Water shadows gently swayed, casting ripples over her hair.

She always enjoyed keeping fish as a hobby. To her, this place must have seemed like Eldorado.

"Mr. Undertaker, how on earth...?"

"The Inunaki Tunnel is connected to the Samdo River. It's the concept of the underworld, the water flowing in the afterlife. That's why one can drown if walked incorrectly. It also matches well with underwater or submerged tunnels. Though it was tricky, as you can see, it was possible to manifest it as an aquarium's underwater tunnel."

"....."

In the 117th cycle.

When I confronted the outer god-class anomaly Infinite Void, I met the Saintess. Though it was merely an illusion.

On the silver moon in the night sky, the Saintess looked down at the Earth. She said this:

-Just a layer beneath that planet, it's all turned into hell.

Her words lingered like soot in my heart.

And now, in the 197th cycle, the Saintess was looking up at the sea from the depths of the Earth's surface.

Beyond the tunnel, starlight jellyfish floated. They were void creatures, making the deep sea look like the Milky Way.

An inverted universe.

“How do you find it?”

I asked her impressions of the hellish scenery.

“Do you like it?”

“……”

The Saintess remained silent.

Every aquarium was a lonely structure.

But a glass tunnel crossing a sea was the only aquarium where one could view fish without confining them.

Having a home while still being free.

I wondered if my metaphor reached her silently.

After a long time of closed lips, the Saintess nodded, and I wanted to believe the tunnel's significance was fully conveyed.

“...Yes. Very much.”

“I’m glad.”

“Thank you, Mr. Undertaker. ...I’ll never forget this view for the rest of my life.”

I smiled.

“Neither will I.”

There are countless stories related to this ‘café hideout.’

But today, I will end the story here without any epilogue.

Let me simply add that from that day on, there was one more stop

added to the Saintess's morning walks.

Footnotes:

Chapter 109

The One Who Was a Companion I

Sinnoa

Among the powers I had awakened, if I were to choose the most fundamental one, it would undoubtedly be the Time Seal.

This skill was the foundation for my alias as the "Undertaker" and also the very first skill I awakened.

However, the most routinely useful skill, the one I employed as naturally as breathing, was undeniably the Complete Memory.

Without this skill, how could I have possibly recounted thousands of years of tales to you all?

But, in truth, even Complete Memory didn’t guarantee perfect recall of everything 100%.

There was a mere 0.01% of my long life as a regressor where a portion was left blank, as if forcibly deleted data.

So today, I want to talk about the 'Incomplete Memory' aspect of my ability.

This is the story of the 173rd run.

One day, the Saintess said.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

“Yes.”

[I might have been holding a prejudice against the Constellations all this time. Shouldn't we consider revamping their image to be

more approachable and kind?]

“Ah, sure. Do as you see fit.”

[Last night, I suddenly had a great idea.]

Perhaps those of you with extraordinary memories will find the following conversation familiar:

[Hello, hello! Greetings to all the awakeners of the Korean Peninsula! Nice to meet you, meow!]

[I am the Constellation who will be constantly watching over you from now on, the Saintess of National Salvation, meow!]

[Meow! Please take good care of me, meow!]

“…….”

Yes.

In the 173rd cycle, I deliberately did not subdue the "Butterfly Effect".

The flapping wings that began in Beijing moved not to America or Brazil, but to the neighboring country of South Korea, and wreaked havoc on the mental world of the Saintess, a guardian spirit of the peninsula.

“Saintess.”

[Meow?]

“That’s not it. Please stop……”

[Okay.]

The Saintess’s deviation was quelled, leaving countless ‘?’ on SG Net.

In any case, the Butterfly Effect caused such random, unprecedented events that could not have been seen in previous runs.

In creating an "unpredictable future for the regressor," the Butterfly Effect might have been my greatest adversary. Yet, conversely, it was also a gracious oddity that generated "new events that one could never tire of."

After all, one doesn't get to hear the Saintess's meowing tone all the time, do they?

I created a folder named "173rd Run - Saintess's Cat-Constellation Transformation" on the desktop of my mind, saved the recording, and returned to my routine.

A regressor's schedule is strictly defined. This period was just the 7th month since the start of the run, so I was quite busy with various tasks.

From subduing the World Tree Udumbara in Onyang, Asan, to proposing the establishment of the National Road Management Corps during my first meeting with Noh Do-hwa at a rehabilitation hospital.

But Noh Do-hwa was dead.

"……."

The location was the National Hospital, which also served as a rehabilitation center.

Hospitals, pharmacies, and supermarkets were the most likely to be raided in an apocalypse. As a public institution with weak security, the rehabilitation hospital was seen as easy prey for looters.

The National Hospital, while not boasting significantly better services than private hospitals, provided reasonably cost-effective care to patients, thanks to government subsidies.

Its ratings were good. The high ratings could be attributed in part to Noh Do-hwa's craftsmanship as a prosthetics maker in the hospital's assistive device center.

Noh Do-hwa's corpse was sprawled at the entrance to the inpatient ward, far from her usual workplace in the assistive device center.

If it had been just a looter attack, the damage wouldn’t have been so severe. This was still early in the apocalypse, and looters, no matter how ruthless, were not yet desensitized to killing.

The looter attack coincided with the emergence of anomalies. When the hospital began to collapse, Noh Do-hwa had left her usual post and ran to the inpatient ward. And there, she died.

The attack seemed to have occurred just a day prior. The bloodstains on Noh Do-hwa's favorite white coat hadn’t yet lost their crimson hue.

“Why…….”

I muttered, swallowing my words.

This was the first time. Never before in the early stages of a run had Noh Do-hwa died.

Therefore, it was immediately apparent what had caused such an outcome.

The Butterfly Effect.

When left unsuppressed, this anomaly deviated from the usual causal loop, generating random variables. One of those variables had somehow caused the looter and anomaly attacks.

As a result, Noh Do-hwa was dead.

Leaving the Butterfly Effect unchecked could lead to such routes being observed.

“…The gift has become useless, Noh Do-hwa.”

I sat next to her corpse, leaning against the wall, and placed the gift box from China beside me.

Pu'er tea, Bingdao Laozhai, first flush. A luxury item worth around 20 million won.

It wasn’t fake. I had used my knowledge and connections as a

regressor to obtain the genuine article. Every run, I presented this to Noh Do-hwa, who preferred tea over coffee.

Noh Do-hwa rarely opened up to others. But upon receiving this gift, she would furrow her brows and say, '…Well, where should we start the conversation?' leaving room for dialogue.

Like this:

-Haah? A regressor? Excuse me. Are you seriously asking me to believe such nonsensical rubbish……?

-There is plenty of evidence. We've had this conversation countless times. That's why you created the [If they know this much, I have no choice but to believe! 'I believe, you are indeed a regressor' 100 Questions List].

-What kind of bullshit…….

-I'm not a prophet, nor am I from the National Intelligence Service. Before that, let me convey the words from the previous Noh Do-hwa of the former runs to the current Noh Do-hwa.

-What is it……?

-Do you enjoy reaping the sweet benefits?

-Huh……?

-The material I just handed over contains not only the question list but also records of failures from previous runs. In other words, the current Noh Do-hwa is in a far more advantageous position than the Noh Do-hwa of previous runs. Hence, the former Noh Do-hwas are pointing this out. Do you enjoy reaping the sweet benefits?

-……

-By the way, the phrase 'fucking bastard' is also included after this sentence.

-Bullshit.

After conversing all night like this, Noh Do-hwa would accept her role as the leader of the National Road Management Corps.

But today, such a conversation wasn't possible.

-Undertaker……

-Yes?

-Your profession is to conduct funerals, right? If I die, please don't bury me. Ah. This isn't just a request for this run, but for all time to come……

-It's not difficult, but why don't you want me to conduct your funeral?

-Hah, I don't want you embalming me……. Just leave my corpse where it is. Don't look at it. Don't inspect it. Don't even bid farewell. Do you understand……?

-Sure.

-We'll meet again anyway. Just tell me why I died when that time comes……

I sat next to her corpse, not even glancing at her dead face, merely looking up at the hospital corridor.

For a while.

"…See you next time, Do-hwa."

There was no response.

But I would carry this scene and memory into the next run. Then, Noh Do-hwa would undoubtedly react with her characteristic "Hmmm" and that distinctive laugh.

Imagining that scene made me smile a little.

I left the gift and exited the hospital.

Afterwards, with the Saintess's cooperation, I tracked down and

exterminated the looters who had attacked the hospital. It might not be of much significance, but the looters operated in loosely organized cells reminiscent of the 72 Bandits of the Green Forest from wuxia stories, and one of their groups included Lee Baek.

This was proof that people don't change easily.

After uprooting the large looter group that was just starting to establish itself domestically, I crossed over to Beijing to eliminate the Butterfly Effect.

[That person seemed important to you, Mr. Undertaker.]

"Yeah. Though she must have been quite fed up with me."

[……]

From then on, the Saintess and I never mentioned Noh Do-hwa again. We continued the 173rd run as if nothing had happened.

And to add, the idea of committing suicide to start a new run didn't cross my mind.

Living diligently despite Noh Do-hwa's disappearance was my own form of funeral and tribute to her death.

Taking advantage of such variables, I would actively gather data that couldn't normally be collected.

So that in the next run, I could make Noh Do-hwa say, "Hmmm, well, at least my pointless death had some merit…."

That was the reason.

The reason I decided to explore a more radical path in the 173rd run.

"National Road Management Corps?"

Dang Seo-rin tilted her head.

“So, you want to create such an organization, and you want me to lead it?”

“Exactly.”

Noh Do-hwa was the top candidate to lead the National Road Management Corps. And having a first choice naturally implied there was a second choice.

As expected, my second choice was always Dang Seo-rin.

“Hmm……. There are many things I want to ask, but let’s start with this.”

“Feel free.”

“Why me?”

It was a straightforward question.

There were numerous reasons why Dang Seo-rin was suitable for the position of National Road Management Corps leader.

“I anticipated your question and prepared some materials.”

“Huh? Materials?”

“Yes. Please take a look at this PPT.”

“…Oh no, I suddenly have a very bad feeling that I’ve asked something I shouldn’t have.”

Leadership:

Dang Seo-rin had already elevated Samcheon to the most powerful guild on the Korean Peninsula across countless cycles.

Not only that, she had magnificently governed the city of Busan, which had become the de facto capital after Seoul’s fall.

While other guild leaders relied on AI judges, Dang Seo-rin used the ‘Equivalent Exchange’ magic to govern Busan’s judiciary in her own way. Her guild members and the citizens of Busan accepted this

method.

In terms of leadership, there was no one who could rival Dang Seo-rin.

Noblesse Oblige:

When some guild leaders were busy establishing their own kingdoms within the cities they occupied, Dang Seo-rin threw herself into the battlefield without hesitation. She went to the front lines to fight against anomalies.

Ten Legs. Udumbara. Meteor Shower. Each time these powerful anomalies swept through the Korean Peninsula, Dang Seo-rin sang her magical songs on the battlefield, literally at the cost of her lifespan.

Dedication to the public good.

The ability to turn dedication into results.

The charisma to gather supporters and establish authority by packaging and spreading those results.

Dang Seo-rin possessed these extremely rare and valuable qualities.

As previously mentioned, in this apocalyptic era, there was a bizarre trend called ‘Awakener Supremacy’.

Like Noh Do-hwa, I always referred to awakeners simply as ‘awakeners.’ But there were many who called the same beings ‘transcenders’ or ‘ascendants.’

Dang Seo-rin didn’t attach her identity to such wordplay. She just bore endless responsibility along with her immense power.

There was no one more qualified than Dang Seo-rin for the position of the National Road Management Corps leader, who must not only unite the awakeners but also consider all the humans on the Korean Peninsula.

Personal Charm:

In addition to the charisma required for leading a group, even in one-on-one situations, Dang Seo-rin was……

“Wait, wait! Stop! Stoooop!”

“Hmm?”

In the middle of my enthusiastic presentation on the "101 Reasons Why You Should Lead the National Road Management Corps," Dang Seo-rin waved her hands in a frenzy.

“Undertaker, that’s enough! I get it! Please stop! I beg you!”

“Why? I haven’t finished yet.”

“I said stop! Are you trying to kill me by making me die of embarrassment? Seriously, you’re crazy!”

Judging by the fact that Dang Seo-rin usually carried a pointy hat and a witch's broom, one could deduce that the part of her brain responsible for feelings of embarrassment or shame had atrophied.

However, if you bombarded her with compliments in a non-magical, non-witchy, non-singing context, it would cause her brain to panic, much like overworked leg muscles shaking after a strenuous squat.

And during such times, unreasonable demands often worked very well.

“Alright. So, can I take that as you accepting the role of the National Road Management Corps leader?”

“Yes! I’ll take it. I’ll take it, so shut up before someone hears you!”

See? This is the technique of a former Dang Seo-rin secretary.

Thus, Dang Seo-rin’s Samcheon Guild merged with the National Road Management Corps. Or rather, it evolved into the National Road Management Corps from now on.

The process was smooth.

There were few concerns about the concentration of too much power in Samcheon, which was just a guild. Dang Seo-rin's reputation had the power to turn concerns into expectations.

If you ask why I hadn't assigned the role to Dang Seo-rin in previous runs despite its simplicity——besides minor excuses, the core reason was just one.

-If possible, don't tell the next version of me that you're a regressor.

I couldn't confess to Dang Seo-rin that I was a regressor.

Because of her own will.

In the run where we first succeeded in subduing Ten Legs, the 10th run where I revealed I was a regressor, Dang Seo-rin had imposed a binding curse on me.

-I'm a greedy and impulsive person. I can never think like, 'I'll give up this run for the sake of the next one.'

-If I know that I have hundreds of years of lifespan left, I'll definitely use it all up for the current run.

-Until the very final crisis, make sure my lifespan is saved.

I kept that promise.

From the 10th run to the 173rd, I never once disclosed my secret to Dang Seo-rin.

And this meant that, unlike Noh Do-hwa or the Saintess, Dang Seo-rin could never join our regression alliance.

While I could share the information I gained from regression with Noh Do-hwa without reservation, with Dang Seo-rin, I always needed a bit of packaging and acting… in other words, a lie.

A lie. Something I would never do to Dang Seo-rin under normal circumstances.

But in the 173rd run, the shocking early departure of Noh Do-hwa

made me resolve to experiment with the IF route of [What if Dang Seo-rin led the National Road Management Corps?].

Unsurprisingly.

In this newly explored route, Dang Seo-rin showcased her talents to the fullest.

“Undertaker. You know that Equivalent Exchange magic you helped develop? I was thinking yesterday, this magic has limitless potential for use.”

“Yes. When sending National Road Management Corps members on patrol to other regions, always include one who has participated in the Ten Legs subjugation. That way, if they get into a fight with another guild, we can smooth things over by saying we’re all comrades, right?”

“Hmm- The AI judge that guild leader Cheon Yo-hwa provided is convenient, but sometimes people are dissatisfied with the AI’s verdict. So, I think the final judgment should be made here at the Busan National Road Management Corps headquarters……”

My judgment was not wrong.

Though aided by the data Noh Do-hwa had accumulated and my advice, Dang Seo-rin led the National Road Management Corps with astounding speed, as if it were natural.

And it wasn’t long before she came up with ideas that neither Noh Do-hwa nor I had considered.

“Hey, Undertaker.”

“Hmm?”

“Isn’t it possible to record the songs I perform with my Cursed Song Incantation and play them softly throughout the city all the time? For example… developing magic that makes people feel a bit happier.”

That was the beginning.

Footnotes:

Chapter 110

The One Who Was a Companion II

Sinnoa

“Hello, teacher!”

“Oh, it's Yo-hwa.”

“Yes! Hehe, it’s been a while!”

One day, Cheon Yo-hwa descended to Busan with a few of her close aides.

As expected of Baekhwa Girls’ High School, all of them were dressed in white sailor uniforms. Now that Cheon Yo-hwa was no longer a senior but roughly a ninth-year high school student, she should be graduating soon.

The top guild master of the Korean Peninsula was in a witch cosplay, and the second-in-command guild master was in a school uniform cosplay. The future of this land was grim.

“Have you been well?”

“Of course. I’m always doing well.”

“Haha. Indeed, it seems like even if you were dropped in the middle of the Sahara Desert, you'd come back just fine. By the way—”

As we chatted, the rest of the Baekhwa Girls’ High School guild members had already moved away. In the plaza, only the two of us remained, and Cheon Yo-hwa glanced around.

“Busan has changed a lot.”

“Hmm.”

Cheon Yo-hwa was right.

The 173rd cycle's Busan boasted a city view unseen in past runs.

Previously, even though Busan was the premier city of the Korean Peninsula, it wasn't very glamorous, fitting the apocalyptic times.

Red-light districts might have adorned themselves with expensive electricity in yellow and pink lights, but most buildings didn't exceed two stories. The elevator and sewage systems required to maintain high-rise buildings had completely collapsed.

But now it was different.

Most buildings were four or five stories high, with some even exceeding ten stories. Civilization wasn't fully restored, but the most expensive real estate was still on the ground floor.

Living in a five-story building and going up and down the stairs to the restroom each time was a workout many were willing to endure, as more people desired to live in Busan.

"It's quite splendid."

"How's Sejong these days?"

"Ah—well, it's the same. Since we have a strong grip on Sejong, people still gather there, but other cities are in dire straits. The other guild leaders often complain when we meet, saying all the specialists have been snatched up by Busan."

Cheon Yo-hwa's eyes narrowed as she looked at the new capital of the Korean Peninsula.

"But it's hard to focus on those complaints. There isn't a guild leader strong enough to confront the National Road Management Corps leader, right?"

"Who knows. You're here, Yo-hwa."

"Haha. The guild leaders always say that."

Cheon Yo-hwa laughed awkwardly, waving her hand dismissively.

“Why would I engage in a power struggle with the management leader? I’m content feeding my kids, hunting anomalies, and occasionally traveling to meet you!”

“That’s very like you.”

“Hehe...”

But for someone with such a humble lifestyle, the aura of the guild members accompanying Cheon Yo-hwa was extraordinary.

She must have formed the delegation with the best elite members of Baekhwa Girls’ High.

I glanced at the waist of Cheon Yo-hwa. Like a Pokémon trainer with Poké Balls, anomaly master Cheon Yo-hwa wore a custom belt with hourglasses attached.

One particularly white sandglass stood out. Despite its appearance, it was an indestructible anomaly seal.

The Infinite Void.

It was Cheon Yo-hwa’s most powerful weapon. Perhaps recognizing me even from inside the hourglass, her doppelgänger ‘Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化)’ stirred the sand.

Sensing the vibration from her waist belt, Cheon Yo-hwa’s gaze turned icy. The vitamin-like smile that had been radiating in all directions evaporated instantly.

“Shut up.”

The hourglass trembled briefly before settling down. It might have been my imagination, but the vibration felt like mockery.

At that moment.

- Ah, ah—

From the speakers erected like utility poles throughout Busan, a small song began to play.

It was an acapella recording of Dang Seo-rin's voice.

- Ah... Ah... Ah... Ah... .

The melody resembled a children's song but it was bright enough not to irritate anyone's nerves.

As the quiet song briefly washed over us, Cheon Yo-hwa's eyebrows relaxed.

"Ah—this is. The famous Busan specialty, right?"

"Yes. It's the song of the National Road Management Corps leader."

"Hehe... it really makes you feel at ease listening to it? No, I should say it makes you feel good. Is this a drug?"

It actually had a drug-like effect.

'The song of the National Road Management Corps leader' was broadcast every hour from 7 AM to 10 PM daily. The effects of Cursed Song Incantation subtly changed with the time of day.

For example, at 7 AM, it was a song that had the effect of waking you up feeling refreshed and clear-minded. At 10 PM, it made you pleasantly sleepy and ready for a good night's rest as soon as you lay down.

"Thanks to it, there are no insomniacs in Busan. No one in the world sleeps as healthily as Busan citizens."

"Hmm..."

"And during work hours, songs that invigorate and energize play, while songs that reduce stress and create a slightly excited atmosphere conducive to enjoyable conversation play during dinner time. Labor productivity and overall life satisfaction are at their highest."

“It’s a happy city.”

Even now, dozens of citizens were huddled under the speakers. Once the song ended, they wore refreshed expressions and returned to their workplaces in groups.

‘A city made of songs.’

That was the current Busan.

“It’s no wonder other cities keep losing their population to Busan.”

To establish this system, Dang Seo-rin and I worked tirelessly for six years.

We developed five types of magic tailored to various situations, and used anomaly artifacts to ensure the magic effects were preserved in recordings.

“Well, teacher. I have a meeting scheduled with the owner of that song. I’ll excuse myself!”

“Ah, sure.”

“Yes! See you later!”

Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa, the representative of white magic and the representative of black magic, the de facto ruler of Busan and the warlord of Sejong, the leader of the National Road Management Corps and the student council president of Baekhwa Girls’ High School.

A secret meeting between the two awakeners, considered rivals in many respects, was held. Of course, thanks to the Saintess’s Clairvoyance, I could eavesdrop on all the main details of the secret meeting.

The Saintess was reluctant to share the detailed nuances of the negotiations for some reason.

As a result of the meeting.

“Hehe. Now we’re neighbors. Please take care of me from now on, teacher!”

“……”

Baekhwa Girls’ High School decided to move its headquarters from Sejong to Busan.

Yeongdo District was allocated as Baekhwa Girls’ High School’s territory, and Sejong’s citizens were freely allowed to relocate.

Cheon Yo-hwa maintained her title as student council president of Baekhwa Girls’ High School but was also appointed as the deputy leader of the National Road Management Corps.

Anyone would interpret this as Cheon Yo-hwa leading her guild to a dramatic surrender to Dang Seo-rin.

That was the final blow.

Let’s accelerate time a bit more.

When Cheon Yo-hwa, the only one considered a rival to Dang Seo-rin, easily bowed her head, the other guild leaders couldn’t hold out either.

One by one, the guild leaders, who ruled like kings from their respective bases, bowed their heads. They flattered the leader of the National Road Management Corps to maintain their value and status.

Dang Seo-rin was generous.

“Undertaker. You said that underwater tunnel could be connected to Kyushu, Japan, right?”

“Hmm.”

“There are many famous hot springs in Kyushu. Can’t we extend the tunnel near there? If we build luxurious villas around them as gifts, the other guild leaders should be reasonably satisfied.”

And so it was.

Some warlords tried to cling to power until the end, but it was futile. The National Road Management Corps had the Sword Marquess. Unless Sword Marquess trampled the farmlands, the sovereignty of the Korean Peninsula's food supply rested entirely in Dang Seo-rin's hands.

Dang Seo-rin lightly swirled her wine glass.

"I always respect your thoughts, Undertaker, but I think differently about the operation of the National Road Management Corps."

"Do you?"

"Yes. There's no need to inefficiently leave multiple cities unattended and order the management members to patrol until they die. There's only a handful of people left on the Korean Peninsula anyway. Busan alone is enough."

"....."

"I'm going to make Busan the premier city on the Korean Peninsula… No, the world. No place in this post-apocalyptic world will be as good as this city."

"If you do that, the entire Korean Peninsula will be consumed by the void. There's a high probability of a 'monster wave' occurring. You'll witness near-infinite anomalies invading from beyond the horizon whenever you feel like it."

I warned her.

"To be honest, it's unpredictable what will happen. Monster waves are practically impossible to exterminate. Do you plan to play an endless defense game in reality?"

"That's frightening but… Yes. We can do it. With your power and my magic, it's possible. Undertaker, will you follow me?"

"....."

I hesitated for a moment.

Perhaps it was an instinct honed through my time as a regressor, but I sensed this moment was a point of no return.

Even so, my answer was already decided.

"...Of course."

Dang Seo-rin beamed brightly.

"As expected of you, Undertaker! I trust you!"

Acceleration.

Four years later, only the city of Busan remained on the Korean Peninsula.

Ironically, the world of a certain witch, who wished more than anyone to travel and wander around, had become narrower than in any other run.

The average height of buildings in downtown Busan increased. It was enough to call it the last metropolis of humanity.

Even the Saintess, who always stayed in Yongsan, Seoul, moved to Busan. There was no longer a need to stay there and monitor the awakeners of the Korean Peninsula.

In the center of Busan, where land prices skyrocketed, a plaza without any buildings astonishingly spread out.

A plaza designed to seat tens of thousands of people. The center was hollowed out so that everyone could watch what happened below.

Like the Colosseum.

That was Dang Seo-rin's 'courtroom.'

Dang Seo-rin sat at the top seat of the judge's bench. Beside her was Cheon Yo-hwa, who had dyed her white sailor uniform black at some point.

The judges looked down.

In the magnificent courtroom, a defendant knelt.

“I committed violence against a passerby.”

The defendant’s low self-confession echoed throughout the wide courtroom. A feat of Dang Seo-rin’s [Amplification Magic].

“Sometimes I can’t control my body. It’s rage, I guess. It wells up. When I come to my senses, it’s always like this. This time, if others hadn’t stopped me, I would’ve beaten someone.”

Boo, boo— jeers erupted from the audience of tens of thousands.

But when Dang Seo-rin lightly tapped her gavel, the entire city fell silent as if it had never happened.

“Continue.”

“…Yes. I hate this side of myself. I apologize and repent to all those I’ve harmed. Above all, please, Your Excellency the Judge, correct this character of mine...”

The defendant bowed their head.

Dang Seo-rin shook her finger coldly. A golden scale glowed in the air.

The magic of Equivalent Exchange.

“Defendant. Do you repent your wrongdoing?”

“Yes.”

“As you wish, [from now on, you will be stripped of your inner violence]. Under this condition, the victim has graciously offered to forgive the violence you committed.”

The victim had received a judgment in the same place a year ago to [forgive anyone who wrongs them with a compassionate heart].

“Do you agree to the victim’s proposal?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you. Thank you, Your Excellency. Thank you...”

“Executioner, please proceed.”

Cheon Yo-hwa, in her black uniform, stood up.

She approached the defendant and placed her hand on their head. Cheon Yo-hwa’s murmured words were muted, not echoing in the courtroom, but I guessed she was ‘brainwashing’ the defendant.

Personality alteration. Infusion. Distortion.

That was Cheon Yo-hwa’s ability.

“Ah...”

Finally, the golden scale shimmered.

On the left pan was the victim’s forgiveness, and on the right pan was the defendant’s violence.

The scale, having gained the consent of both sides, balanced itself and granted their wishes.

The defendant stood up abruptly.

“I can’t feel it... I can’t feel it! The emotion that’s tormented me all my life, it’s no longer there! Ah! Thank you! Thank you! Your Excellency, the Judge, thank you!”

The audience of tens of thousands clapped in unison. Cheers of encouragement for the defendant and praises for Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa’s powers echoed.

They, too, were citizens who had received something [in exchange] at the courtroom for trivial or significant reasons.

“Ah, Protector.”

Suddenly, a voice came from beside me. I turned my head to see Yu Ji-won standing there.

“Ji-won.”

“Yes. Why are you watching the trial from such a remote place? As the Protector, you could watch it more closely.”

By the way, ‘Protector’ was the title given to me. The city’s protector.

It was a title dripping with Dang Seo-rin’s preference, one I personally didn’t like. I almost missed the days when Yu Ji-won exaggeratedly called me ‘Your Excellency.’

“I was just passing by. I have to leave to block the monster wave again anyway.”

“Ah... as expected. You’re really busy.”

Yu Ji-won smiled.

A natural, warm, and thus completely uncharacteristic human smile that the original Yu Ji-won would never have made.

“But thanks to Your Excellency’s efforts, the citizens of the city can live in peace, right? I always support you. If you ever need my guidance, just let me know.”

“……”

I felt the sincerity in all those words.

In a situation where it was difficult to find truth in sincerity, I was momentarily at a loss for words.

Yu Ji-won had also recently had her psychopathic tendencies erased by Dang Seo-rin’s [Equivalent Exchange] and Cheon Yo-hwa’s [Brainwashing].

Yu Ji-won had a long-standing habit akin to an incurable disease: she secretly hunted and butchered small animals like cats, dogs, and birds.

But unlike the normal Yu Ji-won, she was caught in the act, and

eventually, she was brought to Dang Seo-rin's 'witch trial.'

"Ji-won."

"Yes?"

"Are you satisfied with your life these days?"

Yu Ji-won blinked.

"Of course. I've never spent more fulfilling days. Since the day of the trial, I've felt like I'm truly living as a person."

"....."

Was that really so?

I had a slightly different interpretation.

I had never heard of Yu Ji-won enjoying such a stress-relief method of butchering small animals.

Even if it was a new hobby acquired in this run, it was hard to believe that someone like Yu Ji-won would 'accidentally' expose the scene of butchery.

Perhaps it was a deliberately disguised hobby and an intentional exposure.

The person before me had fabricated acts that made her look like a psychopath. And then she underwent a witch trial to correct her personality.

To survive here and continue to live as a city's power, she had judged that 'this way' was advantageous.

Yu Ji-won could see the world as a maze with set entrances and exits. Even her personality and way of thinking were just means to reach the 'correct answer.'

"…I see. That's good. Keep up the good work, Chief Yu."

"Yes, Your Excellency."

I walked down a passage with no visible exit.

Waaa—! A cheer erupted from the far-off audience. A tremendous roar.

Dang Seo-rin! Dang Seo-rin! The courtroom vibrated as if struck by a rushing train.

Before leaving the courtroom, I looked down once more.

At that moment, another part of a defendant's personality was placed on the golden scale for exchange. Dang Seo-rin whispered something to Cheon Yo-hwa, who nodded.

Then Dang Seo-rin and I made eye contact.

"……"

"……"

But only for a moment. As the ruler of the city and the judge of this space, Dang Seo-rin turned her head to continue her duties.

I did too.

Even as I walked down the corridor, the cheers from behind did not stop. Dang Seo-rin! Dang Seo-rin! Dang Seo-rin…

Cheers never ceased in the courtroom, and the songs never stopped playing from the city's speakers.

I walked, trailing the dual melodies like shadows at my feet.

Footnotes:

Chapter 111

The One Who Was a Companion III

Sinnoa

It had already been 15 years since the start of the 173rd run.

“Guild leader…”

Even after more than a decade, Sim Ah-ryeon, our guild member who still didn’t grasp the concept of personal growth, made a face.

“Why the long face again?”

“Please don’t get rid of it…”

“...Get rid of what? Are you smoking?”

“...Ugh, this is why non-players... Anyway. Um, SG Net is down…”

Sim Ah-ryeon sniffled.

SG Net, an advanced technology website, had its servers located in Seo Gyu’s brain and heart.

Unless our manly guy SG Man got himself killed in a street fight, there was no chance SG Net would shut down.

Though statistically, that was quite likely, it hadn’t happened yet. So, Sim Ah-ryeon’s use of the word ‘down’ was purely metaphorical.

“Sniff. Look at this…”

Sim Ah-ryeon showed me SG Net on her smartphone.

-OldManGoryeo: Today's café mocha.jpeg

-Anonymous: I wrote a novel, please review it

-OldManGoryeo: Today's café mocha.png

-Anonymous: Do you believe in God?

-Anonymous: Anyone want to go to a hot spring trip?

-Anonymous: Why are there only idiots here? LOL

-OldManGoryeo: Today's café mocha.jpg

I tilted my head. After glancing a few times, there was only one thing out of place.

“Ah-ryeon, why are you drinking so much coffee?”

“Aaagh! There are only two posts on SG Net today! Two! Just two posts and that's it! Today’s coffee, yesterday’s coffee, and the day before yesterday’s coffee!”

“Ah…”

“Do you know how many posts are usually made on SG Net per day? Four! Four posts! Unbelievable! Guild leader! I can’t live like this! I can’t stir up any drama. Out of the four daily posts, one is mine, and the other is my anonymous post…”

“Hmm.”

Indeed, SG Net had died.

The only thing still active was the [Library Society’s Encyclopedia of Anomalies] that Sim Ah-ryeon and I ran. The ghost users of the community had been purged.

There was always a cause for every effect. There was a clear reason why SG Net’s ecosystem had been destroyed.

“Well, that was when everyone lived scattered across the country, but now we all live here. This city has many plazas and rest areas. There’s no longer a dire need for an online community like before.”

“But still, this is too strange… I swear, even in ancient Vatican City,

they had internet communities. It makes no sense that an internet community dies just because people live together in Busan. Guild leader! This has to be an occult phenomenon! An anomaly! Wow! You love anomalies, guild leader…! Please, exterminate it quickly!”

This kid... sharp as ever.

“Ah-ryeon, do you really want to hear the other reasons from my mouth?”

“Wh-What do you mean…?”

“Look. There are no unemployed or homeless people here. Everyone has a job and leads a healthy daily life. After work, people have small parties or go to clubs and have real-life community activities. They relieve all their stress there, so naturally, they don’t need to go online. Just look at Seo Gyu; he went out to a TRPG meeting tonight, didn’t he? But Ah-ryeon, you’re always holed up in the guild building alone…”

“Aaah! I don’t want to hear it! I don’t want to hear it!”

Sim Ah-ryeon covered her ears and rolled on the floor. Well, not exactly rolled... she rubbed her back against the ground. Actively, like backstroking, she had a meltdown.

If Gregor Samsa had seen her, he would have been ashamed of the degrading display of insect dignity.

“Reality? Reality? You’re saying people don’t need the internet because they’re happy in the moment? Are you stupid? Guild leader, you’re really stupid! This smartphone screen, this is reality! This is the truth! People quitting the internet is inhumane, impossible on this Earth, in this universe!”

“But it has actually happened.”

“Eek…!”

OldManGoryeo collapsed.

Even if the world were to end tomorrow, Sim Ah-ryeon would post

nonsense on the internet today, but her power Grudge Orb was bound to decline.

It had become increasingly difficult to attract people's attention.

Present-day Busan was becoming closer to an ideal city.

Everyone wanted to become a better version of themselves. And Busan had a way to grant people’s wishes.

- I’m tired after work but still have a habit of staying up late doing other things. It ruins my daily life. Great Witch, can you remove this habit?

- Of course. Insomnia is such a torment. Just provide one month’s worth of your salary.

It wasn’t a deal with the devil but with a witch.

Dang Seo-rin’s Equivalent Exchange magic and Cheon Yo-hwa’s Brainwashing magic. When these two powers worked together, people could conveniently extract the parts of their personalities they wished to remove.

It wasn’t just personalities.

- I was abused by my family as a child. Even now, traumatic memories surface and torment me. This personality of mine burdens those around me. Great Witch, can you remove the memories of my family’s abuse?

- Of course. But you must also offer the negative emotions you have towards your family as a price.

Memories, emotions, personality.

The Great Witch accepted anything as material for negotiation and received anything in exchange.

Busan's crime rate plummeted. Naturally, the criminals’ personalities had been completely reformed.

Dang Seo-rin's 'witch trials' became increasingly open to the general public. Once a week, the golden scale was hoisted in the grand plaza, and dozens of people transformed into better versions of themselves each time.

As Tolstoy said, happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

There are many ways to revert to unhappiness, but the path to happiness is always singular.

The same was true for this city.

As people systematically eradicated their miseries, their auras gradually became similar.

Healthy. Waking up early and going to bed early. Regular exercise. Valuing those around them. Polite. Kind. Honest. Avoiding hurting others and getting hurt.

Utopia.

"What do we do, guild leader…? Sniffle, now I can't heal you if your arm gets cut off or your legs get broken… I'm sorry. If another monster wave invades, I can't heal you…"

"Ah, don't worry about it. You were going to be fired soon anyway."

"…What?"

"The monster wave will soon be over."

I will cover the detailed explanation of the anomaly known as 'monster wave' in another story.

For now, it sufficed to imagine it exactly as the name suggested.

A tsunami of anomalies. Endless waves of monsters rushing from the horizon.

Even anomalies that would never coexist due to overlapping territories would swarm together like a giant legion.

Why this phenomenon occurred remained unknown, but its timing was clear.

When the void grew excessively large.

For instance, if the entire North Korean area turned into a void, a ‘monster wave’ would inevitably appear.

The tsunami lasted about 20 hours.

Thousands, tens of thousands of anomalies surged like a wave, covering the ground still held by humanity.

This phenomenon compelled me to create the National Road Management Corps.

The reason we didn’t abandon the various cities of the Korean Peninsula and maintained our territory by connecting the national roads was to prevent being swept away by the near-infinite monster waves if we allowed the void to encroach further.

Dang Seo-rin chose the exact opposite.

-Undertaker! Undertaker! Undertaker!

-Waaaaa!

And today.

With all resources and manpower concentrated in Busan since the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, the fear of the monster wave, which had always threatened the city’s security, was finally ended.

-Everyone! Please welcome with applause! Our hero who protected Busan, no, the Korean Peninsula! No, the city’s guardian who protected the world! Here comes the Undertaker!

-Long live the Undertaker! Long live Busan!

A parade was held in the city.

It was a kind of festival. Just like a general who won a victory in Rome paraded through the triumphal arch to boast of his achievements to the citizens, I too marched slowly, escorted by the awakeners around me.

I rode in an open car, but in the sky, members of the Samcheon Guild (now part of the National Road Management Corps) formed a decent aerial squad on their brooms.

Victory songs poured ceaselessly from the speakers installed throughout the city. The melody was stirring and moving.

Liquor, a major luxury item, was distributed without limit today. We would burn through five years' worth of reserves in one day.

-Until now, our city has always been threatened by the despicable waves of anomalies! But thanks to the Undertaker and many warriors' brave fights! The monster wave has finally been eradicated! Rejoice, citizens! Our city is free!

-Waaaaa!

The climax of the festival was when the parade reached the headquarters of the National Road Management Corps.

The plaza where the 'witch trials' were held weekly. Overlooking the plaza, the headquarters towered like the Tower of Babel.

At the grand staircase one had to climb to enter the headquarters, the ruler of the city, the master of the Korean Peninsula, the one in the black conical hat, Dang Seo-rin, was waiting.

"Welcome, Undertaker."

Dang Seo-rin smiled. Her smile and voice were broadcasted throughout the city by a special magic designed for this day.

"You finally did it."

"……"

“Once, you warned me. You said the path we chose would be blocked by countless anomalies. But I said, with your power and my magic, we could overcome it.”

Dang Seo-rin pouted playfully.

“Can we now say that we’ve proven who was right?”

“Take the correctness. I’ll take the blood and effort invested to make your words right.”

“Whatever. Always showing off.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd surrounding the plaza.

Despite the ruler’s overly casual language and conversation, it didn’t matter. Maintaining power and authority in this city no longer required grand political rhetoric or exaggeration.

Every citizen was complete.

“Anyway, the hero who defeated the greatest enemy deserves a fitting reward. I swear on my golden scale that I’ll grant whatever you wish. Now, our hero. Make your wish.”

“Thank you. Then… I noticed Yu Ji-won was handling the mic for today’s event. Replace her. Even though her personality changed, she still overdoes it. I almost died of embarrassment getting here.”

-Undertaker? Protector?

Laughter erupted from the plaza again.

Dang Seo-rin also chuckled and took a step closer to me. Thump. For some reason, her footsteps weren’t broadcasted through the city’s speakers, but only reached my ears.

I understood that Dang Seo-rin had momentarily cut off the ‘broadcast magic.’

“Is that enough? Really? I meant it when I said I’d grant any wish.”

“My wish is to stay by your side till the end, and it’s already being fulfilled.”

“……”

“So fire Yu Ji-won. Now.”

Dang Seo-rin chuckled.

“Really…”

What words followed, I didn’t know either.

Dang Seo-rin extended her right hand, and I, as per her taste, kissed the ring on it. Then the cheers of the whole city drowned out all other sounds.

Night fell.

Fireworks exploded.

In the night sky of the city, all sorts of witches flew around. The National Road Management Corps members, who had been granted a three-day leave starting today, soared on brooms, firing fireworks spells at will.

Dang Seo-rin and I sat on the high terrace of the headquarters, looking up at the night sky’s festival.

On the table were some famous Haeundae Bakery bread and two empty wine bottles.

“Now then.”

Dang Seo-rin’s long fingers traced the rim of the wine glass.

“Are all the anomalies threatening us gone?”

“Who knows. The greatest threat is gone, I’d say. There might still be outer god-class anomalies I haven’t detected yet but at least the monster wave won’t target this place again.”

“That’s good. No more seeing those disgusting anomalies swarm in.

Really, that's good."

Fireworks exploded again.

Even the sound of fireworks being launched seemed to have been magically implemented, echoing pleasantly in the sky.

The red and yellow backlighting illuminated Dang Seo-rin's profile as she watched the night sky.

"Ah, I feel good. Yeah. Undertaker, make me a cup of coffee. I want some."

"If you drink caffeine at night, you won't sleep."

"What's the difference?"

Dang Seo-rin propped her chin on her left hand and smirked. Her right hand stroked Blackie, curled up on her lap.

"I'm not sleeping tonight anyway. I'll skip work tomorrow too. You're free starting today too, aren't you?"

"…Indeed. Just one cup then."

The rooftop terrace, virtually Dang Seo-rin's private bar, had all the tools a barista needed. The beans smelled freshly ground.

There was even ice cream in the icebox. I made affogato and handed it to Dang Seo-rin with a wry smile.

"Here. Hangover coffee."

"Ah, thank you! Mmm. As expected. Coffee made by you tastes the best."

Fireworks exploded.

Meow— Blackie meowed on Dang Seo-rin's lap.

"But… how did you subdue the monster wave? Didn't you say it was something that couldn't be eradicated, more a phenomenon than an anomaly?"

“I didn’t subdue it.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t subdue it. Near Seoul, monster waves of tens of thousands of anomalies still appear, disappear after 20 hours, and reappear endlessly.”

“……”

I had seen it with my own eyes.

Dang Seo-rin, who had been enjoying the affogato, froze.

“…Wait. Really? You’re not kidding? Then that’s a big problem!”

“No, I’ve never lied to you, Seo-rin. The monster wave will never push down here again. Your city is safe.”

“Uh… hey, Undertaker?”

Dang Seo-rin looked confused.

“Sorry, I can’t follow this conversation. Wasn’t the monster wave a phenomenon that pushed from the void to the non-void, human territory? You said that before.”

“That’s right.”

“And the monster wave is still appearing, not eradicated?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why do you claim with such certainty that the monster wave will never strike Busan again?”

“Because this is the void.”

Fireworks exploded.

“——This place is no longer human territory but anomaly territory. Busan is no longer Busan but Utopia. Literally, ‘no place,’ the void.”

“……”

“So there’s no reason for the monster wave to target this place. Dang Seo-rin. As long as you, the anomaly, rule this area.”

Fireworks exploded.

Footnotes:

Chapter 112

The One Who Was a Companion IV

Sinnoa

How much time had passed?

In the night sky devoid of the ticking of clocks, only the periodic, extravagant explosions of the fireworks measured the length of the silence.

"An anomaly... me? I, Dang Seo-rin?"

It was after the fourth firework painted the sky red that Dang Seo-rin finally opened her mouth.

“That can’t be true. What are you talking about, Undertaker? I’m the same as before, nothing has changed. How could I be an anomaly…”

“Yes, nothing has changed. But our abilities themselves are a kind of anomaly. Awakening, transcendence, ascension—no matter how grand the words, they are inherently alien phenomena in the real world. You must have had some inkling.”

“……”

I sipped my coffee. While giving Dang Seo-rin her affogato, I made myself a café au lait.

“I don’t particularly like the habit of comparing a human to a small universe, but a human is indeed a small space. Just because one awakens their ability doesn’t mean they instantly become a complete anomaly. It happens slowly. Like the void eroding the land, the process of becoming an anomaly goes through many procedures and stages.”

“…What nonsense procedures and stages?”

“I don’t claim to know everything. But in your case, it’s clear. Your rapid transformation into an anomaly began when your golden scales started influencing other people’s personalities.”

“That doesn’t make any sense…”

“Let’s delve into a more complex concept.”

Let’s compare an anomaly to a force.

We say that water falls, that a coffee can spills on the floor, that a ball drops from the Leaning Tower of Pisa—all due to the force of gravity.

Anomalies and the Void are the same.

‘Why does walking to the right in the Inunaki Tunnel result in drowning?’ ‘Why did the area where the Meteor Shower fell turn into an ashen zone?’ ‘Why do all objects and spaces lose their boundaries in the Infinite Void, reduced to mere qualia?’

The answers to these questions are clear.

‘Because it’s the Inunaki Tunnel.’

‘Because it’s the Meteor Shower.’

‘Because it’s the Infinite Void.’

Each anomaly has the power to create its own events.

Just as objects are drawn to gravity, the Meteor Shower has the property of turning its surroundings into ashes.

Anomalies become the causes that produce strange results in this world.

It’s as if one can only say, ‘The reason for this bizarre occurrence is because of that anomaly.’

Conversely, the method of subduing an anomaly follows this line of

analysis.

‘The reason part of the Inunaki Tunnel is flooded is because it is mixed with the mythology of the Sanzu River.’

‘The myth of a river flowing in the afterlife is found not only in the Sanzu River but also in the Styx.’

‘Therefore, if one carries gold or silver coins to pay the ferryman of the underworld, they will not drown in the Inunaki Tunnel.’

One analyzes the anomaly.

By dissecting the anomaly, which was pinpointed as the ultimate cause of the incident, one interprets it as ‘even an anomaly is just a result established by other causes.’

This is the method I declared as certain around the 100th run.

To restore the world to the proper chain of causality. To eliminate the voids scattered like holes in the world.

This was the essence of the ‘method to fight anomalies’ that I established.

“Dang Seo-rin. Among the people living in this city, is there anyone who doesn’t owe you?”

“……”

“At the top of that four-story villa lives a young man named Yoo Chul-won. He suffered from insomnia. Five years ago, he received a witch trial from you, and thanks to that, he spends every day and night, and thus his entire daily life, refreshingly. The cause of ‘Yoo Chul-won’s daily life’ is you, Dang Seo-rin.”

“…..”

“The reason a psychopath like Yu Ji-won can genuinely care for and like others, to the extent of holding small parties with friends every week, is what? Dang Seo-rin, it’s you.”

“…”

“The reason all the people in this city wake up happy in the morning, work diligently throughout the day, spend time happily with loved ones in the evening, and sleep peacefully at night without worries—this is true for not just one or two people but for all the citizens of the city. It’s solely because of you, Dang Seo-rin.”

“……”

“Simply ruling a city doesn’t turn you into an anomaly, but this city is now indistinguishable from you.”

Why is this city so happy?

Why do such and such events occur in this city?

The answer to these questions.

—Because it’s Dang Seo-rin.

“This place is Utopia.”

“……”

“A land ruled by a witch who can render perfect judgments in any trial and eternally send beautiful songs through the city. The most benevolent void in the world. If my words don’t seem credible… you can test it. Your Equivalent Exchange magic will now work even on anomalies.”

“That…”

“You could give anomalies self-awareness, implant past memories, and bestow human forms. Of course, it would require many trials and even more time... But if luck is on your side, you might be able to turn the entire world into your domain, a void called Utopia.”

“……”

Silence settled.

The fireworks stopped exploding.

It was as if the entire city had held its breath. Even the distant, pleasant humming of the drunkards and the laughter of the witches subsided.

As Dang Seo-rin breathed, the lights across the city flickered. When the yellow lights all blinked simultaneously, Dang Seo-rin smiled strangely.

“Then… are you going to subdue me now?”

“……”

“It’s a common story. The hero defeats the Demon King, but the real mastermind was the king who supported the hero all along, leading the hero to the final stage. The greatest ally turns out to be the ultimate last boss. Isn’t that a worn-out cliché?”

“……”

“Right, Undertaker. Come to think of it, I don’t remember you calling Busan ‘Busan’ recently. You always referred to it as ‘this city’ or ‘here.’ You’ve suspected it for a while, haven’t you? That I would turn into an anomaly, that Busan would become the void.”

“Yes.”

“You’re really a bad guy. But then again, you did warn me. You said it was unpredictable what would happen. I caused the current situation.”

Dang Seo-rin stood up. Blackie jumped down.

With a snap, a broom flew to her hand from the terrace. Dang Seo-rin donned the conical hat she had placed on the table.

“Perfect. If you fabricate news about the monster wave being defeated, the entire city would obviously celebrate. I’d take time off to drink with you. My personal guards are all scattered, and most are probably drunk. Perfect timing, isn’t it? Have you already recruited Cheon Yo-hwa to your side? …Ah. I see. No wonder she

quietly withdrew from today's meeting."

"....."

"Still, Undertaker, I can't give up my city. It's an oasis painstakingly created in this wretched world. No matter what anyone says, I, my citizens, are human. No, I'll make us the only human species from now on. So if you plan to subdue me and this place—be prepared for death."

I stood up as well.

"No."

Unlike Dang Seo-rin, I had no weapon in hand. The cane sword made by a blacksmith no longer existing in this world remained tilted beside me.

Because this story doesn't end that way.

"I won't subdue you."

"…What?"

I lightly grasped Dang Seo-rin's hand.

There was a slight tremor, but I didn't mind and pulled her closer.

In the exact opposite direction from a thousand years ago.

-You've got a fierce look in your eyes.

-……

-You're that person, right? The only survivor from Busan Station. The eccentric who always asks strange questions.

A long time ago during the 4th run.

My first meeting with Dang Seo-rin was before I had the Complete Memory Ability.

I couldn't guarantee if our meeting really happened that way, if it was raining around us, or if we had this exact conversation.

-Name?

-…Undertaker. It's a pseudonym.

-You're someone who buries people? Not bad. The depth of a person depends on how many corpses they've buried in their heart.

But one thing was certain, remembered as an indelible truth even if it faded.

-How about it?

Back then, Dang Seo-rin extended her hand to me.

Call it a regressor's intuition. The moment I looked up at the black-haired witch with a broom in one hand and a conical hat on her head, I already knew that a continuous line of my endless life had intertwined with hers.

-Wanna join our guild?

I took that hand.

Just like now.

Only the direction had changed.

"I will never, no matter what, hurt you."

"……"

"I don't care if you become an anomaly. Even if you turn this city, the world, into the void. Even if you burn the entire world, Dang Seo-rin. I will still be by your side."

"Ah."

We were alike.

My ability, Time Seal, the reason I was called Undertaker, also

merely handed people an eternally happy day.

Even if it was a fake, as long as no one noticed, it was no different from the real thing.

The Utopia Dang Seo-rin created was the same. Even if people's happiness was obtained through deals with the witch, perhaps it was the best happy ending this world could achieve.

This route was never a bad ending.

A world where Dang Seo-rin lived to the end, where her dream city was realized, could never be recorded as a bad ending for me.

"If you ever get tired of ruling the city and want to leave, we can leave together anytime."

"……"

"If you want to turn the entire world into your Utopia, I'll gladly be your sword and lead the way."

Her hand trembled.

Dang Seo-rin.

My guild master.

"You allowed me to stay by your side even after becoming an anomaly. Whether it was conscious or unconscious doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all. You are the reason I live."

You are the cause of my existence.

To inherit each other's place and still be together. That was the only difference between anomalies and humans.

No matter how deep we fell into the void, it wouldn't turn into hell.

"So don't worry."

"……"

“We can go anywhere.”

Dang Seo-rin hugged me.

The city lights came on. Witches flew crisscross in the night sky. The noise of drunkards and the song from the speakers intertwined.

Fireworks exploded.

“…I want to travel.”

“Okay.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have given up on the national roads. No, railways. The Railroad Management Corps or something. Instead of staying in Busan, I should’ve built a fortress train like the one in ‘Snowpiercer’ and kept traveling around the country. That would’ve been much more fun.”

“Okay.”

I hugged Dang Seo-rin’s shoulders. I patted her back.

“Dang Seo-rin.”

“Yeah…?”

“I’m actually a regressor.”

Dang Seo-rin looked up at me.

“A regressor…?”

“Yes. I actually repeat the world endlessly. My life has ended over a hundred times. Every time I wake up, it’s always the tutorial dungeon at Busan Station.”

“……”

I told her.

The magic called Cursed Song Incantation burns life to spread the song, but actually, the lifespan accumulates with each run.

“But you told me in the tenth life not to ever tell you the secret that I’m a regressor. Because you’re greedy, if you found out such a secret, you’d use up all the remaining lifespan to create a happy ending in the current run.”

“Ah… indeed. That makes sense.”

Despite knowing I was a regressor, Dang Seo-rin quickly understood. She probably had her own thoughts about my identity.

Soon, Dang Seo-rin smiled.

“You’re foolish.”

“Who? You from the 10th run?”

“No, you.”

When I looked at her in confusion, Dang Seo-rin’s smile deepened.

“Why didn’t you kill me immediately at the start of each run?”

“…What?”

“You fool. The sooner I die, the longer my ‘original lifespan’ accumulates for the next run. If my original lifespan was 60 years, you could’ve transferred all 60 years to the next run each time… Why didn’t you kill me?”

“Wait, what? You’re saying that now—”

I couldn’t continue my rebuttal.

Dang Seo-rin’s face was right in front of me. Her breath was close. The coffee taste, mixed with ice cream flavor.

The scent of grass after a summer rain.

Dang Seo-rin slowly pulled back.

“……”

“Was that your first kiss in this life?”

“That…”

“Ah. No, don’t answer.”

Dang Seo-rin parted her lips and sang. Above us, a small golden scale hung.

Dang Seo-rin whispered playfully.

“Undertaker, put all the memories of your kisses on the scale. Whether they exist or not. In this run, in all runs.”

“……”

“Hurry up.”

I did so.

I couldn’t know what Dang Seo-rin placed on the right side of the scale in exchange for my memories on the left. Nor could I mention what memories I lost anymore. The golden scale in the air shone brightly, deeming the balance achieved.

“Okay. Now close your eyes.”

In the old night sky, with the golden light illuminating like fireworks, Dang Seo-rin pulled me by the arm.

“—This is now our first kiss.”

Our shadows overlapped.

While fireworks scattered in the distance, a thought occurred to me.

As Dang Seo-rin was the cause of my existence, perhaps I was also the cause of Dang Seo-rin’s existence.

If so, tonight might be the moment when the gentlest ‘strategy’ against an anomaly temporarily existed.

And…

Though I would never remember it, the memory Dang Seo-rin

erased with the golden scale was probably no different from the person in front of me now.

There is an epilogue.

When I opened my eyes, I was staring at the ceiling of the tutorial dungeon at Busan Station, not the terrace of Utopia.

The 173rd run had ended.

"……"

Why?

What led to my death?

Regarding the reason for my death, I have the following hypotheses.

First hypothesis: Upon hearing that her lifespan accumulated across runs, Dang Seo-rin resolved to die with me.

'Utopia' Busan wasn't established without cost. The songs from the speakers, the Equivalent Exchange of the golden scale, everything originated from Dang Seo-rin's Cursed Song Incantation.

The price of Cursed Song Incantation was lifespan.

Even the smallest magic in Utopia ran on Dang Seo-rin's life as fuel.

Of course, the resource had secured thousands of years, but it was certain that the end would come someday.

Dang Seo-rin decided to save that fuel.

For me.

For a better true ending we hadn't yet reached.

…But there's also a completely different second hypothesis.

Perhaps Dang Seo-rin didn't die immediately after the kiss.

We might have lived the 173rd run as if nothing happened, spreading ‘Utopia’ not just in Busan but across the entire Korean Peninsula, and eventually the world.

After many moments of happiness and unhappiness, luck and misfortune—after concluding a grand epic, when Dang Seo-rin’s lifespan finally burned out.

For some reason I can’t imagine now, perhaps Dang Seo-rin asked me to forget ‘the memory from the kiss to now.’

As a result, I regressed with only the memory up to our kiss.

Both interpretations can be valid.

I have no intention of digging into which hypothesis is correct. After all, neither is a bad ending for me.

I intend to leave that moment of blankness, the ‘imperfect memory’ part, the night sky of fireworks—gladly within me as a space of void for Dang Seo-rin.

Forever.

Footnotes:

Chapter 113

The Non-Player I

Sinnoa

I'll tell you in advance, don't expect a neat ending from today's story.

This time, it's undeniably a bad ending.

Let's talk about a disastrous game called reality.

The Infinite Void.

Since the extermination of the Outer God, much had changed in the world.

Later, I realized that each of the Outer Gods had their own domain.

You might call it a divine realm.

If the term "divine realm" is unfamiliar, you could call it a sanctuary. For the Infinite Void, the 'Tutorial Dungeon' was its representative divine realm and sanctuary. Among these, Baekhwa Girls' High School was its headquarters.

When one religion declines, others rush to fill the void.

Monsters declared Earth a battleground for religious wars to spread their doctrines instinctively.

During the holy crusades, humans were dying, but frankly, the monsters didn't care. On Earth, it was a long-standing tradition to not treat those with different beliefs as civilians.

The important thing was that the moment the Infinite Void was defeated, the delicate balance of power that had been maintained like a house of cards collapsed instantly.

From the defeat of the Infinite Void, the suppressed monsters started to run rampant.

“Where am I...?”

“I’m not Kim Jun-young from Anyang! I’m Moon-cheong Namgung, the first disciple of the Namgung family!”

“Please, take me back to that world again... Wait, why are there tears?”

A prime example was the ‘Hero Syndrome.’

As I mentioned earlier, I first witnessed Hero Syndrome in the 118th cycle. And the extermination of the Infinite Void occurred in the 117th cycle.

I’m not trying to test your memory. Thanks to my [Complete Memory], I can recall it in detail.

What I want to tell you is—don’t you find the timing quite ironic?

Doesn't it seem like they were waiting for the Infinite Void to be defeated?

Let’s revisit this. During this period, the monsters that newly increased their gacha pick-up rates on the Korean Peninsula weren't just the Hero Syndrome.

-Baaang!

-Bang! Baaang! Bang!

-Baaang! Bang!

The ‘Isekai Truck,' the nemesis of all writers and readers, first appeared in the 119th cycle.

Looking broader, there were many other monsters. In the 126th cycle, there was the ‘Savior Syndrome.’ In the 141st cycle, the fictional structure ‘Korea-Japan Undersea Tunnel’ appeared.

Hero Syndrome, Isekai Truck, Savior Syndrome, imaginary buildings... Don't you feel a certain pattern?

Indeed. All of these were hints and signs of a massive trend.

Every oven-cooked dish needs preheating.

Today, before I submit the answer to that question, I want to talk about one of the most absurd yet impressive signs.

A virtual reality MMORPG.

The so-called 'online game' would be the protagonist of this story.

Occasionally, there were persistent posts on SG Net, a recurring topic that was periodically mentioned.

-Anonymous: Status window! Status window! Status window!

-Anonymous: I shouted 'open status' as soon as I woke up today. Did it appear? (Day 31)

-Anonymous: Am I the only one who can see the status window??

-Anonymous: When I shout 'open status,' it actually appears, lol

-LiteraryGirl: Honestly, if you've secretly shouted 'open status' in this messed-up world, thumbs up, lol

It was the status window topic.

Of course, as a mature adult, I had never muttered 'status window' to myself.

Did I shout it in the 1st or 2nd cycle? My memory starts from the 5th cycle, so anything before that is ancient history.

There's no irrationality in blaming a modern country for a crime that happened in ancient times. Does Greece get treated as a war criminal by Turkey because of the Trojan War?

Anyway, there was no such thing as a status screen with 'ability

scores' and 'skill descriptions' in this world.

Awakeners had to figure out their abilities through countless trials and errors.

For example, without SG Net, Sim Ahyeon didn't realize that her healing ability was [Grudge Orb]. In other words, she didn't know that the more attention she attracted, the stronger her healing became.

This is why awakeners with 'simple abilities' had an advantage early in the cycles.

Abilities like Lee Baek's [Lion's Roar], which simply made his voice louder, were easy to recognize.

A world endlessly unfriendly to awakeners.

And this unfriendliness was precisely the secret to my overwhelming popularity and trust among awakeners.

"Seo Gyu, your ability is [Ubiquitous]. With a smartphone, you can create an internet community that anyone can access. The more users there are, the more your ability develops, and you can add various systems to the forum."

"Huh?"

"Ah-yeon, your ability is [Grudge Orb]. If Seo Gyu creates SG Net, you'll be one of the original members and the most famous villain, growing stronger by absorbing all the animosity from people."

"Heh?"

Monopoly on information.

The identity, strengths, and weaknesses of abilities that even the awakeners themselves didn't know, as well as how to develop their abilities further.

I held all this information in my hands, releasing it to whomever, whenever, and as much as I wanted.

I didn’t even have to act directly.

[The Saintess of National Salvation bestows an ability upon you.]

With a slight ‘distortion,’ I could make it seem like their abilities were awakened and developed by the constellations.

[The Saintess of National Salvation grants you the ‘Low-level Healing’ ability.]

[The Conqueror of the Alps grants you the ‘Hammer Proficiency’ ability.]

[The Chancellor of the Red Cape grants you the ability to ‘Adjust Pain Perception to the Point Where Stubbing Your Little Toe Doesn’t Hurt.’]

The constellation talk functioned flawlessly.

For the awakeners, the abilities they didn’t know about seemed to be given miraculously by the constellations.

[The Chancellor of the Red Cape hints that if you stub your toe on a desk or doorframe 999 times, your ‘Pain Perception Adjustment’ ability will improve.]

Sometimes I did it myself. Sometimes the Saintess disguised as a constellation.

The regressor schemed back and forth.

Those who awakened (or discovered) their abilities through me followed me personally, while those who believed the constellations gave them their abilities worshiped the constellations. Either way, they were in my palm.

By releasing information that the awakeners might have discovered themselves 2, 6, or 10 years later, we gained absolute support.

This was one reason why the guilds on the Korean Peninsula were quieter than in other places. Military and civilians were one; they were all like disciples who owed me. Even Dang Seo-rin quickly

mastered ‘Equivalent Exchange’ magic thanks to me.

Therefore,

-Anonymous: I shouted 'open status' as soon as I woke up today. Did it appear? (Day 191)

-Anonymous: It appeared, so I’m posting, lol (Day 191)

A sudden post in the 133rd cycle threatened not only my position but also the security of the Korean Peninsula.

At first, I dismissed it as a joke post and ignored it.

But about 30 minutes later, it became clear that I had been too complacent.

[Mr. Undertaker. This is a serious matter.]

“Yes? What is it?”

[Status windows are appearing before the eyes of awakeners across the Korean Peninsula.]

“What?”

I immediately accessed SG Net.

-Anonymous: What the hell? A status screen actually appears before my eyes like a hologram?

-LiteraryGirl: Evaluate your own status.

-Anonymous: Are these guys collectively trolling now? Has SG Net gone mad? Ban this boring topic.

-Anonymous: Did S-class power appear??

-Anonymous: Guys, my status window shows an A-class charm. Is this good?

The community was in an uproar.

“What is this...?”

“Guild leaderrrrr!”

Crash! Someone barged into my room.

There were two notable points about this recent event.

First, the person had opened my private room’s door without any prior notice, showing they had no concept of courtesy.

Second, the fact that they didn’t ‘walk’ or ‘run’ in but ‘rolled in’ indicated that the person possibly lacked even the ability to walk on two legs.

Mentally and physically, this creature was unfit to be recognized as Homo sapiens. This unidentified cryptid's name was Sim Ahyeon.

“Guild leaderrrrr! It appeared! It appeared!”

“.....”

“An S-S-S-class appeared...!”

I didn’t need to ask Sim Ahyeon ‘What?’ or ‘What appeared?’ after reading the dialogue.

And I didn’t need to ask what ‘S-S-S-class’ meant either.

But to a cryptid, human conversation didn’t work. The creature before me opened a sketchbook and scribbled furiously with a marker.

“L-Look at this!”

I didn’t want to see it.

But the trained senses of a regressor gave me many advantages and one disadvantage.

The disadvantage was that even a quick glance at Sim Ah-ryeon's sketchbook revealed all the characters and content.

[Status]

Name: Sim Ah-ryeon

Title: 'Bird That Drinks Poison'

Occupation: Healer, Pharmacist, Artist, Saintess (Potential), Novelist (Potential)

[Stamina: E-class] [Strength: E-class] [Intuition: S-class] [Agility: E-class] [Intelligence: B-class] [Charm: F-class]

Personality Traits: [Loyal] [Social Anxiety] [Careless] [Arrogant]

Unique Skill: [Bird That Drinks Poison (SSS)]

*Bird That Drinks Poison (SSS): Converts the overflowing poison in this world into medicine.

The more resentment and curses you receive from others, the stronger your healing abilities become. The greater the resentment and deeper the curses, the stronger the healing.

Transforming evil into good. Turning resentment into opportunity. You were born with the fate of being the savior, the Saintess of this land.

May fortune be with you.

“D-Did you see? Guild leader, I’m an S-S-S-class...!”

“.....”

“Bird That Drinks Poison... Hehe, Bird That Drinks Poison... And also the savior, the Saintess...!”

It was only then that I realized ‘S-S-S-class’ was Sim Ah-ryeon's way of saying ‘SSS-class.’

Why she pronounced ‘SSS-class’ that way, I had no choice but to acknowledge my ignorance.

But my ignorance did not end there.

I only got into web novels and genre fiction in general from the 555th cycle. Therefore, I couldn’t be angry or denounce the sight of this cryptid proclaiming itself as Bird That Drinks Poison, the mockery of this world, the disgrace of this universe.

I simply remained silent. As Wittgenstein said, we must remain silent about what we do not know.

“G-Guild leader, you should try shouting it out too.”

“What?”

“Status window. If you shout ‘Status-Open,’ it will appear... You can also just think it, but the first time, you must say it. Oh! When you say it, you must firmly hold the intention and desire to see your own stats...!”

Then what about the mute? This status window thing, which was obviously an anomaly because only an anomaly would pull off such nonsense, did this anomaly discriminate against people with speech disabilities?

“C-Come on, guild leader! Quickly!”

“...Ah-ryeon, it’s not advisable to rashly expose oneself to such an anomaly.”

“Hmm?”

“You’ve been in our guild long enough to know a lot about anomalies. Like how a red light means you shouldn’t cross the street, calling out your name might be the condition for triggering this status window anomaly. You shouldn’t call it out recklessly.”

“...Oh.”

Sim Ah-ryeon then showed a look of understanding.

“G-Guild leader... Are you afraid your stats might be worse than mine, so you don’t want to call it?”

“……”

“S-Sorry. As you know, I often lack consideration... Hehe. I won’t boast about my stats in front of you anymore.”

Sim Ah-ryeon left the room, mumbling about showing off to Seo Gyu.

More precisely, she left the room and then peeked her head back in.

“Ah, by the way...! Even if you don’t have an S-S-S-class ability, or if you’re an S-class or A-class, I will never look down on you, guild leader...!”

“……”

“Isn’t it wrong to look down on someone based on their abilities? Right? Hehe. So... G-Good luck, guild leader...!”

Bang.

The cryptid left, closing the door behind her.

The room was quiet.

Silence filled the air.

“Saintess.”

[Yes.]

“Gather all the information on this anomaly as soon as possible. Quickly.”

[...Understood.]

Despite the hesitation in the Saintess’s tone, I had no doubt in my mind. In retrospect, this was a significant historical event, akin to a reform in genre fiction.

I had declared war against the 'Status Window.'

Footnotes:

Chapter 114

The Non-Player II

Sinnoa

Since we're already on the topic, the author of the novel "Bird Drinking Poison" (who really wrote it in the 766th cycle) said the following:

-The settings of a novel are like the roots of a tree; they need to be vast and solid, but if exposed, the tree will wither and die.

This applies not only to the settings of a world but to all situations.

The protagonist is not omnipotent. There should always be a hazy margin, like a 'white mist,' lingering at the edge of his vision.

The white wasteland left by the protagonist's ignorance is the fertile ground that continuously enriches the prose and descriptions.

Of course, the characters... information about the characters should always be somewhat shrouded in mist. How can one instantly know the intelligence of this person or what their skills are?

Therefore, the status window is harmful.

To use an analogy, the status window is like recklessly eliminating the minerals from the earth and the nitrogen from the air.

I'm not saying this because I'm pissed off at Sim Ah-ryeon, but because I have a very logical and just reason.

Even if I took an interest in subcultures from the 555th cycle and we're now in the 133rd cycle, meaning I actually didn't have any knowledge of status windows, and the things I'm saying now are historical distortions by later generations, there's no need to listen to those counterarguments at all.

This is not a contradiction but rather proof that the 133rd-cycle me

had prophetic intuition. Even in my subculture-ignorant days, I instinctively felt that the status window was a harmful existence.

“Relying on something like a status window makes people weak.”

I immediately took action.

Not only did I wage a public opinion battle on SG Net, but I also emphasized the harmfulness of the status window to every awakener I met.

“Excuse me? Hyung?”

“In my time, we fought with anomalys to gauge our strength and slowly estimated our capabilities. That process of exploration, the experience of testing oneself while crossing the line between life and death, is an irreplaceable treasure. But these days, people boast about their strength being a B grade, saying they can easily handle slimes.”

“Uh...”

“What an ignorant statement! Slimes cannot be defeated by strength alone, and the danger varies drastically depending on whether you face them in a swamp or a narrow labyrinth where they might drop from the ceiling unexpectedly. The void is a space that cannot be quantified, which is why it’s void.”

“.....”

“How can you trust only the alphabets displayed on the status window to measure your skills, your opponent's abilities, or even the depth of the void? The status window itself is a anomaly, contaminating the consciousness of the awakened and lowering the standard of humanity. It’s nothing but an ‘idiot box’! Why can’t you see through the wicked scheme of the anomaly that’s trying to destroy the awakened, one by one, by making them rely on the convenience of the status window?”

“Uh...”

Seo Gyu raised his hand.

“May I ask you one thing, hyung?”

“What is it?”

“Why do you talk like that?”

“It’s a draft of an article to awaken the consciousness of the awakened. How about posting it on SG Net? Seo Gyu, doesn’t it make your chest swell and make you feel the duty of an awakener anew?”

“Uh, well...”

“Surely, you’re not advocating for the status window, are you? I’ve been educating you one-on-one since the waiting room at Busan Station, so I trust you haven’t entrusted your judgment to such a filthy anomaly.”

Seo Gyu’s expression became subtle.

According to physiognomy, it could be interpreted as ‘What’s up with this brother again?’

Next to him, Sim Ah-ryeon (who was still there) whispered to Seo Gyu.

“He, he must not have had the 『Status Window』. Gacha disaster...”

“Oh, so that’s why he’s like that.”

“Yeah, yeah... Oh! Suddenly, I feel an overwhelming aura of aggro from somewhere? Ah! Even though I didn’t do anything, aggro is piling up in my heart! I can feel my abilities strengthening in real-time! It’s delicious! So delicious! It’s a delicacy I’ve never tasted in my life... Who, who could hold such resentment towards me...!”

“You two won’t have coffee for the next six months.”

Seo Gyu and Sim Ah-ryeon screamed in horror, but I gracefully ignored them. These guys needed to realize the preciousness of discomfort more deeply.

-ZERO_SUGAR: [Long Post] An article about the ghost 'Status Window' currently appearing in Korea ~Awakeners of all nations, awaken!~

I sounded the alarm with a heart full of blood. However, the awakened, already steeped in the false convenience of the anomaly, did not respond at all.

Instead, they laughed.

-Anonymous: ? What's this?

-Anonymous: Is this a joke?

-Anonymous: Wow, this is legendary lol

-[Baekhwa]TenthGrader:(>_<);;;;;

-Anonymous: I saw this in elementary school! It's like the old story of nobles smashing the underground shelters that commoners found convenient, saying, 'How dare you try to avoid the winter wind?'

┗[國道] Officer: It's an anecdote from the Goryeo period about the literary figure Yi Gyu-bo. The original text says, '夏熱冬寒, 四時之常數也. 苟反是則爲恠異'. Meaning, 'Hot in summer and cold in winter is the constant of the four seasons. If it's the opposite, it's strange'. Coincidentally, the original text also uses the word anomaly (恠異).

Anonymous: How are you so smart?

LiteraryGirl: Oh.

-dolLHoUse: Oppa...

-OldManGoryeo: lol

-OldManGoryeo: lol

-OldManGoryeo: lolololololol

-OldManGoryeo: This guy's strength and intelligence skill levels were F on the status window. I saw it lol

Anonymous: Oh!

Anonymous: We didn't even know ㅠㅠㅠ

"....."

There was no public opinion in my favor anywhere on SG Net.

Is this the pain of a pioneer with clear eyes in a city of the blind?

...No, strictly speaking, there was exactly one piece of support.

-[Yuldoguk]SwordMarquess: Ah, what this lad says is indeed correct! When something is visible only to oneself, it is an illusion, and from ancient times, being captivated by illusions has been diagnosed as a sign of madness. The fact that all the martial artists are collectively captivated by an illusion is nothing but a mass insanity. Alas! Unavoidable madness is a tragedy, but what can be said about willingly going mad?

Anonymous: Here comes the boomer duo.

Anonymous: Romance of the Three Kingdoms boomer vs. martial arts boomer... My chest swells...

It was a defense that was worse than no defense at all.

There were some mean people on SG Net who often grouped me and the Sword Marquess together, and his defensive shooting only added fuel to this prejudice.

"...Fine."

I admitted frankly.

"Anomaly, you win."

This wasn't a monologue. Since the 'Status Window' was certainly a psychotic-type anomaly, it was everywhere and nowhere.

"But don't think your victory is confirmed here. Next time, and the time after that, I will appear again and eventually overthrow you."

[…….]

“Saintess. Even if you don’t say anything, I can hear your breathing when you’re watching.”

[Ah. Yes. I will be careful.]

Thus, we moved to a slightly higher stage.

To put it plainly, we moved on to the 134th cycle.

“Eek? W-Why is so much aggro generating on its own when I didn’t do anything…? It’s delicious, but. Scary! Guild leader! Someone I don’t know is hating me for unknown reasons! In real-time! Every day! P-Please help me!”

“……”

For some reason, the 134th cycle Sim Ah-ryeon had awakened her skills to an unprecedented level.

Of course, such minor happenings were not very important.

I earnestly warned the Saintess.

“Saintess, starting three days from now, an anomaly called the status window will begin to appear nationwide.”

“Ah. Yes.”

“I explained what kind of anomaly the status window was last time, so you remember, right?”

“Yes, very much so. You passionately talked for three hours in front of Noh Do-hwa and me.”

“Good. Now, seize the moment and hijack the status window.”

The Saintess blinked.

“…What?”

“Pretend that giving out status windows is part of the constellation

authority. Then, every time someone uses the status window, their gratitude and all their emotions will be directed towards the constellations. People will sing the greatness of the constellations, and they'll never know it was actually an anomaly."

"...I'm sorry. If I understand your proposal correctly, you're suggesting we steal the anomaly's achievement and make it ours?"

"That's a bit harsh, but yes. That's correct."

"Oh..."

The Saintess sighed.

She must have been impressed by the greatest anomaly hunter, me, Undertaker's strategy, which even mocked the gods.

Next to her, Noh Do-hwa, who had been quietly listening, put down her coffee cup.

"Amazing. Now, you're not just stealing people's achievements but also those of anomalys now. Didn't you rant about how dependence on the Status Window leads to laziness? Why are you now suggesting a hijack? Is this the caliber of a regressor..."

"Thank you."

"That's not a compliment, idiot..."

My plan was perfect.

I remembered the exact moment when the first post confirming the status window appeared on SG Net, thanks to my [Complete Memory] ability.

This operation couldn't afford any failure, so I even moved to Yongsan and conducted the operation from the Saintess's house. The Saintess and I sat side by side in gaming chairs, staring at the monitor.

"Standby."

“……”

“Standby, standby. 3 seconds, 2 seconds, 1 second—— now! Saintess! Now!”

The Saintess clasped her hands together.

[The Saintess of National Salvation bestows upon you a new power.]

[From now on, you can check your abilities by murmuring ‘Status Window’ or ‘Status Open’.]

At that moment.

-Anonymous: I woke up today and immediately said “Status Open”. Did the “Status Window” appear? (Day 191)

-Anonymous: It appeared, so I posted it lol (Day 191)

With impeccable timing, a confirmation post appeared on SG Net.

Not just the first witness, but awakened across the entire Korean Peninsula received the constellation message simultaneously. SG Net was filled with posts like “What’s this?” “Did you all get the constellation message just now?” followed by “It’s really there?” “Why is this real?” with confirmation posts flooding in.

I clenched my fist in triumph.

“It’s a success! Saintess! We did it! You did a fantastic job!”

“…Yes.”

For that single moment of timing, the Saintess paused time and sent messages to all the awakened in Korea.

How could I not be thrilled? Seeing a delivery man sneakily eating all the food from a lunchbox wouldn’t be as shocking.

-Anonymous: The Saintess of National Salvation < < GOAT among constellations, give her a thumbs-up lol

-Anonymous: Really, this one is just correct lol

Anonymous: Bastard?

Anonymous: Show some respect and call her madam.

-LiteraryGirl: She tells us what skills we have, how to develop them, and now even gives us a Status Window. How much more can you give us, oh my GOAT...

Naturally, all the faith originally intended for the anomaly now gathered towards the constellations, specifically towards the Saintess.

The anomaly did the work, but humanity reaped the rewards. This is the supreme path of a regressor.

“How’s that? Checkmate.”

“.....”

The status window anomaly was neutralized.

What I didn’t anticipate was that the “Status Window” was merely an aftershock of the void created by the elimination of the anomaly, Infinite VOID.

Just like aftershocks follow an earthquake, the ripples of the void occur multiple times.

Boom!

Barely a few days after celebrating my victory over the status window, Sim Ah-ryeon burst through my door.

“G-Guild leader!”

“...Ah-ryeon. I’ve told you repeatedly not to obsess over trivial things like status class...”

“It’s *S*-class. Please get it right.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway! That’s not the point right now—— I mean, it’s important, but! There’s a big problem! Come out quickly!”

Sim Ah-ryeon tugged at my sleeve.

For a moment, the thought “She’s pulling with E-ranked strength, no wonder my body isn’t moving” shot through my mind and tickled the corner of my mouth, but I held back.

I hadn’t fallen that far yet.

Anyway, when we got outside to the vacant lot (we hadn’t yet considered using an underwater tunnel as our hideout), there was a half-dead slime slithering around.

“Aah! It’s already escaping! Hey! Hey! Stop! How dare a slime...!”

Probably, Sim Ah-ryeon was the one who had beaten it, as the slime was clearly wary of us and wriggled around.

Sim Ah-ryeon picked up a stick.

“L-Look! Guild Leader! Look closely...!”

I wondered what she meant by “look closely.”

As I pondered the increasing complexity of cryptid language, Sim Ah-ryeon swung the stick.

And I widened my eyes.

“...Huh?”

“D-Did you see that? Hehe. You saw it, right?”

What surprised me wasn’t that Sim Ah-ryeon’s stick swing contained profound techniques, nor that the slime showed some unprecedented chemical reaction.

More accurately, it was something witnessed in the ‘void’ above the slime’s body, where there should have been blank space.

[DAMAGE!]

[91!]

It was displayed.

Above the slime's body, in English, the word 'DAMAGE' and the numerical value of the damage.

Bold, exaggerated red letters floated briefly... and then disappeared.

What happened next was even more astonishing.

Beep-boop ♪

A ridiculous sound effect played once. Sim Ah-ryeon twitched her fingers as if manipulating an invisible status window.

"I gained experience points and leveled up..."

"Experience points? Level?"

"Yes. I hit slimes daily for stress relief, and suddenly, damage numbers started popping up. The status window now shows experience points and levels..."

"....."

"I'm level 13! Oh. I just leveled up to 14... What's your level, guild leader? Hehe. What if it's 99?"

Sim Ah-ryeon's eyes sparkled, but I remained silent.

Somewhere, I could hear the anomaly's mocking voice.

-Checkmate? No, it's a counter-move.

-Where are you looking? That was my afterimage.

The status window was just the tip of the iceberg.

Experience points. Level-up system.

The true nature of this anomaly, freely manipulating all these elements, was none other than an RPG... a 'Role-Playing Game'.

Footnotes:

Chapter 115

The Non-Player III

Sinnoa

This world was polluted.

It didn't mean that the physical space was contaminated. The mental world, the brains of the awakeners, were completely stained with disgrace.

-Anonymous: (Recommendation) ☆☆☆Level 5~Level 10☆☆☆ Experience farming goldmine hunting ground dungeon list. Newbies must read!!

-Anonymous: Today, I got up at dawn and gained 10,000 experience points. Brought back items, settled accounts, and now I'm downing beers. Worth it?

-OldManGoryeo: Today's cafe mocha.png

-Anonymous: Looking for a level 10 party!! No NPC porters, sorry ㅠㅠ

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Guys, I found a Black Orb of Messiah (S) while hunting monsters today. Is this any good?

Look at this rotten mental world.

Not long after the advent of the 'Online RPG,' SG Net had devolved into this state.

As expected of Koreans, who had always prided themselves as a nation of gamers since the end of the century, they adapted incredibly fast. Just like you'd see in subcultures.

‘What? The world... turned into a game?’

‘This can't be real...’

‘That cheater. How does he understand the game's mechanics that we don’t?’

Those clichés were completely skipped. Even elementary school kids accepted the new reality with the seasoned, veteran-like expressions of ‘What? We’ve become game players? It's about time.’

Soon, SG Net was flooded with strategy guides. There was no need for me to tirelessly publish guides under the guise of the ‘Great Library Society.’ Everyone independently, enthusiastically, and diligently strategized against the anomalies.

This was definitely strange.

"Why such a long face...? Hmm. Isn't it better now than when everyone trembled at the sight of anomalies? Nowadays, they voluntarily jump into the void to level up."

"That's because they're exploring the void with a game-like mentality. They should understand the world through their intuition and accumulated experiences, but they're only looking at a refracted world through the lens provided by those anomalies."

"Hmm..."

"This 'online game' is a void in itself. The awakeners, who call themselves players, are virtually turning into void anomalies!"

"Well, there's some sense in that... But if it looks like you're just angry because anomalies are stealing your monopoly on fame and achievements, then it might be my mistake...?"

There was no need to respect the opinion of someone with a toxic perspective.

I had traveled to Japan, China, and even as far as Mongolia and India. And everywhere, I confirmed that the ‘Online RPG’ had infected them all.

‘...This is no ordinary matter.’

It wasn't just people's perceptions that had changed.

Even the anomalies were gradually changing.

"Hehehe. Lately, there have been so many slimes along the riverbank, it's so easy to catch them...!"

For instance, the slime that Sim Ah-ryeon caught every day to relieve stress and beat to a pulp with a club.

Originally, this slime wasn’t a common anomaly. It appeared only occasionally in sewers and rarely ventured outside.

Unless one descended into the underground, the chances of encountering a slime in daily life were almost nonexistent.

But the number of slimes was rapidly increasing. Now, they were bouncing around even on ordinary riverbanks.

Bling♪

Bling-bling♪

As a result, the sound of Sim Ah-ryeon beating slimes constantly echoed in front of our guild's headquarters.

Because of this noise pollution, I seriously considered relocating the guild hideout.

In addition, moving from the nonsensical S, SSS, EX grading system to a very precise, scientifically proven 'Depth' standard was also part of this resolution.

“Power-leveling... Indeed, I can feel my Dark Phoenix skill leveling up rapidly by just beating slimes in the yard! It’s like discovering a hidden spot in the basement leading to a secret elixir mine, where only the protagonist can reap the benefits...!”

Sim Ah-ryeon's healing abilities were gradually reaching the level where she could heal even if the patient's limbs were torn apart, as long as the head was intact.

More awakeners on SG Net began to call Sim Ah-ryeon the 'Angel.'

This was definitely strange.

However, the rapidly increasing anomalies in this rotten world weren't limited to slimes.

Goblins, Orcs, Ogres, Trolls. In other words, the usual monsters from games increasingly filled the void.

There was only one way to explain this phenomenon.

'The online game is encroaching on both the awakeners and the anomalies...?'

A chill ran down my spine.

An anomaly that didn't discriminate between humans and anomalies, didn't remain in one place, wasn't confined by space and time, and just endlessly expanded its domain.

An Outer God.

Indeed, just as Infinite Void had been vanquished, another unidentified outer god was extending its claws.

Disguised under the mask of a game, which was hard for humans to resist.

-Anonymous: (Proof shot) Set a new damage record while hitting an Orc, lol

-Anonymous: This game is insanely fun.

-Anonymous: Looking for a level 20 party!! Already secured one NPC porter!!

-Anonymous: Anyone up for a Troll eyeball exchange in front of Gimhae Dungeon?

SG Net was becoming indistinguishable from a 'game forum.'

Gradually, the term 'monster' became more common than anomaly, and non-awakeners individuals were called NPCs.

Defeating monsters dropped 'items.' Slime cores, Goblin teeth, Orc hearts, etc. These materials had specific effects, which could be viewed through the ‘item window.’

Everything was a game.

...I shared my suspicions with a member of the Regression Alliance. Noh Do-hwa and the Saintess’s expressions finally turned serious.

"Chief Noh Do-hwa. Please officially declare the 'Online Game' as an anomaly under your authority. We need to alert people now."

"Understood. Though I'm not sure how effective it will be now. Everyone’s showing signs of game addiction..."

Game addiction.

That was another symptom displayed by the awakeners infected by this outer god. It was different from the game addiction previously discussed by the media before the end of the century.

Now, the awakeners believed that ‘a world in the form of a game’ was far more real and desirable. SG Net was posting new threads every three seconds.

"Saintess, please continue to act as the ‘operator of the online game,’ so people won’t suspect anything. We may not be able to immediately subdue that anomaly, but we can at least curb the faith spreading to it."

"...Yes. I understand."

With these precautions, I managed to hold out until the 134th cycle.

However, inwardly, I had already prepared for the next run. As I hijacked the 'status window,' phenomena like 'experience points,' 'levels,' and 'damage' were added.

What kind of anomaly would await next?

Already, the awakeners, not just in Korea, but worldwide, were heavily addicted to the 'Online Game.' The stats and levels it

provided were tangible, and the void, once filled with fear, had suddenly transformed into a hunting ground brimming with experience points.

Humanity was pushing back the void more effectively than ever. They kept winning, by becoming followers of the anomaly themselves.

Suddenly, a monologue from the protagonist in [The Catcher in the Rye] came to mind.

...You like games, huh? Sure. If you get into a team full of great guys, life is indeed a game. I'll admit that. But if you end up on the opposite team, where there are no great guys at all, then what kind of goddamn game is that? It's nothing. It's not a game at all...

As long as the awakeners seemed to be winning on the surface, the 'Online Game' was indeed a game.

But how long would that victory last?

Despite the warnings from the National Road Management Chief, the awakeners didn't stop playing the online game. They were thoroughly engrossed in leveling up.

And one day.

Just as there are always precursors before a major earthquake, a message arrived.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame announces a new event.]

Flashback.

"Ah. Come to think of it, why did you suddenly mimic a strange constellation a few days ago?"

"Huh?"

"A week ago. You sent a message under the name of the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. I was surprised that even you make mistakes

sometimes. Did you send a message meant for another awakeners to me by mistake?”

“...?”

Anyone with a good memory would recall.

This was the anecdote I mentioned when I first met the Saintess.

“I never sent such a message.”

“What?”

“I've never created a constellation named the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. Did you misread something?”

“.....”

The story of a ‘mysterious constellation’ sending a message that the Saintess never created.

I simply shared episodes as they came to mind, not strictly bound by time, but if we arranged the flow in order of regression:

117th run. Defeated the outer god ‘Infinite Void.'

118th run. First encountered the ‘Hero Syndrome.’

119th run. First witnessed the ‘Isekai Truck.’

126th run. Defeated the ‘Savior Narrative Syndrome.’

133rd run. First witnessed the ‘Status Window.’

134th run. First encountered the suspected outer god ‘Online Game.’

And the message from the mysterious constellation—or rather, a being whose identity as a constellation was even questionable—also came in the 134th run.

My instinct, sharpened over many regressions, trembled like the needle of a seismograph.

My intuition wasn’t wrong. The 134th cycle was merely the foreshock.

The next run. In the 135th cycle, the real earthquake began.

-Anonymous: These guys really play games all day long, lol. Turn off the game and go outside, lol.

The 135th run was fundamentally similar to the 134th.

Except, at some point, strange posts started to appear.

-Anonymous: To us, the game is reality? To us, the game is reality? To us, the game is reality?

Anonymous: For real, lol.

Anonymous: I've been playing ‘reality’ for 50,783 hours straight, lol.

Anonymous: You should log off.

-Anonymous: This guy posts nonsense at night and now, too...

Anonymous: What?

It seemed like nothing more than the usual bickering on a normal community forum.

But in truth, every void disguises itself as something mundane. A school. A tunnel. The sea.

Eventually.

-Anonymous: Shit, playing games too long made my whole body stiff. I'm logging off first.

The void descended abruptly.

-Anonymous: Sorry, guys. Too sleepy to stay logged in; logging off first.

-Anonymous: I'm logging out to live my real life~

-Anonymous: Looking for a level 30 party!! Already secured three NPC porters!!

-Anonymous: Ugh, this game is so boring. I'm quitting this trash game, bye.

SG Net members started posting about logging off or quitting the game.

But as everyone knew, the 'Online Game' was an overlay on reality.

How could they 'log out' or quit this game?

[Mr. Undertaker.]

The answer was delivered to me immediately, even if I didn't want to know it.

[The awakeners are not moving.]

"...Are you saying they’re dead?"

[Yes. Almost. But, it's strange. Some awakeners fall into a coma-like state, then after a while, resume activity as if nothing happened.]

"....."

[It's like they've logged into a game.]

It was similar to zombies.

Active at night but stopping in the sunlight, the awakeners showed no signs of movement during the ‘logout’ period.

[The awakeners in a coma-like state show nothing even through my Clairvoyance. Darkness. Only pitch-black darkness painted over.]

An awakener in logout state couldn't be harmed, even if I attacked. My blade passed through as if they didn’t exist in this world.

Even Sim Ah-ryeon, who enjoyed the ‘Online Game’ the most in our guild, couldn't escape this phenomenon.

“—Ah, guild leader!”

Sim Ah-ryeon ran up to me with bright eyes.

...It was hard to believe she had stood still for the past three days without moving a muscle.

“Were you waiting for me?”

“...Yes.”

“Wow! Thank you! Hehe. Even if they’re NPCs, their reactions change when the affection level goes up!”

“.....”

“I wanted to come back sooner, but real life held me back... But it's all sorted now!”

Among the addicts, NPC originally referred to non-awakener individuals who hadn’t gained skills.

But now it was different.

Over time, ordinary people gained minor abilities. They didn’t hesitate to log into the game and upgrade to players.

Now, NPC referred to those like Noh Do-hwa and me, who didn’t log into the game at all.

Ironically, the ones who could exist entirely within the 'game world' for 24 hours were called NPCs by the addicts.

To the addicts, Noh Do-hwa building roads across the Korean Peninsula was a ‘quest’ in the truest sense.

I was also considered a ‘hidden NPC,’ tasked with informing players about various jobs, skills, and training methods.

Which side was truly the NPC?

From my perspective, those who were devoured by the anomaly and became part of the void were the NPCs. But they perceived me

as the NPC.

I thought.

If this was an example of the butterfly dream, it would be a profoundly nightmarish butterfly's dream.

Footnotes:

Chapter 116

The Non-Player IV

Sinnoa

Let’s talk about something different for a moment.

Although the phenomenon of humans being tainted by the presence of anomalies is often expressed as 'having faith,' there is actually a much better term.

Bewitched.

Enchanted. Captivated.

If you look at the Hanja character for "Bewitched (魅)," it includes a ghost (鬼) inside. A mysterious attraction. An impulse. From this, the ancients sensed a ghost, that is, an anomaly.

They also warned countless times.

Each anomaly is different. Naturally, the words that describe the attraction of anomalies are innumerable.

All these characters mean enchantment.

The reason the ancients didn't stick to just one word and instead referred to it as bewitched in various ways is because an anomaly resides in the characters themselves, and characters with anomalies become spells.

This is the same as why I constantly use 'aliases' when calling upon an anomaly.

If an anomaly occupies a single character or name, it’s like giving the anomaly a 'home.' Thus, calling the name of an anomaly is akin to saying,

-Hey, ghost. Anomaly.

-This is your home. Come here.

As I emphasize again, the name of an anomaly should never be fixed. If you must call it, you should use a different name each time, and if you lack the knowledge and experience to do so, it's best not to call it from the start.

As the founder of the Library Society, I deliberately created multiple ways to call upon anomalies.

Take the Ten Legs, for example.

It was called by various aliases such as 'Crawling Baby Cthulhu,' 'Lord of Shadows,' 'Thorny Hell,' and 'Lurker.' Considering that the Ten Legs is not a mental anomaly but merely a physical force, it might have been an excessive precaution.

And what about the Outer God, Infinite Void?

I prepared a plethora of terms for humans, enough to overwhelm them: 'Infinite Hell,' 'School Ghost Stories,' 'Night Parade of One Hundred Ghosts,' 'Hyakumonogatari,' 'Forbidden Four Characters,' 'Hyakki Yagyo,' 'Baekhwa (白化).' Going further, although seldom mentioned in anecdotes, 'Heraclitus' Wreath,' 'Backrooms,' etc…

I provided more than enough naming options for humans.

Only in this way can anomalies be driven away by the pressure of the characters without nesting.

Today's story is the same.

When I started the story, I named the anomaly 'Online Game.' But by now, you can guess there's a more appropriate name.

'Logout Game.'

For those who get bewitched by this anomaly, the outcome is an exit from reality.

-Anonymous: There's no content in this trash game, ffs

-Anonymous: For real, I haven't been logging in to games lately. Even dailies are a hassle…

-Anonymous: When will this game end?

-Anonymous: Looking for a level 40 party!! No NPC porters, please ㅠㅠ

-Anonymous: Since all the game fanatics died, there's barely anyone left here lol

-Anonymous: Wow, why is this trash game's forum still alive?

The period players logged out grew longer, and the number of users accessing SG Net steadily decreased.

The community was gradually becoming desolate.

There was one named member who consistently posted nonsense from beginning to end.

-OldManGoryeo: Today, the guild leader NPC made me a cafe mocha.png

□ Anonymous: You still haven't logged off? What level are you?

□ OldManGoryeo: This old man has been max level for a long time, so now I just decorate the guild house instead of running dungeons

□ Anonymous: Max level, damn

□ Anonymous: But how does an NPC perform the guild leader role? Is it a bug?

□ OldManGoryeo: Seeing that the game company doesn't patch it, it doesn't seem like a bug?

Sim Ah-ryeon.

While others were logging off the 'game' one by one, Sim Ah-ryeon continued.

Once she logged in, what she did was nothing significant.

“Sigh. Trash game… It’s already been two years without an update, so users keep quitting, ah…”

Complaining about the trash game.

“Guild leader! Look at this! [Coffee Beans]! Hehe. If you receive this item, your favorability goes up, right? Hehe. It’s a drop item with a very low chance from defeating Necromancer Liches, and I collected them all and brought them! Eii, eii. Rise, favorability, rise quickly…”

Obsessing over the favorability system that I couldn’t understand and showering gifts repeatedly.

“Ehehe, uhee. Uheehee…”

Catching slimes from the Han River and beating them in all sorts of ways.

Watching her, even I thought, 'Won’t she get tired of it?’ because of her monotonous play pattern.

Sim Ah-ryeon herself seemed to get tired of it. She used to log in every day, but over time, her login intervals became 1 day, 3 days, 7 days.

Even so, it was a steady login rate compared to other players.

In fact, not just players, but even NPCs were almost gone.

At most, there were Noh Do-hwa and the Saintess?

If you searched, Go Yuri might still be around, but there was no reason to invite danger.

In the end, the three of us—me, Noh Do-hwa, and the Saintess—members of the Regression Alliance, decided to live together by the Han River.

There was no point in maintaining the headquarters of the National Road Management Corps any longer, and we couldn't survive just staying in the aquarium mansion in Yongsan.

Most of all, the warmth of life was too sparse in this world. It was inevitable for the last NPCs, or rather survivors, to stick together.

“Hmm. It’s quiet…”

Noh Do-hwa breathed out as she drank her coffee.

“The anomalies are not causing any disturbances and are holed up in the dungeons. The awakeners are all petrified and not moving. When I heard the Undertaker experienced countless cycles, I wondered what it would be like to witness the end of the world… Was this the sight?”

“It’s rarely this quiet.”

We watched the river bask in the sunlight for a while.

“I’ll go ahead and experiment.”

The Saintess said.

“Pardon?”

“I’ll find out where the logged-out people disappeared to. Whether they fell into a state akin to death, or if, as the Undertaker speculated, they were dragged into the ‘Divine Realm’ of the outer god. I’ll log into the game and find out.”

“…It’ll be dangerous. Other awakeners only had the sense of returning to reality, so they weren’t particularly affected. But if you’re aware of the outer god and dive in, it’s unpredictable how it will react.”

“But we need information. Anyway, the Undertaker is considering the next cycle. Then it’s better to take on the risk and gain even a little information.”

“……”

“As you pointed out, rashly plunging into the outer god's divine realm is unwise. It might reveal the Undertaker’s ability. So, I’ll take on the reconnaissance.”

It was a valid argument.

Normally, we wouldn't have used a card like the Saintess just to perform a scout's duty.

In the chessboard of our strategy, the Saintess was the King. An agent that should never be captured or revealed to the enemy.

However, there were no more awakeners for the Saintess to monitor, and there was no longer a need to perform for the constellations.

We took a gamble.

In the guild's basement, the Saintess murmured softly.

"Status Window."

"……"

"……"

Noh Do-hwa and I watched the Saintess.

"How is it?"

"…I can see my abilities. And my level. But the terms indicating the awakening ability are quite different."

The Saintess was looking at the empty air before her, as if letters were written there.

"Do you see a logout button?"

"Logout button… Ah. Yes, here it is. It's at the bottom of the menu."

"Hmm."

"I'll press it now."

At that moment.

The Saintess froze. Her movements literally stiffened. The heartbeat

that had been throbbing in her chest, the sky-blue eyes' gaze, and the water-colored hair fluttering in the river breeze all stopped.

Everything. Completely froze.

"……"

"Hmm."

Noh Do-hwa reached out her hand. But her hand simply swiped through the air.

"It's an unpleasant experience, even after experiencing it several times. Hmm. It's like a mirage or illusion since you can see it but not touch it…"

"……"

"You said you named this anomaly the Logout Game? It seems keen on turning our world into fiction…"

I set the timer on my watch.

Ten seconds.

That was the agreed time with the Saintess. The first logout state would last exactly ten seconds before she would escape.

Ten seconds passed.

The Saintess didn't move.

"……"

"……"

Anticipating such an outcome, we had also agreed on a second timing of three minutes.

Two minutes and fifty seconds passed.

The Saintess still didn't move.

Foreseeing such a situation, our third timing was——

“Undertaker.”

“Yes.”

“She’s dead.”

“……”

“Watching a dead person for too long is not respectful to the deceased. There’s a chance she might return, so I’ll keep an eye here. Please go upstairs…”

I agreed with Noh Do-hwa’s words.

The river was bathed in light.

After calming my mind, I made two cups of coffee and went back to the basement. Noh Do-hwa’s body had frozen.

“……”

I took one cup of coffee and went back upstairs. I never returned to the basement again.

The next day, a message appeared before my eyes.

[Emergency Patch Notice.]

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame informs you that a serious bug was discovered and patched at around 3 PM yesterday.]

[We sincerely apologize for any inconvenience caused to our users. Thank you.]

Sometimes, as a regressor, I have such thoughts.

Maybe others treat life more lightly than I do, who spins the wheel endlessly.

In my mind that remembers everything, there are countless endings

the Saintess met and countless scenes of Noh Do-hwa's death.

My companions often overlooked how their deaths would be remembered by me.

'I can't die yet.'

In a world where I was left alone, where everyone had fallen into fiction but remained a reality only to me, I waited.

For the moment the outer god would reveal itself.

'The world has almost entirely fallen into your hands. You must be eager to declare your ultimate victory. But there still exists someone who proves [This is not a game] in your void.'

That someone was me.

'I must be a thorn in your side. You anomaly.'

To complete its void, it had to eliminate the impurity.

If the outer god could no longer bear it and threw off the game's mask to reveal its true form, if [The Admin of the Infinite Metagame] showed its true colors, I planned to see that appearance and then die.

Until then, I absolutely wouldn't die. The regressor couldn't be taken lightly. Unlike Old Man Scho, who always ended his life like a molly fish, I had tenacity.

"Guild leader, have you been well? Haa. Real life has been so busy lately, it's getting harder to log in... But I'll visit whenever I think of it! Hehe."

Sim Ah-ryeon's login intervals rapidly increased.

Now it wasn't strange for her to log in once a year, once every three years.

Talking to her, it seemed she wasn't aware that it had been three years. She probably thought she was logging in after about three

weeks.

‘The flow of time is different.’

Well, it was natural for time to become strange in the void. Even in Baekwha Girls' High, Cheon Yo-hwa didn’t think she had spent four years there.

I didn’t just sit idly and let the time pass.

I entered the dungeon, known among Korean users to be the most valuable, and hunted all the monsters.

After waiting for a moment, the monsters respawned, but I killed them all.

For 11 years.

Originally, the experience points should have gone to the players, but I, a mere NPC, had ruined it all.

[Emergency Patch Notice.]

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame informs you that a serious bug was discovered and patched urgently.]

[We sincerely apologize for any inconvenience caused to our users. Thank you.]

Soon after, the dungeon disappeared.

“Hah.”

Did it mean there was no longer a need to maintain the pretense of the game’s structure?

I went on to destroy the dungeons across the Korean peninsula. Each time, ‘emergency patches’ were made, and the once meticulously crafted ‘game’ rapidly deteriorated.

The cities and villages where players once interacted met the same fate. Beautiful natural scenery, streets, grotesque monsters, all

objects were destroyed.

Only the petrified players who were still logged out remained scattered around.

My rampage continued for 37 years.

[Emergency Patch Notice.]

[Emergency Patch Notice.]

[Emergency Patch Notice.]

At some point, even the game stopped changing the night and day cycle.

Even the Sun and the Earth had been bewitched by the outer god.

The Han River's flow stopped. The cicadas' summer sounds ceased. Even when monsters respawned, they stayed in place.

A bizarre world.

A broken game.

A virtual El Dorado where nothing is born and nothing dies.

However, the eternal memory within my brain and the blood flowing through my veins constantly reminded me that I was still alive.

Now, the real-time was only the memories within my brain, and the real space was only the volume of my body.

[Emergency Patch Notice.]

212 years passed.

Footnotes:

Chapter 117

The Non-Players V

Sinnoa

Now the appearance of the void had become shabby.

The graphics of the once beautifully flowing river degraded from 'virtual reality game' to 'AAA game,' then to an ordinary '3D game,' and finally to the level of a '90s console game'.

Ultimately, it fell to the level of a 'dot game.'

In this void, no sea or river flowed. Only fixed blue, sky blue, and white dots remained.

The mountains were modest green and dark green. Trees were black-brown and yellow-brown. Rocks were gray. Clouds were white.

The players, simply put, had transformed into flesh-colored dots with a bit of decoration.

“…….”

Every time Sim Ah-ryeon logged in, with intervals of 1 year, 3 years, 9 years, 20 years, and 50 years, her 'graphics' deteriorated.

From a character that looked like it was meticulously crafted by a graphic designer in an AAA game, to a character typical of any 3D game, to a design appearing in low-quality 90s games.

By the last time we met, if you didn’t know it was Sim Ah-ryeon, you’d just see her as a 'green-haired,' 'long-haired,' 'polygon chunk' carrying a 'large wooden easel.'

SG Net also met its end.

-OldManGoryeo: The cafe mocha the guild leader NPC made for me

today.jpeg

-OldManGoryeo: The cafe mocha the guild leader NPC made for me today.png

-OldManGoryeo: The cafe mocha the guild leader NPC made for me today.jpg

-OldManGoryeo: The cafe mocha the guild leader NPC made for me today.jpeg

There was only one person's post on the first page of the forum.

Even that was an old post.

For the past 100 years, Sim Ah-ryeon hadn’t logged in. I thought she couldn’t endure this 'trash game' any longer and quit.

Seo Gyu also became a player hundreds of years ago, yet SG Net was still maintained, suggesting that the Awakeners who were 'logged out' didn’t die but were 'dragged into' the domain of the outer god.

[Service Termination Notice.]

Finally.

[Hello, players. This is the Admin of the Infinite Metagame.]

[We regret to inform you that the 'Reality Online' service will be terminated.]

[We sincerely thank all the players who enjoyed and loved 'Reality Online' until now.]

[The 'Reality Online' server will shut down in 72 hours.]

Three days.

For all those centuries, the anomaly that had kept its true form tightly hidden would crawl out of its den when the world was ending.

I waited. Clutching Do-hwa, the prized sword that had stayed with me for over 200 years in this cycle, without a single nick.

And exactly 72 hours later,

[Hello, everyone. This is the Admin of the Infinite Metagame.]

Suddenly, a blue butterfly appeared in the mosaic sky made of dots.

That butterfly had a distinctly different 'resolution' compared to the surrounding scenery.

I unleashed a strike as soon as I saw the anomaly, but unfortunately, it didn’t reach the sky. That mosaic sky probably didn’t exist as a real space.

Ignoring my attack, messages continued to flow before my eyes.

[We are about to embark on a new journey.]

[It may take a very long time to reach the new destination, but we hope to meet you again somewhere at the end of the Möbius loop.]

[Thank you.]

[We definitely want to meet you again.]

Then.

“Ah ah ah ah!”

A mechanical sound came from behind me. It was an endlessly unfamiliar yet somehow familiar sound.

I was taken aback and had to turn around, even though I was staring at the outer god anomaly with cold hatred.

There.

“Guild leader!”

Green dot hair.

Flesh-colored dot face. Eyes and mouth made of black dots.

A dot figure, much smaller than me, was standing there.

“I’m back!”

The dot figure exaggeratedly swung its arms back and forth as it took steps toward me. Thud. Thud. The crude footstep sound effects echoed as its shoes hit the ground.

The dot figure hugged my waist tightly. That too was just a sound effect. I felt no sensation from my waist.

I hesitated and opened my mouth. It had been so long since I talked to someone that my tongue moved sluggishly.

“…Ah-ryeon?”

“Yes!”

The dot figure smiled. Probably widely.

Every time it spoke, a text electronic sound followed. The few pitch mechanical sounds barely mimicked a human voice.

“How did you, no. Why are you here…?”

“Why? When the server termination notice went up, I hurriedly logged in! Since it’s the last time, I at least wanted to spend the last moments with the guild leader!”

“……”

“Sorry for being late, guild leader. Hehe.”

I…

[Alert.]

[The server will automatically shut down in 30 seconds.]

I hugged 'Sim Ah-ryeon' tightly.

It felt like hugging the air. There was no sensation in my arms. I stroked her hair, which was always unkempt and sticking out. Again, there was no sensation.

“Guild leader?”

“No. You don’t have to apologize. You have nothing to be sorry about, Ah-ryeon. Rather, I should apologize as the guild leader. I... I was trying to gather information for the next time. I didn’t expect you to end up like this.”

“Guild leader.”

Sim Ah-ryeon reached out her hand.

[The server will automatically shut down in 20 seconds.]

“Don’t be sad, guild leader.”

[The server will automatically shut down in 10 seconds.]

“I really like the cafe mocha you make, guild leader.”

[The server will automatically shut down in 3 seconds.]

[The server will automatically shut down in 2 seconds.]

[The server will automatically shut down in 1 second.]

“So, next time too——”

When the countdown ended, the dot world instantly faded to 16-bit color.

Then, without any pause, it degraded to 8-bit, 4-bit, and finally to a scenery made only of black and white.

The nutrients, reality, and essence of our world were all being ravenously devoured by the butterfly in that void.

Sim Ah-ryeon’s lips moved, but only an ah-ah-ah sound, a mechanical noise that couldn’t be converted into a human voice, echoed.

At that moment, I felt the outer god was doing everything it could to 'bewitch' me. I also sensed that if I got bewitched, I would lose even the chance to end my own life.

I mustered my last aura. Hugging Sim Ah-ryeon even tighter.

“..... .....”

I couldn’t understand any sound from Sim Ah-ryeon, who had now fallen below 1-bit, but I was certain it was the sound of a smile.

Everything faded to black.

My reality met 'server termination.'

There’s an epilogue.

Quite a lot, actually.

It would be nice if I could quickly reach a happy ending where I, the Undertaker, begin a great counterattack and smash the outer god that dared to touch our world— but unfortunately, that’s something I’ll attempt much later.

It wasn’t until after the 555th cycle that I started developing a strategy to tackle 'The Admin of the Infinite Metagame' or the 'Logout Game.'

So for now, let’s start with some small epilogues instead of jumping straight to the 555th cycle.

First epilogue.

“What, what’s this? Where am I?”

“Huh? Busan Station? I was just at the park…”

“Leader? Leader, where are you?”

Murmur, murmur.

Right after dying by the outer god, I woke up to familiar murmurs.

The Busan Station waiting room.

Although I couldn't call it my hometown, it was a place I could say was the regressor's hometown. People who had been trapped in the void were bewildered.

'Ah.'

I felt a temporary sense of deflation.

No matter how much of a master I was at managing my mentality, it was never easy to regress right after facing a bad ending.

In such times, I relied on my own regression routine. Getting up quickly, walking to the vending machine to buy a Ceylon tea, subduing the Tutorial Fairy to save Seo Gyu, then picking up the Silver Bells from the souvenir shop. A series of routines. Habits. Suggestions. Rituals.

Isn't it interesting?

In a world where everything repeats forever, the way for a human to protect oneself is to draw a circle slightly smaller than the world. Thus, the world becomes the clock hands, the growth rings that draw the rhythm of time, and ultimately a round dance.

I raised my upper body. To wind up the spring of life once again, I pushed my weight forward. And then.

Thunk—

"……?"

Something came into my life.

A very light laptop was placed on my thigh.

'A laptop?'

It was something I had never seen before. Here, 'never' meant that

throughout all cycles, I had never witnessed such a scene with a laptop on my thigh.

My eyes widened.

I immediately turned on the laptop.

Beep, whirr…

The booting time was slow.

My heart pounded. People murmured around me, but I ignored them all.

What mattered now was that this unknown object had suddenly entered my regression, into my eternal round dance.

Soon the desktop appeared. A blank white desktop. No miscellaneous icons at all.

Only an unnamed notepad file lay in the upper right corner of the screen.

“……”

Click.

Following my heart’s lead, I clicked the file. Then the notepad appeared on the laptop screen.

[What is this world?]

A single line of text.

At that moment, I instinctively knew. This laptop and the notepad file were left by none other than the Outer God 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame.'

Was it a reward for being the last survivor in the game it hosted? Or was this mysterious question-and-answer itself another game?

Either way, in my 135th cycle, I couldn’t tell.

Only that another item, besides the cane-sword Do-hwa, had been bound to my endlessly repeating regression.

“Hm.”

Clack. I typed and replied to the outer god’s notepad.

[F U C K Y O U]

……

There was no response from the laptop.

What went wrong?

Thinking for a moment, I realized that the question was in Korean, but I had responded in English.

Clearly, it was my mistake. I quickly erased my answer and typed again.

[Why don't you just eat a dick, you fucking son of a bitch.]

Click—

The laptop turned off. It shut down on its own.

Even in the next cycle, the laptop didn’t work until I transitioned to the next one.

It seemed I only got two chances per cycle to answer the question.

Epilogue two.

As I mentioned, even though I acquired the laptop as a bound item, I hadn’t succeeded in defeating the outer god.

Therefore, a temporary measure was necessary.

I gathered Noh Do-hwa and the Saintess and earnestly requested.

“If the status window appears, we must start preparations

immediately to prevent anyone from opening it at all costs.”

“Hm…”

“We must not pick and choose means and methods. Using the authority of the National Road Management Corps and the whispers of the Constellations, continuously indoctrinate how harmful the status window is.”

“Well, understood…”

“Saintess, if you find any awakeners bewitched by the status window, report to us immediately. The National Road Management Corps will arrest and imprison them.”

“Yes, Undertaker.”

“Imprison the awakeners as life-sentenced prisoners. If necessary, treat them as death row inmates. If we create rumors that they’re spreading mental anomalies like a virus, we can minimize resistance.”

Of the 72 death row inmates mobilized for the Inunaki Tunnel hunt, many were awakeners imprisoned for this 'status window viewing crime.'

My measures didn’t stop there.

'The magic of the Logout Game largely stemmed from the fulfillment of the desire for progress. Hitting damage with visible numbers, gaining experience points, and leveling up.'

Simply oppressing the awakeners wouldn’t be enough to stop the spread of the status window. Where there’s desire, demand arises.

An alternative to somewhat satisfy people's desires was necessary.

That was 'Cafe Agit.'

-OldManGoryeo: (1000m) I like quiet cafes, but I don’t dislike noisy ones either. However, because there are too few visitors to my depth, I unintentionally rented out the cafe by myself ㅇㅇ… I’m

bored, so you all come down quickly.

[Baekwha] NinthGrader: (1200m) >_<);;

OldManGoryeo: Idiot lolol There's almost no difference between 1000 meters and 1200 meters, but you act like it's a big deal lololol

[Baekwha] NinthGrader: (1200m) The fish are pretty (>_<);;

OldManGoryeo: Fish? What fish?

BaekwhaGirlsHigh9thGrader: (1200m) Haha (>_<);;

OldManGoryeo: ???

Depth system.

I assigned numerical grades to the awakeners.

It was difficult to understand the difference between Level 10 and Level 11. But Cafe Agit's depth of 100 meters and 200 meters, and then 300 meters and 400 meters, were designed so that anyone could clearly see that 'the interior and service are luxurious.'

This was my measure.

To prevent mental anomalies from intruding recklessly, I built the cafe in an underwater tunnel.

Designed the depth system and cafes to satisfy Awakeners' desires for progress.

Continued to bombard them with laws from the National Road Management Corps and warnings from the Constellations to instill awareness of the status window.

This thorough defense was successful. From the 197th cycle onward, I never faced extinction due to the Logout Game.

Now, as a regressor, my job was to wait until an exact strategy was developed.

There was no problem. As this story proved, I was very familiar

with waiting.

Therefore.

“Ah-ryeon.”

“Yes, yes? What is it…”

“I brought a slime I found on a walk. It’s for you.”

“Whaaat? I just happened to want to beat up a slime, how, how did you know…?”

“And this is a donut from the Haeundae bakery you like. Here.”

“Huh? Huh? Is today my birthday? Guild leader is being kind to me! A miracle that might happen once every 700 days…”

Today’s epilogue ends with watching our problem child happily munching on a donut after beating a slime with a club.

“Hehe… Thank you, guild leader!”

Footnotes:

Chapter 118

The Agonizer

Sinnoa

Let's recount a short anecdote about Old Man Scho.

"Hey, Embalmer."

"……"

As I've mentioned before, Old Man Scho often called me "Embalmer." This was because my alias was Undertaker, a profession involved in embalming the dead.

The saying "It's not what you say but how you say it" fits perfectly here.

He called me "Em-balm-er" instead of "Em-balmer" with a slight change in the vowel sound, but in Old Man Scho's highly developed Korean pronunciation, it had a ring that resembled "damn."

This proved that Old Man Scho's mental state hadn't matured past infancy. By giving people nasty nicknames and using them in front of others, he was trying to assert his power over them.

In the eternal election between the goodness of human nature and the bad, today, the latter gained another precious vote.

"Embalmer. Why don't you answer? Did you donate your tongue to a beggar? Hey, you shouldn't mess with beggars like that."

"Damn…"

"Hey, Embalmer. I'm pleased to see you understanding the Parthenon Temple's maxim to 'Know thyself,' but why do you belittle yourself like that? Do you still claim to be a regressor? All human values are equal. Though you may be a damned bastard, you're still an embalmer, not a plague."

Who taught this old German native-level Korean?

Truly, that person must be an incredible language instructor. If I could identify them, I'd love to visit and give them a polite stab.

"So, what is it? What new nonsense are you planning this time?"

"You remember better than I do. That kid."

Old Man Scho pointed to someone.

A child, about five years old. A girl was playing, running around with her young parents who owned a bakery in Haeundae, Busan.

Old Man Scho spoke.

"Last cycle, that kid was a boy."

"……"

"The couple's child changes with each cycle. The child that should have been born to that couple disappeared. Isn't that right?"

That wasn't all. Though I hadn't told Old Man Scho, I remembered precisely. With each cycle, the couple's child always changed.

In the 18th cycle, it was a boy, and in the 17th cycle, it was also a boy but looked different. In the 11th cycle, they had twins. The timing of pregnancy and birth varied subtly. Not once did the same child appear in any cycle.

"So, what is your point? Why ask this all of a sudden?"

"Think about it, doc."

When talking seriously, Old Man Scho would call me doc instead of Embalmer.

"Every time we regress, the children who existed in the previous world disappear entirely."

"…Not all of them."

“Right. Those lives unaffected by our butterfly effect remain. But since the Ten Legs was exterminated, I’ve noticed more lives I’ve never seen before.”

“Many felt it was safe to settle in Korea after the Ten Legs was exterminated, which is natural.”

“Don’t pretend not to understand. That’s not my point. I’m saying there are children whose existence is erased entirely due to our regressions! Their memories, their beings. Everything! Except for you, who remembers everything!”

“……”

“I worry that the unintended butterfly effect I cause might be doing something terrible to those little children.”

Old Man Scho’s old face was filled with an indescribable guilt.

I later learned that the Schopenhauer couple had once lost a child to miscarriage. Old Man Scho projected his wounds onto the ‘disappeared lives’ every time a cycle passed.

Maybe that’s why Old Man Scho decided to take a ‘vacation.’

To erase his traces, to not interfere at all with the lives that were yet to be born, so their existence wouldn’t be erased meaninglessly.

“Hmm.”

“…What’s with that irritating expression?”

“Nothing. Just…”

But my thoughts were different. Not just thoughts, my feelings too.

Perhaps this was when Old Man Scho and I were destined to part ways.

Because I didn’t feel any guilt towards those 'disappeared lives.'

Of course, I felt regret and sorrow.

For instance, the child Old Man Scho pointed out had once given me bread, following her parents in making rice donuts. They made too many and ended up giving me some as a gift.

“Hyung! Ah-ah!”

The child's laughter, the hand that put the donut in my mouth, the stooping of my back to receive the child’s touch, the stickiness of the sugar coating too thick on the rice donut, my reaction of ‘Wow, this is really delicious!’ and the shy greetings of the child's parents.

All memories that remained with me.

Yes, I admit it.

I will never again receive a sugar donut from Jeong Seo-ah, the five-year-old girl from the Haeundae bakery, who wanted to make bread because her parents were so cool.

Not only Jeong Seo-ah, countless losses—tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands—cling to a regressor's years.

Shadows exist not only in space but also in time, and we call those shadows memories. The longest-lived human, me, bore the deepest shadows.

But my heart’s emotions were sorrow, wistfulness, longing.

I can say unequivocally that they were not guilt.

To begin with, the subjects of my guilt were limited.

Mostly to the tombstones I had sealed with Time Seal. That is, only those whom I had buried forever.

“Old man, I told you last time.”

“Huh? What?”

“You know, you wondered if we erase existences every time we regress because the children born in each cycle are different.”

“Huh? When did I say that…? Oh, oh, that?”

Old Man Scho glared at me.

“What a crazy bastard.”

“……?”

“You damned bastard! That was more than three cycles ago! Why do you talk like it was yesterday? You’re trying to make me look like a forgetful old man on purpose, aren’t you?”

Old Man Scho fumed. It took three minutes to calm him down.

So, I couldn’t bring up the joke, “Didn’t you once tell me not to use the word ‘plague’ on people? Why the change?” When dealing with someone much older, you have to yield a lot.

“Doc, if you don’t fix that nasty habit, you’ll get in big trouble one day.”

“Indeed. Hearing that from an old man whose whole body is infested with crazy cells suddenly makes me vigilant.”

“Why is your tongue getting sharper every day…? Embalmer! Where did your innocent old self disappear to?”

“Who knows. Probably dragged away by Germans, gassed, and died.”

“You racist bastard! My family supported the Social Democrats since the Imperial era! My ancestors were arrested too!”

“Yeah, no matter how much a white man frames a yellow man with racism, it doesn’t work? Anyway, old man, I thought long and hard about what you said, but I disagree.”

We were walking along Haeundae Beach.

Once a symbol of vacation in Korea. The jewel named civilization that humanity lost seemed to have stolen everything from here. The water-colored sand held a blue emerald.

“If lives disappear every time we regress, conversely, new lives that couldn’t have been born before are created because of us.”

“…Huh?”

“If there were no regressions, the humans born at this moment would have been predetermined. But the stronger the butterfly effect we cause, the farther it spreads, and entirely different possibilities briefly see the world.”

“……”

“Of course, it’s not a good world. Every generation complains they were born in the worst times, but now it’s really the worst except for the Ice Age. Still, I think it’s better to be here briefly and pass through life than to remain in the bottomless abyss of nothingness.”

Crunch. The sand under my shoes made a sound.

“And do we regress because we like it? It’s the damned anomalies’ fault. The ones who should feel guilty are those anomalies. Why should we bear the world’s destruction?”

“Hah.”

“Old man. In my opinion, there’s no need to feel guilty about the departed lives, nor claim credit for the new ones. The resolve to prevent world destruction is already a heavy burden on us. Adding nonexistent responsibilities to it would only break our backs unnecessarily.”

“……”

“If you feel you must be guilty, that too is a resolve, so I won’t stop you, but you should feel just as much joy for the new lives.”

“……”

“As I am not a great person, I choose not to feel both guilt and joy for new lives, as I can’t bear both.”

The sound of waves, sand, and footsteps continued for a long time.

So, I had just advised Old Man Scho not to be too sad.

“The boy who couldn’t understand a single line of the Analects has grown so wise.”

Like an old sea spewing waves, a sigh flowed from Old Man Scho’s mouth.

“Indeed. Having the courage to possess something is difficult, but even more difficult is the courage to abandon it. Doc, maybe you are more suitable as a regressor than I am.”

I couldn’t easily agree with that soliloquy.

But one thing was certain: my words didn’t offer much comfort. As you know, Old Man Scho eventually went on a vacation with his beloved wife.

I still didn’t agree with Old Man Scho’s assertion.

It was just that seeing Sim Ah-ryeon smiling with 1-bit graphics made me wonder for a moment if I was doing something terrible to other children.

“Hey, mister!”

It was then, while walking along the beach.

“Hmm?”

“Ah-ah!”

A small boy came running, thrusting a rice donut towards me. Looking over the boy’s shoulder, I saw a familiar bakery couple smiling cautiously.

I immediately understood the situation.

“Ah-ah!”

“……”

I compared the boy in front of me to Jeong Seo-ah, the little girl I

met thousands of years ago in the 19th cycle.

Their appearances were entirely different.

But surprisingly, the taste of the rice donut I bit into, including the overly thick sugar coating, was remarkably similar.

My eyes widened. I chewed the donut, savoring its taste.

“How is it? Delicious?”

“…Delicious. Really, very delicious. You could be a bakery owner.”

The boy giggled and ran back to his parents’ embrace, leaving a trail of sand grains in the air.

As I left Haeundae with light steps, a peculiar sense of incongruity stopped me.

‘Wait, didn’t the little girl in the 19th cycle call me hyung?’

In terms of pure timing, excluding cycles, I was a year younger now.

‘So why did he call me mister…?’

Hmm.

…Come to think of it, maybe Jeong Seo-ah’s rice donuts were tastier.

Footnotes:

Chapter 119

The Brainwasher I

Sinnoa

I don’t particularly like aphorisms or maxims.

Being impressed by a saying is akin to admiring a photograph of a beautiful landscape rather than experiencing the scenery firsthand.

For those who have visited that landscape, it may hold commemorative value, but for others, it’s just a fake antique used for interior decoration in their home.

However, there is one Nietzsche aphorism that I find useful even for a pragmatist:

- He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

This truly is the ultimate guide for hitchhikers traveling through the end times, isn’t it?

To make it a bit more practical, you can tweak the latter part slightly:

- If you gaze long enough at Go Yuri, Go Yuri will also gaze back into you.

Go Yuri.

Her personal color is pink.

Her Pokémon type is Psychic.

Her special skills are a soft smile for everyone and a brainwashing hypnosis beam.

If she had appeared as a Kadabra in the first-generation Pokémon anime, she would have gained a cult following among children, but unfortunately, she was reincarnated in reality, causing me a headache.

What I want to convey to you is that I, the Undertaker, put in a tremendous amount of effort to seal away this Pokémon.

'What if I don't look directly at her and take a picture? Wouldn't that reveal Go Yuri's true form?'

Click.

I committed the audacious act of secretly photographing Go Yuri. It was a move that risked my life.

The act of photographing itself was successful, but the result was disappointing. The performance difference between a standard camera lens and my retina was negligible.

In short, the photo showed the same pink hair, the same soft smile. Hmm. Somehow, the photo seemed inferior to the real thing.

When I realized, 'Hmm, the photo is worse than the real thing,' I knew I had already fallen under a weak hypnosis. A chill ran down my spine, and I immediately burned the photo.

Failure.

'What if someone else takes the picture?'

I had Yu Ji-won, whose life wasn't particularly precious to me, take the picture. The result was the same. Yu Ji-won returned unharmed.

Failure^2.

For the record, these tests were never conducted in the same cycle.

Regarding Go Yuri, research had to be conducted more cautiously than handling a nuclear bomb. Naturally, all tests had to be conducted in different cycles.

‘What if I record her voice with a recorder——?’

Failure.

‘…Wait. What if I use a spirit camera?’

It was a clever idea.

By this time, I had received an instant spirit camera from the Magical Girl Association as a reward for defeating the Inunaki Tunnel.

Click.

I had high expectations for this test. The spirit camera was a precious artifact. There couldn’t be a more suitable item to reveal Go Yuri’s true nature.

Then it happened.

Whirrr……

A strange noise started coming from the spirit camera, which was developing the photo normally.

Rrring! Clang! Clang-clang-clang! Clang-clang-clang!

It was the sound of a telephone. Or perhaps, the loud noise of a red fire alarm button being pressed.

Clunk! The camera jerked on its own, and the next moment, it spewed smoke as if a fire had broken out inside.

Then it stopped.

“……”

Goosebumps rose on my skin.

“What’s the matter?”

What was even more chilling was that Go Yuri had approached before I even noticed.

She was right in front of me.

Go Yuri tilted her head and bent down, looking up at me from below.

“Huh. You look familiar... Oh, wait, weren't you the one at Busan Station waiting room? Um, your name was definitely... Undertaker. Yes, Mr. Undertaker, right?”

“……”

“Wow! What a coincidence to see you here! Ah, but the object in your hand keeps emitting smoke. Is it alright? Something seems…”

Go Yuri smiled brightly.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

Damn.

It was foolish to trust such a camera. No matter how powerful a treasure it was, how powerful could it be if it came from a group cosplaying as magical girls?

But a regressor is a profession that establishes countermeasures even for such contingencies. I immediately activated Protocol 552-71.

“An unexpected storm is roaring! The wind sounds noisily, and Zhou Yu urgently descends onto the terrace, looking at the banners!”

“…Huh?”

“Oh ho! As the Azure Dragon and Vermilion Bird flank the White Tiger and Black Tortoise to the northwest, a great southeast wind rises with a roar! Crash! The drum board spins! Ah, like thunder, Zhou Yu’s heart falls at the sight!”

“Uh, wait... What?”

“Heavens! Ah! Why did you birth me and Kongming together! Woo

woo woo! Wooo!”

“……”

I danced like a madman, running toward the horizon. The dignity, character, and everything else I had built up over a thousand years as a regressor were all thrown into the mud.

The original name of Protocol 552-71 was “Singing the Song of Red Cliff.” Or acting crazy.

For the record, I was good at singing Pansori.

I was even better at acting crazy.

Indeed, even the world’s greatest curiosity monster, Go Yuri, didn’t pursue a human failure. Dobby was free, and I escaped.

And I never approached within 30 kilometers of Go Yuri in that cycle.

Failure.

——Go Yuri was indeed a dangerous existence.

As the founder and mastermind of the Library Society, I had a hard time resisting the urge to add [Go Yuri-class] to the end of the danger lineup [Village-class - Polis-Class - Continent-class - Ocean-class - Outer God-class].

My business partner and National Road Management Corps Chief Noh Do-hwa, with whom I consulted whenever I had such thoughts, maintained a calm expression in the operations room.

“From my perspective, you seem more dangerous…”

“Hmm.”

I didn’t necessarily agree with Noh Do-hwa’s point, but I adjusted the strategy.

“As I mentioned, ‘She Who Must Not Be Named’ is dangerous to all

humans, not just me. Everyone projects their ideal type onto her, so no matter how emotionally detached I am, I can't help but fall for her."

"Damn. I don't even know where to start tackling this... First, was your ideal type pink hair…?"

"That's a trivial issue, Chief. But by addressing the above issue, we can form the following hypothesis. If someone has no emotions at all, they might be safe from 'She Who Must Not Be Named,' right?"

"Hmm? A person with no emotions? Does such a person exist…?"

"More precisely, it should be someone who has their feelings of affection for others, in other words, the ability to like someone, suppressed. Go Yuri's perception manipulation starts from there."

"……"

"……"

We turned our heads almost simultaneously.

"Hmm?"

Scratch, scratch.

There, the operations control officer of the National Road Management Corps, Yu Ji-won, was carving wood with a knife. She was carving pieces to use on the chessboard [Mini Map].

"Why are you looking at me?"

The high-intelligence psychopath tilted her head.

Yu Ji-won.

Her personal color is silver.

Her Pokémon type… who cares. Anyway, she's a psychopath. Investing much time to explain her would be a waste of life.

Comparing her to Go Yuri, there was nothing she could win in except appearance.

As unrealistic as it seems, Yu Ji-won was incredibly beautiful. It was just an objective truth I couldn't distort.

Among the awakeners in Korea, the two rivals for top appearance were Go Yuri and Yu Ji-won. This land had no hope.

That's right. I always assigned Yu Ji-won to monitor Go Yuri.

On the map of Korea spread out in the operations room, a black bishop (♝) with the word "Go Yuri" engraved on it was always moving around.

"Ji-won, you need to contact 'She Who Must Not Be Named.' Naturally, you must never let her know I sent you. Most importantly, if I sense even a hint that you're brainwashed, I will isolate you immediately."

"Hmm..."

Yu Ji-won stroked her chin. To stroke her chin in front of someone else and go "Hmm" was such an obvious sign of a psychopath that it was chilling.

"Your Excellency, I have a condition."

"What condition?"

"When you move to the next cycle, please get me something."

This was the sound of a born maniac.

If Yu Ji-won were an ordinary psychopath,

'Huh? The next cycle's me? That's a completely different person from me now, isn't it? I'll pursue my current happiness.'

'I'll live for myself now.'

That's how she would have thought, but no. Our psychopath had

extraordinary brain patterns.

‘Hmm. If that person (Undertaker) causes the world to regress, no matter how hard I work to accumulate wealth and power, it would all disappear with one click of regression, wouldn’t it?’

‘Why should my power and safety disappear because of a click bug?’

‘But I can’t kill the regressor.’

‘Therefore, I must cling to the regressor.’

‘In other words… I must negotiate with the regressor to pass more power and information to the next cycle’s me. Then, even more in the next cycle. If I continue to inherit the legacy…’

‘The ultimate victory will be mine.’

‘I will now go all-in on the regressor coin.’

This was the outrageous thought process she had reached.

How do I know this? Because she told me directly.

Now, I am confident that no further explanation is needed as to why I consider this good-looking maniac to be insane. At least, I have never seen a character in any work of fiction involving infinite regression with such a brain flow.

Reality always easily triumphs over fiction.

“Ji-won.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Do you even have an idea how many times I’ve heard that from you?”

“No. But your statement just now reassures me that I’m sane in any cycle. It’s comforting.”

“I think we need to replace the word ‘sane’ with something else…”

“Hmm. Intelligent? Reasonable? Clever?”

“It’s like the exact opposites of all those words fit perfectly.”

“……?”

In the end, I had to make another promise to Yu Ji-won. For the record, she’s ranked at a depth of 1,000 meters in my cafe’s system.

She started at 100 meters.

I don’t need to explain how she crawled from 100 meters to 1,000 meters. I’ll just add that I’m very good at keeping promises.

I dispatched Yu Ji-won and followed her. Of course, maintaining a strict distance of hundreds of meters.

Go Yuri was running a soup kitchen in Daejeon. She distributed food twice a day, morning and evening, in exchange for some labor from ordinary people.

I watched the scene through binoculars. Seeing Go Yuri smiling brightly while wearing an apron, my teeth couldn’t help but chatter.

The apron even had Chinese characters on it.

Three Kingdoms (三國志).

‘Scary! Go Yuri!’

I shuddered.

‘Even in such a moment, you try to bewitch my mind! Do you think I would feel any affection for you just because of that?’

Moreover, the apron was not blue or red, but green, the symbol of the Shu Han.

Truly formidable brainwashing!

My hands trembled. Forcing the binoculars aside, I saw our ultimate weapon of the National Road Management Corps, the silver-haired

psychopath, walking steadily.

And——

“…….”

“…….”

The two entities met.

The one who absolutely creates affection and the one who absolutely does not feel affection.

In other words… a contradiction!

Just their contact alone seemed to break the laws of the universe and insult social ethics, creating a meeting that should never have happened in proper history due to a bizarre twist of fate (me).

My heart swelled involuntarily.

Footnotes:

Chapter 120

The Brainwasher II

Sinnoa

And thus, the collision of two black holes brought about the end of the solar system... Unfortunately, such an ending did not occur.

The world was fine. The encounter between Go Yuri and Yu Ji-won did not cause any macro-level disturbances.

Given that the universe manages to endure decades under the colonial rule of countless monsters, it was surprisingly resilient.

“……. …….”

“……? ……. …….”

From a distance, the two were having a conversation.

I couldn’t eavesdrop as they were out of my hearing range. Besides, the conversation content would likely be distorted due to Go Yuri’s [Perception Manipulation].

Go Yuri bowed slightly. She handed over something indistinguishable, perhaps a business card or a letter. Yu Ji-won accepted it and bowed her head as well.

A moment later, Yu Ji-won returned as if nothing had happened.

I hurriedly approached Yu Ji-won.

“What did you talk about? What was your impression of Go Yuri? Did you feel an inexplicable desire to agree with her?”

“Pardon? No?”

Yu Ji-won responded with a sentence that exemplified the subtlety of the Korean language.

“We just had a conversation. It went very smoothly.”

“Oh…!”

I sighed. So even a psychopath couldn’t resist Go Yuri’s power.

“…I see. It must have been a special experience for you. It’s probably the first time you’ve felt even a small amount of positive emotion toward a human. When will you ever have such an experience again?”

“Hmm?”

Yu Ji-won tilted her head.

“Excuse me, sir, but I don’t understand what you’re saying. I did not feel any affection toward the target.”

Now it was my turn to tilt my head.

“What do you mean? You just said the conversation went well.”

“Yes? It did.”

Then, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, Yu Ji-won stated expressionlessly,

“How does having a smooth conversation equate to feeling affection for the other person?”

?

“Sir, a smooth conversation brings comfort. More precisely, it’s the satisfaction of not having to waste excessive dialogue to enhance mutual understanding, thus saving time. It’s like taking the subway instead of walking to school, which is much faster and more convenient. That doesn’t mean you feel human affection for the subway train, right?”

“…….”

“Ah. My apologies, sir. Everyone has different tastes. Do you

perhaps have a fondness for subway trains?”

Of course, I didn’t. One person with a bizarre attachment to railways was enough.

But listening to Yu Ji-won’s lengthy explanation, I had a revelation.

‘Maybe it could work! With Go Yuri! If this unparalleled psychopath can avoid [Perception Manipulation], it might just be a miracle!’

I couldn’t hide my excitement as I grabbed Yu Ji-won’s shoulders.

“Ji-won.”

“Yes, sir.”

“From now on, use any means necessary to get close to ‘He Who Must Not Be Named.’ Become friends, or whatever it takes, and observe her every move. Report everything to me. Can you do that?”

“Of course, sir. Leave it to me. But...”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll make sure your will is conveyed to the next cycle’s you.”

“I swear my loyalty, sir.”

A silent understanding passed between us.

The Saintess, who had been quietly observing the situation, muttered.

[Mr. Undertaker, I’ve been wondering whether to point this out, but... Isn’t it obvious that you’re stalking Go Yuri?]

It wasn’t worth considering.

As if I’d stalk someone who runs a soup kitchen for free, wearing a green Three Kingdoms apron, smiling politely at everyone. Do I look like that kind of person? Ridiculous.

From that day, Operation "Paradox" was launched.

The strongest shield in Korea, a character who would always have a warning in any work [※This character is a side character and cannot be conquered], was deployed right in the middle of Daejeon.

Yes. Yu Ji-won stayed in Daejeon and contacted Go Yuri daily. Since Go Yuri had to report to the soup kitchen every morning and evening, she had no way to avoid Yu Ji-won.

On the second day, nothing unusual happened. The two seemed to have a warm conversation.

The same on the third day.

And the fourth day.

Finally, on the fifth day.

[Mr. Undertaker, something strange seems to be happening with Yu Ji-won.]

I felt a nibble on the line.

“What kind of strange occurrence?”

[…It’s hard to explain, but when Ms. Yu leaves her lodging and starts walking, strangers approach her and strike up conversations.]

“Hmm. Maybe people are just entranced by her Hermes-grade face.”

[You’re the first person I’ve heard describe someone’s good looks that way… No, it’s really strange. You should come and see for yourself.]

So I did.

I discreetly followed Yu Ji-won without being noticed.

“Oh, Ms. Yu! I happened to get some lucky apples. Please, take one. Oh, don’t worry about the money. Just take it! You’re so pretty, I can’t help it!”

“Thank you. I’ll enjoy it.”

“Wow! It’s Ms. Yu! Let’s play together today! Come swing with us in the playground!”

“Yes. If I have time in the evening.”

…As the Saintess had said, it was a strange scene.

Every time Yu Ji-won walked down the street, people of all kinds approached her to talk.

I’ve mentioned several times that Yu Ji-won was as beautiful as a crystal sculpture carved from eternal ice. She always had a perpetual frostiness about her due to her lack of expression.

Would it be easy to approach such a person and start a friendly conversation?

Even if they did, they’d receive a reply with a monotonous voice and emotionless eyes behind glasses.

In short, there was no reward for being friendly.

Yet people approached Yu Ji-won as if it was the most enjoyable thing, continuously striking up conversations.

“Saintess, please connect me to Yu Ji-won telepathically. I need to check her mental state.”

[Alright. …Connection established. I’ll relay Ms. Yu’s words. Please speak comfortably.]

“Thank you. Hey, Ji-won. Are you okay?”

[I’m fine.]

Yu Ji-won’s response, relayed through the Saintess’s voice, was utterly nonchalant.

“From what I see, Daejeon has already fallen to She Who Must Not Be Named. At least, the people who talk to you are definitely enchanted by She Who Must Not Be Named. They’re trying to keep you in the city by any means.”

[Hmm. I also found it strange. But if their aim is to win my favor, their tactics are shallow.]

“What?”

[It’s annoying.]

“…….”

[When the restaurant owner recognizes me and makes small talk, I don’t show it, but I find it bothersome. The whole street feels like one big, annoying restaurant.]

The next day.

The city of Daejeon fell silent.

“…….”

Yu Ji-won left her lodging, but no one approached her.

The lady who gave her apples the day before, the kids who begged her to play, all passed by her expressionlessly as if they didn’t know her.

I couldn’t help but be terrified.

[Now, this is comfortable.]

Yu Ji-won wasn’t shaken at all.

Her feelings were simply akin to being lucky to find an empty seat by the window in a cafe.

Despite the sudden cold shoulder from the city’s residents who had been clinging to her the day before, she showed no signs of unease or confusion.

But this meant… Yu Ji-won had won.

No interactions, no bewitchment!

Then, the city truly went berserk.

“Ahhh!”

A resident ran and collided with Yu Ji-won. The resident lost balance and fell.

At that moment, screech—crash! A truck passed by and crashed into a building. The resident got up and grabbed Yu Ji-won’s hand.

“Thank you! Really, thank you! If I hadn’t bumped into you, I would’ve been hit by the truck and died! You saved my life!”

“Yes. Take care of your life.”

“…….”

As soon as Yu Ji-won entered a bakery, the staff lined up and set off fireworks.

“Congratulations! You are the 100,000th customer since our opening! As a special event, we will give you five items free every day from now on….”

“Sorry, I don’t prefer such events. Please give it to the next customer. I’ll take a baguette if you have one.”

“…….”

Everywhere Yu Ji-won went, she was saved from ‘coincidental accidents,’ and ‘amazing probabilities’ of good fortune found her.

Yu Ji-won ignored all of it.

[Why did I ignore them? Because following your orders, Your Excellency, is far more advantageous than forming friendly relations with those people.]

[They won’t take care of my next cycle, will they?]

Using the funds I provided, Yu Ji-won ate what she wanted and bought what she wanted, simply going to the plaza twice a day to chat briefly with Go Yuri.

In short, she lived comfortably, doing what she wanted in this end-of-the-world scenario.

Conversely, maybe it was just my imagination, but the residents' faces seemed to grow more haggard by the day.

Bang! Bang-bang, bang!

By the 30th day, a gunfight broke out near Yu Ji-won's lodging.

The following scene was reconstructed based on Yu Ji-won's later testimony.

Right after the gunfire, a man with a gunshot wound on his arm pounded on Yu Ji-won's door.

"Please help! Please open the door! I'll repay you!"

Before the host could respond, the door opened on its own.

Yu Ji-won, who had been reading a Latin book by the window, raised an eyebrow in annoyance.

"What is it this time?"

"Oh. I'm the head of the top guild in this city. My subordinate backstabbed me. But… he couldn't kill me despite the surprise attack. My brothers will avenge me."

"Ha."

"If you hadn't opened the door, I'd be dead in the hallway. Thank you. I'll give you everything in this city…!"

Yu Ji-won put down her book and walked over.

For the record, Yu Ji-won was the operations manager of the National Road Management Corps and, in a cycle when we exterminated the Meteor Shower, she led one of the 12 squads.

In other words, Yu Ji-won was second only to me in aura manipulation.

A warlord with a bullet wound in his arm was no match for her. Yu Ji-won lifted the guild leader effortlessly, like a chicken.

“Huh?”

Then she opened the door and tossed him into the hallway. The guild members aiming to betray him flinched.

Yu Ji-won spoke to the assassins.

“What are you doing? Aren’t you going to kill him?”

“…….”

“Then I’ll go back to reading, so don’t disturb me.”

Boom. The door closed.

That was the scene reconstructed from Yu Ji-won’s memory.

No more gunfire was heard in the hallway.

That night.

A strange sound echoed in the dark sky over Daejeon.

-Oooo……. Ooo……

-Hehehe, hehehe! Hehe!

It sounded like the cries of beasts, the roars of tigers, and the countless laughter of children. All the sounds mixed and echoed simultaneously.

Even I had never experienced such a phenomenon.

“Saintess, can you observe what’s happening in the city?”

[I’m sorry. I can’t see anything. It seems all the awakeners in Daejeon are either asleep or for some other reason, I can only see darkness.]

"……"

[If you permit, I can go to Ms. Go Yuri.]

"No."

I responded immediately.

I had a gut feeling.

This state was not achieved through the 'correct strategy.'

It felt like using a cheat code to unlock an ending in a game.

The problem was that this was far from a happy ending. Whatever was awakened forcibly must be incredibly enraged.

"Go Yuri, or the entity overshadowing her, can enchant and control the entire city's population. Confirming this information alone is a great achievement. Any further contact is dangerous."

[Understood.]

"What about Yu Ji-won?"

[Just as dark. The same as the other awakeners.]

The bizarre cacophony continued throughout the night.

Yu Ji-won's whereabouts were revealed when morning came. At 7 AM, she woke up and walked out of her lodging as if nothing had happened.

I immediately entered Daejeon and contacted Yu Ji-won. I asked if she had heard the strange noises last night.

"Noises?"

Yu Ji-won tilted her head.

"I don't know, Your Excellency. Since the fourth grade, I've been wearing an eye mask and earplugs to sleep."

With daylight, not only did the cacophony disappear, but the city's residents also vanished.

The Saintess's [Clairvoyance] still couldn't observe anything. The only visible awakener was Yu Ji-won.

Even when I deployed Yu Ji-won's [Mini Map], the result was the same. Neither Go Yuri nor any other Awakeners in Daejeon responded.

It was as if they had evaporated in an instant.

After that day, until the end of the cycle, neither Go Yuri nor the citizens of Daejeon reappeared.

"Oh."

Yu Ji-won pulled something out of her pocket. It was a letter.

An item that would serve as the epilogue for this episode.

"Your Excellency, please accept this."

"What is it?"

"Ms. Go Yuri asked me to deliver this letter to you."

"……."

"To be precise, she asked me to deliver it to [the first person I meet after I can no longer run the soup kitchen]."

I hesitated but took the letter.

I opened the envelope. A sweet apple scent wafted out.

-謀事在人, 成事在天.

-Planning is man's work; achieving it is heaven's.

"……."

Mosa jaein, Seongsa jaecheon. A phrase from Romance of the Three

Kingdoms. Similar in meaning to “Do your best and leave the rest to heaven,” it could be given to anyone.

But the fact that it was a phrase from Romance of the Three Kingdoms shook my heart uneasily.

‘Could it be that she knew I sent Yu Ji-won?’

…More importantly, I knew Go Yuri’s handwriting. She had once been part of my guild, so it was natural.

The handwriting on this letter was distinctly different from Go Yuri’s writing back then.

Perhaps this phrase was the first genuine aspect of Go Yuri I had ever seen.

The first trace not filtered by [Perception Manipulation].

I turned the letter over.

-The butterfly of the typhoon and the butterfly in the dream are different beings.

My entire body tingled as if struck by static electricity.

A phrase hinting at the existence of the blue Morpho butterfly of the anomaly ‘Butterfly Effect’ and the butterfly that appeared at the end of ‘Logout Game.’

A message only I could decipher in this world… and simultaneously, one of the pieces of information I was most curious about at the time.

How much did Go Yuri know? Or was this simply a reflection of the information I wanted to see, like a mirror?

From where had I been enchanted?

“…Ji-won, when did you receive this letter?”

“Oh. On the first day, when we parted.”

“…….”

“She promised no harm would come to me as long as I delivered the letter. It was a fair deal.”

Yu Ji-won tilted her head.

“Is there something strange written in it, sir?”

“…….”

I remained silent.

Just folding the apple-scented letter, I pondered once more.

——In the end, the strongest spear and the strongest shield would always result in a draw.

Footnotes:

Chapter 121

The Dreamer I

Sinnoa

Before I knew it, my story surpassed 120 chapters.

I didn't count the numbers myself; according to Oh Dok-seo, it was true.

Though I wasn't sure, 'self-proclaimed web novel expert' Oh Dok-seo insisted that the number 120 had symbolic significance.

"Got it, mister? Anyway, I need 120 chapters. You have to hand over 120 chapters without any setbacks."

"Why?"

"Because I'm planning to stockpile up to 120 chapters and release them all at once on the platform*... Ah, damn. Do you even understand when I explain? You haven't even looked at a web novel before the Advent of the Void."

*This novel was released with 120 chapters on kakaopage in April 2024.

"Yeah."

"Anyway, 120 chapters! I need at least 120 chapters. I'm saying this because I have a plan!"

Oh Dok-seo scratched at me as if she were my editor. In reality, she did perform the role of an editor.

What could an old and sick person like me do? I had to follow the young one's lead.

However, the method of writing was up to me.

I preferred the traditional method. I wrote by hand in a notebook and handed it to Oh Dok-seo. Sometimes, I went even more traditional and told the stories orally.

When I let Oh Dok-seo experience the old traditions lost by the younger generation, she looked moved.

"Seriously... Damn. How can you do this? You need to give me usable manuscripts."

I was a kind author to my editor. So I answered according to Oh Dok-seo's intellectual level.

"Not my problem."

"....."

"Good luck."

My role was merely to tell the story.

If I were asked to edit, revise, proofread, and format it, that would be difficult for me.

Not because it was bothersome, but because the life of a regressor was busy.

If my story was released somewhere officially and an error was found, it wouldn't be my fault. It would be entirely Oh Dok-seo's fault.

Would someone like me, who possessed [Complete Memory], make mistakes?

Between us, if any typos were observed, you could blame "Ms. Oh Dok-seo". Though she had a chuunibyou otaku personality, she had a kind heart, so please understand her with your broad minds.

Anyway, since 120 chapters was a milestone number, it seemed like a good opportunity to summarize the cities of the Korean Peninsula that appeared in my story so far.

Let's call it a newly crafted map in the apocalypse era.

Here's the note I handed over to Oh Dok-seo while explaining the current situation:

[Busan]

The headquarters of the National Road Management Corps.

Food produced through the 'Sword Marquess' in the Gimhae Plains and Kyushu is stored in Busan. The patrol teams of the National Road Management Corps also act as merchants, transporting food and supplies from Busan nationwide. Therefore, patrol teams are sometimes called "caravans."

Judicial and military powers in Busan are exercised by the Samcheon World Guild. The National Road Management Corps and Samcheon are in a blood alliance.

The last hope of the Korean Peninsula. Power outages and water shortages occur frequently, but with the romance of rainwater and candlelight, there are no problems. Cheers to those living today.

- Key Figures: Noh Do-hwa, Dang Seo-rin, Yu Ji-won, Old Man Scho's corpse.

[Daejeon]

A massive refugee city. Most refugees and displaced people from the Korean Peninsula gather here.

Near Daejeon, many creatures mutated by the Void Poison live. Using this ecosystem, Daejeon produces its own food. However, the safety of the food is not guaranteed.

Managed by the Satisfaction Guild, which is practically controlled by Pink Hair. If you don't value your life, please visit and enjoy the city.

- Key Figure: Voldemort.

[Sejong]

A prominent holy city of the Korean Peninsula along with Pyongyang. The county of Cheon Yo-hwa, by Cheon Yo-hwa, for Cheon Yo-hwa.

The Baekhwa Guild, composed of alumni from Baekhwa Girls' High School, strongly dominates the city.

Originally, the guild members of Baekhwa were descendants of families that worshipped a pseudo-religion called Cheonilgyo, and they still serve Cheon Yo-hwa. Although Cheon Yo-hwa herself despises pseudo-religions, the city's operations make it look like a cult's headquarters.

If you're tired of living in the apocalypse, go to Sejong and curse Cheon Yo-hwa. Recommended phrase: "No matter how you look at it, isn't wearing a school uniform a bit crazy?" This way, you can take a biology class and realize how many organs you have in your body.

- Key Figure: Cheon Yo-hwa.

[Seoul]

The frontline. South of the Han River has been scorched. Boasts the cheapest housing prices on the Korean Peninsula.

A defense line is formed to block the monsters constantly pouring in from the north. All bridges except for Jamsu Bridge and Seongsu Bridge have been destroyed for security reasons.

Originally, my hideout was also in Seoul, but since the Inunaki Tunnel was renovated, Cheon Yo-hwa's Baekhwa Guild has been defending Seoul.

If you are a nostalgic person still wanting a Han River view, it is highly recommended. Just note that with the Han River view, you also get a monster view.

- Key Figure: Saintess.

There are many other cities like Jeju, Naju, and Pyongyang, but since they haven't been covered in my story yet, I'll skip them.

"Hey, mister."

Once you summarize and look at the map, you might start thinking like Oh Dok-seo.

"Isn't it doable after all?"

"Hmm."

"Food production is smooth, power is well-organized around Busan, and Cheon Yo-hwa follows you fervently. Saving the world might be impossible, but saving the Korean Peninsula seems definitely possible, right?"

"Not sure."

Sorry, but it's not that easy.

You must have witnessed Daejeon disappearing overnight in the last story.

Let me say it again.

This world hates humans.

First, I need to point out that maps created when the world was intact are of no use.

Because this world is very serious about giving humanity a big middle finger.

If the National Road Management Corps blindly sends a patrol caravan, incidents like the following happen frequently.

-Oh no, this is bad. Daejeon should appear around here. Why do we keep going in circles?

-Team Leader, it's a big problem. We've been wandering around this area for 14 days now. Posting on SG Net gets no comments at all...

-14 days? What are you talking about, Assistant Team Leader? It's only been 4 days.

-What?

Missing. Disappearance. Vanishing.

Despite crossing a distance equivalent to only two bus stops, it takes more than half a month in terms of time.

They think they are walking on a path, but suddenly they find themselves heading towards the bottom of a pond.

Where the river should flow, a salt mine appears, and where the mountain should be, a vast lake stretches to the horizon.

A literal labyrinth.

A world consumed by the void is no different from a huge maze, a labyrinthos.

In this world, my role is to break through the labyrinth. If compared to Greek mythology, I would be Theseus, who navigated the maze and roasted Minotaur steak.

"Undertaker."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"The 21st patrol team has been stationary on my map for three hours."

"Not moving at all?"

"No."

"The power poles? The power lines?"

"They seem to be cut. The reports that were regularly posted on SG Net stopped 180 minutes ago."

"Ah... They're trapped in the void again. That's why sending patrols near Daejeon always causes trouble. Saintess? Are you watching?"

[Yes, I am.]

"Please send a message to the 21st patrol team in the name of the constellations. Tell them not to panic and wait at their location. A rescue team is on its way."

[Are you going to check it out yourself?]

"Yes, I need to repair the power lines if they're cut."

[Understood.]

Yu Ji-won's 'Mini Map' and Saintess' 'Telepathy'.

Thanks to their assistance, I managed to connect cities in this harsh apocalypse.

Though it was impossible to control vast areas, ruling the lines between them was still feasible.

And of course, besides Saintess and Yu Ji-won, many talents assisted the National Road Management Corps.

"Ha-yul."

"Yeah?"

"They said the power lines are cut again. Let's go lay the threads."

If Theseus was to navigate the maze, he would need Ariadne.

The Puppeteer Lee Ha-yul.

This kid, who spun puppet strings like a spider, was also indispensable in managing the roads of the Korean Peninsula.

When I ran with Ha-yul on my back, I quickly found the 21st patrol team sitting in the middle of the forest.

It seemed they had been trapped in the void for quite some time, as their faces looked utterly exhausted.

"Ah...! Undertaker!"

The team leader of the patrol recognized me and brightened up. My official position within the National Road Management Corps changed with each cycle, but I was always treated with respect by the team members.

"You came!"

"Yeah. You've all worked hard."

I took out chocolate and Ha-yul from my backpack. Ha-yul walked around on her own, and I distributed the chocolate to the team members.

"How many days have you been stranded?"

"From my perspective, it's the 15th day. But since the days each member perceives are different, it's not accurate."

"Thoroughly bewitched. What about the sun?"

"I observed the direction as per the guidelines, but on the 1st day, it rose in the south, on the 2nd day, it rose in the east, on the 3rd day, it rose in the north, and so on. The direction changed daily."

"The moon?"

"I always saw one, but there was one testimony from a member that they saw three moons."

"Any missing members?"

"No. We always moved in groups of three."

Of course, that couldn't be true.

Given how deeply the void had consumed even the celestial phenomena, the possibility of everyone returning safely was slim.

Upon checking, I found the patrol team, which should have had 24 members, reduced to 21. However, none of the remaining members recognized or remembered the missing three.

I sighed deeply.

'At this rate, I'll really have to clear a separate path near Daejeon.'

At that moment, Ha-yul looked at me. She busily moved her tiny hands.

-Found. Broken place.

It was sign language.

Usually, Ha-yul had a puppet she carried around to speak for her, but we had left it behind in our haste this time.

Still, we communicated well with each other through sign language. Sometimes, we even chatted in Japanese sign language.

"Where?"

-Here.

Swoosh—

Ha-yul waved her hand, and a thin puppet string rose from the ground. The string was broken in the middle.

Transmission Line.

The puppet strings Ha-yul produced were not only used for the security of the guild hideout. Underneath the roads used by the National Road Management Corps, we laid puppet strings.

Ha-yul's puppet strings exhibited near room-temperature superconductor performance limited to aura. If skilled in aura, one could even send Morse code through the strings.

Most importantly, the 'Transmission Line' was truly Ariadne's thread for the patrol teams.

In the void, constellation phenomena and compasses were easily nullified. In such a maze, Ha-yul's puppet strings were the 'only objective indicators.'

Ha-yul and I buried the puppet strings only along the safest paths.

In other words, as long as the patrol members moved along the strings infused with aura, they could at least avoid dangerous areas.

However, the moment the strings were broken, the survival rate of the patrol members plummeted.

"Why do you think it broke?"

-Don't know. Presumably due to creatures living underground.

"Ha... This is the umpteenth time near this area. I really should abandon the Daejeon route and only use the Sejong route."

-Is it okay?

"The more we do this, the more Daejeon will become isolated and the voidification will worsen, but what can we do? Let's bury the line a bit deeper this time."

-Okay.

Puppet strings flowed out from under Ha-yul's nails. The strings cut through the ground like a cake and sank.

Thud—

In the meantime, I brought and planted a power pole. Power poles were easy to find anywhere in the country, and they served as a perfect marker indicating 'there's a transmission line underground here.'

The repair work was quickly finished but the real rescue operation was just beginning.

"Team Leader Park."

"Yes, Undertaker."

"Take your team and head up to Sejong. I'll join you after finishing some business around here."

"Understood. Thank you!"

The patrol caravan moved.

If it had been after the 380th cycle, Byojoki and Kongkongi would have pulled the carts, but unfortunately, this incident happened in the 205th cycle. The patrol members pushed handcarts themselves and moved away.

"Alright. Let's finish this quickly and return. Ha-yul, get on."

-Okay.

Ha-yul jumped and clung to my back like a sloth. I scoured the surrounding area with the regressor's unique walking technique.

Ha-yul, from behind, stretched her hands and formed sign language.

-Fun. Fun. Fun.

"....."

This kid liked riding on my back. She said it felt like riding a roller coaster.

Anyway, after an hour of searching, we couldn't find the missing members.

Just when I was about to give up and go back, something that shouldn't appear in the void caught my eye.

-Oppa, over there.

"...Yeah. I see it too."

Thunk. I stopped walking.

[DREAM CASINO]

Flashing.

Pink and red neon signs shone brightly. In a situation where even in Busan, where power outages occurred daily, I wondered where they got such power.

"A casino...?"

...It seemed the missing members had turned into gamblers.

Footnotes:

Chapter 122

The Dreamer II

Sinnoa

It had been so long that I couldn't remember, but before I became an awakener, in my first cycle, I must have been a pretty decent young man.

Smoking? I didn't do it. Drinking? Not really.

Of course, I never got addicted to gambling either. Except for the fact that I re-rolled my life over 1,000 times to see the best ending.

-Oppa. I'm curious. I want to go inside.

"Hold on."

Therefore, even though Ha-yul tugged at my sleeve as soon as she saw the casino, I, a morally upright young man, didn't give in easily.

Instead, I drew my sword first.

A single slash.

An abrupt strike. My signature weapon, the cane-sword Do-hwa, sliced the world diagonally in half.

Rumble—

Dust rose from all directions. A part of the casino building, which had started illegal operations in the void, collapsed without resistance.

"……! ……!"

Ha-yul jumped around excitedly beside me, but it was just a silent scream.

No matter how curious I was, it was crucial to test whether 'physical force worked' on the opponent.

It wasn't just because I was the type of TRPG player who would suggest to the Game Master, "Can I fetch gasoline and burn down the house from the outside?" before entering a suspicious mansion.

Simply determining if physical force was effective allowed me to gauge the danger level of the void and the monsters.

I calmly observed the reaction of that 'casino anomaly.'

"Hiieeeeek!"

And then I witnessed an astonishing sight.

Tiny creatures came rushing out from the casino entrance, shrieking and flailing.

"The headquarters is collapsing!"

"Hiieeek! An earthquake? Is it an earthquake?"

"That's impossible! Our revolutionary front base was built in the safest area of the Korean Peninsula, considering all possible natural disasters."

"But an earthquake is happening!"

"Comrade 107! How can you deny the reality of a disaster happening right before our eyes with your petty bourgeois attitude?"

"I cannot endure self-criticism anymore."

"Hiiek! Comrades! Please, no purging!"

They were none other than the Tutorial Fairies.

The avatars of the Fairy King, a subordinate of the Outer God Infinite Void. In short, they were just imitations of imitations, rushing out to repair the building.

'...Why are they here again?'

I was dumbfounded. I sheathed my cane-sword and approached the fairies.

Tap, tap. I tapped the shoulder of the nearest fairy.

"Hey."

"Hoeh? Is it a human guest? Sorry, but due to a sudden earthquake disaster, our establishment is temporarily... heeeek? Undertaker!"

The fairy flipped over. Other fairies, who were on ladders holding hammers and tools, all looked this way simultaneously.

"Undertaker? Why? Why is the Undertaker here?"

"The Nightmare of Busan Station!"

"The Tyrant of Baekhwa Girls' High!"

"Comrade 107! What is this? Didn't you assure us that this place would never be discovered?"

"Hiyyyyyak! Run! Run away! If we get caught by that bastard again, our whole race will be annihilated!"

The fairies scattered in all directions, but it wasn't a very smart move. Sometimes, in RPG battles, the 'Run Away' command doesn't work, and this was one of those times.

"Ha-yul."

-Yes.

Spider silk shot out from Ha-yul's fingertips.

Shortly after, all 27 fairies were wrapped in spider silk and delivered in front of me.

"Hiek, hieek..."

"Hey. Weren't you all exterminated along with the Fairy King when

Infinite Void was sealed? What are you doing hiding in this backwater?"

The fairies trembled.

"The Fairy King was just our oppressor...! We never truly submitted to that creature!"

"Oh. So, you mean there's a faction for the king and a revolutionary faction? But wasn't that just part of your setting? Are you still living with that revolutionary stuff?"

"Saying it's just a setting! No! We are very serious!"

The following fairy's words were quite shocking.

"We originally lived well without the Fairy King! But that terrifying entity created the Fairy King to oppress us!"

"...Huh?"

"Now that the Fairy King has perished, we have finally achieved the long-desired liberation of our fairies! However, due to prolonged oppression, our national capital is limited... Thus, we reluctantly entered the gambling business to raise revolutionary funds...!"

"Revolution is innocent!"

After gathering the suspects' testimonies and information, I reached a startling truth.

"So, you mean you had nothing to do with the Outer God Infinite Void, but Infinite Void created the Fairy King and just forcefully ruled over you?"

"Exactly!"

"So, the division between those who followed the Fairy King and those who didn't was real... There were royalists and republicans?"

"Have you been listening with your ears or a toilet bowl, human!"

Goodness.

Yes, in fact, the 'Tutorial Fairies' had nothing to do with Infinite Void. Infinite Void had created the puppet dictator Fairy King to oppress the fairies.

It was a form of colonial rule.

However, after I and Cheon Yo-hwa exterminated Infinite Void, the situation drastically changed. The fairies suddenly found themselves liberated and scattered everywhere, turning into guerrillas with a determination never to be dominated by a colossal anomaly again.

The casino established here... the so-called 'Dream Casino' was a business run by guerrilla fairies.

The reason for its operation? To build a fairy anomaly community by the fairies, for the fairies, and of the fairies!

'Indeed, all the anomalies at Baekhwa Girls' High were ghosts, but the Tutorial Fairies felt somewhat out of place.'

Who would've thought such a secret was hidden?

As I marveled at the wealth of information I didn't know about the world, Ha-yul jumped up and down next to me.

-Oppa. Oppa.

"Hmm?"

-Over there. I want to look around.

Apparently, Ha-yul had been very interested in the casino from the beginning. Well, since the danger had been confirmed to be almost non-existent.

"Hey, little ones. Give us a tour of how this casino operates."

"Hieek. That's nonsense! We can't reveal the interior of our revolutionary base to a bourgeois oppressor...!"

"Should I call Cheon Yo-hwa and ask her to put you in the hourglass where Infinite Void was sealed?"

"A tactical retreat for strategic advancement is understandable even among proletarian comrades...!"

We entered the casino.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the missing members of the caravan were found inside. More precisely, not in the casino but in the hotel built above the casino, where all three were fast asleep.

"What? Why are they all sleeping? Is this your doing?"

"Hieek...! T-This was done with mutual consent! At our casino, we exchange the chips that guests win for dreams instead of money!"

"Exchange for dreams?"

"Yes! Look at our menu...!"

A fairy pulled something out of its bosom. It was a large menu. It was far too big to fit into the fairy's body, but instead of nitpicking, I decided to read it.

♪♫*♪～Feels like walking in a dream～♪♫*♪

Thank you for visiting our 『DREAM』 casino ٩(♡ε♡)۶! We welcome you with all our heart!◕◕)

Rip.

I reflexively tore up the menu.

"Hieek? What are you doing!"

"Sorry. It's my instinct..."

"Is your instinct to tear up menus when you enter a store? That's

scary! We put a lot of effort into making these with good paper, so don't waste them!"

Hmm.

I calmly received another menu and read it again. This time, for the sake of my mental health, I excluded the emoticons and only narrated the contents of the menu plainly.

———————————

[Dream Casino Guide]

*Welcome!

*At 'Dream Casino,' guests can enjoy various games using Fairy Coins. Fairy Coins are purchased with your 'time.'

*Rate: 1 hour = 1 Fairy Coin.

*To use the entertainment facilities in this casino, you must bet at least 1 Fairy Coin.

*Fairy Coins can be exchanged for the following rewards:

- 10 Fairy Coins: Enjoy a comfortable dream for a night. Guaranteed sound sleep. Dream content is unspecified. You can freely set the time from a minimum of 2 hours to a maximum of 24 hours.

- 50 Fairy Coins: Enhance a specific sense in the dream. Vision, smell, taste, etc. The memory of the sense is likely to remain relatively clear after the dream ends.

- 100 Fairy Coins: Choose a specific location in the dream. Any space within 100 square meters (e.g., a top-class restaurant before the end times). Movement beyond the set range is impossible. You can decorate the scenery seen through the windows for 10 Fairy Coins. Please consult with a staff member for detailed settings!

- 1,000 Fairy Coins: Choose a person to appear in the dream. Even someone who no longer exists in reality is possible.

- 2,000 Fairy Coins: Set the relationship between yourself and the person in the dream. Please consult with a staff member for detailed settings!

- 3,000 Fairy Coins: Set your own appearance in the dream. Change of appearance, social status, forgery of resume, gender change, age change are all possible. Please consult with a staff member for detailed settings!

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- 10,000,000,000 Fairy Coins: Guarantee a perfect lucid dream. Promises senses and intellect identical to reality!

This item is a membership. Customers who exchange for this item will be immediately upgraded to 'VVIP' status, and the 'lucid dream' will be guaranteed when using other products.

- 100,000,000,000 Fairy Coins: Freely set the flow of time felt in the dream. Do you want immortality? Live for 100 years in a dream during 1 second in reality! If you get tired of the dream life, you can wake up immediately.

This item is a membership. Customers who exchange for this item will be immediately upgraded to 'VVVIP' status, and the 'time speed control' will be guaranteed when using other products.

*Note: The maximum number of coins that guests can exchange at once is 9,000 Fairy Coins.

*Note: This establishment may demand the repayment of the principal at midnight sharp every day. If you cannot repay the principal, your time will be confiscated for the amount of the missing coins.

How the confiscated time is used is entirely up to this establishment. We wish you safe and healthy gambling.

"....."

I was at a loss for words for a moment.

There were so many issues to address that I didn't know where to start. But first, as a regressor, I asked the question I had to resolve.

"Hey, do you guys... have the ability to manipulate dreams?"

"Hoeh? Of course."

"We are dream fairies."

"We couldn't do our main job due to the oppression of the Fairy King, but our true name is Baku1, the Dream Eaters."

Shock! A truth revealed in the 205th cycle!

The true identity of the Tutorial Fairies was Baku, the Dream Eaters, also known as Succubi and Incubi!

-Fairy Coin. 9000 coins, wish to exchange. Exciting.

Next to me, Ha-yul, who seemed to have absorbed some Japanese culture, was burning with the spirit of Pachinko. I flicked her forehead and looked at the fairies.

"What happens to human customers whose time is confiscated?"

"Hoeh. This happens."

Suddenly.

One of the caravan members who had been lying on the hotel bed suddenly stood up. Ha-yul, startled, shrank back.

The member was a middle-aged man. His beard was overgrown, likely because he had been trapped in the void for days.

He muttered with a vacant expression, his eyes glazed over.

"Hoeh, hoeh, Fairy number 5000... reporting my name and rank..."

"....."

Silence.

Both Ha-yul and I looked at the fairies, demanding an explanation.

The Tutorial Fairies, no, the Baku, tilted their heads with a clueless expression.

"Hoeh. That customer took out a full loan of 9000 coins and lost it all in baccarat in just one day. Now he has to work as a comrade of our Fairy Revolution Club for the next 10 years!"

"That's right!"

"Hoeh! We will keep advancing without stopping until the day of revolution!"

This is insane.

It's a breeding ground for anomalies.

Footnotes:

1 - Baku (獏 or 貘) are Japanese supernatural beings that are said to devour nightmares. They originate from the chinese Mo. According to legend, they were created by the spare pieces that were left over when the gods finished creating all other animals. They have a long history in Japanese folklore and art, and more recently have appeared in manga and anime.

Chapter 123

The Dreamer III

Sinnoa

“But before the revolution could even begin, we were caught by the notorious reactionary, the Undertaker...”

“Hoeek. Tears, we have tears...”

Droop.

The fairies' bodies drooped.

To reiterate, fairies were anomalies that directly challenged human physics.

Not only did their shoulders slump like humans, but their entire bodies melted like slime, sticking to the ground.

“Why do the attempts of those who dream of a world revolution always end in disaster?”

“Failure, another failure...”

“From the moment we left our homeland, we gave up wealth and honor, but seeing all the seeds of our revolution turn to ashes is truly exhausting...”

Dark clouds began to form around the fairies' slime bodies.

Hmm.

There were countless points I wanted to address, but first, I needed to clear up a major misunderstanding.

“Hey. I don’t understand, so let me ask you something.”

“Hoe...?”

“Why am I a reactionary?”

Blink, blink.

The fairies tilted their heads in confusion.

“Well, you caused chaos at Busan Station and Baekhwa Girls’ High, so naturally, you’re our enemy. And our enemy is the enemy of the revolution.”

“That binary thinking is certainly fitting for revolutionaries, but isn't it true that I helped you?”

“Hoeek?”

At that moment, I felt what they call a 'kill angle.'

You could say I felt infinite possibilities.

The first material humans made into a weapon was not stone but the tongue. I wielded an intangible sword.

“At Busan Station, you oppressed humans first, so you should be grateful that I stopped you before you committed any evil deeds. Isn’t that right?”

“…Is that so?”

“And I defeated Infinite Void at Baekhwa Girls’ High, causing the Fairy King to perish. Thanks to that, you were freed from your shackles. Aren’t I your liberator?”

“…….”

“…….”

The fairies looked at each other.

“Hoe?”

“Now that you mention it, it sounds plausible...”

“If self-salvation is impossible, aiming for external salvation is an

acceptable revolutionary methodology.”

“But wouldn’t that just be accepting another new oppressor?”

Whisper, whisper.

Suddenly, a revolutionary debate erupted. For revolutionaries, a debate was a type of coliseum. Those who lost were purged. I also fervently joined the debate.

“No, that's not it. Did I try to dominate you after defeating Infinite Void? I left you alone.”

“Hoe.”

The truth was, I thought they had been exterminated along with Infinite Void, so I ignored them. But in the grand scheme of revolution, minor details didn't matter. Only the linear progression of history was important.

“I didn’t interfere even when you gathered and opened this casino. How can I be a reactionary and an oppressor?”

“Indeed...”

“There’s logic in that...!”

“Wait! Then why did you just destroy our casino with your sword?”

It was a sharp question, but far too weak to damage my iron face.

“Well, you kidnapped our management team first, so I attacked.”

“Hoeek, kidnapped? We didn’t...”

“Moreover, no matter how much the ends justify the means, how can opening an illegal gambling den be revolutionary? Why not sell drugs too? You’d be a perfect mafia gang cartel.”

“Hoeeeek...”

“Then... were you really the savior of our race, Undertaker?”

Their eyes sparkled as they looked up at me. Suspicion and expectation mixed in their gazes, proving now was the time for the finishing blow.

I smiled kindly.

“Don’t call me that. We are comrades in the revolution, born on different days but sworn to die together.”

“Huh!”

“Comrade Undertaker...!”

The fairies sprang up.

“How could this be! We misunderstood Comrade Undertaker’s true intentions all this time!”

“Now that I hear it, not a single word is wrong! Comrade eliminated the Fairy King and its vile master, and asked for nothing in return!”

“Liberator!”

“The Torch of Freedom! Our Savior!”

“Ah, Revolution! The leader guiding the ignorant masses! Comrade Undertaker is the avant-garde of this world!”

It was over.

What was there to hide? From that moment, I leveraged my defeat of Infinite Void to become the secretary-general of the fairies.

When I established the 'Canned Hotel' to train writers in the 560th cycle, the ability to mobilize the fairies en masse stemmed from this position.

“But regardless of mutual misunderstandings, I’m sorry for destroying your base.”

“It’s okay, Comrade Undertaker!”

“We’re the ones who lured your subordinates to the baccarat table,

so we're more apologetic!"

"Hmm. No, no. I understand how commendable your revolutionary spirit is. So, I have a proposal..."

I smiled broadly.

"If you truly want to complete the revolution, you can't stay hidden in this backwater. You need to move to the city. What do you say, comrades? Would you like to experience city life with me?"

"…Hoe?"

A month later.

A splendid banner hung at the entrance of the Inunaki Tunnel that opened into the sea off the coast of Busan.

[Coffee Shop Hideout Event!]

[New Entertainment Facility 'Dream Casino' Now Open!]

[Massive Entertainment Hall Run by Baku! Welcome to Dream Utopia!]

In this modern era, it was fair to say it was the age of advertising. Naturally, just hanging a banner wasn't enough to appeal to customers.

"Huh? What's this?"

"Was there always an ad like this...?"

For the first time, 'advertisements' appeared on SG Net. Whether surfing the website or posting, the 'Dream Casino' ad sparkled continuously on the screen.

It was practically a monopoly.

People who clicked the ad received a welcome gift of 100 coins. While it wasn't as fun as visiting the casino in person, an 'Internet

Casino’ was also established for simple online entertainment.

Of course, it was just a trivial pastime, a kind of bait.

This would eventually make people curious enough to visit the main branch—the 'real casino' in Busan.

And there was more.

“Undertaker, do we really need to go this far?”

“Trust me. This casino business will definitely be a hit.”

“…Alright.”

The Saintess sighed but reluctantly followed my lead.

Soon, every Awakener active on the Korean Peninsula received a constellation message.

[The Dream Baku manages the casino.]

That's right.

The debut of a new constellation!

Previously, I had created a new constellation called ‘The Librarian of the Great Library’ when establishing the 'Library Society’s Encyclopedia of Anomalies' board. I put Sim Ah-ryeon in charge.

This time, by setting up the casino in the Inunaki Tunnel, I forged a new constellation called ‘Dream Baku.’

[The Dream Baku is the lord of all fairies.]

[The Dream Baku desires you to be intoxicated in dreams. Play. That is the way to praise and worship the ‘Dream Baku.]

[The deeper your faith in Dream Baku, the more varied the types of entertainment you can enjoy in the casino.]

The Librarian of the Great Library. The Dream Baku.

Gradually, the scale of the website was expanding to fit the name ‘SG Net’—‘Constellation Net.’

Names borrowed from historical figures were slowly becoming more real, reaching out to awakeners.

Noh Do-hwa, who had been informed of my plan in advance, frowned.

“Undertaker, is there a reason we must proceed with this casino business? Even if the transactions are only ‘time’ and ‘dreams,’ a casino is still a casino. Won’t it have adverse effects...?”

“It will.”

I didn't deny it.

“Some awakeners might get addicted to gambling. As a result, they might mortgage their entire lifetime to the fairies.”

“Even so...?”

“Even so, we must proceed. Not just because there are too few entertainment facilities these days. Chief, look at this.”

“Hmm...?”

I lifted a transparent box. Inside were coin-like objects lined up.

They were casino chips.

“We have finally discovered something. What do you see, Chief?”

“Uh. Aren’t those casino chips...?”

“Yes. Money.”

Clatter.

I grabbed a handful of chips and dropped them on the table.

“Currency. Money, Chief. Think about it. If we succeed with Dream Casino, we can finally circulate ‘safe money’ in this damned

apocalypse.”

“...!”

Noh Do-hwa’s eyes widened behind her glasses.

Our gazes electrified.

“Until now, we’ve only managed to maintain exchange rights in very limited ways, backed by food. But this is different. Fairy Coins, used in Dream Casino, can literally be exchanged for ‘any goods’ people want.”

“In a dream...”

“Yes, even if it's a dream. A dream you can set up yourself isn’t much different from reality. Look at the last item. With a hundred billion coins, you can turn all those dreams into perfect lucid dreams. With a trillion coins? You can control the flow of time in the dream.”

“Aha. Aha...”

“Practically, very few people will manage to hold a hundred billion or a trillion coins. But it doesn’t matter. Currency is originally an illusion, a fantasy, a ghost. The difference from mere individual delusion is—”

“Not a single person’s dream but a dream shared by all humans... Hence, a fantasy that carries the weight of real-world materials...”

“Exactly.”

“Huh. Literally a dream casino. The play of Baku...”

Noh Do-hwa picked up a casino chip I had dropped with her delicate fingers.

“Good...”

Her monocle glinted. A sigh escaped from her slightly parted lips.

“Not the gold standard, nor petro-dollars, nor Bitcoin, but ‘dream standard’... Hah. Currency, which started with the dream of civilization, returns to its original form at the end. What a paradox...”

“How about it?”

“Huh...”

Noh Do-hwa adjusted her monocle. Then she looked at me intently.

“It suits you...”

“Pardon?”

“I said it suits you. This is essentially an advanced form of your power, isn’t it? Time Seal or something...”

“.....”

“I know you regard Time Seal as a curse, not a power. But from my perspective, you are also a kind of Baku, Undertaker. And you’ve just strengthened your power by subjugating anomalies... Congratulations. What do they call it? Ability upgrade...?”

“I only repeat the same day endlessly. The fairies' dreams are just simulations. No matter how powerful their abilities, they can’t create dreams by accounting for all variables in reality.”

I looked at Noh Do-hwa.

We examined each other’s gazes.

“Master Artisan Noh Do-hwa. Just as the sword Do-hwa you made wasn’t something the Outer God Infinite Void could calculate.”

“.....”

“I will aim for reality. As I have so far. Forever.”

Silence fell.

With a deep sigh, Noh Do-hwa nodded.

“...Good. Then there’s no worry. Let’s proceed with the currency reform immediately. It’s a damned brilliant plan...”

That was the highest praise Noh Do-hwa could give.

“Oh, and what will we name this new base currency to be circulated in our world? Fairy Coin...?”

“No. I thought of calling it Dream Currency (夢貨), but simply calling it ‘Won’ might be better.”

“Oh? Why’s that...?”

“Familiarity will make it easier for people.”

I tossed the casino chip, or rather, the new world's currency, to Noh Do-hwa.

She skillfully caught my money.

“A dream flowing in this endlessly repeating world, so Won (圓). A currency that lives off human wishes and dreams, so Won (願). And a target of curses and lamentation, so Won (怨). Conveniently, both Japan and China use the terms Yen (円) and Yuan (元), respectively. It can be interpreted in many ways. Powerful spells often hide behind multiple names.”

“Hmmm... Well.”

Noh Do-hwa pocketed the money with her usual twisted smile.

“Not bad. I’ll leave the magical aspects to you, Undertaker, as it’s your specialty...”

There’s an epilogue.

Not long after, the National Road Management Corps began to serve as a ‘bank.’

They freely supplied each major guild in various cities with 9 billion Won worth of ‘currency.’ Interest-free.

When the guild leaders visited Busan, they each used the casino and left excellent reviews in reality and on SG Net.

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: It was a midsummer night's dream. How long has it been since I tasted such a high-class omakase restaurant? A glass of wine. A warm partner. It was a time to realize again the truth that life is enough with just that. Though I couldn't leave photos, isn't that also a form of beauty? Today's saying: Moment, stop. You are truly beautiful.

-[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: Totally recommended!! I could enjoy an ordinary school life! I achieved my bucket list of walking home hand in hand under the cherry blossoms! (>_<);;

Rave reviews.

Naturally, the guild leaders' reviews stimulated other guild members and further piqued the interest of awakeners across the Korean Peninsula.

Within less than two years, the Won became the official base currency.

It was almost no problem to exchange goods with only the Won in the Korean Peninsula-Japan archipelago-China continent regions, considering the naming preferences of those still concerned with the sequence of the countries' names.

The 205th cycle might have been a critical turning point in some sense.

Of course, many incidents occurred due to Dream Casino and the Won... But those are stories for another time.

So, let's end this chapter with a glimpse into a dream I bought at the casino.

"Brother Hyun-deok!"

"Oh! Undertaker! My brother, you've done a great job!"

"How could this be my achievement alone? Thanks to Brother

Woonjang leading the soldiers, and the fault lies with Jo-jeok for betraying the people's will. Ultimately, it's Brother Hyun-deok's merit for gathering the scattered people of the world."

"Hohoho. I can't compete with your eloquence, Undertaker."

I, no, Yu-bi, Zhang Fei, Guan Yu, and the Undertaker Sworn Brotherhood founded the Shu Han in the dream. Naturally, we cut off Cao Cao's head and threw it into the waters of Xu Province.

This was true justice. The proper Romance of the Three Kingdoms. A story so moving, one couldn't watch without tears.

I was deeply moved.

How could I selfishly keep this thrill to myself?

Right after waking from the dream, I pounded the keyboard (the reincarnation laptop given by the Outer God).

In no time, a lengthy Romance of the Three Kingdoms novel was completed.

I handed this 'masterpiece' to my so-called editor.

"Dok-seo, make sure to include this in the main story. Wow, even I think it's a masterpiece. A monumental parody of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. I plan to serialize it on SG Net too, so in the main story..."

"Wait. Are you telling me to insert a 600-chapter Romance of the Three Kingdoms parody into the novel I'm editing?"

"Exactly. That solves the issue of the number of chapters you mentioned perfectly. The readers will cry tears of joy."

"Aren't you a crazy maniac?"

"...?"

...Unfortunately, it seems my masterpiece won't be included in the main story due to some ignorant chuuni.

Footnotes:

Chapter 124

The Disbeliever I

Sinnoa

Do you know what promise Koreans will never keep?

"Let's have a meal together sometime."

That's right.

To Koreans, this phrase doesn't actually mean meeting up to increase insulin secretion when you're really hungry.

To interpret it precisely,

"We are not allies, but at least we declare that we are not hostile to each other at this moment."

Every country has sophisticated diplomatic expressions like this.

For example, when a Japanese person from Kyoto asks, "Would you like some ochazuke?" it doesn't mean "Wow! Traditional food! The Japanese are so kind!"

If North Korea launches a missile, the automatic AI translation in your head should process it as "Please notice us! We're here too!" instead of "Damn Southern bastards, die!"

It's the same with "Let's have a meal together sometime."

If you respond to a Korean's statement with "Sure! When? Tomorrow? Next week?" the other party will seriously question whether this diplomatic relationship is worth maintaining.

And there's one common diplomatic statement that transcends national borders:

"The end of the world is coming soon! Everyone!"

"Hell is coming! I can see the scenery of hell with my eyes! Get on the new ark before the hellfire pours down!"

"I am the Son of Heaven and the Savior. Those who believe this truth will be blessed, but calamity will follow the disbelievers, this I declare."

It's the doomsday prophecy of cults.

Anyone who lives with their brain's translation function always on knows that the proper interpretation of "Someday, the world will end!" from cultists is: "But if you donate, we might be able to extend the deadline."

People who don't understand this basic diplomatic language are a minority in any country. The marginalized weak who are excluded from international diplomacy are always exploited.

And then the Void arrived.

“Wow! The end of the world really is here! The guru’s prophecy was true! Guru! What should we do now? Should we start the mass suicide you mentioned?”

“Uh.”

The brains of anomalies didn’t have a translator installed. Of course, they couldn’t understand the subtleties of human diplomacy.

On the day the Void arrived, cult leaders worldwide felt an involuntary urge to ask the anomalies, "Are you seriously that clueless?"

“No… what I meant was, just because the end is near doesn’t mean we have to commit suicide…”

“Guru, stop talking nonsense and hurry up and kill yourself.”

Most cult leaders found themselves on the receiving end of the clueless accusation instead.

But they didn’t need to be too sad. Their followers weren’t mean enough to completely abandon their gurus. They kindly completed the “prophecy fulfillment” achievement together.

- Breaking news. This morning at around 11 a.m., evidence of mass suicide was found in a facility in Chungcheongbuk-do…

- According to police investigations, there is no clear connection between the recent series of collective incidents…

- The terrorist group that occupied the Seoul subway has been identified as members of a certain cult. They committed mass suicide once a day, including their leader…

It was a harsh season for cult leaders.

There had never been such an unemployment crisis. Running a cult required more stringent choices.

However, in troubled times, heroes always emerge.

In the Korean Peninsula, two cult leaders successfully overcame countless suicide suggestions and declared, "I want to live! With you!"

Entry number one.

“All Awakeners must join the New Buddha to escape the sin of killing as soon as possible! Those who don’t are going against the will of Hwaeom! They are disruptors of universal peace!”

“Immortality without killing! Spiritual Hwaeom! Eternal cosmic peace!”

New Buddhism.

Coincidentally, a monk in central Korea who had settled in his city saw the zombie virus, the Udumbara, and reached enlightenment.

The faith that wearing flowers on their heads would make them immune to anomalies resonated deeply with modern people who doubted the performance of their mental translators. They willingly

replaced their brain translators with more eco-friendly materials.

New Buddhism rapidly expanded its influence, dominating the Korean Peninsula, the Japanese archipelago, and the Chinese continent. At one time, South Korea's most popular export was not K-pop but K-religion.

Of course, once I started defeating the Udumbara, it lost all its influence. The monk and his followers booked a one-way ticket to Nirvana.

Entry number two.

“Understood! Brothers and sisters! I, your shepherd, will lead the way!”

“As expected of our leader!”

“Mo Gwang-seo! Mo Gwang-seo!”

Mo Gwang-seo.

Like all pioneers of new doctrines, Mo Gwang-seo had a unique background.

He was a double excommunicate, first excommunicated by the Catholic Church from the Mary’s Ark of Salvation, then again by the group that excommunicated him. He was truly an unparalleled cultist.

When you multiply a negative by a negative, it becomes a positive. Unusually for a cult leader, Mo Gwang-seo had a mathematical brain and was convinced he was on the right path of faith.

His followers numbered around 210. He didn’t even rank among the top cults on the Korean Peninsula, but Mo Gwang-seo didn’t mind. After all, Jesus had only twelve disciples (one of whom respected Brutus more than his master).

Mo Gwang-seo's confidence was not without basis.

More accurately, he created the basis.

“What’s that smell? Leader, what is that?”

“Ether.”

“Pardon?”

“This is the holy ether that will guide me to heaven, contained in this barrel.”

The latest chemical substance Mo Gwang-seo called ether was also known as gasoline.

Indeed, Mo Gwang-seo proved he was on a different level from other mediocre cult leaders.

Before his followers could even hint at wanting an explosive show like the one they heard the next-door cult leader had, Mo Gwang-seo had already prepared gasoline.

“Brothers and sisters! Fire has always been holy ether! It purifies the worldly filth and brings us closer to heaven! But cleansing these foul airs is no easy task. As a soul who has penetrated the six spiritual realms, I will pave the way and guide you all to the heavenly kingdom above.”

The commonality between a rock star and a cult leader is the importance of performance on stage.

As soon as his speech ended, Mo Gwang-seo doused himself in oil from head to toe.

The smell of gasoline was so strong that even someone with pollen-impaired senses in spring could notice it.

“Everyone! You must do the same. Each of you must break through this wind path I open with your full might as one so that the souls left on Earth can easily ascend! And let the world be saved by the merciful light of glory and the blessing of love! In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen!”

Mo Gwang-seo quickly ran outside the hall. He had received a normal education in South Korea and knew what would happen if

gasoline ignited in an enclosed space.

Incidentally, he majored in film directing in college.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen!”

“Leader! Leader!”

Moved by the cries, a few followers shouted “Amen!” and chased after the cult leader. One particularly fast follower easily caught up to the leader and hugged him tightly.

“Leader! I’ll go with you! I’ll pave the wind path with you!”

“Oh- ohhh!”

Perhaps Mo Gwang-seo intended to keep running and escape.

After leaving the followers' sight, he might have planned to detonate pre-set explosives to make it seem like the leader sacrificed himself to ascend.

Then, if he returned a few days later, he would appear to the followers as a resurrected messiah. This would be a textbook example of turning a crisis into an opportunity.

What Mo Gwang-seo didn’t account for was that his performance was so brilliant it overly inspired the followers.

“Let go! Let go! Don’t touch that—”

Boom!

According to survivors, an explosion occurred near the parking lot of the hall. Even if Mo Gwang-seo had doused himself in oil, simply catching fire wouldn’t have caused a massive outdoor explosion.

Mo Gwang-seo and the two followers who went after him were blown up on the spot. Particularly, Mo Gwang-seo’s body was torn to pieces and burned for a long time.

“The leader has ascended!”

“The leader has paved the wind path!”

“Ah, holy. Amen...”

Had the story ended here, it wouldn’t have been different from countless other cults that sprang up and naturally dissipated right after the Void’s arrival.

As always, misfortune struck when the curtain didn’t fall at the story's end.

“Huh?”

“What is it, Mr. Kim? Don’t change your mind now, just douse yourself with gasoline.”

“No, look! Look at the leader’s ascension site! That’s...!”

“What?”

As the remaining followers were preparing for a group immolation in the parking lot, someone pointed.

There was light.

This wasn’t a literary interpretation about logos meaning light in the Bible. The literal ‘light’ appeared near the outdoor parking lot of Okjeong Lake in Okjeong-dong, Yangju, Gyeonggi Province.

Step. A human silhouette walked out from the center of the light.

“Oh, ohhh...”

It was Mo Gwang-seo.

Backlit by the light, Mo Gwang-seo looked as if he was surrounded by a halo.

Thud. The followers kneeled without hesitation.

They wept.

“A miracle...”

“The leader has resurrected!”

Smirk.

Mo Gwang-seo, or rather, the being the followers believed to be Mo Gwang-seo, did not answer. He merely smiled kindly.

But that was enough for the mentally conditioned followers.

Like heroines in light novels falling for the protagonist’s head-patting technique, the followers washed their tears with tears, kissed Mo Gwang-seo’s feet, and pledged eternal loyalty.

“It’s a resurrection! It’s a miracle of resurrection!”

Now, the followers no longer needed the wind path to ascend to heaven.

The very place where the resurrected Jesus existed, this land, was the holy temple.

They didn’t hear trumpets, nor did they see angels, but those trivial details didn’t matter. To live as a cultist, you must have the courage to ignore life's trivialities. And the 200 followers were indeed courageous.

“Chairman Mo Gwang-seo was the resurrected Jesus!”

“Oh! Amen! Amen!”

“I am saved! We are saved!”

Mo Gwang-seo won.

Where? In the religious war.

In this land called the Korean Peninsula, a jar of despair with 20 gods and 50 resurrected Jesuses waging eternal crusades, Mo Gwang-seo was chosen as the last man standing.

Now, Mo Gwang-seo’s cult was reborn as the 'Resurrection Church.'

“Spread this miracle far and wide!”

“Believe in the miracles of holy water and holy fire!”

“Evangelize and evangelize again! Amen!”

Followers of the Resurrection Church traveled across the country with holy water—gasoline—marked on their foreheads.

While New Buddhism absorbed followers from the Buddhist sects, the Resurrection Church voraciously devoured Christian believers.

Of course, other cultists became the most tempting prey.

“What? Apostatize? How dare you! Our leader received the Eucharist from the Pope, and it turned into flesh and blood in his mouth, and our statue of the Virgin Mary shed tears 500 times, and we have photos and evidence!”

“So what? Our leader resurrected.”

“What?”

“Our leader is the resurrected Jesus. What can you say to that?”

Mo Gwang-seo’s resurrection didn’t end at one. The first time was hard; the second, third, and fourth were easy.

Every Sunday, Mo Gwang-seo was engulfed in gasoline and set ablaze. And each time, he walked out of the light, beaming a merciful smile.

“Ah, ahh!”

“Do you believe now?”

“I believe! Amen!”

The material ‘evidence’ other cults boasted of was nullified by the vivid resurrection show before their eyes.

Sinning by killing the person they believed to be Jesus every Sunday was justified before the mission of evangelism. It was unrealistic to expect rationality from them.

Attending Sunday mass and then returning to their base, the apostates immediately arrested the ‘false prophets.’

“You Satanic bastards! Do you think you can do this to me and get away with it?”

“Shut up! You are Satan!”

“What, what?”

The competitors who were gods and Jesuses yesterday turned into Satan overnight.

Followers criticized themselves for being deceived by the Antichrist and poured the holy water from the Resurrection Church on Satan’s head.

“Please, spare me! Please, spare me!”

“Let the ether purify the filthy soul. Amen.”

“Amen!”

Holy beacons ignited across the country. Naturally, stories of the Resurrection Church began to reach me, who was active between Seoul and Busan.

‘...What the hell.’

My eyes grew cold.

There was nothing special about cults themselves. They had always been prevalent on the Korean Peninsula.

Ever since Hwanung hypnotized a perfectly normal bear, saying, "You are not a bear anymore, but a human," this land had been famous for mental brainwashing.

But the Resurrection Church was a bit different.

I was a sound Korean. So, as soon as I heard Mo Gwang-seo’s story, the AI translator in my head worked furiously.

A being that keeps resurrecting?

But doesn't understand human language?

Glows and smiles silently with each resurrection?

'...No matter how I look at it, that's not a person. It's a human transformed into an anomaly.'

Indeed.

These cultists were no longer content worshiping humans and had started venerating 'anomalies' as Jesus.

Footnotes:

Chapter 125

The Disbeliever II

Sinnoa

Initially, I didn't pay much attention to Mo Gwang-seo and the Resurrection Church.

The stories about Mo Gwang-seo and the actions of his followers described in this chapter were embellished by about 50% with my imagination. I had reconstructed the events from various testimonies rather than witnessing them firsthand.

Why didn't I care?

'I'm too busy to deal with cults.'

Frankly, they weren't worth my attention.

The situation was different with New Buddha, which was also a heresy. Although similar in using anomalies for faith, New Buddha's Udumbara posed a direct threat to human civilization.

Moreover, New Buddha was hostile towards Awakeners. Immediate action was necessary.

But the Resurrection Church?

"Awakeners? What does that matter now? Jesus has resurrected!"

"Amen!"

"The end has come. Brothers and sisters, repent now and board the ark of salvation designed by our leader."

"You! You look like a kind person who must be saved!"

Aside from occasionally encountering evangelists on the street, they weren't particularly harmful. And street evangelism was already a

side quest encountered on the way to work in South Korea before the apocalypse.

As a regressor, I had far more important main quests to worry about.

The more crucial fact was that the Resurrection Church also had its own main quest.

- Everyone! I will pave the path so you can ascend. You must also help others.

During his lifetime, before transforming into a Resurrection Anomaly, Mo Gwang-seo targeted a unique sales point in the religious market of the Korean Peninsula.

- But where do you think your help is most urgently needed?

- Hmm? ...Yeouido?

- No! It's North Korea!

- What.

He advocated the Northern Evangelism Theory.

- Jesus said to go out into the roads and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. Why did He say to compel them? Was He telling us to drag unbaptized people into the church by force?

- Absolutely not. There are those who forcefully block the path and fence off the sheep who would normally respond to the shepherd’s call. They are evil Satanic demons. These are the Antichrists we must forcefully oppose.

- The unbaptized brothers and sisters in North Korea are not at fault. The grave sin lies with the Kim family, who have erected iron fences and barriers against them. Since the Korean Peninsula was split, the 'path' was cut off, and 'fences' were erected. Jesus commands us to restore the weeping path and the bloody fence with your steps.

- Ah, brothers and sisters! We do not tread this difficult path out of pride or to show off. We believe that other brothers will guide the sheep through easier fields, and we take this arduous path of evangelism out of faith and love for them.

- So let the lightning of faith break down Satan's wall and let our steps reach their fingertips as soon as possible, Amen.

Mo Gwang-seo's Northern Evangelism Theory was quite well-received among his followers. More precisely, those who responded to it joined his congregation.

In truth, the Northern Evangelism Theory was just another 'diplomatic' phrase Mo Gwang-seo had devised.

If understood literally as a call to march north to spread the doctrine, both Mo Gwang-seo and the JSA guards would be at a loss. As a citizen of a democratic country, Mo Gwang-seo had merely presented a 'promise' to the electorate.

But as mentioned before, the root of all evil lay with the anomalies that did not have a translator installed in their brains. In this case, it was the Ten Legs.

"The barbed wire fence has fallen!"

Ten Legs was highly responsive to gatherings of over 300 people.

Having concluded that Korean humans were quite palatable, the Ten Legs became interested in similar meat. The military camps in North Korea, where the distinction between prison and barracks was becoming blurred, looked like Michelin 1-star fusion restaurants to the Ten Legs.

"Ah! Chairman Mo Gwang-seo, no, Jesus's prophecy has been proven again!"

"The fist of fire has broken the fence, now it is time to spread the gospel!"

"Let's go, brothers! To North Korea!"

The Resurrection Church really did ‘march north.’

After absorbing various cults across the country into their congregation, they trained them and continually sent their followers marching north.

This new crusade continued its advance even as the national army was decimated.

If you wondered why a crusade appeared on the Korean Peninsula instead of Jerusalem, you either didn't study history enough or were influenced by Occidentalism. Pyongyang was originally known as the Jerusalem of the East.

“March north!”

“God wills it!”

Kaesong, Kumchon, Pongsan, Sariwon.

North Korea's major strongholds were liberated one by one. The Korean Peninsula undoubtedly had a terrain that favored volunteer soldiers over regular troops.

The Crusade’s success was simple. The Resurrection Church treated the Ten Legs that broke the armistice line as ‘Apostle of God,’ and followed behind them after they devoured the North Korean army.

In a sense, the Resurrection Church’s followers were among the humans most adept at surviving the apocalypse. Their leader was an anomaly. Their vanguard was an anomaly. Undoubtedly, few groups utilized anomalies as effectively as they did.

And finally.

"Look over there!"

"It's Pyongyang! We’ve finally arrived!"

"Ah... The Lord's light fills the Jerusalem of the East."

Pyongyang was liberated!

The followers were thrilled. Besides Gung Ye, what other religious figure since Dangun had achieved such a feat?

Of course, the so-called Jerusalem of the East was devoid of the Lord's light. The only church in Pyongyang, Jangchung Cathedral, had long been in ruins. There were hardly any people left.

—There's something coming!-

In fact, they were disappearing in real-time.

The North Korean regime had prepared for a final soul-staking battle to defend Pyongyang. And as you might guess from the past tense, they had been utterly annihilated.

There were even some Chinese troops in Pyongyang. Their minds had abruptly reverted to the 1950s upon hearing the intel that liberation forces from the south were advancing north.

That's right. Although they sometimes forgot, Pyongyang and Beijing were blood allies.

So they bled together.

—Guah!-

The Ten Legs roared. Ten Legs was super strong, the strongest among anomalies.

With its tentacles reminiscent of Cthulhu, the Ten Legs burrowed effortlessly through the underground bedrock, rendering bunkers meaningless.

The leadership of the North Korean regime, the generals of the North Korean army, and most importantly, the North Korean soldiers and Pyongyang citizens, all departed to meet Mr. Marx.

Even the Chinese People's Liberation Army troops from Manchuria realized they might have misinterpreted the intel. The Ten Legs liked East Asians too much to be an imperialist vanguard.

At that moment.

As North Koreans perished, Chinese despaired, and South Koreans who had just arrived in Pyongyang screamed.

Step.

Mo Gwang-seo walked out.

“Chairman!”

A follower shouted. The followers who had followed Mo Gwang-seo even before he performed the miracle of resurrection still used the old title 'Chairman' to flaunt their sense of privilege.

“Jesus!”

The belated converts also shouted. Mo Gwang-seo had walked at the forefront throughout the crusade march. Seeing such an esteemed person walk towards that terrifying monster! Even if the Ten Legs was apostles of God, it was natural to worry.

“What the hell is that bastard?”

The North Koreans also shouted. The Chinese were no different. It was a normal reaction.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, or Chairman Jesus bastard, Mo Gwang-seo walked.

With a squelch, Mo Gwang-seo was skewered by one of the numerous tentacles of the Ten Legs.

“Chairman!”

“Oh Lord! Lord!”

It was as predictable as the law of gravity, yet the Resurrection Church’s followers were horrified. How could this be! The Ten Legs were indeed apostles of God, but it turned out their name was Judas Iscariot.

This was why one should always confirm the true name before summoning a servant. The Resurrection Church’s followers seemed

to be paying the price for ignoring an old proverb.

As everyone either burst into tears or looked at the crying people with confusion, wondering 'What the hell are they doing?'

Flash—

There was light again.

—GRuah!

The light radiated from the tentacle of the Ten Legs. The city, amidst a massacre, was momentarily enveloped in a white glow.

Ten Legs spat Mo Gwang-seo out as if it had bitten into a shell while eating fresh oysters.

By the time the light subsided, all the humans participating in the urban warfare saw Mo Gwang-seo's halo.

“……”

“……”

The battlefield fell silent.

Smirk.

Mo Gwang-seo, the Resurrection Anomaly who monopolized the gaze of tens of thousands, just smiled kindly, unchanged.

—Grrrr…

And a miracle occurred.

Ten Legs that had bitten and spat out Mo Gwang-seo turned its back.

Perhaps in human language, it would translate to 'I wouldn't come to this tasteless restaurant even if you paid me,' but just as anomalies didn’t have human translators, humans didn’t have anomaly translators either.

Thud, thud... The massive figure of the Ten Legs gradually receded. A moment ago, the faces of the North Korean soldiers and the Chinese soldiers, who had been ready to be annihilated, were now filled with astonishment and awe.

What had just happened?

“Hallelujah!”

The Resurrection Church’s followers provided the answer to their question.

“Jesus has defeated the Apostle of God!”

“Ah, compatriots! Praise the Lord! He has affirmed our crusade!”

“It’s a miracle, a miracle!”

The Chinese troops didn’t understand the Koreans' excitement. But the North Koreans did.

Through the North Korean officers' translation, the Chinese soldiers also understood the Resurrection Church followers' cries.

The few remaining soldiers and citizens' eyes changed.

Coincidentally, that day was Saturday, and the next day, the Resurrection Church held a special ‘mass.’ Even disbelievers who were still skeptical of Mo Gwang-seo's miracle attended the live concert to see how amazing it was.

The mass ended.

That day, Pyongyang was reclaimed as the Jerusalem of Joseon.

The Eastern Holy State.

It was the name of the new country established in the ruins of Pyongyang.

Although not internationally recognized, it was no less competitive.

The previous regime was similar anyway.

Now, North Korea was Rome itself. Though too far east to be called Eastern Rome, it didn't matter.

Naturally, the capital was Pyeongyang Sacred City. The head of state was Mo Gwang-seo.

Mo Gwang-seo's official title was neither king nor president, prime minister, nor chairman. Not even the pope.

The only fitting title for Mo Gwang-seo was Jesus, and so the full name of the head of the Eastern Holy State was set as 'Mo Gwang-seo Jesus.'

The comedy scripted and starred by the Resurrection Church had finally reached its climax.

"No, fuck. What the hell..."

Noh Do-hwa's expression upon hearing the news from the North was priceless.

"Wasn't that place a communist den? What's this Jesus rap now? Marx would have defined religion as the opium of the people...?"

"Hmm. Wouldn't a cult be better than Juche ideology?"

"Fuck, what's better? They're all the same shit. The country's really gone to hell..."

Indeed, this world was a fantasy. If a reality with 'Holy Empire' marked on the map wasn't fantasy, what was?

In any case, Ten Legs remembered Pyongyang as a 'dirty restaurant' and avoided it.

The followers of the Eastern Holy State praised this as the 'glorious miracle of Mo Gwang-seo Jesus Christ.'

Naturally, other North Koreans flocked to Pyongyang. It wasn't so much that they were deceived by the Eastern Holy State's

propaganda but rather because they didn’t want to serve a meal to the nasty Ten Legs.

As time passed in the apocalypse, the governments of Korea, Japan, and China collapsed one after another.

Although the three East Asian countries didn't die together despite being born at different times, they bonded like brothers in death. Only the Eastern Holy State preserved its national identity. Truly, it was a region where the concept of international diplomatic cooperation had been neutered for generations.

As surrounding nations watched with ‘Why haven’t they collapsed yet?’ looks (similar to the previous regime), the Eastern Holy State gradually became self-aware.

‘Huh? All our neighboring countries are gone?’

‘Then isn’t it legitimate to occupy those empty lands now?’

The Eastern Holy State once again initiated ‘march north.’

They didn’t justify it with some newfound nationalism. Such nationalistic thinking was not sexy.

The Eastern Holy State was the only government directly recognized by the Lord. Therefore, it could officially claim any territory in the world.

Thus, the Second Crusade was officially declared in Pyongyang Sacred City.

The Crusaders, restricted to populations of around 300 by the Ten Legs, swept through the Gando region like a tsunami. Liberation, liberation, and more liberation.

“Today, the Holy Crusade of the East liberated three more villages, guiding them into the arms of our Mo Gwang-seo Jesus Christ. Let us pray for the well-being of our brothers and sisters. Amen.”

“Amen!”

This was not a contest between nations or peoples. It was not a national conflict.

It was a bloody battle between the Resurrection Church, equipped with a hypnosis app, and the unfortunate ordinary people opposing them.

Naturally, in this genre of battle, the ordinary people were always at a disadvantage. Even those who had never encountered an R-rated doujinshi could sense the clear foreboding.

If this were the world of a doujinshi, the first person to sense the ‘foreboding’ would have been the first to fall.

“Hmmm...”

Fortunately, reality was not a doujinshi.

Unlike doujinshi, which strictly adhere to genre conventions even if it lowers humanity's average intelligence, real humans could make normal judgments.

Especially Noh Do-hwa, the Director of the National Road Management, who would confiscate the opponent's phone if they had a hypnosis app and explain '101 reasons why you should commit suicide right now' in return.

Initially appalled by the cult chaos, Noh Do-hwa's eyes gradually changed.

“Undertaker...”

“Yes.”

“I’m just curious, but is there any way to use Mo Gwang-seo's Resurrection Church...?”

It was a kind of fate.

The Director of National Road Management, the ruler of the 'South' of the Korean Peninsula, instinctively began to pay attention to the leader of the 'North.'

Footnotes:

Chapter 126

The Disbeliever III

Sinnoa

It was obvious, but Noh Do-hwa was a pragmatist.

She was an extremist who went beyond the black cat and white cat analogy, believing it didn't matter if the cat was black or white as long as it tasted good (and indeed, rats were a good source of nutrition in the apocalypse).

In short, Noh Do-hwa was specialized in squeezing out extreme efficiency from any situation, regardless of whether the counterpart was a cult or something else.

"Use them? The Resurrection Church?"

"Yes. I'd like to consult the ‘Regressor Wiki’ first, though... The Resurrection Church won't last long, right?"

"Of course. The Resurrection Church will collapse within three years at the latest."

Indeed.

No matter how wildly the Resurrection Church expanded, aiming not only for the North Korean region but also reaching into Manchuria, there was no reason to care. It was destined to collapse soon anyway.

It was different from New Buddha's Udumbara.

Udumbara genuinely provided 'benefits' to its virus-infected followers. New Buddhists could regenerate from severed limbs, crushed heads, and torn organs endlessly. They could even live without eating, surviving solely on photosynthesis. If not for the minor drawback of having to sacrifice their lives to the World Tree upon the due date, I might have converted to New Buddha myself.

But the Resurrection Church?

"Mo Gwang-seo has no powers. Apart from shining every time he resurrects, he has no abilities at all."

"Hmm..."

This had already been verified multiple times.

In one cycle, we even kidnapped Mo Gwang-seo and conducted biological experiments on him. We tried everything: scorching, roasting, burning him with aura, and other methods.

'Is he still not dead? Even now?'

Despite our efforts, the results were disappointing. Mo Gwang-seo resurrected every time.

One day, we tied Mo Gwang-seo to a spot where a meteor shower was expected to hit. The meteor shower, which devastated everything around it, failed to kill him.

We even hired a UFO to kill him. We put Mo Gwang-seo on a fishing boat that sailed to the East Sea, timing it with the fall of aliens there.

-Kyaaaah!

-Kiyah! Kyaaah!

An interstellar warrior race attacked Mo Gwang-seo.

Flash! Flash! Mo Gwang-seo died dozens of times per second, creating blinding flashes everywhere. The East Sea turned into the hottest club in the world in no time.

Thirty minutes passed.

-Kiyaaaah...

-Kyak, kyaaaah...

The miracle UFO, which could survive space but melted like salt in

H_2O, sank.

The aliens, who had put all their energy into the club party, also turned into liquid and flowed away. These guys were just Ultraman with a time limit extended from 3 minutes to 30 minutes.

Bing—

Amidst the aliens evolving into slimy slimes, only Mo Gwang-seo remained, smiling peacefully on the fishing boat.

It was an astonishing vitality.

But... that was all.

The light emitted by Mo Gwang-seo had no divine blessing, not even the rejuvenating effects of a Bacchus drink. It was just bright.

Very bright.

Besides damaging the human cornea, it had no other, real, or significant meaning.

-Ooh! Mo Gwang-seo Jesus Christ has returned to save the Earth!

-I believe!

For some reason, people were fascinated by Mo Gwang-seo. They worshipped him as a god, despite his lack of usefulness beyond shining.

Why?

I had no idea. If I knew, I would have run to Pyongyang to chant Amen to Mo Gwang-seo myself.

Isn't the world mysterious?

"Well, there's no need to analyze why. Leave that to psychologists or sociologists. What's important to us is that the Resurrection Church has mobilization and action capabilities..."

Returning to the main point, Noh Do-hwa continued.

"We only need to guard a few strongholds. If the Resurrection Church can attract the attention of anomalies in the North, wouldn't that be beneficial?"

"Oh. Are you planning to use the Resurrection Church as a human shield?"

"Yes..."

Clang.

Noh Do-hwa lightly tapped the ankle brace with a hammer. Even after becoming the Director of National Road Management, she would make or repair braces herself if there were no urgent issues.

In her usual routine, Noh Do-hwa had a memo attached to the brace with the name Shin Soo-bin written on it. She was one of the elderly who still referred to her as 'the brace mechanic' rather than 'Director of National Road Management.'

"Undertaker, if you think about it rationally, the Resurrection Church doesn't cause us much trouble aside from their northern crusade. If we can use these people who are so desperate to die as shields, wouldn't that be the right way to use lives...?"

"Hmm."

I pondered.

In previous cycles, I didn't interfere with the Resurrection Church. I viewed the Resurrection Church as a slow suicide ritual for the remnants of South Korea.

Christianity. The religion with the deepest roots in Korea. The Resurrection Church merely imitated its language and grammar on the surface.

Northern Crusade. The ideology with the longest roots in Korea. The Resurrection Church also borrowed the color and scent of this ideology.

The cult of all cults.

The parasite of all parasites.

But a parasite can't survive if the host dies. Civilization had collapsed. South Korea was dead.

Only the parasites remained, writhing in the last season on a corpse that had already stopped breathing.

I didn't respect their lives, but I honored their deaths. People should have the right to choose their deaths. The 'Eastern Holy State' and 'Pyongyang Sacred City' were their self-chosen graves and coffins.

"Let’s consume the brain of the Resurrection Church..."

Noh Do-hwa was someone who would use corpses if necessary.

In front of Noh Do-hwa's eyes, which had a gloomy shadow, I temporarily set aside my personal sentiments.

It wasn't difficult. I didn't have to disregard the opinions of a life I valued for lives I didn't respect.

"So, you're suggesting we take control of the Eastern Holy State's leadership and play the puppet master."

"Yes..."

"It's not easy. The Eastern Holy State is not a country. It's not even a single group. It's just a collection of cultists gathering and dispersing under the symbol of Mo Gwang-seo. We have to either bring all twelve so-called 'Apostles' to our side or choose one as a champion and make them 'Pope.' Of course, our support must flow to keep the Eastern Holy State intact. Is it worth the effort?"

"No, it's not worth it..."

Heh, Noh Do-hwa chuckled.

"But if we can manipulate just Mo Gwang-seo, won't it be a profitable deal...?"

"What? How? If you're thinking of using Cheon Yo-hwa's

brainwashing ability, we've already tried that. Mo Gwang-seo's brainwashing resets every time he resurrects. Yo-hwa can't go up to Pyongyang every Sunday to act as a missionary."

"No, not the Baekhwa guild leader. Don't you have a bum in your guild? Are you saving that for soup...?"

I blinked. A bum?

"Oh."

I had a solution.

"Guild Leader? Why are you looking at me like that...?"

"Not you, Ah-ryeon."

"Huh?"

Our guild had two bums.

One was Sim Ah-ryeon, who dreamed of being Professor Quirrell's tongue. The other was the one nestled in Sim Ah-ryeon's arms, tilting their head.

The bum waved at me when our eyes met. Then, a maid connected to the bum by a transparent thread spoke.

"Why?"

The Puppeteer, Lee Ha-yul.

Ha-yul rarely appeared in my stories, for a simple reason. She often left without telling anyone.

You could say she liked traveling. Describing her as a wanderer with an itchy foot wouldn't be far off. Ha-yul would disappear for half a month to a month after extracting just enough puppet threads for use.

Sometimes, she would randomly ask me to join him on trips to

dangerous areas.

‘This time, I want to go to India, Oppa.’

‘Let’s make rice balls at Uyuni Salt Flats. You make the rice, Oppa.’

As someone who enjoyed life in the apocalypse, Ha-yul perfectly embodied the principle that hard workers can't beat those who enjoy it.

If Ha-yul were to become the protagonist of a spin-off, the genre of the story would swiftly change from survival to road movie travel.

Maybe she was a counter-revolutionary who was born oppressed by a normal market—just a guess.

Anyway, from Noh Do-hwa’s perspective, who believed humans should devote 25 hours out of 24 to work, Lee Ha-yul was naturally a ‘bum.’

The bum was currently lying on the sofa, using Sim Ah-ryeon’s lap as a pillow, munching on potato chips.

"Ha-yul."

I tried to smile as warmly and kindly as I could.

For reference, I also believed that humans should spend at least 20 hours a day working, even if not as much as Noh Do-hwa.

"Why?"

"Ha-yul, you like puppets, right? Puppets? I found a puppet in the North that you might like to play with. Interested?"

"....."

Blink, blink. The golden eyes of this lazy hitchhiker child swayed emotionlessly.

"Not interested."

"Hmm... How can I make you interested? I think it’s time for you to

start working, don’t you think?"

"No need to work. Puppet threads, only I can make them. Patent rights. Other guild leaders beg me to install them in their hideouts. Consulting fees alone are enough for a lifetime of playing."

This damn privileged talent...

"I finished reading the Romance of the Three Kingdoms you told me to read last time. At least give me three years of impunity."

"Hey. Does reading it properly include supporting Wei? How could anyone support Wei?"

"Sun Quan's country was invisible and transparent. Shu was an infinite labor black country. If you're not from Xu Province, why wouldn't you choose Wei?"

"...If you don't help with this, I’ll tell Seo Gyu to delete your SG Net account."

"I must have been from Xu Province in my past life. How can I help, Oppa?"

A direct highway of puppet threads was laid from Seoul to Pyongyang.

Ha-yul had to become a thread-spinning machine for two years, producing about 250km of threads, but it wasn’t a big problem.

The threads were laid without being noticed by anyone, and they were transparent. It was difficult to cut the threads without using aura.

I infiltrated the Holy Pyongyang City.

"Hmm? Just now..."

"What's wrong?"

"No, I felt a breeze. Was it a mistake?"

Although Mo Gwang-seo had an awakened bodyguard unit, avoiding their detection was no big deal. Thirty percent of them were opium addicts anyway.

Some of the bodyguards even carried firearms. Using guns in this day and age—they were amateurs who didn’t value their lives.

I erased my presence and snuck into the 'Mo Gwang-seo Christ Cathedral.'

The place, once known as the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, had been haphazardly rebuilt with spires and crosses all over the building, some of which had collapsed in the wind.

In the heart of the cathedral, Mo Gwang-seo was alone. Without an altar or a tabernacle, only the presence of the cult leader, Mo Gwang-seo, sitting on a golden throne, sufficed.

"....."

Though it wasn't mass time, there was no telling when a follower might enter. I quickly attached puppet threads to various parts of Mo Gwang-seo's body.

"Saintess, it's all set up."

[Yes, I’ve told Ha-yul... She says it’s too far, so it's difficult to control.]

"Does that mean it's impossible?"

[No, she says he can still move the mouth.]

I nodded. For this task, I had intensely trained Ha-yul in aura control for the past two years.

"Tell her to say something random as a test."

[Okay.]

A moment later.

"Oppa."

Chills ran down my spine. Mo Gwang-seo's lips, which always wore a smile, were slowly moving.

"Can I take a break from training now?"

"...Sure, Ha-yul. Just endure it on the days of the mass once a week."

"You- the hypocritical bastard- who betrayed Liu Bei of Yi Province. Zhang Fei's head dangling- Guan Yu's head dangling- Brother, why don't you come, Brother? Did you forget the Peach Garden oath? Come quickly, Brother."

Click.

Mo Gwang-seo's mouth returned to its original position.

"....."

I was furious but held back. Okay. After all, the kid endured hellish training, spinning puppet threads nonstop for two years, so she deserved some stress relief.

I slightly adjusted Lee Ha-yul's awakened rank from 1,000m to 900m in my mind and slipped away.

The very next day's Sunday mass, the Eastern Holy State's hypnotic app (with backdoor installed) showcased its performance.

"From the far frozen land, monsters will come."

The followers were startled.

"Ch-Chairman...?"

"Mo Gwang-seo Jesus has spoken!"

Buzzing.

The cult followers, who had never heard the resurrected leader speak, were shocked. Some impatient individuals were already

kneeling and weeping.

Mo Gwang-seo spoke softly.

"You have purified the kingdom with your faith, now it is time to build walls with your body and blood. When this winter comes, the demon army will arrive. Build fortresses and walls at every path to testify your faith."

"W-Walls, you say...?"

"Your kingdom must be preserved for the lost sheep to find their way. Protecting this place is the path to heaven. My beloved children, prepare to fight the monsters and demons. But do not oppress my people, build walls solely with your voluntary faith."

"Oooooooh!"

Mo Gwang-seo's official first speech caused a huge uproar.

The crusaders, who had been marching north endlessly as if they relished throwing their lives away, stopped and began constructing fortresses. The leader's command was sacrosanct.

Even if the fortresses couldn't significantly impact the monsters, it was far better than futile expansion of church influence. The number of monsters coming down from the North also decreased.

And that wasn't all.

[The Morning Star of the Second Coming commands the faithful followers.]

We even created a Constellation imitating Mo Gwang-seo.

On non-mass days, the Saint impersonated Mo Gwang-seo and sent 'Constellation Messages' to control the followers.

Claiming to be the reincarnated Jesus, so the second coming. Mo Gwang-seo's name, Gwang-seo (曙光), reversed to Seogwang, meaning dawn. So, the Morning Star of the Second Coming.

Naturally, this Constellation was newly established exclusively for awakened individuals who worshiped the Resurrection Church.

[The Morning Star of the Second Coming prophesies the imminent arrival of monster armies.]

[The Morning Star of the Second Coming guides your path forward.]

[The Morning Star of the Second Coming orders not to antagonize the National Road Management, as they fulfill God's will.]

The malicious software secretly installed by Lee Ha-yul and the Saint worked perfectly on the Resurrection Church.

Now, the followers of the Resurrection Church were puppets controlled by us.

"Excellent..."

Noh Do-hwa, who commanded this grand hacking project, was thoroughly satisfied. Confirming the proper functioning of the backdoor, the Director of National Road Management smiled faintly.

"We can use them whenever necessary now. Thank you for your hard work, Undertaker..."

"It was nothing."

From this point on, our actual control extended beyond the Han River to the North.

The time taken to reach this point, combining all cycles, was about 2,000 years.

It might be the slowest territorial expansion in all genre novels and alternate history novels.

Here’s a short epilogue.

Even though a direct highway of puppet threads connected Seoul to Pyongyang, occasional maintenance was necessary.

Every six months, I infiltrated the Pyongyang Sacred City cathedral to check on the puppet threads.

After finishing the usual tuning, I turned around.

"Enter through the narrow gate."

I turned around.

Mo Gwang-seo's unfocused eyes were looking down at the floor.

"The gate to destruction is wide, and the path is broad, and many are those who enter through it."

"....."

"But the gate to life is narrow, and the path narrow, and those who find it are few. O Scribe, enter through the narrow gate."

Then Mo Gwang-seo fell silent again.

It felt a bit eerie, but I didn't take it seriously. I thought Ha-yul was just playing a prank on me again.

Back in Seoul, I asked.

"Ha-yul, I didn't know you read the Bible."

"Huh?"

"You quoted the Gospel of Matthew in Pyongyang. Why did you call me a scribe?"

"....?"

Lee Ha-yul tilted his head.

"I've never read the Bible."

"....."

"I'm not religious."

...Whether Lee Ha-yul was telling the truth or lying, I'll leave that judgment to you.

Footnotes:

Chapter 127

The Victim I

Sinnoa

Let's talk about the end of our world again today.

Whenever fifteen years pass since the start of the regression, peace and stability slowly begin to return to the Korean Peninsula. Of course, the phrase "peace on the Korean Peninsula" has always been known to elicit different reactions from foreigners and locals alike.

"Siren? What's this? An air raid? Is the Korean War breaking out?"

"No. It's just daily life."

"What?"

While other countries peacefully harvest mackerel or herring from the sea, the East Sea's specialty was missile parts.

Even in the apocalypse, the situation wasn't much different. In Busan, the largest city on the Korean Peninsula, power outages happened almost daily, and bizarre creatures held gatherings inside and outside the city.

Experienced Koreans were prepared to humbly accept reality, thinking, "Well, it’s still peaceful enough, right?"

Foreigners, however, had a different perspective.

In most regions, the fifteenth year marked the beginning of the inevitable collapse of civilization.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

"Yes?"

[Monster waves have been detected in North Korea. It's currently assumed that they are moving south from the Gando region towards the Korean Peninsula's interior.]

Monster waves.

A phenomenon where all anomalies gather and surge like a tidal wave.

This anomaly had led to the destruction of countless nations and societies: Russia, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, Mongolia, China...

Korea was no exception.

[It's been 16 hours since the monster wave was detected. The Eastern Holy State in the North Korean region continues to resist, but the final defense line is in jeopardy.]

[Final defense line breached. Battle in Pyongyang has commenced.]

[The Mo Gwang-seo Christ Cathedral has collapsed. It has now been engulfed by the monster wave. The number of awakeners in Pyongyang is rapidly decreasing.]

[Ah. There's a light coming from the cathedral. The light... It keeps flashing. It seems that Mo Gwang-seo is repeatedly experiencing death.]

[The Resurrection Church believers in Pyongyang have launched a final assault. Soon, all the awakeners observable with ‘Clairvoyance’ will be annihilated. Six, five, four, three, two… one.]

[Pyongyang, annihilated.]

[The monster wave continues to move south.]

Even if humanity managed to overcome the cycles of being slaughtered by the Ten Legs and wiped out by meteor showers, extinction was inevitable.

Danger level: 4. Ocean-class.

Monster waves were not even anomalies with unique gimmicks like the Meteor Shower or the Infinite Void.

As the name suggests, monster waves were more fittingly associated with "monsters" rather than bizarre "anomalies."

Their strength lay in one simple fact.

[The monster wave is about to enter Seoul. The number of anomalies engulfed by the wave is estimated to be around 500,000. Estimated at about 500,000.]

[Blow up the Jamsu Bridge.]

It was their overwhelming 'quantity.'

"100,000. 200,000. 500,000. In severe cases, it's almost like an army of one million. It's an anomaly that defies any strategy."

"Hmm…"

Naturally, I shared this information with the Blood Pact members every time we held a secret meeting.

Noh Do-hwa, who joined my 'Regressor Alliance' in every cycle, sighed as if it were bothersome.

"Is there no specific strategy for this?"

"There is. According to the information I've gathered so far, the first place where the monster wave occurs is Istanbul in Turkey. It appears exactly one day after I regress."

"Hooh…?"

"When the monster wave first appears in Istanbul, it's actually not that difficult to handle. It's just 1,000 anomalies gathered together."

"One thousand... Hmm, that's within the range that Awakener Undertaker could barely manage alone, right?"

"Exactly. So, in the next cycle, I plan to head straight to Istanbul with the Saintess as soon as I land at Busan Station."

The Saintess, who was quietly sipping her bagged coffee beside us, was startled and looked up.

"What?"

Noh Do-hwa and I looked at the Saintess. Then we looked at each other again.

"Is it really necessary to take the Saintess with you? The longer the constellations remain silent, the more the awakeners will go wild..."

"I also need to keep the map on and fight. It would be fine to go with support, but honestly, enjoying a trans-Eurasian trip with a high-intelligence psychopath is a bit much for me. I'll defeat it as quickly as possible and return."

"Hmm. Fine, then. I'll draft a 'protocol to endure the first month even without Awakener Undertaker and the Saintess' for the next cycle..."

The Saintess carefully raised her hand.

"Um, excuse me. I'm not comfortable with such long trips abroad. Mr. Undertaker? Captain Noh Do-hwa. My opinion is——"

The apocalypse was too harsh a time to respect the opinion of a shut-in NEET.

In the next cycle, I carried the Saintess across the Eurasian continent.

It felt as if my endless aura training had been for this very moment, and my steps literally took a different form.

"Please let me know if it gets tough."

"...! Just, a little- Mr. Undertaker, please slow down a bit-"

"I'm glad you seem to be fine."

It took just 113 hours.

It was the time needed to cross the void filled with terrifying anomalies and occasional tactical nuclear bomb drops and reach Istanbul, Turkey.

It was truly fortunate that the Saintess had mastered [Time Stop]. Even basic human necessities like sleep could be instantly resolved by stopping time for a moment.

As for me? I was fine without sleep for up to six days.

"Saintess, I'm sorry to ask immediately after arriving, but please use the awakeners' vision to let me know if you spot any remnants of the monster wave."

"...I've just decided I will never travel with you again, Mr. Undertaker."

"Don't worry. I'll take you back to Korea even faster!"

"....."

One of the most historic cities in the world, Istanbul, was now facing the peak of over-tourism due to the 'monster wave.'

Various types of anomalies, all with different characteristics, mixed like dirty water to form a tsunami. From a distance, it looked like a 'black wave.'

However, having managed to obtain a travel ticket as early as possible, the black wave was only surging in the western part of Istanbul.

At this level, I could handle it alone.

I descended.

"No way! Who are you...?"

"Thank you! Friend from afar! We will never, ever forget your help this time!"

The locals, who were planning a recapture operation across the Bosphorus Strait, couldn't contain their gratitude.

The monster wave was smoothly exterminated. Although both governments had collapsed, a renewed 'brotherhood' was formed between the Turkish and Korean people.

After filming a light national pride drama, I returned to my companions.

"Thank you for your hard work, Saintess. But isn't it meaningful that we defeated an anomaly that could have grown to an ocean-class level in the future? Let's hurry back to our homeland and deliver this good news."

"Ah... Ah..."

"I'm truly satisfied to see you happy, Saintess."

"Ah... Ah... Ah..."

We returned home safely.

Everyone was happy.

And exactly 17 years later, the entire Korean Peninsula, including Busan, was destroyed by the black wave of the monster wave.

"Damn. You, you crazy regressor. Didn't you say you exterminated them?"

"Ah, sorry."

That was the last conversation between Noh Do-hwa and me.

What went wrong?

To conclude, the 'monster wave' was not an occurrence limited to Istanbul.

It just happened to appear in Istanbul first. Under certain

conditions, 'monster waves' could appear anytime, anywhere.

"What conditions are those?"

"Turns out, they occur whenever the void reaches a certain size."

In Istanbul, the void occurred in the middle of the city, similar to Seoul's case.

However, unlike Seoul, which simply wiped out the surface, Istanbul's void was abnormally large.

Even roughly measured, the void inside spanned the size of the Mediterranean Sea. The so-called 'Constantinople' void was teeming with fictional Crusader anomalies.

"Even if we somehow block the Turkish side, it’s pointless. Once civilization begins to crumble, voids appear so frequently it's almost absurd. In Germany, India, Russia, Mongolia, monster waves can occur anywhere."

"Hah...? So, how do we exterminate them...?"

"Practically speaking, it’s impossible to exterminate them."

Yes.

Even as a regressor, there was nothing I could do. The power of 'sheer numbers' was just that formidable.

"We’re struggling just to manage the Korean Peninsula. We can't possibly take care of the entire Eurasian continent."

"Well, that's true..."

"Yes. If we somehow manage to defend against the horde of anomalies coming from Manchuria, survival itself is possible."

The problem is.

"But monster waves don't occur just once; they appear continuously and periodically. Sometimes with a month's gap, sometimes weekly.

Defending against waves of tens of thousands of anomalies, no matter if I take the lead, the damage will inevitably accumulate."

"....."

"Awakeners are not invincible."

As the forces were gradually worn down, the point would come when it would be impossible to stop the southward advance of the monster wave.

We could delay. We could postpone.

But one day, we would inevitably reach the 'end point.' Whether we wanted it or not.

The National Road Management Corps conference room fell silent.

Noh Do-hwa let out a hollow laugh.

"Isn't this a bit of a scam...?"

It was Noh Do-hwa’s way of laughing off the situation.

We kept this information confidential. If the future of humanity were widely known to have such a 'predetermined bad ending,' countless people would have despaired.

The Ten Legs or the Meteor Shower at least existed as entities. They could be killed.

But how could we possibly deal with an anomaly that existed as a horde? An anomaly that occurred like a natural phenomenon?

"Is there no way to use the Resurrection Church of Mo Gwang-seo...?"

The idea of using the Eastern Holy State as a puppet state was proposed against this backdrop.

From Noh Do-hwa's perspective, it would have been better to erect a 'human barrier' in the north to delay the southward advance of

the monster wave, even if only slightly.

It was an effective method but not a perfect solution.

I was deep in thought.

"Ummm."

Cornered on all sides.

As the cycles continued, I gradually accumulated strategies for dealing with other anomalies while constantly pondering a final solution for the monster wave.

Yet, no brilliant ideas came to mind.

As I sat on the café hideout sofa mimicking Rodin's 'The Thinker,' Sim Ah-ryeon with her green hair approached.

"Guild leader..."

"Yes? What's up?"

"Remember the Meteor Shower anomaly you mentioned last time? I finished drawing the illustration today... Can I post it on the SG Net board under the name 'The Librarian of the Great Library'?"

Our Ah-ryeon wants to play Constellation again.

I nodded generously. After witnessing Ah-ryeon reduced to 16-bit pixels in the 'Logout Game,' I had become somewhat lenient towards her.

"Go ahead."

"Wow! Guild leader, you're the best! Hehe. It's so fun to act like a constellation by predicting an anomaly that hasn't appeared yet...!"

As Ah-ryeon rolled away to her home (the world of the net), a sudden inspiration struck me.

"...!"

It was a revelation so immense.

If I had majored in art, I would have slapped Picasso right there. If I believed in Buddhism, I would have placed a lotus cushion right next to Buddha.

"Ah-ryeon, wait a minute!"

"Yes?"

"I'm just asking, but how would you feel if all humans living on this earth, at least Koreans, came to hate you?"

"What...?"

"Of course, they wouldn't really hate you. Suppose, for example, you were OldManGoryeo or the Librarian of the Great Library. The entity you're portraying is the most loathed and despised being in the world."

"Guild leader, do you call my nickname OldManGoryeo in your mind?"

"That's not important now. Just answer my question! Quickly."

"Hmmm..."

Sim Ah-ryeon touched her chin with her index finger.

"If they specifically hate me, of course, I would dislike it as a person..."

"But?"

"If the entity I'm portraying monopolizes such immense hatred... I don't think I'd mind. But why?"

"Got it. Thanks for your answer. Now go ahead and enjoy being a villain."

"I'm not a villain!"

In the next cycle, the 217th cycle, I implemented my unprecedented

idea.

Right after regressing, I recruited Seo Gyu, Sim Ah-ryeon, and the Saintess, as usual.

But just when the Ten Legs was about to rampage properly on the Korean Peninsula...

[The Saintess of National Salvation is in mourning, announcing the advent of darkness to humanity.]

Awakeners in Korea received a message they had never seen before.

[The Saintess of National Salvation recommends that awakeners check the Constellation's Playground immediately.]

The awakeners, puzzled by the message, logged into SG Net.

And.

As soon as they logged in, they saw a post pop up on the site.

Author: 'Collector of All Anomalies'

Greetings, human awakeners active in Korea.

I am a Constellation who has been paying attention to your activities.

Considering your significant achievements compared to other regions, I have decided that Korea needs a slightly more... 'challenging choice.' (Smile)

Starting today, an apostle called the 'Ten Legs' will appear in the Korean region.

The Ten Legs has numerous tentacles. If pierced by these tentacles, it is difficult to escape death.

Moreover, the tentacles regenerate in real-time, so even if you succeed in cutting one off, other tentacles will form.

Will you be able to withstand this trial?

This is truly an intriguing 'experiment,' I must say. (Smile)

I wish you the best of luck.

And shortly after, the Ten Legs did indeed appear, causing extensive damage.

"Kyaaaah!"

Sim Ah-ryeon, who logged into SG Net as 'Collector of All Anomalies,' cheered. Yes, it was a cheer, not a scream.

"Guild leader! Amazing! This is amazing! The power! The voices and curses of those who hate me... They're flooding in...!"

"Hmm."

"I feel like I can do anything now! Guild leader! I feel incredibly strong...!"

Indeed.

Why hide it?

The project to make all the main anomalies appearing on the Korean Peninsula seem as if they were caused by a specific Constellation.

Thus, the grudges and resentments directed towards these anomalies naturally accumulated towards the 'mastermind.'

Project Zero Requiem.

Footnotes:

Chapter 128

The Victim II

Sinnoa

“Who is this constellation anyway? It makes me so angry!”

Dang Seo-rin slammed her fist on the table.

We were in a sundae gukbap (blood sausage soup) restaurant in Busan. It was unlike Dang Seo-rin, who usually focused solely on eating, to rant about the ‘Collector of All Anomalies’ throughout the meal.

This was proof of how spectacularly successful our <Zero Requiem> project had been.

“Hmm. Well, it seems that the constellations think of themselves as an administrator of an online game.”

“Ha. Running a game with such a nerdy attitude would make it fail in today’s world!”

“Well, reality is failing.”

“Ah... Seriously, it makes me so mad. Does he think the Korean Peninsula is his playground? I’ll make sure he regrets it someday.”

Except for the occasional times when she put people in concrete shoes and made them walk on the sea, Dang Seo-rin was a person of character.

Even someone like her was this angry. Imagine how other awakeners felt.

I put aside my guilt towards Dang Seo-rin and quickly focused on manipulating the media.

Author: ‘Collector of All Anomalies’

Greetings, human awakeners active in Korea.

I’m surprised! I didn't expect you to defeat the Ten Legs, the apostle I ambitiously prepared, so easily. Should I say it's to be expected from the region that prides itself on being a nation of gamers? (Wink)

For such impressive people, I plan to release anomalies with even higher difficulty levels in the future.

Do you like… ‘hide and seek’?

I do. (Smile)

The next anomaly I’ll present to you is the World Tree Udumbara. If you can’t find it within the limited time, the entire Korean Peninsula, no, the entire world, will be engulfed by a zombie virus.

Shortly after the Ten Legs were exterminated, another new post went up on SG Net, causing an uproar.

-Anonymous: Seriously, why does this bastard keep showing up on the Korean Peninsula?

-[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquess: Oh! I cannot contain my lament at the villainy of this demonic outsider!

-[Baekwha] HighSchoolSenior: Hoeii (>_<);; I want to tie him up and slowly tear him apart with a nail clipper (>_<);;

-Anonymous: Am I the only one going crazy at that ‘wink’ nonsense??

-Cooking Queen: Interesting.

Only five people in the world knew that the ‘Collector of All Anomalies’ was a fabricated entity: myself, the Saintess, Noh Do-hwa, Yu Ji-won, and Sim Ah-ryeon.

Noh Do-hwa pouted.

“Sometimes I feel self-loathing, wondering if we really need to go this far... But, since the ‘Monster Wave’ deceived us first, we must respond to deception with deception...”

In any case, our media manipulation and <Zero Requiem> operation continued to progress smoothly.

From the beginning, I, the Undertaker, had memorized all the anomalies that would appear on the Korean Peninsula.

Their identities, gimmicks, and even the timing of their appearances.

Using this regressor’s knowledge cunningly, creating a new constellation as the ‘mastermind playing with the Korean Peninsula’ was a piece of cake.

If pre-apocalypse journalists saw this, they would have been moved, thinking, ‘Indeed, the essence of Korean media continues to be passed down to future generations even after the collapse of civilization!’

Ultimately, all the negative feelings of the people were directed towards the ‘Collector of All Anomalies.’ In other words, towards Sim Ah-ryeon.

Author: ‘Collector of All Anomalies’

Greetings, human awakeners active in Korea. (Smile)

Now, the awakeners would have a fit just seeing the expression (Smile).

-Anonymous: Again? He’s back?

-LiteraryGirl: What are the other constellations doing instead of catching that mastermind bastard?

An absolute evil.

Treating this apocalyptic struggle for survival as mere amusement. The tone of the mastermind, devoid of any dignity or intelligence.

…If the ‘Collector of All Anomalies’ had been a somewhat serious character, a cult might have formed worshiping this constellation.

Even if he caused the death of humanity, the power to freely unleash terrifying anomalies would have seemed enormous to mere mortals.

However, the ‘Collector of All Anomalies’ was too frivolous to be worshiped as an evil god.

In short, he lacked style.

Whether someone loved or hated humanity, the ‘Collector of All Anomalies’ exuded such a strong nerdy vibe that no one could respect him as a Constellation. Only hatred, resentment, and contempt poured out.

-Anonymous: Did you see the meteor shower scattering starlight corpses as it died?

Anonymous: Yep, saw it. It was brutal.

[NRMC] Officer: It was thanks to the Samcheon Guild Leader that we stopped it. If we hadn’t, the Gyeongsangnam-do area would have been completely devastated.

Anonymous: Why do we keep getting these kinds of anomalies? I just want to beat up that collector bastard.

And so.

Fifteen years passed.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

[A monster wave has been detected in North Korea. It's currently assumed to be moving south from the Gando region towards the

Korean Peninsula's interior.]

I nodded.

It had been a long time of enduring.

Who owns SG Net, the only information-sharing platform in this apocalypse? Me.

Who is the person who has alliances with constellations that people trust as the only reliable source of information? Me, the Undertaker.

At this moment, all information power on the Korean Peninsula was in my hands. Pre-apocalypse media outlets wasted this power on electing opposition or ruling party presidents, but— the works I created played in a far more high-dimensional realm than such pitiful political realities.

"Ah-ryeon."

"Yes."

"Have you practiced your singing a lot?"

"Yes, yes...! I got certified from the Great Witch of Samcheon World that I can graduate now...!"

"Excellent. Now, go. Go show the people."

"....."

"Show them that healing was originally a noble's profession."

"...! Yes, Guild leader...!"

There were omens. There were hints. There were foreshadowings.

I didn't focus on this child for no reason when dealing with the 'Logout Game.'

It was all for this moment.

Sim Ah-ryeon.

The person who would become the savior of the Korean Peninsula.

Formerly, the Villain, OldManGoryeo. Internet troll.

Alias, the Bird that Drinks Poison.

Ready to be deployed.

In this world, there were few problems that couldn't be solved by overwhelming firepower.

Just as I had sliced through the Ten Legs with aura despite having little martial arts knowledge, the 'Monster Wave' had destroyed numerous countries with sheer numbers.

But I, the Undertaker, in my 217th cycle, would throw a cold and thrilling critique at this era soaked in the meta of overwhelming firepower.

Overwhelming firepower. It was nothing before 'overwhelming healing power'.

"Hold them back! Don't let them cross the Yalu River!"

"But, sir! There are countless anomalies! Even the visible ones number in the tens of thousands. How can we...?"

"Do not utter weak words! The Second Coming Jesus is watching over us! Even if we die, that will be the path for our ascension! God wills it! Amen!"

Yalu River Defense Line.

Not long ago, the Eastern Holy State had been immersed in its northern conquest. It must have been so much fun to simply loot the Manchuria that the Ten Legs had ravaged.

However, as Proverbs 13:11 says, wealth obtained dishonestly dwindles.

The believers of the Eastern Holy State were terrified by the endless

black wave of anomalies.

In the DNA of the Korean people was a fear of ‘overwhelming attacks from the north.’ No matter how brainwashed a cultist was, it was not easy to overcome fear embedded in DNA with faith.

“Ca-Cardinal! The anomalies are trying to cross the river by piling up their corpses!”

“No! Stop them! If this place is breached, there’s only the Chongchon River and the Taedong River left!”

Just then.

[The Morning Star of the Second Coming takes pity on humanity and sends down his Saintess.]

The Resurrection Church believers fighting at the front looked up at the sky with wide eyes. The fighters who couldn’t even look up had their heads decapitated by the anomalies, seeing the sky from a closer view.

The Morning Star of the Second Coming? Isn’t that our church’s Jesus? He sent down the Saintess?

“Ah———”

A single line of song pierced through the battlefield, soaked in black filth and red blood.

Step. Step.

Sim Ah-ryeon, our guild’s once nerdy child, walked across the battlefield with her hands neatly clasped.

Her voice was not as astonishing as Dang Seo-rin’s, who could make Chinese people marvel, Japanese people gasp, and Koreans kneel.

It was still far from reaching the level of the peninsula’s top idol.

But, Sim Ah-ryeon was Dang Seo-rin’s disciple.

More precisely, I made her a disciple. Dang Seo-rin had squeezed out her busy schedule to tutor Sim Ah-ryeon one-on-one.

For ten years!

So, while she might not be the peninsula's top idol, she could be considered the top idol of Pyongyang. Sim Ah-ryeon, our healer, walked while singing a beautiful Latin Requiem (Sim Ah-ryeon didn't know the meaning of the lyrics).

I secretly used aura to amplify Sim Ah-ryeon's voice so that it echoed far beyond the horizon.

"Ah—— Ah——"

Then, a miracle happened.

A warrior who had been sent flying to heaven by an anomaly's 'split and die' attack had his lower body regenerated.

"What?"

A person who had lost their arm saw it grow back.

A person whose foot had been crushed saw it reappear.

The half-bodies strewn across the battlefield regained their arms, legs, fingers, toes, eye sockets, and mouths.

The blood that had soaked the ground returned to its owners and became flesh again.

As the wave of song spread from Sim Ah-ryeon, the injured and the half-bodies in its range were healed one by one.

Resurrection.

But it wasn't just human lives that were resurrected. The green grass and colorful flowers, dirtied by the black filth, bloomed anew.

"Ah... Ah..."

Green regeneration.

The believers looked down at their hands. Hands that, just seconds ago, had exposed bones.

Someone unknowingly murmured.

“It’s a miracle...”

Indeed.

It was a miracle.

Even in this apocalypse filled with anomalies and awakeners, the sight of life being reborn with every step Sim Ah-ryeon took was profoundly moving.

The ‘Monster Wave’ tried to attack, but I quietly dealt with those nasty anomalies.

I, the Undertaker, was a person who valued manners. It was a courtesy for villains to stay quiet during magical girl transformation scenes.

“Saintess, she’s the Saintess...”

“Jesus has called Santa Maria!”

“Hallelujah! God wills it!”

The battle situation rapidly changed.

The Monster Wave was bewildered. It learned the lesson of empathy the hard way. No matter how much it killed and cut, the number of human heads seemed endless.

Humans were inherently a warrior race. As long as their heads weren’t chopped off, they could ‘start anew stronger,’ following the rules of the game.

For four straight nights.

In the battle at the Yalu River defense line, the 2,000 elite soldiers of the Eastern Holy State achieved an overwhelming victory against

200,000 monsters from the Monster Wave. It was a historic triumph.

“Uwoooo!”

“We won! We really won!”

“The Great Mo Gwang-seo Jesus Christ has not abandoned us humans! Long live Jesus! Long live the Saintess!”

“……”

Sim Ah-ryeon smiled.

It wasn’t that Ah-ryeon had learned to mimic Go Yuri. I had repeatedly told her, ‘You look fine as long as you keep your mouth shut, so please never open your mouth.’

As long as she wasn’t involved with online communities or the Logout Game, Ah-ryeon was generally a well-behaved child.

Her mysterious smile drew enthusiastic cheers from the Resurrection Church believers.

Once again, the genre of this world was, in fact, fantasy.

And according to the rules of the fantasy genre, the Holy Empire must have a Saintess.

Especially since there was already a Saintess in the south of Seoul, there must be another Saintess in Pyongyang in the north. That was the physical law of the Korean Peninsula.

Who could have foreseen it?

The Eastern Holy State’s Saintess.

Her name was Sim Ah-ryeon.

There is an epilogue.

Thanks to the success of <Zero Requiem>, another ocean-class

anomaly, the Monster Wave, was safely dealt with.

However, this ‘dealing with’ couldn’t be called an ‘extermination.’ Beyond the Yalu River, monster waves continued to occur periodically.

Each time, Sim Ah-ryeon had to ride on my back to the Yalu River front to demonstrate her Saintess’s dignity.

“G-Guild leader. Did I do well? I did well, right? Praise me...”

“Yes. You were perfect. You did a great job. As expected of the world’s greatest healer. Ah-ryeon, you are a gem.”

“Hehe...”

Even if it was only a temporary solution, Sim Ah-ryeon consistently protected the Korean Peninsula as the ‘indestructible barrier of life’ in the north.

In the fifteenth year, in the sixteenth year, in the seventeenth year, in the eighteenth year, in the nineteenth year, in the twentieth year, in the twenty-first year, and in the twenty-second year.

Although, by the twenty-second year, her power had grown so strong that a ‘corruption phenomenon’ occurred... In reality, Sim Ah-ryeon had almost single-handedly defended the front for those eight years.

——As I dealt with the ‘Monster Wave’ this time, I was deeply troubled.

The Monster Wave, one of the mid-boss anomalies that had destroyed our world countless times, had caused many tragedies.

At first, I intended to write about those solemn deaths as I did with the ‘Ten Legs’ and ‘Meteor Shower.’

But when I thought of Sim Ah-ryeon, I changed my mind.

Despite receiving all kinds of hate and contempt from the awakeners, playing the Saintess against her will, and being

summoned to the battlefield at least once a month, Sim Ah-ryeon never showed signs of struggle.

As her guild leader, I should sing of joy rather than tragedy.

Majesty, sorrow. At least while Sim Ah-ryeon was smiling, I didn't want to paint such landscapes.

Because.

"Hehe... When we get back to the hideout, make me a café mocha, please... With lots of chocolate syrup..."

Because I had come to love her smile as much as she loved my coffee.

Footnotes:

Chapter 129

The Eschatologist I

Sinnoa

Do you often have nightmares?

I have them frequently.

For example, one night in my dream, the Villain, OldManGoryeo completely subjugated Seo Gyu to his side, making him the tyrant of SG Net.

-OldManGoryeo: From now on, topics like the Three Kingdoms in SG Net will be banned 24/7…

-ZERO_SUGAR: What are you talking about, Ah-ryeon?

-OldManGoryeo: Ah, this resentment and grudge. As expected, guild leader's trolling is the best. It's so delicious. Guild leader is the ultimate gourmet spot…

-OldManGoryeo: From now on, I will stand in the sky…

Then, all SG Net members applauded the new administrator's decisive action.

Even the Saintess, who always logged in anonymously, and Noh Do-hwa, who rarely participated in the community, joined with their real names to praise OldManGoryeo.

What a horrible nightmare.

Even if the world forgave such a tragedy, I, the Undertaker, could not. After having this dream, I secretly added an extra shot of espresso to Sim Ah-ryeon's café mocha the next day (Ah-ryeon was puzzled by the change in coffee taste).

There were other nightmares, less terrible but with a bit more

realism.

-Teacher? Teacher…?

In that nightmare, I, the Undertaker, was already dead.

I couldn't remember exactly how I died. Even with my 'Complete Memory', recalling the scenes of the dream was difficult. Perhaps if I bought a lucid dream from the Tutorial Fairies for a billion won, I might remember.

How did I die?

Was I betrayed and stabbed in the back? Was I killed by someone I trusted enough to let my guard down, even though I usually had my defensive aura active?

Or was I killed by an anomaly that my aura couldn't affect?

Unlike others, I had over a thousand possible causes of death, making it impossible to pinpoint.

-Teacher, teacher. Teacher… Please wake up, teacher. Open your eyes...

In the dream, Cheon Yo-hwa was looking at my dead body.

Actually, "looking" wasn't the right word. Her red eyes were so wet they looked like a car windshield in the rain, unable to see anything.

She knelt in front of my corpse, using her hands to trace my outline since her sight was gone.

It was fortunate she couldn't see.

Since it was a dream, I experienced it in third person, as if I were having an out-of-body experience. The genre of that world was gore. There wasn't a single intact part of my corpse.

-……

Cheon Yo-hwa soon realized this. Her hand stopped.

-Die.

And she repeated it.

-Die, die. Die. Die. Just die.

Crash, the sound of something breaking.

Then the scene in the dream changed abruptly.

Around Cheon Yo-hwa, something resembling the noise of an old TV twisted. White and black alternated rapidly, spreading out quickly.

‘Ah.’

The noise waves that spread from Cheon Yo-hwa engulfed an entire city, the Korean Peninsula, and then the whole world.

As the noise expanded, the world screamed. Between the screams, blood kept spurting.

Birch trees and spider lilies.

The color of the noise and the blood resembled what once bloomed at Baekwha Girls' High School.

Divine Realm.

The realm of the Outer God. When Cheon Yo-hwa, who had sealed herself as the priestess, wished for the world’s destruction, the Infinite Void enveloped the world in black, white, and red without hesitation.

‘Yo-hwa, no. Yo-hwa, don’t do it.’

Cheon Yo-hwa, who had imprisoned all the anomalies of the Hyakki Yagyo, displayed her dreadful power.

This exact situation was one of the “Bad Endings" I had anticipated.

The Outer God was dangerous. Sealing such a god, Cheon Yo-hwa always carried the risk of becoming an even more catastrophic disaster.

But Cheon Yo-hwa wasn't weak. She was strong. Since the 117th cycle, I had rarely seen her mental breakdown while I was alive.

Yes. As long as I was 'alive.'

What if I died?

What if I died before Cheon Yo-hwa, especially in a manner too humiliating for her to accept?

What would happen to the disciple to whom I had handed the graduation certificate myself?

Ka ha ha ha ka ka ka ka—

The Infinite Void, released from its glass prison, laughed loudly.

The earth turned into a mass of black and white noise. The Outer God, assassinated by a regressor, finally returned and declared its ultimate victory.

Although it was just a dream, the laughter filling the universe felt too ominous to dismiss as mere mental triumph of the Outer God.

The requiem of the world's end was laughter.

-Huh?

Then it happened. Cheon Yo-hwa (千謠話), who had swallowed Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化), stopped laughing.

Zzzz—

It stared at me. The black and white noise, the earth, the universe, the god who had isolated the world, was gazing directly at me.

-Not dead yet? Still?

That's where my dream ended.

Similar nightmares repeated several times.

Cheon Yo-hwa wasn't the only one appearing in my nightmares.

Each time, the protagonist changed. Dang Seo-rin, the Saintess, Lee Ha-yul, Sim Ah-ryeon...

Of course, a dream was just a dream. It was simple to dismiss it as 'just an unpleasant dream.' And I had indeed ignored it for a while.

"Hoei? A nightmare?"

But in the 205th cycle, I obtained information that the Tutorial Fairies were actually Baku, which changed my perspective.

I decided to take my nightmares more seriously.

"Yes. Dreams are your specialty. Could there be an 'anomaly that parasitizes dreams'?"

"Hoeii. Of course!"

Fairy number 264 wiggled her hips.

"There are all sorts of anomalies in dreams, not just fairies!"

"All sorts?"

"Hoei. Since ancient times, humans have considered dreams another dimension. To describe the situation using the terms developed by Comrade Secretary-General, dreams are 'an entirely different world from this one, but one we can enter or end up entering'!"

"…A void."

"Hik-hik-hik. Correct! While some humans have never experienced the void, no human has never dreamed...! Humans are a pitiful race destined to experience the void called dreams from birth! And living in that 'first void' are us fairies...! A truly fundamental race! If there's a reactionary trying to invade our rightful Lebensraum, we

must punish them!"

"Hmm."

Dreams could indeed be voids. No, they were voids.

Talking with the fairies, the experts in this area, convinced me of this. But I still had questions.

And I wasn't the type to brood alone when I had questions.

I immediately sought out the advisor I trusted most and confided in them about my 'nightmares.'

"Why am I the advisor?"

"Because you've never been the protagonist in my nightmares."

"Hah..."

Noh Do-hwa, the Commander of the National Road Management Corps, cleaned her glasses. It didn't really help much. The cleaning cloth itself was dirty from not being washed for so long.

I snapped my fingers, generating aura. Then I delicately cleaned the smudges from Noh Do-hwa's glasses.

"You should use water instead of a cloth."

"I don't have time for that. I'm terribly busy. Hmph. If someone hadn't burst into my office demanding psychological counseling, I might have had some free time..."

"Was it Ji-won? I'll make sure to scold her later."

"Do you have no conscience...?"

"Anyway, help me think about this. If this 'nightmare' is an anomaly, why does it keep showing me such dreams?"

"Hmm..."

Noh Do-hwa chewed on the tip of her pen.

"...Assuming this isn't just an unpleasant dream created by your subconscious."

"What kind of person do you think I am?"

"It must be trying to shake your mental state. While anomalies don't have intelligence or reason, if we think of them as intelligent beings like humans, honestly, you must be an incomprehensible thorn in their side..."

"A thorn in their side?"

"Yes."

Noh Do-hwa smirked.

"You know when and what anomalies will appear, and you've been using all sorts of bizarre methods to defeat them... What else could be more incomprehensible? There are only two ways to defeat you: overwhelming numbers or psychological attacks..."

"....."

"Overwhelming numbers. That's the Monster Wave. According to you, that Holy Saintess thing will help us hold out for eight years, right?"

"Yes."

"Then, there's no other option. It has to try shaking your mental state. I've been meaning to point this out... Awakener Undertaker, you tend to view anomalies as overwhelmingly powerful enemies."

"Because they are overwhelmingly powerful."

"Well, when it comes to ocean-class ones and Outer Gods, they can treat us humans like insects. Even the Ten Legs was despair-inducing before you grew stronger... But from the anomalies' perspective, aren't you a terrifying existence as well?"

"Hm."

“So if I were an anomaly, I’d try breaking your mind. Showing you the destruction of the people you care about, one by one... It seems like a good strategy. What do you think?”

Indeed.

Noh Do-hwa’s analysis made sense.

Of course, as she emphasized, anomalies lacked human-like intelligence.

It was more reasonable to think that the ‘phenomenon threatening me’ occurred accidentally rather than the anomaly having a ‘purpose’ of breaking me.

However, whether the anomaly had a purpose or not, the fact remained that there was an anomaly trying to break my mind.

“Talking with you, Commander, helps me organize my thoughts. But still, it’s just a dream, isn’t it? Since it doesn’t seem to be affecting our reality much, let’s leave it be.”

“Hmph. As you wish. I’ll leave the anomalies to you, Awakener Undertaker. By the way, it’s good to know I’ve never appeared in those creepy nightmares...”

But after a few cycles, it became clear that our judgment was overly optimistic.

“Teacher!”

Thud, thud, thud.

Cheon Yo-hwa, a former basketball ace, came running. Even in the café hideout, 1,200 meters deep, small enough that running was unnecessary, Cheon Yo-hwa hurried to me.

As if I might disappear somewhere.

Cheon Yo-hwa sighed in relief only after reaching me.

“Ah... You’re safe. Thank goodness...”

“What’s wrong? Why do you look so upset?”

“...I’m sorry. I had a really unpleasant dream last night.”

“An unpleasant dream?”

The long regressor life had developed a keen sense in the back of my neck. As soon as I heard ‘unpleasant dream,’ my neck prickled with goosebumps.

“Yes. In the dream, something terrible happened to you. You did your best to help people, but no one appreciated it. I don’t remember well, but there was betrayal too...”

Of course.

My hunch was correct.

“So, I was really, really angry. The people around me suddenly felt inhuman, and if they weren’t human, I didn’t need to care for them... So.”

“You broke the seal of the Infinite Void.”

“Ah... Yes. Um, the Infinite Void covered the world, causing human extinction, but I felt nothing. I hated that feeling...”

Exactly.

There was something I hadn’t considered and that Commander Noh Do-hwa hadn’t noticed.

If the ‘nightmare’ was truly an anomaly, I wouldn’t be the only one experiencing it. Everyone having nightmares was being lured by the same anomaly.

I was an awakener with the Complete Memory ability, which allowed me to vaguely remember the nightmare. Most people simply forgot their nightmares.

I wasn’t too worried about my own mental state. I had various means to maintain my mental health.

But if others were affected?

The situation changed significantly.

As known, Dang Seo-rin, the Saintess, Cheon Yo-hwa, Sim Ah-ryeon, and others all had the potential to ‘fall’ and cause world destruction.

An anomaly that gnawed at their minds, even without their clear memory, needed to be treated with high caution.

I immediately moved to the casino.

“Fairy number 264.”

“Hoeiit. What is it, Comrade Secretary-General?”

“Gather as many available Baku as possible. Prepare for lucid dreaming. It’s time to raise the red flag again.”

“Hoek... We can gather about 90. But what enemy has appeared that requires a full assembly?”

I said.

“We need to crush the anomaly parasitizing humanity’s dreams.”

“Hoeii? As expected of the Comrade Secretary-General...!”

Thud. Fairy number 264 grabbed my hands with both of hers.

“Dreams are our rightful territory...! If it’s about punishing a reactionary taking over our ancestral lands, the Fairy Revolution Club will fully support you!”

The fairy shed tears of floral-scented joy.

It was the moment the first ever humanity(me)-anomaly(fairies) coalition was formed.

Footnotes:

Chapter 130

The Eschatologist II

Sinnoa

To anyone who might read my life story someday, I have a piece of advice: try to build a good relationship with the Tutorial Fairies.

I was an inexperienced regressor, and we ended up in a cycle of hatred, cutting off heads and smashing skulls. But you don't need to get involved in such bloody disputes.

"Hik-hik-hik. Starting the operation to hunt down the reactionary guerrillas hidden in the Secretary-General's unconscious brain folds...!"

"Alright. I'm counting on you."

The Tutorial Fairies were really decent anomalies. If you overlook their peculiar manner of speaking and their tendency to grind humans through the tutorial, they can communicate with Homo sapiens.

As long as you don't start with 'What the hell are you talking about, you bastard!' you can leave a good impression on the fairies. In fact, it's best not to start with that even when dealing with humans.

The fairies scurried over and surrounded me. I counted 64 of them.

"First, to enter the unconscious, you need to make your mind and body comfortable and then sleep deeply!"

"Hmm."

I lay down on the bed. The fairies formed a circle and grabbed my hands on both sides.

Fairy-Fairy-(Me)-Fairy-Fairy.

That’s how it looked if I drew it.

There were 32 fairies on each side, left and right.

“Now, we’ll invite the Secretary-General to our fairies' homeland. If you have a song request, please let us know!”

“Song request?”

“Hoi. To enter the land of the Baku, a suitable and charming lullaby is essential…! If there’s no request, ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’ will be the default BGM!”

I requested ‘Island Baby,’ as ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’ had become a trauma due to the Meteor Shower.

The fairies joined hands and swayed their shoulders from side to side.

“Mom goes to the island shade-♪”

“To cut necks-♪”

“The baby, left alone, poops-♪”

Wait. Were those really the lyrics of ‘Island Baby’?

“ZZZ…”

I didn’t have time to ponder as the fairies' singing plunged me into sleep.

Blink.

When I opened my eyes, the scenery had changed. A moment ago, I was lying in the hideout bed, but now I was slumped on a café table in the old Baekje Hospital building.

Under the table was the corpse of Old Man Sho.

The fairies were still holding my hands. The formation had halved, with 16 fairies on each side now.

“Oh…? This would be an instant cure for insomnia patients. I should suggest it to Commander Noh Do-hwa, who constantly complains about sleep deprivation...”

“The sea sings-♪”

“The song of destruction-♪”

“ZZZ…”

I fell asleep again within the dream. My thoughts drifted beyond the fading consciousness.

Isn’t this like the movie Inception?

Blink.

I repeated the dream within a dream. Each time, my consciousness dove deeper into the unconscious, into deeper sleep.

From the hideout to the café, to Dang Seo-rin’s VVIP train car, to the convenience store at Jamsu Bridge, to Baekhwa Girls' High School…

“Oh? Vice guild leader, you—”

Sometimes, the characters in my dreams recognized me and widened their eyes.

In an old cycle, guild leader Dang Seo-rin was surprised to see me.

But the lullaby didn’t stop.

“Cutting heads softly-♪”

“Fall asleep-♪”

Deeper. Even deeper.

Dream within a dream.

To the bottomless pit of the unconscious that normal humans could never perceive or remember even if they dreamed.

“—Sunbae?”

“Hyung.”

“G-Guild leader…”

“Oppa.”

It was an endless descent.

My relationships, memories, and essence as the Undertaker scattered more and more.

Like a slaughtered animal at the butcher shop. Like a wooden doll being carved by a sculptor.

“Humanity sleeps soundly-♪”

“Even though a baby’s cry-♪”

“Shakes the soul.”

Blink.

With each layer deeper into the dream, the number of fairies decreased. 64, 32, 16, 8, 4, 2…

Finally, one.

“Hoi.”

Fairy number 264. The first Tutorial Fairy I ever met held both my hands.

In reality, the fairy appeared as a 2D deformed character, expressing an (>_<);; face.

“Eek… What a tough job! You did great!”

The fairy shook her head, causing deformed sweat drops to fly.

“Secretary-General's unconscious is so solid!”

“Really?”

“Eek. In my long life as a Baku, I’ve never seen a human with such an unconscious structure! Secretary-General, you have no distinction between ‘present’ and ‘past.’ Everything is present before your eyes, and its capacity spans thousands of years! An ordinary mortal couldn’t endure this...! As expected of our Secretary-General!”

“Hmm.”

As a human, I found it hard to understand the concept of ‘solid unconsciousness.’

I could only guess that the fairies struggled because of my Complete Memory.

How should I explain this?

Unlike others, my memories never faded, except those before the 4th cycle.

For me, this had been the case for thousands of years, so I was accustomed to ‘memories that seemed truly present.’

It was the reason Old Man Sho genuinely envied me.

The old man’s life-long regret was that his wife’s face and voice were gradually fading.

I’ll have another chance to talk about this unique condition of mine later.

“Anyway, well done. Is this the bottom of my unconscious?”

“Hik-hik-hik. Yes! Only highly skilled Baku could reach this place...! It’s an overachievement project brought to life by the heroic will of revolutionary heroes!”

I looked around.

Busan Station’s waiting room.

In a way, it felt very fitting. While I had a separate birthplace, the regressor ‘Undertaker’s’ hometown could only be here.

My starting point. The space had a volume, just like reality, flowing through the waiting room.

“It doesn’t feel like a dream at all.”

“Of course. This place isn’t just the Secretary-General's unconscious but is akin to ‘humanity’s collective unconscious.’ For humans, it’s an essential phenomenon like air or water… The reality before reality, a priori structure, hyperreality.”

“Collective unconscious? Isn’t that Carl Jung’s concept? You guys know about that?”

“Hik-hik-hik. Thanks to the void, we accessed all human knowledge and had crash courses!”

“Ah.”

“Anyway, you must be very careful here, Secretary-General. What surrounds you isn’t just physical reality but humanity’s unconscious itself...!”

Despite saying that, the fairy didn’t let go of my hand. Just like when the Fairy Lord showed me the void, it must be truly dangerous here.

“In this place, the laws of space and time mean nothing!”

“So, it’s no different from the void?”

“Not just similar; it is the void!”

Some people talk faster when discussing things they know well, and Fairy number 264 seemed to be one of them.

“In a way, dreams are the first grand void that envelops all humans...! Thankfully, this waiting room is a ‘familiar place’ to you, Secretary-General, so we could use it as a base camp.”

“Base camp.”

“Yes, so whatever happens, don’t let go of my hand when leaving this place, Secretary-General! To activate the emergency escape protocol if needed...”

It was then.

Tap—

The low sound of high heels echoed through the waiting room. For the noise of heels hitting the floor, it was excessively loud. Like a church bell in a village.

The waiting room beyond our radius was shrouded in darkness. Hence, the figure producing the footsteps appeared slowly from the bottom up.

Tap—

Black loafer shoes. White stockings. A purple skirt covering below the knees. But the white stripes slightly eased the heavy feel of the deep purple.

“Oh?”

Pink hair.

“This is interesting.”

“.....”

“Meeting you here, guild leader?”

Go Yuri.

Go Yuri smiled brightly.

My heart sank.

My aura pulsed faster than my heartbeat. I gathered aura throughout my body, ready to slash Go Yuri’s neck in an instant.

“—Hoi?”

Poof!

The weight holding my left hand suddenly decreased. I turned to see that the fairy’s head had been completely ripped off.

Thud, thud. The fairy’s flesh fell to the floor belatedly, like a song out of sync.

The arm of Fairy number 264, which I held, hung limply. It swung up and down three times before finally settling.

It was an instant death.

A Baku, which exerted more power in dreams than in reality, had been slaughtered in its own domain.

“……”

“Oh, I’m sorry, but I was so delighted to see you again, guild leader, that I couldn’t help it… I’m really sorry—”

No words were needed.

I gathered all my aura and pushed off the floor.

I passed Go Yuri, and the feeling of her neck exploding in response to my slash traveled through my cane-sword to my hand. The sound was more of an explosion than a cut, a pop that followed a step later.

I had grown much stronger since the battle with the Ten Legs. Without saying, ‘Did I get her?’ or confirming the kill, I just kept running.

In short, I fled as fast as I could.

“—Ah.”

But not even 300 meters later, I ran into Go Yuri again.

Thud!

I collided with her head-on, causing her to fall backward.

Go Yuri rubbed her nose, smiling wryly.

“Ouch... Sorry, guild leader. I wasn’t looking ahead. Ahaha. I can be a bit clumsy sometimes.”

“.....”

I immediately shot my aura upwards.

The inverted lightning pierced through the ceiling of Busan Station, revealing the sky. I gathered aura in my feet and launched myself into the air.

Sky Walking.

At this point, only someone who had refined their aura to the extreme could perform such a technique.

“The weather is lovely.”

Go Yuri was sitting on a cloud.

“.....”

“Doesn’t it feel clearer up here than on the ground, as long as you avoid the void? Ah. guild leader, would you like some Pu'er tea?”

Using the cloud as a bench, Go Yuri swung her legs one by one. Next to her, a thermos and teacups were prepared.

I stopped sky-walking and fell. Boom! As soon as I hit the ground, I used all my strength to dig. I tunneled into the earth, descending deeper.

I was a drill, and our drill was one to pierce the underground.

“Oh dear. I almost forgot. Guild leader prefers Ceylon tea over Pu'er tea.”

Go Yuri, who had been buried 600 meters underground, was excavated. She smiled brightly, holding two cups of Ceylon tea in

her hands.

“……”

“Oh, were we playing hide-and-seek? So... Was I the seeker? guild leader, I found you. Ahaha. Is this how it’s done? I haven’t played hide-and-seek since I was a kid, so I’m a bit embarrassed.”

Dear God, Buddha, Allah, Shiva, Jesus Christ, Mo Gwang-seo! Please!

I had no choice. I activated the last emergency escape protocol 552-71: "Jeokbyeokga Pansori."

“Unexpectedly, a storm raged ururururu! The wind howled fiercely, and Zhuge Liang quickly descended to the platform, looking at the flags…”

“Oh ho— The Azure Dragon and Vermilion Bird responded to the White Tiger and Black Tortoise, and suddenly, the wind from the northwest rose to the southeast—”

“……”

“Oh, like thunder, the storm raged, and Zhuge Liang’s heart trembled at the sight…”

Boom!

Go Yuri, somehow having obtained a drum, beat the drumhead skillfully. She sang Jeokbyeokga as well as I, who had once received professional pansori training during a vacation cycle.

“Oh? Guild leader, why aren’t you singing? I practiced a lot to sing this with you...”

“……”

Go Yuri’s eyebrows drooped.

That’s when I had to face the cold, harsh reality.

Yes.

I was screwed.

Really, really screwed.

Footnotes:

Chapter 131

The Eschatologist III

Sinnoa

"Don’t worry too much, guild leader," Go Yuri said with a bittersweet smile, as if she was genuinely concerned about me.

"You see, this place is a well of dreams descended through you. I am merely a role within the dream within a dream, a manifestation of your subconscious. I have nothing to do with the real me."

"...So, you're just an illusion?"

"Yes. If I had to put it, it's likely your fears and aversions manifesting. It's quite sad that your unconscious fears have taken my form..."

Go Yuri lowered her eyes sadly, but I couldn't let my guard down.

Imagine Godzilla wagging its tail, asking to be petted. Even a light novel protagonist equipped with the 'pat → conquer' internal protocol might question the magic in their hand.

"Really, it wouldn't make sense if I weren't an illusion. No matter how mysterious I am to you, it’s absurd for me to sit on a cloud or be 600 meters underground, right?"

"....."

"All these are just manifestations of your fear. The fact that I call you ‘guild leader’ is itself strange. Because, as you know..."

"...You never accepted me as guild leader. That title only exists in my memories."

"Exactly!"

What should I do?

Trusting Go Yuri was out of the question. I might as well believe that the UFO which fell into the East Sea was an ambassador for friendly interstellar relations.

But it was also true that I couldn't escape from here.

I had to wait for the Tutorial Fairies to rescue me or find a way out myself.

Until then, like it or not, Go Yuri would be closely following me.

"Besides, I can guide you here."

"Guide? That's quite a welcome offer. The guide I hired was just assassinated."

"Ahaha. I'm sorry, but wouldn't a local guide be more reliable than an outsider?"

Go Yuri clasped her hands behind her back and leaned closer.

"The Baku are merely bridges between dreams and reality. It’s hard to call them completely ‘from this side.’ But I, formed from your unconscious, have always existed here."

"....."

"I know almost everything that happens here. guild leader, you came to explore the nightmares, right? I can guide you far better than any Baku."

I was silent for a moment.

"...There are conditions."

"Yes. Please tell me anything."

"Don’t try to win my favor unnecessarily. Don’t get too close. And don't kill any Baku without warning like you did before. If you violate these conditions, I will escape by any means necessary."

What would happen if I ended my life in this dream?

It was uncertain, but it was worth a try, simply because it was an unknown method of death to me.

Go Yuri's smile turned a bit complicated.

"Understood, guild leader. I will try my best. However..."

"However?"

"Uh, nothing. This place is dangerous, so we should hurry out."

Go Yuri turned around. The light tapping of her loafers echoed through the waiting room.

"Follow me. I'll show you the nightmares."

As soon as we stepped out of Busan Station, the scene before us was a void.

Let me remind you of the terror of the void.

In our reality, before the apocalypse, 'space and time' were always orderly. When you looked left, you saw the left. When you stepped right, you moved to the right.

But the void is different.

There, normal space-time and physical laws mean nothing.

Especially in a deep void.

"…!"

As soon as I stepped outside Busan Station, my head felt dizzy.

Far ahead, about 200 meters away, a yellow traffic light was standing. It caught my attention, and the next moment, it was right in front of me.

Blink, blink, blink—

The yellow light of the traffic signal flashed fiercely before my eyes.

When I blinked again, the traffic light had disappeared.

"….."

Waaah!

Somewhere, I heard children crying. Turning around, it was just a grassy field. The grass swayed in the wind, and with each sway, it wailed like a baby.

"There, there."

A crone was crouched in a flowerbed, picking azalea buds. Waaah! Red blood gushed out as the buds were picked, and the crying grew louder. The crone gently stroked the azalea petals as if soothing a baby, her nails stained with bright red flower juice.

"....."

I steadied my breathing.

In the midst of the endlessly echoing signal light's blinking, the flower baby's crying, and the crone's stroking, I focused solely on the path I walked.

Next to me, Go Yuri blinked.

"Wow. You're amazing. You're really maintaining your self-awareness. How do you do it?"

"...It's a secret. Where are the nightmares?"

"Ah, right over there."

Go Yuri pointed.

I turned my gaze naturally and held my breath.

"What is that...?"

There, a familiar yet unfamiliar scene unfolded.

The building was familiar. The National Road Management Corps

Headquarters. It stood tall like the Tower of Babel, a landmark of Busan.

In a cycle where Busan turned into a ‘Utopia,’ I had watched fireworks with Dang Seo-rin from the terrace.

"Ah——Ah——Ah———"

Even now, in this dream, Dang Seo-rin was there.

Not on the terrace, but hanging from the spire.

Dang Seo-rin was crucified, nails driven through her wrists and ankles. It was as if she was subjected to a witch trial, bleeding from her limbs, singing without end.

My limbs grew pale.

But the horrific sight didn’t end there.

"——Ah——Ah——"

Below Dang Seo-rin, another person was crucified.

It was Sim Ah-ryeon.

She followed her master, singing in Latin, using the techniques Dang Seo-rin had taught her.

Their faces were expressionless. The duo’s acapella resonated endlessly through the night sky, shaking the entire universe.

"What on earth…?"

"You already know, don’t you?" Go Yuri said.

"It’s a perpetual motion machine. The ‘Great Witch’ sings, burning her lifespan. Though it’s an ability bound to end someday, the story changes when ‘Saintess of the North’ joins."

"....."

"When the Great Witch's lifespan runs out, the Saintess of the North

can refill it. This creates an endless fuel for the dream."

"....."

"The Great Witch dies every time she sings, resurrects, and dies again, endlessly singing for the world's peace. That's the nightmare."

I immediately swung my sword.

The Tower of Babel collapsed. The singing of Dang Seo-rin and Sim Ah-ryeon was engulfed by the sound of the falling tower.

Perhaps it was just my imagination, but it felt as though they looked at me, letting out a brief, silent cry before disappearing into the dust cloud.

My heart pounded.

But the nightmare wasn't over.

"...You can't kill dreams, guild leader."

Go Yuri said, looking troubled.

"As I mentioned, these nightmares are just your fears manifested. A wise person like you must have imagined at least once, right? That if those two fell together, an eternal peaceful utopia might be created."

"...What a horrible hobby. I would never choose that."

"Yes. And this place could be called a trash bin of possibilities you didn't choose."

"....."

"Worlds after bad endings, parallel worlds' fates, or simply nightmares. Bad tastes."

Tap. Go Yuri started walking.

The surroundings changed.

Sejong City turned into a white sand desert, and at its center, Cheon Yo-hwa and Lee Ha-yul sat facing each other.

Even from a far distance, their conversation was oddly clear.

"...But, Teacher sometimes randomly brings up comparisons to “Records of the Grand Historian” and “Water Margin”. Shouldn’t we insert that knowledge into him?"

"Disagree. Prefer to pursue a perfect brother rather than the current one."

"Wow... Ha-yul, sometimes our tastes match, and sometimes they don’t."

"Agree. Can’t understand why you follow outdated realism."

"What? Doll otaku."

They chatted softly.

It should have been a heartwarming scene, but my mouth felt dry.

Creak—

Something was between Cheon Yo-hwa and Lee Ha-yul. It was ‘me.’

A doll resembling the Undertaker, my corpse, stood crooked between them.

"Then let’s omit “Records of the Grand Historian” and “Water Margin” and just insert “Romance of the Three Kingdoms”. Without that, it’s hard to call him teacher!"

"Agree."

Creak. Creak.

Cheon Yo-hwa was inputting data into my corpse. Like turning a zombie into an AI judge.

The body of the ‘Undertaker,’ with its limbs and all muscles, was connected to Lee Ha-yul’s puppet strings.

The ‘Undertaker’ opened its mouth.

-You guys… What do you really think of humans? I’ve always told you, Yo-hwa. You need to view humans with more warmth.

"Wow! It’s just like teacher!"

-And Ha-yul. I’ve told you not to play with living people like dolls. No, not even with dead people.

"Satisfied."

They were cheerful.

In the white desert world, only those two continued their puppet play forever.

The scene seemed so distant.

"That’s another bad ending."

Go Yuri whispered beside me.

"When the Infinite Void was unleashed, covering the world, only a small oasis was allowed for Cheon Yo-hwa and the Puppeteer."

"....."

"Please, whatever you do, don’t approach them? Though they seem normal, those versions of Cheon Yo-hwa and the Puppeteer are extremely corrupted. They’re anomalies capable of destroying the world alone… Guild leader?"

I ignored Go Yuri’s warning.

Crunch. My foot sank into the sand.

With just one step, Cheon Yo-hwa and Lee Ha-yul’s gazes instantly focused on me.

"....."

"....."

They stared intently.

My disciples looked at me. I walked towards them slowly but surely.

As I approached, their faces turned completely expressionless, as if they had never been chatting happily.

I stood before them.

And I hugged them.

As tightly as I could without breaking them.

"Yo-hwa."

"....."

"Ha-yul."

"....."

"You shouldn't be here. Let's go home, kids. Let's go home..."

"....."

"....."

Slowly, Yo-hwa and Ha-yul's forms crumbled in my embrace. White sand became a sandstorm and scattered.

Even the desert itself disappeared in the wind. I found myself sitting in the middle of a cracked asphalt road.

"That's amazing…"

Go Yuri murmured.

"Really, how do you maintain your self-awareness so firmly? Here, you could indulge your desires. It's a place where that's inevitable."

"It's nothing special. I sometimes take a vacation to let go."

"Even vacations are just a means to return to reality, right? Why do you never completely let go? Even once. Letting go wouldn't mean anyone could harm you."

If I could answer that my spirit was strong enough, it might have felt a bit better.

But that wasn't the answer.

For one to become strong, it's always insufficient to rely on one's own reasons; the presence of others is necessary.

The reason I could hold out strongly.

"—Ah."

It was paradoxically because there always existed 'others who crumbled before me.'

"We're in trouble, guild leader. That 'ending' is really dangerous."

"....."

"It's one of the most perilous beings in this apocalyptic world. I recommend you escape. Unlike Cheon Yo-hwa or the Puppeteer, it won't be easy to give it a burial."

Even before Go Yuri's warning, I sensed something ominous approaching.

'Something' was coming our way.

The hair on my head stood up. My nape, always ahead of my senses in detecting threats, prickled fiercely.

I strengthened my vision with aura. Beyond the forest of broken buildings, it was walking toward us.

"Hah."

Seeing the figure, I couldn't help but laugh bitterly.

Indeed.

If this place was my nightmare and the collective unconscious of humanity, if it gathered ‘the worst bad endings’ as Go Yuri said, then naturally, it would include such an ending.

"Really, this old man never does anything helpful in life…"

Emit Schopenhauer.

My long-time comrade.

Awakener Alias: Sword Star.

Corrupted Alias: Sword Demon.

The swordsman, born with the ultimate martial talent, now exuded an aura incomparably more powerful than when he was alive, approaching me.

Footnotes:

Chapter 132

The Eschatologist IV

Sinnoa

Let's talk about Old Man Scho.

Flashback. A distant past.

In the distant past, during the 21st cycle, there was a time when Old Man Scho and I laid out a drinking session on a sky-blue bridge and had a heartfelt conversation while drunk.

“Embalmer, what do you think will happen to the world after we die?”

“After we die?”

Old Man Scho and I were probably the only two regressors in this world.

So occasionally, we would excitedly discuss topics that "only regressors could truly immerse themselves in." Just like now.

“Well. At the moment when the two of us die… wouldn’t the world also regress as we do? Time would be rewound.”

“What if that’s not the case?”

“What?”

“What if the world continues even after we die?”

“No, that wouldn’t make sense, would it? We die and immediately wake up. How could the world maintain itself?”

“Listen carefully.”

The old regressor’s theory was this:

A. [The World After the Bad Ending] Hypothesis.

Explanation: Even if the regressor dies, the world does not regress. Time continues until the universe ends. The world is "rolled back" only after complete annihilation. The server reset. However, for some reason, the memories of Old Man Scho and I, the regressors, are preserved without being reset.

“Oh… So, subjectively, we feel like we’ve woken up right after dying, but objectively, we only open our eyes after the world has ended?”

“Yes. In this case, our ability is closer to [Memory Preservation] rather than [Regression]. Given that you, as Undertaker, have the Complete Memory ability, doesn’t it fit well?”

“Oh…”

“There’s another hypothesis.”

B. [Parallel World] Hypothesis.

Explanation: When a regressor dies, their consciousness and memories are transferred to "another parallel world." Although the new world appears identical, it is entirely separate from the one previously lived in. The differences between the two worlds are simply unobservable to the regressors.

“If the parallel world hypothesis is correct, our ability might be called [World Line Transfer].”

“I’ve never thought of it from that perspective before.”

“That’s because you walk around without any thoughts in your head, you ignorant fool. You need to learn. You call socialists communists and mock German history; you're utterly uneducated. You are disqualified as a human, as a person, and in character.”

“Hey, what is with this sneak attack?”

“I support the parallel world hypothesis.”

I blinked.

“Uh… why?”

“Because does it make sense for the entire world and time itself to regress just because two humans die?”

Old Man Scho swirled his soju glass.

“It’s much more plausible that only our consciousnesses are transferred to another world, don’t you think?”

“Hmm.”

Listening to Old Man Scho, I felt an undefined unease.

If, as Old Man Scho said, "rewinding the world's time" was absurd, then "transferring an individual's self and memories to another parallel world" seemed equally preposterous.

On the contrary, assuming countless parallel worlds existed might be more theoretically burdensome.

“Then, in the original world where we were… all the parallel worlds we've passed through must have all perished? We're just wandering through new worlds after leaving our vanished homeland.”

“Exactly! We keep retrying to save the world, but in truth, all those humans are already dead. The anomalies won.”

Looking back now, as often happens with drunken ramblings, Old Man Scho’s impassioned speech lacked consistency.

If Old Man Scho truly believed in [The World After the Bad Ending] or [Parallel World], shouldn’t he have cherished his life even more?

If it wasn’t simply about rewinding time, and countless worlds had

truly faced their end, the weight of our lives would be comparable to "the entire world."

Each time we failed, another world perished.

Yet, Old Man Scho was about to take a long vacation.

Why?

Did it mean he trusted me that much? Believed that even if he gave up, I wouldn't?

Or was his lover much more precious to him than the world burdened upon us?

Between a world and a love, was the latter ultimately heavier?

Old Man Scho staggered.

"What a damn world it is, Embalmer. I really… really don't understand why this happened. I don't know."

"Ah- old man. Let's get up. If you sleep here, you'll catch a cold. Geez, you always do this because you trust your Heavenly Martial Body too much."

It was as if the old man in front of me, already burdened, was straining to shoulder even more weight like a Sherpa.

It was the double stance chosen by the captain of a sinking ship.

Stance A. He couldn't afford to fail here. If he failed, the world would end.

Stance B. But even if he failed here, it couldn't be helped. The ship carried too much cargo for a single human to bear.

That's right.

Old Man Scho was undoubtedly pushing himself to be able to justify himself either way.

"I'm sorry, Doc… I'm s'rry…"

“No, what’s with a German old man suddenly mixing in a dialect? I’m going crazy. Should I just put you in a gas chamber?”

“You crazy, racist bastard…”

“That doesn’t work when a white man uses it on an Asian.”

In the 21st cycle, I was still young. I couldn’t grasp Old Man Scho’s psyche.

So, while supporting his drunken body, I couldn’t support his heart.

If I had had more experience, faced more anomalies, I would have told Old Man Scho back then.

In a calm voice.

‘Old man.’

‘Whether it’s [The World After the Bad Ending] or [Parallel World], it doesn’t matter whether they are true or false right now.’

‘Because all of them are void and anomalies.’

End of flashback.

Returning to the present, several thousand years later.

The reunion with Old Man Scho in the unconscious world was the worst.

“Ah. Guild leader, he’s been spotted.”

Go Yuri muttered, but there was no need for such a kind notification.

Old Man Scho was swinging a steel pipe wildly.

“…!”

The Swordmaster’s strike was faster than sound.

Have you ever seen a night sky adorned with a milky way as

delicate as jewels?

You can see it every day if you visit the clean apocalypse without pollution or fine dust.

And you could see it in Old Man Scho's aura.

Crash!

The 'night sky' colored aura charged in a straight line, slicing through the debris of buildings in its path.

This was the decisive reason why Old Man Scho was called the Sword Star. Because his blade contained the Milky Way and starlight.

The rumble from the collapsing buildings echoed several beats slower than Old Man Scho's attack.

Only after I barely parried Old Man Scho's strike with Do-hwa did the enormous aftershock hit my ears.

"Crazy…?"

My hand tingled, and my whole body shook. My entire sense of touch vomited.

Just one strike.

In the 261st cycle, my heart pounded just by blocking a single attack. For someone like me, who lived on aura rather than martial arts, it felt like my MP had halved in an instant.

Suddenly, Seo Gyu's spirit possessed me. The words, 'You fucking cheat, stop using hacks,' spilled from my mouth.

"Damn, you weren't this strong before!"

"……"

"No matter how much this is the void and you are an anomaly, the original you didn't show up after the 25th cycle. How can you be

this strong?”

Old Man Scho was expressionless. Perhaps, as he fell into anomaly, his small brain wrinkles and facial muscles degenerated together.

-……, ……, …….

Old Man Scho’s lips kept moving, muttering something continuously.

Thanks to spending time with Lee Ha-yul, my lip-reading skills were highly developed. Even from a distance, I could roughly decipher what Old Man Scho was muttering. After all, Germans have been somewhat weak in the field of eavesdropping since World War II.

The eavesdropping result was this:

-Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele.

This madman.

The Sword Demon raised his steel pipe again.

The aura emanating from the old man’s fingertips gave me chills. It felt like I might end up as the Regressor Chicken on the old man’s dinner table tonight.

“Ha.”

At that moment, I had a brilliant idea. I grabbed Go Yuri, who was idly watching.

“Huh?”

“Yuri, let’s be friends!”

The forbidden technique passed down in Korea. The Friend Shield.

Trying to escape hastily could risk the pursuit of this fallen regressor, the anomaly known as ‘Emit Schopenhauer.’

Then, wouldn’t it be better to aim for mutual destruction?

As the guardian of human civilization, I always respected the Code of Hammurabi. An eye for an eye. An anomaly for an anomaly. No-show for Go Yuri.

If I could eliminate even one of the regressor anomaly or the brainwashing beam anomaly, it would be a gain for me! How could I care about the means and methods?

"……"

Hesitation.

Old Man Scho, who had been poised to launch an all-out assault, paused.

I clenched my fist in my mind.

Even Old Man Scho couldn't help but hesitate in front of the brainwashing beam. Even I, who rolled to the 261st cycle, had no countermeasures and could only avoid it, so how could an old man boast so arrogantly?

"Hmm… Guild leader?"

"What? I'm busy now. Don't talk to me."

"But I think I should tell you this."

Go Yuri, reduced to a human shield in my left hand, spoke hesitantly.

"As you know, I am perceived as the most ideal type of person the opponent would be most attracted to, right? So… to that old man who has met his end, who do you think I look like?"

"……"

Ah.

-Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele, Adele.

The ‘night sky’ spread around Old Man Scho.

In line with the latest trends, it was like domain expansion. Considering the old man’s age, it was a unique barrier.

Old Man Scho’s tremendous aura stretched from his toes, staining the ground and the sky. Suddenly, a night sky appeared in the ruins of the city at midday.

Killing intent surpassing sword aura.

The martial talent originally possessed by Emit Schopenhauer. The extreme of that potential.

Even in reality, during his prime, I had never witnessed such a lofty transcendental state unfolding there.

“If he were in his right mind, he wouldn’t confuse his beloved wife with me… But having fallen this far and lost his reason in this ‘end’ state, hmm. I’m in a difficult position…”

“Release your brainwashing technique!”

“Haha, guild leader. That’s passive; I can’t control it. But this is serious. It’s like seeing his beloved wife captured by a kidnapper. Ah, although I’m glad to have become friends with you.”

I immediately threw Go Yuri far, far away.

“Huh?”

Go Yuri flew like a missile. It would be great if she exploded at the end, staying true to her origins.

Naturally, the attention of the no-show anomaly shifted from me to the Yuri missile. The romanticist old man threw away the steel pipe and ran toward Go Yuri.

That was the only timing given to me.

I bolted immediately. The protagonist of an infinite regression series must never miss a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

-Adeleeeeeeeee!

Rumble. Crash. The city was being destroyed in real-time.

I heard Old Man Scho's desperate cries in the distance, but I didn't care.

Please live happily together.

-Adele.

At that moment, I sensed a presence beside me.

There was no time to look back. Slash! Something sliced through my protective aura like tofu and reached my neck.

'Ah.'

I fell forward while still running.

My head floated up, and I barely managed to glance to the side.

Old Man Scho, who I thought I had distanced myself from, was running beside me. His hand was covered in blood.

A close-range strike. My head was severed by a single chop.

Go Yuri was captured by his side. She looked at me—or more precisely, at my head—and gave a bitter smile.

Sensation vanished. Sound and consciousness rapidly faded.

It was rather fortunate. Even if I had lived a bit longer, I would only have witnessed Old Man Scho kissing Adelyuri in a romance scene.

I wanted to at least move my mouth.

'No, this is really too much.'

Simultaneously, I felt like I had returned to the early cycles of the regressor's childhood.

Back then, I didn't have to face the apocalypse alone. The most

reliable dealer's back was always in front of me.

See? Old Man Scho's potential was indeed extraordinary.

If we could fully blossom this tremendous talent, not in a bad ending but in reality, old man. We could definitely save this "damned world".

Thud. My consciousness fell to the bottom.

The sensation of death was not much different from a dream.

Everything faded to black.

Footnotes:

Chapter 133

The Eschatologist V

Sinnoa

When I opened my eyes, leaving another death in my memories, I was in the waiting room of Busan

Station.

It would have been nice to say that the familiar 399 survivors came into view. However, even the waiting room of Busan Station was not spared from the chilling wind of mass layoffs. Only one person welcomed me this time.

“Ah, guild leader. You’re awake?”

“…Hmm.”

“Here’s some Ceylon tea. Have a drink when you get up.”

Go Yuri was sitting on a bench in the waiting room, and I was lying on the same bench.

At the time, I didn’t know, but there was a certain genre grammar in the world.

[The same bench] [One sitting] [One lying down]. When these three concepts combined, they always resulted in a certain inevitable outcome, transcending time and space.

Simply put, Go Yuri was giving me a lap pillow.

Her pink hair cascaded before my eyes like an acacia blossom. A subtle scent like bath salts and the sweet fragrance of apples freshly dipped in cold water wafted through the air.

“……”

I instinctively tried to get up but decided against it.

Perhaps it was because I had used the forbidden technique [Friend Shield] a little while ago. I felt a slight guilt. Surprisingly, there was still room in my heart for feelings of guilt towards Go Yuri.

Not that I could escape the presence before me anyway.

“Did I die?”

“Yes. And no.”

Go Yuri brushed her hair back behind her ear. Her hair swayed like bellflowers.

“In terms of having died at the hands of the [Bad Ending], yes, you died. But it's hard to call it a true death. In a dream, one cannot truly die.”

“…Indeed.”

Even dying in this unconscious world wouldn’t trigger a ‘regression.’ My real self was still sleeping soundly surrounded by the Tutorial Fairies.

It was good information.

“How did you escape? The enemy seemed impossible to fight against.”

“Well, if I tried to fight like you, it would have been difficult. But I don't necessarily oppose such beings. I can escape easily.”

Of course. Hail to the brainwashing beam.

I sighed.

“That old man, he was too powerful.”

“……”

“They say that in this unconscious world, one’s greatest fears are reflected. Right. In truth, I was afraid of the old man.”

It wasn't that I had an aversion to Emit Schopenhauer as an individual. He was my comrade.

It's just that...

"If the old man hadn't gone on vacation and had stayed by my side, what would have happened… I've imagined that a few times."

IF. A what-if scenario.

The route where Old Man Scho didn't go on vacation.

"Old Man Scho has a gentle heart. Even if he hadn't gone on vacation, his love and despair for his wife would have continued to nest in his heart. If he had forced himself to endure that and still stood by my side to save the world…"

Wouldn't he have broken at some point?

There were plenty of dangerous moments.

For instance, when we exterminated the Outer God Infinite Void. Infinite Void shows people the 'most perfect world line' as an illusion.

Of course, Old Man Scho would have been immersed in days of happiness with his wife.

While I managed to break free from Dang Seo-rin, Noh Do-hwa, and the Saintess, could Old Man Scho have escaped?

Wouldn't he have fallen as a new apostle of Infinite Void?

For example, when it was revealed that the Tutorial Fairy was actually a Baku. Negotiating with the Baku could manipulate dreams as desired.

That too would have been a hard temptation for Old Man Scho to resist.

For example, when the being before us took a real 'interest' in Old Man Scho.

Like the nightmare we just faced, wouldn't Old Man Scho, deluded into thinking he had reunited with his wife, become a villain acting only for Go Yuri?

The best comrade turning into the worst enemy.

A common trope.

"Considering all that, maybe it was a divine move for him to go on vacation and leave with his wife."

"....."

"A problem in death, a problem in life. Seriously, that old man was no help at all."

The waiting room was silent.

As if hundreds, thousands of years had flowed by in an instant, weeds sprouted from the cracks in the floor. Through the holes in the roof and ceiling, the aged sunlight dripped like candle wax.

Go Yuri didn't respond.

She just listened to my story with a troubled smile, as if this 'silent listening' was the form of comfort I desired most at the moment.

"Guild leader."

After a long silence, Go Yuri whispered.

"Can you feel better at any time?"

A hint of green apple scent wafted from her whisper.

"Life is like countless dreams. The last dream a person has is called reality, but you're like the Undertaker who roams forever in the dream, burying each dead dream one by one. This place is a farce where the corpses you buried come back to life and dance."

"A dream within a dream, the world after the bad ending, parallel worlds, the collective unconscious. Roughly those concepts have

turned into anomalies and unfolded as void.”

“And you can become the master of that void.”

“……”

“I will help you.”

Go Yuri’s thumb caressed my cheekbone.

Like a child peering into a deep well, Go Yuri gazed down into my eyes.

“Help? You will help me?”

“Yes. This place is not only your unconscious but the unconscious of all humanity. What do you think could be possible if you could freely manipulate this place?”

The sound of breathing, scented with apple, settled on my cornea.

My face felt itchy.

With each movement of Go Yuri’s lips, her breath drew closer.

“You could impose your dreams on all other humans.”

“……”

“That’s right. The dreams that no one else can experience, the apocalyptic scenes only you remember. You could share them with others, with those dear to you, with all humanity.”

“……”

“Show them your life.”

Suddenly, the apple fragrance turned into the scent of wine, like apple wine.

Like petals blossoming and unfolding, the wine scent in Go Yuri’s breath spread around instantly.

“Show them how much you suffered, how hard you worked for others, how wise and powerful you were.”

“……”

“Make them grieve at your pain, commit to your devotion, marvel at your abilities.”

Go Yuri’s voice, flowing from her pink lips like honey, was as rich as nectar.

“You could become everyone’s dream. If such a dream is called a myth, you would become a miraculous myth blooming at the end of the century.”

“You don’t think I’m going to nod at this, do you?”

“No.”

Go Yuri smiled with her eyes.

“Not now.”

Press. Go Yuri’s finger pressed gently against my chin.

“But as your suffering matures more and more, won’t that nod come closer?”

“……”

“Don’t become sweet carelessly, guild leader. If you keep getting tastier, I might want to devour you without realizing it.”

The words murmured from right in front of me felt as if Go Yuri had really said them—or were just a whisper of my delusion.

It was impossible to gauge Go Yuri’s sincerity in any statement.

She called me the ghost of dreams. But in truth, she was the mirage made entirely of dreams and flesh.

Maybe that was the tragedy assigned to the existence of Go Yuri.

As I looked up into Go Yuri's red well, such a thought struck me.

A week of nights passed.

Although it was quite a shock to offer my neck to an old comrade, my mental state recovered completely after a few rests.

I tossed some Ceylon tea into my mouth and farmed Silver Bells from the souvenir shop. Go Yuri watched me with amusement.

"What are you planning? As you said, the Bad Ending is an unbeatable enemy."

"The Bad Ending has its own uses."

Jingle.

The Silver Bell on my wrist rang softly. My personal item, ingrained even in the unconscious (pre-apocalypse price: 9,900 won), felt special today.

"The old man will return someday."

"Huh?"

"More precisely, I will make him return. The co-representative of the company ran off to be happy by himself; I must bring him back, right? The problem was that even if I caught the old man, I could only listen to the sound of a water rocket for now."

Old Man Scho's potential was extraordinary.

But it was 'only' potential.

When Old Man Scho was alive, it was a time when even the Korea Awakener's Federation couldn't catch Meteor Shower.

Can you believe it? Meteor Shower. That anomaly, now so trivial we call it a mid-boss, was something Old Man Scho would exclaim, "They expect us to clear this?"

Old Man Scho's time stopped at the 23rd cycle. From my perspective, that was more than thousands of years in the past.

No matter how successful or talented a person is, continuous adaptation to new eras is necessary. It would be absurd to claim, "Hey everyone! This is the most popular genre literature these days!" while bringing out the Epic of Gilgamesh now.

"I originally planned to train the old man like crazy if he returned. With his talent, I thought about lightly training him for about 200 years so he could at least be useful."

"Hehe."

"But here in the unconscious world, we have such a great answer sheet provided."

Go Yuri tilted her head.

"Answer sheet?"

Yes. An answer sheet.

I was ready to face Old Man Scho's Bad Ending, the Fallen Alter version, also known as the Sword Demon, again.

Like last time, the Sword Demon was wandering the scorched city of Seoul. Dragging an utterly unglamorous construction steel pipe.

As usual, wasn't he the one swallowing up all the elegance and dignity of the awakened ones?

For the sake of preserving the dignity and character of the awakened, it was inevitable that I, the Undertaker, had to step in.

I took a deep breath.

Then exhaled with all my might.

"Hey, you National Socialist German Workers' Party member bastard!"

“……”

Freeze—

A racial hate speech, which would make a well-educated German (excluding the 1930s) have a seizure, echoed loudly.

By the way, the National Socialist German Workers' Party, commonly known as NSDAP, was better known by its alias among the awakened ones. Nazis.

Incidentally, Old Man Scho was a person who voted for the Social Democratic Party of Germany from birth until the day the world ended. His blood was quite red.

Germany had produced both Karl Marx and Adolf Hitler. In other countries, the battle between fascists and communists might be a simple ideological struggle, but in Germany, it was compounded with feelings of ethnic hatred.

Even if one falls into being an anomaly, a true revolutionary fighter never betrays their ideology.

“Look at this!”

Flutter.

I shook an old banner.

“……”

The Sword Demon’s focus wavered wildly upon seeing the symbol majestically depicted on the banner.

卍.

Though it was just a Buddhist symbol in the East, no Occidentalist could comprehend the profound teachings of Buddha.

The DNA of ‘Ka’ dormant in Old Man Scho’s blood began an allergic overreaction to the sound of ‘Ad.’

“Uuurgh!”

The German-born super-communist Swordmaster howled. If only his aura had been red, it would have been perfect.

But its power was undeniable.

True to the protocol to destroy the old and outdated world from its inception, Old Man Scho’s swordplay—or rather, pipe-play—destroyed the city in an instant.

However, the Sword Demon’s hand, aiming to cut me down, suddenly hit the brakes.

“...! ...!”

Where the Sword Demon’s aura was heading, there were statues made of clay.

Busts of ‘Karl Marx’ and ‘Rosa Luxemburg’!

The Sword Demon hesitated like a bugged NPC. His expression was like a Japanese Kirishitan ordered to step on a Jesus plaque to prove he wasn’t a Christian.

Indeed, to the German-born old man, those two statues were like the holy icons of Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

If he swung his sword left, Marx would be destroyed, and if he attacked right, Luxemburg would be ruined.

“Ugh, uuurgh…!”

My preparations didn’t end there.

Just in case, I had displayed all the busts of German leftist politicians I knew: Kurt Schumacher, Willy Brandt, Wilhelm Pieck, Walter Ulbricht, and so on.

Regardless of which faction Old Man Scho supported (though I wasn’t interested in German politics, unifying the leftist factions was an illusion and an anomaly in itself), one of them would surely

get him!

Yes.

I, the Undertaker, had spent a week hanging around Busan Station's waiting room just to show this.

Thanks to all the pointless efforts during every vacation cycle, my sculpting skills were quite impressive.

"Does the old man think he's the only one who can do domain expansion? This is my domain expansion."

"Uuurgh…"

"I've hidden statues all over this city like mines. Come forth, my unique barrier. The revolutionary space of red massacre."

"Uuuuurgh!"

Come, old communist.

Cry and prove your (ideological) purity.

Footnotes:

Chapter 134

The Eschatologist VI

Sinnoa

“Hooah! Urrrrgghh!”

The Sword Demon charged.

However, compared to when he sliced my neck in one move, his movements were now like those of an old caterpillar.

In a bad sense, his footwork had changed. To avoid the mines (statues) I had planted all over the city, the Sword Demon was forced into inefficient paths.

Of course, it was hard to believe that Old Man Scho, who had fallen into corruption, still maintained the same fervent political ideology as before.

In fact, the statues I made the most were of Adele, Old Man Scho's wife.

Statues of her were hiding behind the statues of Marx and Luxemburg.

About 90% of the reason the Sword Demon hesitated in his iconoclasm was because of those statues of his wife.

One might wonder if I really needed the communist statues at all, but such a question would be against the anti-communist ideology of the Korean peninsula.

Why would I pass up the opportunity to legally ridicule and humiliate that senile old man? It was a fun event that came after thousands of years.

Regressors must enjoy things when they can.

Some of the wife's statues weren't just busts but half-body statues. I even added her right arm to make the “fuck you” gesture.

Hundreds of middle fingers were proudly raised at Old Man Scho.

The desolate ruins of the city had become a bit more interesting with these exterior decorations. This was environmental beautification and urban aesthetics at their best.

“...! ...!”

The Sword Demon howled again at my thoroughly prepared gift attack. He must have been touched by the dedication of an old comrade.

I couldn’t understand the language of anomalies well, but if translated into German, it would probably have meant ‘Danke.’

From behind me, Go Yuri muttered.

“Interesting...”

Leaving the amused observer behind, our exchange of swords—or rather, cane sword and steel pipe—became fierce.

Even if the opponent was Old Man Scho, who had reached max potential, fighting was manageable when his movements were restricted.

“Grrrr!”

The Sword Demon, frustrated, jumped into the air.

His plan was to leave no chance of stepping on the statues!

However, it was a half-baked plan. Apparently, that old man had been on vacation for so long that he had forgotten what kind of person I, the Undertaker, was.

“Look at me—!”

Rip!

I tore off my shirt without hesitation. From behind, Go Yuri laughed, “Oh my.”

But my stripping wasn’t for fan service. Nor was it to provoke the enemy like some holy knight tank.

It was purely out of a desire to show Old Man Scho the portrait drawn on my underwear.

A canvas-like white undershirt.

On it was a portrait of Mrs. Adele.

“...!”

Old Man Scho stopped mid-air as if he had collided with a car.

His fingers trembled as they clutched the steel pipe. His mouth hung open, producing only monstrous sounds, “Ugh—ugh?”

From his perspective, he had just witnessed a sudden masterpiece, so worship was inevitable.

Moreover, not only on the clothes but also on my forearms, hands, and feet, I had tattoos of Mrs. Adele.

The [Wife Shield], a complete upgrade of the [Friend Shield], had descended here.

“Try to attack, old man. Try to attack! Where will you strike? My neck? Do you see the ADELE tattooed here?”

“Ugh, ugh... Huh?”

“Cut it if you can! You rotten old man!”

The Sword Demon was at a loss. Even the Old Man Scho, who had abandoned friendship and fled, couldn’t move against ‘love.’

Remember, this is the orthodox way to deal with anomalies.

Servants go to great lengths to hide their true names for a reason. Knowing their identity reveals their weaknesses, and once you

grasp that weakness, the stiff neck of the anomaly turns into a chicken neck.

From now on, it was my turn.

I charged with my entire body covered in an AT Field specially designed against the no-show.

“I’ve wanted to punch you for a thousand years!”

“Urrrrgh!”

Strike. Strike. And strike again.

Each time I swung my cane sword, Do-hwa, the Sword Demon could only dodge.

Even then, Old Man Scho’s murky eyes kept scanning my skin, checking for gaps that didn’t have a portrait or tattoo of Mrs. Adele.

But I didn’t make the mistake of leaving my ankles as the only clean area, unlike a goddess trying to make a baby invincible.

As a Korean who grew up reading stories like ‘The Child Warrior Udoori’, which taught resilience from an early age, I avoided such fatal mistakes.

“Hrrrgh…”

In the end, Old Man Scho couldn’t find any weakness on my body. The Sword Demon couldn’t maintain his mid-air hover and fell.

His only option left was to get beaten by me.

And the beating targeted both his body and mind. I wasn’t a dualist like Descartes, treating the physical and mental separately.

“Emit, what’s wrong?”

“…?!”

“I’m at the conference right now! My God, have you been drinking? Why are you acting like a child? Wait a moment, Emit. I hear

something strange in the sky!”

The lines spilling from my mouth.

They were an exact copy-paste of a 30-second phone call Old Man Scho had with his wife.

Highly developed plagiarism is indistinguishable from the original.

I not only copied the dialogue but also perfectly mimicked the voice. I converted the vibrations of the sound waves into aura, successfully reproducing ‘Mrs. Adele’s voice.’

This strategy was inspired by the 107th cycle when I fought the corrupted version of the Saintess, the Executioner. Using a tactic created by a fallen one against another fallen one was an achievement of human intellect.

“My brother’s name is Maximillian! God, Emit, what are you talking about? This is driving me crazy. Hold on, let’s talk about this in person later!”

“Ugh, ugh, urgh...”

Old Man Scho was helpless against my ‘voice phishing’ strategy.

The mental resilience of a German crumbled in real time against a Korean scam attack.

“Well, well...”

Watching our fight, Go Yuri had a look of sheer ecstasy on her face.

It was like the expression of someone who bought a pastry from a subway bakery that smelled amazing and found it tasted just as good. Just watching seemed to satisfy her.

The battle continued for one, two, three, four days.

In this fierce battle, I wasn’t just releasing thousands of years of accumulated stress on Old Man Scho. That was only 85% of the purpose.

The remaining 15% was to learn by observing the ‘answer sheet,’ as I had told Go Yuri.

‘This anomaly before me is, after all, a manifestation of the potential talent Old Man Scho might have developed.’

Hoo—

I controlled my breathing as I deflected the opponent’s aura and stared straight at the Sword Demon.

Rather than orthodox techniques, it was a mix of unconventional and demonic arts. It was closer to a level built through sinister energy rather than pure martial aura, yet the Sword Demon was undeniably one of the possibilities for ‘Emit Schopenhauer’ as a martial artist.

My gaze sharpened.

‘I must remember as much as possible.’

The grip on the sword handle.

The direction of his swings. The proportion and method of mixing feints into his attacks. The angles at which he added weight to his strikes and the speed at which he deftly parried. The way he utilized aura in his swordsmanship.

If Old Man Scho had not dropped out of the game from the 23rd cycle, he might have eventually developed such sword techniques.

‘I’ll observe, remember, and pass it on.’

For the Old Man Scho who would return someday.

Therefore, I extended the battle as long as possible, even though I could have ended it faster.

I introduced numerous scenarios. How would he react if attacked from the left?

How would he defend against an ambush of formless aura while

pretending to swing a sword?

What if I did this? What about that? Oh, what about this?

I threw countless question marks at my enemy.

“Urrrrgh!”

And my comrade answered with countless exclamation points.

Pounding those curved question marks into his unique exclamation marks, that was the path the martial artist walked.

Even if a human fell into being an anomaly, their blade remained straight.

‘I can’t quite grasp the subtleties.’

I admitted it honestly. As Old Man Scho said, my martial talent was rather lacking.

I had hoped for something, but my senses weren’t dramatically impressed by the dazzling display of swordsmanship and footwork unfolding before me.

Moments of enlightenment or breakthroughs commonly seen in martial arts novels didn’t seem to have any connection with me.

As a martial artist, I was less than mediocre.

‘But if I accurately imitate and demonstrate it, Old Man Scho will understand the hidden meanings.’

However, as a supporter, I had supreme talent.

I rarely felt more grateful for the [Complete Memory] ability than now.

I was always faithful to the role assigned to me as a regressor in this world. I helped my comrades. Supported them. Connected them.

I used time and death, the absolute barriers for mortal humans, as stepping stones to link the frontline like a thread.

“Old man, you’re not fighting me right now, nor are you fighting to defeat me.”

The dark aura and the night-sky-colored aura intertwined.

“Ugh! Hrr, hurrrgh!”

“You’re fighting to become a better person than you are now. This is quite a fortuitous thing. After all, isn’t every battle a duel with oneself?”

“...!”

“I’ll make a prediction. Someday, you will lose your life under your own blade.”

The battle that had lasted all night for four days was gradually coming to an end.

I thought of it as a long letter that the current Old Man Scho was sending to his future self.

In the past, people exchanged letters with recorded game moves to play Go over long distances.

So it wouldn’t be strange for two martial artists to pass on their martial arts across a bit of time.

“... Ugh, ugh...”

The Sword Demon was completely exhausted.

Even a slaughter machine driven solely by ‘love for his wife’ had its limits.

Due to the inherent limitations of being based on a human body, the Sword Demon’s muscles were weary from endless minor wounds, and his heart groaned under relentless fatigue.

The aura was not infinite either.

In the battlefield environment, manipulated to be thoroughly

advantageous to me, it was Old Man Scho whose engine cooled down first.

Pop, pop, pop—

The once grand aura of the Sword Demon, enough to turn broad daylight into night sky, had diminished to nothing.

Like a broken TV occasionally showing noise, the night-sky color flickered around Old Man Scho's shoulders.

If the Sword Demon was the fallen form of Old Man Scho.

That sight was the collapse of that anomaly.

Yes. Although it might be paradoxical for a regressor like me to say, many events have an end.

The time to bury the small time capsule in my mind was approaching.

"Ugh, ugh... huh..."

As I stepped back, the Sword Demon reflexively swung his steel pipe.

Sway—

The strike was pathetic, slicing only through the air.

The Sword Demon tried to follow me, but his steps faltered, and he fell. His ankles were slashed with dozens of wounds like a tree stump poorly felled by an unskilled lumberjack.

The Sword Demon tried to crawl with his hands.

But his nails were all broken from the rough handling of aura.

Crunch! Each time the Sword Demon moved, blood gushed from his ten broken nails.

The Sword Demon's blood was pitch black, smelling like charcoal.

A long trail of ash followed.

“……”

I raised Do-hwa.

Determined to deliver the final blow to Old Man Scho, to his remnants, to his bad ending.

If Old Man Scho were to die, I thought for a long time that I would be the only one qualified to conduct his funeral.

But I had to momentarily pause my downward strike.

Old Man Scho wasn’t crawling towards me, the one he had fought for four days straight.

“…Ah…”

He was crawling a little further back.

“…Adele… Ah…”

He was heading towards Go Yuri.

Footnotes:

Chapter 135

The Eschatologist VII

Sinnoa

I had witnessed the deaths of many comrades. I protected their deaths and watched over them. This was one of the reasons I was given the name "Undertaker."

Looking back now, the death of the Sword Star, Emit Schopenhauer, always happened too quickly, too easily.

-Old man! Watch out for the tentacle!

-Huh?

Old Man Scho fought on the front lines like a true dealer. Thus, he had to die earlier than a supporter like me.

If someone were to request a painting titled "The Death of Old Man Scho" from me, I would capture one of two scenes.

The first would be of him being turned into KFC chicken pieces by the tentacles of the Ten Clans. The second would be of him collapsing headless like a Dullahan in the old Baekje Hospital café.

Either way, his death began too swiftly and ended too abruptly.

Old Man Scho's end never allowed him the leisure to leave a final word.

Even when we agreed to end a cycle mutually, it was the same. Those deaths were not 'Game Over,' but just hitting the 'Continue' button, so there was no reason to leave any last words.

Thus, this was the first time I truly witnessed my friend's end.

“...Adele...”

Plop. Splatter.

Emit Schopenhauer crawled. He crawled towards Go Yuri, bleeding black ink-like blood through his broken nails.

“……”

Seeing my old comrade in such a state, my grip on the sword wavered.

Should I behead him immediately to preserve his last shred of dignity? Or should I allow him to see Adele’s face, even in a hallucination, as he closed his eyes?

Click, clack. My sword wobbled somewhere between drawing and sheathing.

At each short step, one side held reality's dignity, while the other held the happiness of dreams.

“Shh.”

Go Yuri’s whisper was faster than my sword.

“Leave it to me, guild leader.”

“……”

Go Yuri placed a finger to her lips with one eye closed, smiling softly.

There was a time I genuinely liked that smile. Now, I couldn’t trust Go Yuri.

Still, at that moment, I let go of my sword.

Was it because I had spent a week with Go Yuri and had been subtly brainwashed?

Or was it because, as Undertaker, I instinctively felt that Go Yuri was the right person to give Old Man Scho a proper funeral?

In my silent gaze, Old Man Scho crawled.

“Adele... Adele...”

Finally, his mangled nails touched Go Yuri’s foot.

Splurt. The black blood he spilled like ink stained her shoes. The thick, viscous blood ran down her loafers.

“Yes.”

Go Yuri crouched down. With her gloved hands, she gently held Old Man Scho's worn-out hand, covered in black.

“Emit.”

“……”

Old Man Scho looked up with a blank expression. Go Yuri smiled softly.

“You’ve worked hard, Emit.”

“……”

“My, you look so tired. Where have you been running around like this?”

“...,...”

“Yes. You sometimes get fixated on the strangest things and never listen to others. I always worry about you.”

“……”

“Are you okay? You mustn’t overdo it. You should always think about your health.”

Only “Ah-” and “Hrr-” sounds came from Old Man Scho’s mouth.

Thinking about it, few regressors had such a pitiful fate.

His wife was a scholar. She was invited to an academic conference at a university in Korea. Old Man Scho traveled with her to this distant, unfamiliar land.

He had no particular interest in this place. Korea was just a gray zone he had never thought about.

It was merely a place to enjoy a light overseas trip with his wife.

Now, having lost his wife, what meaning could this land hold for Emit Schopenhauer?

I found it hard to imagine the sorrow of those who lose loved ones in a foreign land.

For Emit Schopenhauer, the only path left was to search for his beloved wife.

Their reunion could only happen in two ways. A brief phone call of just a few seconds, or an illusion in the void of this unconscious world.

"....."

"Yes, you."

Go Yuri knelt and gently embraced Old Man Scho.

"I love you too."

"....."

With a final sigh, Old Man Scho's body collapsed.

His flesh turned into a black liquid, and the liquid soon scattered as charcoal dust. It seemed there was a lot to turn into dust in his body, as the black ash spread across the ruins of the city.

Go Yuri knelt, holding the ashes in her embrace.

This was how Go Yuri conducted a funeral for a human.

I moved my lips.

"...Was the old man smiling at the end?"

"....."

Go Yuri stood up with a light grunt and dusted off the ash that had covered her body.

The scattering ash made 'Cough, cough' and 'Achoo' sounds. Go Yuri laughed awkwardly.

“Well, maybe he was having a happy dream. Guild leader, which would you prefer?”

“Prefer?”

“Would you like him to have smiled in my arms? Or would you prefer he regained his senses at the very end, rejecting the false comfort?”

“……”

I had to remain silent.

Go Yuri watched me for a while. Her curved smile seemed to observe my heartbeat, not my face.

I hoped she couldn’t hear my heartbeat. It was a reasonably realistic expectation.

Boom.

Just then, the ruins of the city roared, swallowing all surrounding sounds and echoes.

Go Yuri looked up at the sky.

“Ah, this place’s bad ending is over.”

She put her hands behind her back.

“Really, I can finally breathe a bit. Thank you, guild leader. Thanks to you, I feel a bit more at ease.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Haha. Recently, there have been too many powerful nightmares here. If not for you defeating Cheon Yo-hwa and the Puppeteer, I

wouldn’t have been able to handle it.”

“That’s strange.”

I frowned.

“To Yo-hwa and Ha-yul, you probably appeared as me. Shouldn’t that have made it easier to control them?”

“They said there couldn’t be two guild leaders, so they left the doll and tried to kill me.”

“……”

“Well.”

Clap. Go Yuri clapped her hands.

Then we were back in the waiting room of Busan Station.

This was evidence that Go Yuri had taken control of this unconscious world.

“Now you can leave anytime. Before, I didn’t have enough power to help you. When you sleep here and wake up, it will be reality.”

“……”

“Lie down here, guild leader.”

Tap, tap.

Go Yuri playfully patted her thighs as she sat on the bench, seemingly ready to offer another lap pillow.

“Hmm.”

Returning to reality was good news.

It meant I had somewhat cleared this vast void, called 'Dream within a Dream,' 'World After the Bad Ending,' and 'Parallel World.'

But Go Yuri's words were problematic.

If she intended to cooperate from the beginning, why did she get rid of the 264 Tutorial Fairies?

Was it to ensure I would rely on her and use my hands to clear the 'Bad Endings'? Did she eliminate the Baku as a variable in advance?

Most importantly...

“You. You’re not just an illusion.”

“Hmm?”

“A week ago, you introduced yourself as nothing more than a manifestation of my fears and aversions, separate from the real Go Yuri.”

Indeed.

This was what Go Yuri had said.

-Wouldn't it be accurate to say I am a manifestation of your fears and aversions, guild leader?

-Of course, it's sad that your unconscious fears took my form.

But just now, she had confessed.

“Then how did you almost get killed by Yo-hwa and Ha-yul? Before I entered this place, my fears wouldn't have been materialized, and you wouldn't have existed.”

“.....”

Go Yuri’s lips emitted a humming sound.

After a while, she smiled.

“That’s strange.”

She smiled as if in a bind.

“Guild leader, your 'memory' is very, very strong, isn't it?”

“……”

“You don’t just have a good memory. Ah. Well, then many things make sense.”

“You.”

“I’m always here, guild leader. For thousands of years, and for thousands more.”

Step.

Go Yuri approached.

“You helped me, so I will help you. Because you lived so diligently, too many sediments have accumulated here.”

“Sediments.”

“Yes. Think about it. You wouldn’t have encountered the 'Logout Game' or met your end there if it weren’t for those sediments.”

“……”

“But you ended up witnessing it. The nightmare that should have ended with the Ten Legs continued to increase as you kept moving forward. Countless apocalyptic forms have piled up. Ah.”

Of course, she said.

“I’m not blaming you. I’m just pointing out that the nightmares you witnessed keep piling up in your unconscious.”

“……”

“When you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you. Isn’t that your favorite quote, guild leader? Yes. You’ve nurtured such a void in your heart.”

Step.

Go Yuri drew closer.

“So—sometimes, I think it would be good for you to come down here and clean up periodically.”

“Clean up.”

“Yes. Like cleaning a house. When you return, I will sometimes come out to greet you.”

“Are you saying you are my collaborator?”

“Of course, guild leader. I am, after all, your guild member.”

“Then you can fulfill my request.”

I said.

“Yuri, please disappear from my dreams. That would be much better for my mental health.”

“Haha.”

Go Yuri reached out. Her palm gently covered my eyes.

Warm darkness.

“I’m sorry, but that’s not possible, guild leader.”

A whisper scented with apples brushed against my nose.

“Because we are already one.”

Everything faded to black.

There are epilogues.

The first epilogue.

Afterward, I returned to reality safely as Go Yuri promised.

However, the Tutorial Fairies that should have been around my bed were nowhere to be seen. For some reason, they were back at the casino, working normally.

It was truly baffling. When I asked if they weren't in the middle of performing a ritual to bring me into the unconscious world, they replied.

"Huh?"

Fairy number 264, whose head should have been chopped off in the dream, tilted her head innocently.

"What are you talking about, Secretary? We can show humans the dreams they desire, but we don't have the power to take you to such a scary place."

"....."

"Dreams are meant to be enjoyed, not explored like ruins! We have never received such an order from you, and even if we had, it would have been impossible to fulfill it!"

The fairy giggled.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but it felt like there was a hint of apple scent in the air.

The second epilogue.

Regardless of the fairies' stories, it was certain that I had somewhat conquered the 'Dream within a Dream,' 'World After the Bad Ending,' and 'Parallel World.'

The effects of my conquest began to show from the very next day.

First, there were testimonies on SG Net.

-Anonymous: Had an amazing sleep last night, thumbs up if you did too lol

Anonymous: You too?? I've been having nightmares since I came back from the void, but last night I slept like a baby, no joke.

LiteraryGirl: ? Me too, weird.

-[Yuldoguk] SwordMarquis: For arduous training, healthy sleep is essential. Last night, I also slept properly to glimpse the realm of nothingness.

-[National Road] Officer: Habits while awake carry over to sleeping habits. Those who suffer from insomnia should look back at their daily routines and fix any issues.

-Anonymous: I don't care about anything else; I just wish I could sleep like last night every night.

Similar phenomena must have occurred abroad as well.

As I always emphasize, mental health is crucial for humans, and healthy sleep is a significant aspect of it.

In that sense, I, the Undertaker, might as well celebrate for contributing a little to the mental health of all humanity.

"Good morning, guild leader."

"Good morning, my ass. It's a shitty morning. Thanks to someone, I only got three hours of sleep. But you seem very happy...?"

"Oh."

...I suddenly realized I hadn't conquered the bad ending of the person most in need of sleep health.

Next time, I should look for Noh Do-hwa's appearance in the unconscious world first.

The third epilogue.

This last epilogue is not something that actually happened in reality. It's just a scene I, the Undertaker, saw in a dream.

But there are those dreams, aren't there?

Dreams so vivid that it's hard to distinguish them from reality when you look back on them later.

In that dream, I was dreaming of Old Man Scho.

As dreams often go, the perspective was unclear.

Sometimes, I observed Old Man Scho from a third-person perspective.

Sometimes, I possessed him, enjoying a first-person protagonist view.

And beside Emit Schopenhauer, there was Adele.

-.....

-.....

We spent a delightful day together.

Adele liked to walk, and I liked walking with Adele.

-I know a good path for a walk.

-Really? How?

-Well, just follow me.

I revealed hidden walking routes to Adele, who knew nothing about Korean geography.

Throughout my regressions, I had occasionally found good walking paths for times like this. In Seoul, Sejong, and Busan, I showed my wife the paths I had noted.

Adele was delighted as if she had received a surprise gift.

-You have such good taste!

Hearing that made all the effort of researching worthwhile.

As the day was ending.

We were sitting on a bench together when, suddenly, I saw a familiar face in the distance, beyond the blue hydrangeas and

cypress trees.

My friend. The Undertaker was standing against a tree.

‘Ah.’

At that moment, I realized.

This sunset-tinged landscape was a dream.

‘Yes. I wanted to see my wife before I died.’

I wanted to grow old with you.

I wanted to live with you.

I wanted to die with you, but.

I couldn’t.

-Emit?

-……

I held her hand tightly.

In the remaining time, I murmured to Adele.

-Hey. I had a tough day.

-Hmm?

-It was really hard after we parted.

Adele was startled.

She asked if I was okay.

I looked at her face. As long as possible. As deeply as possible.

-Yeah. But it’s okay.

I was glad to have survived until now.

For the first time, I thought it was fortunate to have survived so diligently. It might have been closer to escape than survival. Yet, it was good I didn't disappear forever.

Because it allowed this moment.

-Because I'm with you, everything is okay.

I said.

-I love you.

And there, my dream ended.

It was just a dream, but I had to sit on my bed for a while.

Was that dream just a fantasy entirely created in my mind?

Or did I momentarily connect with a scene Old Man Scho had really dreamed of, thanks to the unconscious world's pathways?

Or... perhaps, was that the illusion Go Yuri showed the 'Sword Demon' as she embraced him for the last time?

'Which would you prefer, guild leader?'

Go Yuri's voice echoed in my mind.

'Would you prefer he smiled in my arms?'

'Or would you prefer he regained his senses at the very end, rejecting the false comfort?'

I smiled wryly.

Indeed. Even if Old Man Scho fell into being an anomaly, I wished his end to be peaceful.

If that dream was truly the vision Go Yuri showed, I would have to acknowledge this one thing.

That a demise in Go Yuri's embrace was the coziest end the world could offer.

Footnotes:

Chapter 136

The Impostor I

Sinnoa

If you've been following the story this far, you might have vaguely realized it.

There is a certain element essential to genre fiction that is missing from my story.

This element is so important that without it, people would question why the protagonist even bothers to act like a hero.

It's the 'monopolization of fortuitous encounters.'

For example, think about Oh Dok-seo in the 555th cycle. The moment she thought she was inside a novel, didn't she have thoughts like this?

[Oh Dok-seo: Well, anyway. The important thing in the Busan Station part is how early you secure the elixir hidden in Haeundae, that's all.]

Ah, fortuitous encounters! Such a sweet sound.

Like an elixir that instantly raises your state. Or a secret manual buried halfway up a cliff for some reason. Or raising the strongest person in the world from a young age, ensuring they become dependent on you through gaslighting. Or farming an item whose value no one yet knows.

Snatching those things lightly and saying, 'I'm lucky,' in a cool manner is the dignity bestowed upon the protagonist of genre literature.

To be honest, I, the Undertaker, also had a bit of luck in my youth.

I was more of an 'adventurous hunter of fortuitous encounters.'

If I entered a void, it meant there was a rare item to be farmed there.

It was the same with anomalies. Although I kept it secret until now, the 'Heart of Ten Legs' was an extremely rare item. Eating it raw would easily accumulate an era's worth of inner energy (it tastes like tuna belly).

However, unlike the past, I no longer obsess over such items.

In fact, I actively avoid them.

Unless it's absolutely necessary, I decline. If it's too valuable to pass up, I hand it over to someone else instead of taking it myself.

"Why... Why on earth?"

Oh Dok-seo once furrowed her brow upon hearing about my policy.

At that time, Dok-seo was taking a short break while writing my story. She seemed a bit exhausted, so I specially prepared Ten Legs sushi using the heart of Ten Legs for her.

Dok-seo, munching away and saying, 'It really tastes like tuna sashimi,' continued.

"Are you a hipster or something? Do you think monopolizing fortuitous encounters is too clichéd for a protagonist?"

"Not at all. If possible, I would love to monopolize fortuitous encounters. Since I have the [Resume] ability, the more encounters I have, the better."

"Then why... Oh! Is it because it's more efficient for your companions to have them instead of you?"

"Hmm. That's part of it, but... It's easier to show you."

I liked educating Dok-seo about 'anomalies.' It would be helpful later on.

I opened my subspace trunk bag and took out a notebook and an

item, placing them on the table.

Dok-seo's eyes widened.

It seemed to be an item familiar to this otaku.

"...What is this? Isn't it the [Monkey's Paw]?"

"Oh. You recognize it immediately."

The Monkey's Paw.

This anomaly, which looks like a monkey's paw, grants three wishes to a person.

However, being an anomaly, it never grants wishes in a normal way.

To the caster who dares to wish for a shortcut in life, some form of 'misfortune' will befall them.

If you wish for 'eternal life,' it won't grant you eternal youth, so you'll enjoy an endless silver life, forever aging.

If you wish for 'eternal youth and life,' it ensures you survive the end of the world to endlessly wander the universe alone.

If you wish for 'eternal youth and life with the ability to end it whenever you want,' it creates countless horrendous and tragic events around you to test if you won't die even then.

Is it absurd?

Yes, it is absurd.

That absurdity is the essence of the [Monkey's Paw] anomaly.

Wishing without side effects is impossible. It's the dark evolved alter version of the magic lamp with the genie.

"Strictly speaking, it's both a monkey's paw and a human's hand."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"By the time I found it, someone had already made three wishes."

"Yikes."

Unfortunately, this end-of-the-world scenario had fully implemented the curse of the Monkey's Paw.

"Dok-seo, if someone who thinks they're smart but doesn't know what anomalies are found the [Monkey's Paw], what kind of wishes do you think they would make?"

"...There are three wish slots. So first, 'Please remove the side effects of the wishes.'"

I smiled faintly.

"Good. And next?"

"Uh... Remove the limit on the number of wishes? Three wishes aren't enough. Although many stories don't grant such a wish, it's worth trying."

"Wow. How can you be so predictable?"

"Huh?"

"I'll explain later. Anyway, what's the final wish?"

"Um..."

Dok-seo, after eating another piece of Ten Legs sushi, opened her mouth.

"It's a tough choice, but I'd wish for 'luck.'"

"....."

"The Monkey's Paw brings misfortune to its user, right? This is a counterattack. If I'm extremely lucky from the start, the misfortune itself will be suppressed."

I had a hard time suppressing a bitter smile.

Dok-seo's answer was textbook. Cheon Yo-hwa, Lee Ha-yul, and Seo Gyu gave similar answers when I asked them.

Though the details of their wishes varied, their goals were the same. 'To eliminate the limitations and side effects of the Monkey's Paw.'

"You're right. No matter who found it, they would have made similar wishes."

"Oh, yeah."

I took a sip of my café au lait.

Then, I looked at the notebook placed next to the Monkey's Paw on the table.

"That's why monopolizing fortuitous encounters became impossible for me."

I first discovered the Monkey's Paw in Jeju Island.

At the time, I was exploring the tutorial dungeon that appeared at Seongsan Ilchulbong.

The dungeon had a [School Trip] concept, and along with [Baekhwa Girls' High], it was one of the earliest tutorial dungeons to appear.

In the tutorial dungeon, Seongsan Ilchulbong's elevation grew to the height of Mount Everest.

By the time I arrived, the tutorial had long ended, and Seongsan Ilchulbong had returned to its normal size.

I was searching around the long-concluded tutorial site, hoping to find any salvageable items.

'There are quite a few corpses.'

There were no noticeable items. But as expected from a tutorial dungeon, skeletons and corpses were scattered from the entrance of

the hiking trail.

'Are there any familiar faces among the dead?'

Checking the corpses' ID cards and badges, most of the bodies near the entrance were Japanese.

There were about 16 corpses in total.

It wasn't unusual. There were a few Japanese, like Uehara Shino, in the Busan Station tutorial dungeon.

More Japanese would have been summoned forcibly in Jeju Island, which is closer to Japan than Busan.

"Hmm?"

It was then.

I found a slightly 'peculiar corpse' near the summit.

First, the corpse was covered in thick hair.

No, it went beyond thick; it looked like it was smeared with hair growth lotion all over. At first glance, it could be mistaken for an animal carcass or a bush.

Most notably, the corpse was in an odd position.

Hidden in a slope far away from the tourist trail, it was at an angle just out of sight.

'Is this also a victim of the tutorial?'

The corpse was clutching a thick notebook in both hands.

I picked up the notebook, thinking it might be the person's last will.

《Day 1》

I'm writing this diary just in case something happens.

The will was written in Japanese, not Korean.

Flip. Without much thought, I turned the first page of the will.

The world has gone strange.

It was strange before, but now it's even stranger. People are dying absurdly easily.

But I'm lucky! When I was pulled into this mysterious place, a 'Monkey's Paw' was right in front of me.

Thanks to watching the <Monogatari Series>, I knew what it was the moment I saw it.

It's amazing that my ex-girlfriend's otaku hobby helped me now.

Thank you, Sena. I'll forgive you for cheating on me with others.

The Koreans around me didn't seem to know what it was. I quickly put it in my backpack, afraid someone might notice.

Monkey's Paw?

I looked at the corpse again. The body was so hairy it was hard to recognize its face.

'Hmm. Now that I think about it, it does look like monkey hair...'

Did this person make wishes on the Monkey's Paw and end up enchanted by the anomaly?

Flip. I kept turning the pages.

《Day 2》

What wishes should I make if I had a 'Monkey's Paw'?

I once talked about this with Sena.

I thought it was just a silly conversation, but I never expected to be given such luck.

I feel destined.

No matter how many side effects the Monkey's Paw has, it would be foolish not to use it. People are dropping dead left and right. I have to survive somehow.

Thinking like this is the only way to endure, with so many people dying around me. I want to eat gyudon and pineapple.

Borrowing the power of an anomaly.

"Mm."

This was a thought one might have before fully acclimating to the end-of-the-world scenario.

Even I, who had experienced hundreds of cycles, could only use the likes of tutorial fairies and the Inunaki Tunnel, and even those with many restrictions.

A path a beginner should not tread lightly.

But I could understand the desperation to take a gamble in a life-threatening situation.

Flip. I continued reading.

《Day 3》

The Japanese gathered and formed a party. A girl named Yō was particularly strong.

But she insisted that we share our resources by opening our backpacks to each other. Is she crazy? These are personal belongings.

I wanted to join another group, but most of them were Koreans, and

communication was difficult. I asked for a day to think about it.

Yō looked at me expressionlessly and said to do as I wished.

She really creeps me out. Fine, have it your way.

Tonight, I plan to use the Monkey's Paw.

Flip.

《Day 4》

I have meticulously planned my wishes for the Monkey's Paw over the past few days.

Here they are in order:

1. Please don't create any side effects for my wishes.

2. Remove the limit on the number of wishes. If removing the limit is impossible, pretend this wish wasn't made.

3. Give me luck. Prevent any 'accidental misfortunes' from befalling me, like getting hit by a falling rock.

The core of these wishes is the third one: 'luck.'

I considered other cheat abilities but ultimately dismissed them all. No matter how powerful an ability, if the Monkey's Paw brings misfortune, it would be pointless.

Luck. With overwhelming luck, any ability or misfortune would pale in comparison.

Maybe the Monkey's Paw will play some trick while I'm making my wishes.

It's a devil, after all.

So, I'm thinking of writing my three wishes on a piece of paper and presenting them all at once.

Honestly, I don't know what will happen. I think I've prepared well, but just in case, I'm leaving this diary like a will.

If I fail, I hope whoever finds this diary can use it more wisely.

Here goes.

"....."

I found myself deeply engrossed in the diary of this unknown awakener.

Judging by the fact they ended up a corpse, it seemed they failed. But there's as much to learn from failure as from success.

This awakener adhered to a fundamental principle in dealing with anomalies and voids: 'Leave records for others.'

This corpse and I were comrades navigating the apocalypse together.

Flip. My handling of the diary grew more respectful.

《Day 5》

I did it!

While on watch, centaur monsters attacked, but for some reason, they didn't notice me at all and went after everyone else.

Half the group died, but I didn't get a scratch. Even Yō, the strongest among us, got injured.

Surprisingly, the second wish also came true! Unlimited wishes! Hooray!

With the certainty that I'd never die an absurd death, I felt at ease. Yō's face didn't bother me anymore.

Amazing. It's real.

I wished to eat gyudon, and after killing a monster, gyudon dropped. It was so absurd I laughed.

I got six bowls of gyudon and shared them with the group. Yō's expressionless face looked surprised.

Yeah. That's the role that suits you. Just an extra.

Though our numbers halved, the power of gyudon lifted everyone's spirits. I realized anew the importance of food.

Thank you, Sena! It's all thanks to you! I'll forgive you for dating four other guys while with me!

The excitement in the handwriting was palpable.

In my mind, I pictured someone who had risked everything on a final gamble and succeeded, cheering in victory.

But unlike the diary's owner, I remained cautious.

'If this person truly succeeded, they wouldn't have ended up a corpse.'

The joy continued on the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th days. After the 11th day, the diary entries became sporadic.

When I finally flipped to the later pages.

The diary resumed, and her handwriting trembled from a different kind of emotion.

《Day 6??》

Something's wrong. Something's very wrong.

When I woke up today, centaur monsters were attacking. Everything felt familiar, as if it was a repeat of the 5th day.

Half the group died. Yō got injured in the same place. Everything

repeated exactly.

The diary's owner seemed to maintain some composure for a while.

She became diligent in recording the details, noting every event and sign meticulously.

But as the '6th day??' repeated, she could no longer keep her sanity. Her mental strength wasn't that strong to begin with.

Something's wrong something's wrong something's wrong something's wrong something's wrong something's wrong something's wrong something's wrong something's wrong

---

One page was filled with the word 'wrong' written over and over.

Then, after a long gap, a sudden cold sentence appeared in the middle of a blank page.

Time is looping?

Footnotes:

Chapter 137

The Impostor II

Sinnoa

“Wait, hold on, mister!”

Oh Dok-seo, who had been listening to my story, was startled. She spoke so abruptly that some espresso splashed around.

“That, that means that Japanese person was a regressor!”

“Calm down.”

“How can I calm down? If there's another person besides Old Man Scho and you, that makes three regressors!”

“Well, for now, just calm down.”

I calmly wiped the table with a handkerchief. Dok-seo, who had been focused on the Monkey's Paw, was now entirely captivated by the diary. The page with the sentence ‘Time is looping’ lay open.

“I was just as excited as you when I read that sentence in the diary.”

It was only natural. How could my heart not race?

If a ‘Third Regressor’ existed, it would be an incredible discovery.

Even if the person was found dead at Seongsan Ilchulbong, it didn't matter. There was still a possibility they would survive in the next cycle.

But to spoil things a bit, no such miracle occurred.

In the next cycle, and the one after that.

No matter how much time passed, the hairy corpse remained in the

corner of Seongsan Ilchulbong.

“Can I read it too? The diary?”

“Sure. Unlike the Monkey's Paw, that diary is just an ordinary notebook.”

“Thanks, mister!”

Flip.

Dok-seo hurriedly turned the pages.

For a moment, her actions overlapped with my own past self.

When I first discovered that diary.

《Day 5???》

It happened again. Centaurs attacked and started killing our party.

Why do we keep returning to Day 5? Was it because of the wish I made with the Monkey's Paw?

I don't know anymore.

Knowing the ambush was coming, we managed to drive the centaurs away without losing anyone this time. The party members praised me for it.

Even the usually stoic Yō looked at me with surprise, but for some reason, I didn't feel happy.

To you, this will note might look neatly written, but the reality was different.

The handwriting in the diary grew more chaotic, resembling the scrawl of a madman.

Occasionally, when sanity returned, the writing was neat, but it was only a façade.

The content of the diary reflected the writer's deteriorating mental state, spiraling rapidly into madness.

《Day 12??????》

It's certain. No matter what I do, I can't leave this dungeon.

Next, I'll try capturing and interrogating the ‘fairy’ who seems to be the host of this death game. That bitch should have some information.

《Day 13??????》

The fairy ran away as soon as it saw me.

‘Hoeeek! This is the wrong place! It's a mistake!’ it said. I don't understand.

I wanted to capture it by force, but honestly, it was impossible. When it swung something that looked like a magic wand, people died instantly and it turned invisible.

I've reached the final stage again. Koreans call this mountain Seongsan Ilchulbong.

When others reached the summit, they disappeared into a bright halo of light. But I remained inside the dungeon.

Why?

Why can't I leave the dungeon?

I begged the Monkey's Paw to let me out of this dungeon, but nothing changed. Why?

I wished to see my family and friends again, but there was no response. Why?

In a fit of anger, I threw the Monkey's Paw away. The next day, I woke up with it on my chest.

《??????????????》

Someone please help me.

《Day 5??????????????》

Another Day 5 ambush.

Suddenly, I felt overwhelmingly apathetic. This time, I didn't bother to fight the centaurs.

Instead, I joined them. I attacked my party members from behind as they fought the centaurs. Without Yō and me, the group fell apart pathetically quickly.

I saved Yō for last. When she saw my face, she widened her eyes.

You——— she started to say.

At that moment, a centaur's massive body struck her.

When a human is trampled by a horse, they die in a ridiculous manner. It had been a while since I felt such pleasure. It was a bit fun.

The problem was that the centaurs, after wiping out our group, hunted me too.

What fools. As expected of monsters, they had no concept of cooperation or alliances.

“.....”

I swallowed hard.

It was a typical sign of corruption.

The diary's owner, who believed herself to be a regressor, gradually lost her humanity.

Humanity only exists when people live together.

Conversely, if my space cannot interact with others and my time does not intersect with theirs, a person rapidly transforms into ‘something not human.’

The fallen Saintess who became the Executioner was a prime example.

The diary's owner was no different.

《Day 17??????????????????》

I reflect on my past self.

Reflecting on the past leads to the future. I have grown enough to believe that. In this space, no development is possible, so only self-discipline has meaning.

Why did I hate Yō so much?

Because she looked like the girl Sena cheated with? Because her expression annoyed me? Because she seemed like a model student?

I repent my prejudice.

Now I like Yō. I really like her. Other people break down in three days, but Yō lasted nearly three weeks.

She kept muttering the name Rika— Rika—, someone who seemed important to her.

She said she had a promise to keep, to return home. It was laughably stupid.

《Day 20??????????????????》

The world outside this space must have already disappeared.

The concept of 'stage clear' does not exist. When people are

enveloped in the light at the end, they actually die.

So, staying here with me is definitely better. Sometimes monsters pop out, but it's better than dying, right?

At this time, the Korean groups that split up at the start arrive one by one at the summit. But I didn't let them go.

I remembered the game <Fall Guys> that I enjoyed with Sena. You thought you reached the finish line? Too bad.

I hung Yō in the center of the crater. Then, I dragged everyone approaching the summit down the slope.

Roll, roll, roll. If they were lucky, they'd roll right into the crater and hit Yō. A hole-in-one.

I wondered why Korean students would go on a school trip to such a place, but I finally understood the true beauty of this location.

Depending on the angle and force, the rolling trajectory varied greatly. It was a deeply engaging game. I declared this place my private golf course. It's my property.

Some Korean shouted that I was a boss monster. How rude. I'm a young lady.

《Day 27??????????????????》

I felt a pang of fear after a long time.

A rather strong group rescued Yō and ambushed me. The last survivors must have banded together to form a death squad.

When a spear grazed my neck, I thought my heart would stop. I barely overcame the ambush and killed them.

I felt alive. This is what interaction between humans is like.

I gathered the wounded and killed them one by one in front of Yō. I took special care with the one who almost beheaded me.

That Korean glared at me with fierce eyes until the end.

Too bad. Sorry, but I'm a human who maxed out 'luck' with the Monkey's Paw.

Yō made beautiful sounds. Wasn't the violin invented from human screams? I felt more cultured.

Flip.

The diary contained many passages that were hard to convey.

Unless one was deeply interested in gore or guro, it felt like a repetitive cycle of similar content.

Torture conducted solely to elicit new reactions from others. Even the Tutorial Fairy would respond with, ‘This is a bit much.’

But human reactions were not infinite. Creativity had limits.

In the end, the diary concluded with one last sentence on a page yellowed with age.

A staggering handwriting.

I'm sorry for being born.

Monkey's Paw, please make me disappear.

Thud.

I closed the diary. Then I looked down at the hairy corpse that originally held this will note with both hands.

The corpse's posture seemed as if it was praying to someone.

What exactly happened to the ‘hairy corpse’?

Was she really a Regressor? How did the Monkey's Paw work?

An ordinary person would find it hard to investigate further.

But I, the Undertaker, was a seasoned 'True Regressor.'

Even if something seemed useless at first glance, I never neglected building networks with others.

Therefore, I could easily inquire about the ‘Japanese person’ dragged into the tutorial dungeon in Jeju Island.

“Nya? You mean Yō?”

Sway. Manyo Neko's tail swayed. Across from me, Manyo Neko blinked, interrupting her tea drinking.

“You suddenly want to meet Yō, nya? What do you mean, Undateikeo, nya?”

“She’s your childhood friend, isn’t she? I heard she’s from the Jeju tutorial dungeon.”

Yō.

The person frequently mentioned in the diary was actually someone I was familiar with.

There were many people named Yō, but several pieces of evidence convinced me.

She was stronger than other awakeners. She still had black hair despite being awakened. Most importantly, she murmured the name ‘Rika’ while being tortured.

That’s right. She was mentioned a few times in the Inunaki Tunnel episode.

Manyo Neko's real name was Rika, and she had a childhood friend named Yō.

If I hadn't conquered the Inunaki Tunnel, I wouldn't have been able to request this meeting.

Fate is mysterious.

“Nya. It’s true that Yō was spirited away to a Korean island…”

“I’ve been investigating the Jeju dungeon recently. It’s linked to a troublesome anomaly. I need to hear your friend’s testimony.”

For reference, the Magical Girl Association was extremely exclusive to outsiders.

From naming their group 'Magical Girl' 'Association,' it was clear they cared little for public opinion.

“Nya, if it's a request from the Undateikeo, I'll comply. Got it!”

Also, I had received a plaque of appreciation from their leader, known as the Grand Shaman, naming me an 'Honorary Magical Girl.'

I didn't appreciate it much.

In any case, in a society run on networks, my request was easily fulfilled.

Soon, I met with Yō, whose Magical Girl name was Obsidian Qin.

“You wanted to see me?”

Among the many eccentrics in the Magical Girl Association, she was relatively normal.

Obsidian Qin covered her mouth with a black mask marked with an 'X.' For those who experienced the COVID era, this could be seen as fashion.

“Yes. We met briefly during the Inunaki Tunnel incident, right? Nice to see you again.”

“Ah… Yes. Thank you very much for that time.”

“I heard you conquered the tutorial dungeon at Seongsan Ilchulbong in Jeju.”

“…”

“There’s an anomaly suspected to have originated there. I need your testimony to gauge its danger. Can you tell me what happened in the tutorial dungeon?”

I was cautious when bringing this up.

According to the diary, this person had likely been tortured by the diary's owner.

If even a fraction of the diary was true, Obsidian Qin would have a deep-seated trauma.

People usually react negatively when such buried topics are brought up.

A flinch or a shudder.

“That's news to me. Was there an anomaly so dangerous that the Undertaker would be interested?”

But Obsidian Qin's reaction was neither.

Her puzzled look contained only curiosity. It was too calm for someone with trauma.

Despite sensing something odd, I continued my inquiry.

“…Have you seen this figure before?”

The photo I took out showed the ‘hairy corpse.’

Finally, Obsidian Qin said, “Ah—” as if she recognized it.

But still, her reaction was strange for someone who had been deeply hurt.

“…I think I know who it is. Is this person related to what you want to know?”

“Yes. Any information, no matter how small, would be helpful.”

“I can share, but…”

Obsidian Qin frowned.

I tensed. This might be the moment I learned about the third Regressor.

“I’m not sure if it’ll help. Honestly, I don't know much about her.”

Her lips moved slowly beneath the black mask.

“—She was so weak that she died almost as soon as the tutorial dungeon began.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 138

The Impostor III

Sinnoa

Kuro.

The nickname of the 'diary owner,' whose name hadn't appeared throughout the diary, was Kuro.

Note that this was a nickname, not her real name. Even Obsidian Qin couldn't know the diary owner's real name.

"Kuro never talked to anyone."

And probably no one knew.

"Weren't you in the same group?"

"Yes, she was in our group because she was Japanese like us. But she always followed at the back, never actively trying to do anything or join in."

"....."

In layman's terms, she was an outcast. An outsider.

You know how, even on a school trip, there's always that one kid? While the other kids form a tight group following the teacher, this kid stays at the very back, asserting, 'Don't worry about me, I'm just enjoying the scenery.'

Kuro was exactly that type.

Life as an outcast became much harsher after the end of the world than before.

In this era, social skills were not just a 'nice to have' trait; they were directly linked to human survival.

"If she was such a loner, she wouldn't have been treated well in the group, right?"

"Exactly. She just stood by and watched when fighting the monsters. I remember she wasn't even included in the distribution of spoils given by the fairies."

"....."

"But we didn't kick her out of the group. She didn't cause any trouble. Frankly speaking, we thought that if monsters attacked from the rear, Kuro would be the first to be sacrificed."

"She was just a pawn, a sacrificial lamb?"

"To be honest, yes."

...That image was completely different from what I had felt while reading the diary.

In the diary, Kuro, though twisted, at least seemed to carry her weight in the group.

Moreover, as the entries progressed, there were hints that her power had grown. It was said she could fend off the centaur tribe's attack alone.

Were all those testimonies lies? Was the diary I picked up just the delusions of a lonely person?

"However... Thinking back after hearing from you, Undateikeo, there were some odd things."

"Any detail, no matter how small, is fine. Feel free to speak."

Obsidian Qin furrowed her brow, as if searching through faded memories.

"Kuro slept a lot."

I blinked.

"Sleep?"

"Yes, sleep. You know how everyone stays alert because monsters can appear anytime, right? But Kuro was strangely calm when she slept, despite being nervous when awake."

"....."

"And this might sound strange, but every day she slept, her arm became more hairy. Yes, just like in the photo you showed, Undateikeo."

The Monkey's Paw.

Humans who draw power from anomalies become more like them.

If someone relied on the Monkey's Paw, they would eventually degenerate into a form similar to a monkey.

"When hair suddenly appeared on her arm, we were alarmed. We thought it might be a mysterious disease or curse. So we subdued Kuro and searched her belongings."

"What was in her backpack?"

"...A monster's hand, a normal notebook, and some snacks. We naturally tried to confiscate the hand, but."

But we couldn't.

"When we tried to take it, the hand went wild with tremendous strength. Several people in our group were knocked out instantly."

"Huh."

"Fortunately, no one was seriously injured. But in the commotion, Kuro escaped. The monster's hand seemed to follow her. We were bewildered and unnerved... so we let her disappear."

"You never reunited with Kuro?"

"No."

Obsidian Qin looked down at the photo on the table.

"I was curious about what happened to her, but now she has turned into such a hairy creature. It must have been a curse of some sort."

"....."

I talked with Obsidian Qin about various things until evening and then parted ways.

Just before leaving the shrine, I asked Obsidian Qin, who came out to see me off.

"Oh, one last thing."

"Yes?"

"Did a large number of Japanese people die at the start when you ran the tutorial dungeon in Jeju Island? Like, about 16 people near the dungeon entrance?"

Obsidian Qin shook his head.

"No, nothing like that happened. Our group had a high survival rate."

"I see. Thank you."

"No problem. Take care."

I quietly descended the shrine's steps.

Now then.

What is the truth of the incident?

The Monkey's Paw definitely did something. Trusting Obsidian Qin's testimony, it was clear that the diary didn't depict reality as it was.

"Hmm."

I wrote a small sentence on the back of the diary.

[Old Man Scho is a fool].

And when I moved to the next cycle, I picked up the same diary at Seongsan Ilchulbong.

When I opened the pages, I couldn't find the words [Old Man Scho is a fool].

"——Ah."

Only then did I realize the way the Monkey's Paw granted wishes, the nature of this diary, and the truth about the 'False Regressor.'

The answer was simple.

"This is a 'dream diary,' Dok-seo."

Dok-seo blinked.

"A... dream diary?"

"Yes. You've heard of it, right? It's written for psychological counseling purposes or to experience lucid dreaming. Anyway, this item is a 'notebook recording what happened in dreams.'"

"I've heard of it... What? Then everything written in this notebook is just fantasies that happened in dreams?"

"Something like that."

I picked up the notebook and flipped through it.

"Didn't you notice anything strange?"

"Strange?"

"Yes. The diary claims time repeats infinitely from the 5th day. But somehow, this diary alone 'maintains its contents without being affected by the regression.'"

"……! Ah! Ah!"

"So you noticed."

I smiled.

"Items like my cane-sword Do-hwa or the logout game's laptop I gave you, those are special items that maintain their form through regression. Naturally, if real regression happens, the diary's contents should reset. But the diary continued."

"Then is the diary like those special items you have, something that persists through regression...?"

"That was a possibility, but I tested it myself, and it wasn't."

[Old Man Scho is a fool].

The sentence I wrote as a test was neatly gone in the next cycle.

In the end, this diary was nothing special. Just an ordinary notebook.

"So the conclusion is simple. Someone dreaming about repeated regression wrote this diary."

"Ah... Wait, but then, didn't the Monkey's Paw deceive Kuro by pretending to grant her wish?"

Dok-seo snatched the notebook from my hand and opened to the part titled 《Day 4》.

---

1. Please don't create any side effects for my wishes.

2. Remove the limit on the number of wishes. If removing the limit is impossible, pretend this wish wasn't made.

3. Give me luck. Prevent any 'accidental misfortunes' from befalling me, like getting hit by a falling rock.

"Here. This."

Dok-seo pressed her finger on the first wish.

"Look carefully. She clearly wished for no side effects from her wish."

"She did."

"But if the Monkey's Paw just showed her a dream where she was a max-luck regressor, but in reality, she remained a powerless outcast, wouldn't that be fraud?"

I smiled.

"Dok-seo, you lack sensitivity to anomalies."

"What? What nonsense?"

"Think deeply about the Monkey's Paw. It's not a 'wish-granting being' in the first place. It's a 'side-effect-creating being.' That's the Monkey's Paw."

Humans always want benefits without losses.

In other words, they have no conscience.

The anomaly says, 'In all things, if there's an advantage, there's also a disadvantage.'

If you gain something, you must lose something.

'Luck and misfortune are equal in total.'

This is the principle the Monkey's Paw adheres to.

"In that sense, the name [Monkey's Paw] doesn't reflect its essence well. It should be called [Pros and Cons] or [Total Luck Law]."

"The Total Luck Law..."

Dok-seo muttered blankly.

I nodded.

Total Luck Law.

That was the real name of this anomaly.

"The Total Luck Law works like this. First, a person wishes for 'luck.' Then the anomaly judges the same amount of 'misfortune' to balance it."

"Ah...?"

In short, the Monkey's Paw is like a merchant's hand exchanging luck and misfortune.

"One day, a customer suddenly demanded free luck. That was Kuro. Now, how would the merchant, who has been running a smooth business, feel?"

"...What kind of brat is this?"

"Exactly. It's troublesome."

Of course, the anomaly doesn't feel 'trouble.'

But 'errors' occur.

When a situation against its essence is forced, the anomaly will find a way to correct the error.

The Total Luck Law was no different.

"Therefore."

I took out a pen.

Scribble, scribble.

I drew an arrow next to the 《4th Day》 in the diary and added my interpretation on the blank page.

"The Total Luck Law had no choice but to twist Kuro's wish. Like this."

---

1. Please don't create any side effects for my wishes.

→

(1) Any luck must be matched by equivalent misfortune. This is what Kuro called 'side effects.'

(2) If there are no hidden aspects or side effects, there is no luck. Kuro's wish is essentially not to wish

for any luck.

(3) Therefore, Kuro made no wishes in this reality. Her wishes are granted 'elsewhere.'

(4) In 'elsewhere,' the Total Luck Law need not apply. Kuro can enjoy nearly infinite luck there.

(5) Since the luck enjoyed there doesn't need misfortune, Kuro in reality faces no misfortune.

(6) Kuro in reality has neither luck nor misfortune. Thus, her wish for no hidden aspects or side effects is granted.

Dok-seo's jaw dropped.

"No way..."

"Do you understand now?"

"No side effects... Ah, even the most pleasant dreams don't cause side effects in reality... Wow, really. anomalies shouldn't be used lightly..."

I was satisfied with Dok-seo's muttering. I had hoped she would realize that valuable lesson from the beginning.

"The problem doesn't end here. The second wish also brought tremendous aftermath."

---

2. Remove the limit on the number of wishes. If removing the limit is impossible, pretend this wish wasn't made.

I tapped the second wish with my pen.

"This removed the Monkey's Paw's restrictions."

"Removed the restrictions?"

"As you know, the Monkey's Paw allows only three wish-misfortune exchanges. It's a sort of rule. But Kuro asked for the restriction to be removed."

Kuro probably thought she was being clever, inserting a loophole for her benefit.

But the 'side effect' she was so wary of was realized in a completely different way.

"This ultimately freed the Total Luck Law anomaly from its chains."

"...What do you mean?"

"This."

---

2. Remove the limit on the number of wishes. If removing the limit is impossible, pretend this wish wasn't made.

→

(1) A human's wish is essentially 'luck.'

(2) Removing the limit on the number of wishes means removing the limit on 'accumulating luck.'

(3) Luck and misfortune must always maintain an equal total.

(4) Therefore, if the limit on luck is removed, the limit on misfortune must also be removed. From now on, humans must exchange unlimited amounts of luck-misfortune, beyond just three

times.

Dok-seo froze.

"What? What? Whaaat...?"

"Focus on Kuro's wish, Dok-seo. If she had wished for [removing the limit only for me], there wouldn't have been a major side effect."

But Kuro made one crucial mistake, whether consciously or unconsciously.

"Kuro asked for the [removal of the limit on wishes] itself from the Monkey's Paw."

"So...?"

"So, the second wish applied to all humanity, not just Kuro. You and I are not exceptions. If we take more 'luck' than necessary, equivalent 'misfortune' will follow."

"Eeeeeeeek?"

Dok-seo screamed.

"We, us too?"

"Yes."

"Why!"

"Because Kuro, an unknown regressor, wished for it from the Monkey's Paw."

"God, what a nuisance!"

"A complete nuisance."

That's right.

Though we took a long detour, the crux of this story was simple.

-Why doesn't the Undertaker hoard 'lucky opportunities' like protagonists in other stories?

Now, the answer is revealed to you.

The reason is simple. This world already has an anomaly called 'Total Luck Law' as its foundation.

"Haven't you felt it? Even though we have two lucky regressors and Noh Do-hwa, a workaholic, forming the National Road Management Corps, even though the situation is improving, inexplicable misfortunes keep happening."

"Huh. Could it be?"

"It's because of the Total Luck Law. In this world, trying to freeload brings immediate catastrophic consequences."

"Aaaaargh! Ugh! Aaaaargh! What kind of cursed game is this!"

Dok-seo wailed.

In short, in our world, 'hoarding lucky opportunities' is impossible by law.

For someone like Dok-seo, who considers herself the protagonist of the world, it was utterly despairing.

I took a sip of my now cold Café au Lait. It tasted good even cold.

"Well, don't worry too much."

As an experienced regressor, I always had countermeasures against the Total Luck Law.

In fact, I was grateful for this anomaly. It was quite useful in many ways.

"How can I not worry... Wait! I ate the Ten Legs steak earlier! Does that mean I'll face equivalent misfortune now? What did you feed me, old man!"

But that is another story.

We'll save that tale for another chapter.

There is an epilogue.

After discovering that the vast unconscious realm of humanity housed 'Dreams within Dreams,' 'Bad Endings,' and 'Parallel Worlds,' I often delved into the unconscious world.

The purpose was simple. Regularly cleaning humanity's unconscious storage so people could always have sweet dreams.

"Hmm?"

"Groan... Groan..."

Thus, while I was beating Old Man Scho's bad ending today, I sensed a strange presence from the south of the Korean Peninsula.

After finishing with Old Man Scho, I headed south.

The southern coast of Korea. There, Seongsan Ilchulbong stood tall, as if a giant version had been copied and pasted from reality.

"....."

Thud, thud—

At the height comparable to Everest, 'someone' was rolling something down.

It was a human head.

That someone had long black hair. Her hair was so long that her face was obscured.

Thud, thud, thud—

She kept piling heads beside her and rolling them down towards the crater of Seongsan Ilchulbong, expressionlessly. Meaninglessly.

Like a reversed Sisyphus.

Suddenly, I thought.

---

3. Give me luck. Prevent any 'accidental misfortunes' from befalling me, like getting hit by a falling rock.

Kuro wished to eliminate all accidental misfortunes.

How did the Monkey's Paw interpret that wish?

Would it not be concerned with 'inevitable misfortune' instead of 'accidental misfortune'?

Despite numerous myths and anecdotes warning of human arrogance, people still think lightly, 'If I change the form of the wish, I can still use the anomaly.'

Why be satisfied with just three wishes?

Why not ask for infinite wishes?

If it were me, I would have used the anomaly more wisely.

Even if <Kuro's Tale> remains a legend among humans, future descendants will still approach another Monkey's Paw, thinking, 'I could have used it better.'

Hubris.

That might have been the inevitable misfortune given to Kuro.

I turned my back and walked away from the southern sea.

Thud, thud, thud—

Today, too, in someone's dream, a girl would be rolling severed heads.

Footnotes:

Chapter 139

The Lucky One I

Sinnoa

As mentioned in the previous story, in this world, 'monopolizing fortuitous encounters' is impossible.

More precisely, it's possible, but the aftermath is unpredictable.

Like eating a high-carb dessert cake that's bad for your health.

"Hmm."

And I pondered the same way someone on a diet would when faced with a delicious cake.

On the table lay the Monkey's Paw.

'Where does fortuitous encounter end and pure luck begin?'

For example... yes.

I toured the best restaurants in Busan to quickly establish a connection with Dang Seo-rin.

A tour composed entirely of her favorite dishes.

This information was gathered by me personally, over repeated cycles.

Would the Total Luck Law anomaly consider such knowledge obtained by a regressor as 'luck'?

'If so, that's quite unfair. It would mean my regression ability is also considered luck.'

I smirked.

After some research, it seemed the Total Luck Law wasn't that strict.

I had sacrificed sweat, time, and sometimes my life to obtain the knowledge of a regressor.

These were not random strokes of luck but the result of relentless effort.

Thus, even if I consumed elixirs like the 'Heart of Ten Legs,' there were no side effects. Dok-seo's worries were unfounded.

'Hmm. Then what constitutes true luck?'

I couldn't help but be intrigued.

'Should I test it?'

Coincidentally, it was the 590th cycle. For someone like me who enjoyed 'vacation cycles' every 5 or 10 cycles, it was perfect timing.

I finished my early schedule (recruiting the Saintess, enlisting Noh Do-hwa, etc.) after the regression.

Then I headed straight to Jeju Island.

The tutorial dungeon in Jeju Island had already been cleared. It opened much earlier than the one at Busan Station, so it was expected.

I picked up the Monkey's Paw near the top of Seongsan Ilchulbong, beside the already furry Kuro, and made my wish.

"Monkey's Paw, Monkey's Paw. Grant my wish."

-.....

"First, give me endless luck."

Twitch. The Monkey's Paw trembled. This must be the correct way to make a wish.

"In other words, let me enjoy luck that I would never normally experience. Luck that seems nearly impossible."

-.....!

"Second, let the side effects of this luck start exactly ten years from now."

-.....! .....!

"Third, even if I make my wishes, delay turning my body into a furry creature for ten years. That's also a misfortune, isn't it?"

-.....

At that moment, strange laughter echoed around me.

-Ukikikiki! Hee! Ukiki! Hik!

Monkey laughter. No, it was more like an AI mimicking monkey laughter, with an oddly mechanical sound.

Along with that sound, the Monkey's Paw suddenly disintegrated into powder.

"Oh."

If I had to interpret it, it seemed to say, 'Your wish is granted.'

The powder was all absorbed into my arm, but at a glance, there were no changes to my body.

'So, luck begins now.'

What events awaited me?

I stood at the summit of Seongsan Ilchulbong for a moment. But nothing happened.

"Hmm."

Was the wish granted properly?

I returned to the mainland, half-believing, half-doubting.

Despite being busy with settling the National Road Management Corps and various schedules, no overwhelming 'luck' occurred.

Just as I thought the Total Luck Law might not be so powerful and my wish might have failed—

Knock, knock.

Someone knocked on my office door. Since I hadn't yet subdued Inunaki Tunnel in this cycle, I was temporarily staying at the National Road Management Corps headquarters.

"Who is it?"

-I've heard the greatest swordsman in Korea is here, so I came to visit.

"Hmm?"

The voice of the visitor was one I had never heard before.

This was quite remarkable. As I mentioned, this happened in the 590th cycle. By this time, I had met almost every person living in Busan.

As Old Man Scho would say, 'just in case there's a [Teleporter] somewhere in this world,' I usually tried to befriend unfamiliar people.

But a completely new voice?

And this person claimed to be looking for the greatest swordsman in Korea. Quite a character, yet someone I didn't know?

"I don't know what brings you here, but please come in."

-Then I'll be entering.

The door opened.

How should I describe it?

An incredibly handsome young man stood there.

"Uh..."

Those who have heard my tales would know that I don't usually comment on others' appearances.

If I used expressions like 'beautiful' or 'pretty,' it meant the person's appearance had an overwhelming charm that couldn't be ignored.

Just as you must call a mountain a mountain, beautiful things must be acknowledged as beautiful.

This boy's face was so 'irresistible,' it seemed like a miracle bestowed upon humanity by nature.

Therefore, the boy standing before me had a radiance in his appearance unlike any man I had ever seen.

Gray hair. Not the dull color of aging, but a vibrant shade. It was proof that the stranger was an awakener.

His fashion was peculiar. Traditional Korean clothing? No, more like tattered hemp clothes from the Joseon Dynasty.

Even with such a -30 debuff in attire, it didn't diminish the visitor's aura at all.

I was surprised again.

I hadn't seen this person once in 590 cycles?

Even if I hadn't met him, his looks should have been frequently mentioned on SG Net.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was staring at your face. My apologies."

"No problem."

His voice, too, was remarkably refreshing.

Only then did I realize how strange the visitor's speech was.

His voice was so striking that I hadn't noticed the content.

If there were a male version of Go Yuri, it might be at this level.

'Weird. This speech pattern is familiar. Where have I heard it before...?'

I couldn't recall.

The gray-haired boy spoke very politely.

"More importantly, are you the greatest swordsman in Korea, the one who slashed two hearts of Ten Legs, the Undertaker?"

"Yes? Oh, yes. While I had help from other awakeners, it's true that my alias is the Undertaker."

"Hmm. I have come to the right place."

The boy tapped his waist. Even his finger movements were elegant.

A sword hilt hung at his waist. It looked like a wooden sword, not a real one.

"I am also on the path of a warrior, albeit clumsily. I have heard of your fame and came despite the rudeness of an initial meeting. Would you kindly exchange a bout with me?"

"...Oh."

Wait a minute.

'Referring to oneself as a warrior? An aluminum sword?'

——A terrifying premonition struck me.

It felt like standing at the edge of a swamp where I couldn't use my lightness skill and had to wade in wearing sandals, a strange feeling.

But I, the Undertaker, known for mental resilience, suppressed the unease and spoke calmly.

"...Hmm. I'm always up for martial practice, but may I know your name?"

"Oh dear. Look at me. I forgot to introduce myself. As I age, I

should be more courteous, but I still forget such things. Hoho."

Swipe.

The boy, who looked about eighteen, clasped his hands together and bowed. It was a perfectly executed bow, reminiscent of old Hong Kong movies.

"I am called Sword Marquess. A noble of the defunct Sirland Duchy and the Sect Leader of the Mount Hua Sect."

"....."

"I recently attained enlightenment and reversed my aging. But rather than being content with this state, I believe a warrior must continue to train. Thus, I am seeking strong warriors across the land. Undertaker, I humbly request a duel with you!"

"....."

This is driving me crazy.

The Sword Marquess... This self-proclaimed crazy martial arts fanatic was incredibly strong.

"Hoho! Indeed, the world is vast, and there are many masters in the martial arts realm! To think there was such a great swordsman in this remote region. I have learned much!"

"Uh, yes..."

I won the duel. But winning against as a 590-cycle regressor was a given.

The issue was the process.

The Sword Marquess fought me to a standstill for 101 rounds.

Aside from anomalies like the Sword Demon from the Dream Within a Dream vast void, he was at a level that could claim to be the best in the world.

He had the power to hold a front line against anomalies alone, this gray-haired maniac before me.

It was an excellent addition to our forces.

So I should have been happy.

But...

"Master, you are quite skilled..."

"Hoho! Although I am older, how can I accept such compliments from a younger, superior swordsman? Don't make this old man feel embarrassed."

"Yes..."

"Hmm! I will stay in Dongnae for a while. I am not yet ready to restore the glory of the Mount Hua Sect. I intend to train solely until I can at least match your skill, Undertaker."

"....."

Why did this feel so off?

Was this crazy martial arts fanatic really like this back in the day? Was he actually this good with the sword?

Am I supposed to believe this, anomaly?

"Heh."

"......?"

No, this was all an illusion by Go Yuri!

Damn it. To think she used such a trick without me noticing! Go Yuri, you are a terrifying child...!

I tried various methods to torture my cheeks but I didn't wake from the dream.

Damn it.

"Why are you doing that? It's not good for a young man to have a habit of self-harm."

I'm older than you by thousands of times.

No, that's not the point.

"Sir. You mentioned you experienced enlightenment and reversed your aging?"

"Yes, that's right."

"As you know, the world is dangerous these days, and such an event could be the work of an anomaly. Could you tell me specifically how you achieved this enlightenment?"

"Ah, no problem. The essence of enlightenment should be shared among friends!"

The Sword Marquess stroked his chin.

As if there were an invisible long beard there.

To the point where this performance art reached a level of expertise.

"I was meditating on the beach of Yuldoguk when it happened."

So, you were fishing on the beach of Ulleungdo? Got it.

"Suddenly, even though it wasn't night yet, the sky beyond the horizon turned into the Milky Way."

"……?"

"That's right. I suddenly had a moment of enlightenment. I realized the boundary between day and night is merely a human distinction, a fleeting moment in the endless cycle of time, where light and darkness alternate. Everything in the world is like that. Day and night hold their own beauty, and it is the privilege of individuals to appreciate these moments. Hoho! Thus, my desire to prolong this privilege is not selfish but a dedication to all transient beings!"

I apologize for transcribing this lengthy monologue, but the Sword Marquess really said all that.

I wanted to interrupt, but it was tricky. Sometimes I forgot, but this man (formerly old) held the key to our food supply.

I couldn't risk offending him.

"So... after attaining enlightenment...?"

"I woke up to find I had reversed my aging. Hohoho."

What is that?

That's just pure luck—oh.

Oh!

'Pure luck!'

I finally remembered the wish I made to the Monkey's Paw in Jeju Island a year ago.

That's right.

The Sword Marquess 'luckily' 'happened' to achieve enlightenment on the beach and reversed his aging.

This was sheer luck. An encounter that had never occurred in 590 cycles!

I glanced at the Sword Marquess. The old young man was laughing heartily.

And.

As will be revealed from now on, the Sword Marquess's reversal of aging was just the beginning of the 'lucky' events I would experience in the 590th cycle.

Footnotes:

Chapter 140

The Lucky One II

Sinnoa

[Mr. Undertaker, there's a big problem.]

One night, the Saintess sent a message through Constellation Talk.

I jumped out of bed. It was 3 AM. For her to wake me at such an ungodly hour, it must have been an urgent event.

“What’s going on?”

[You mentioned before that in the 7th year, a ‘Meteor Shower’ anomaly would appear in the night sky and devastate Gyeongsangnam-do.]

“Yes, that’s correct.”

[Well, right now, an anomaly suspected to be the Meteor Shower has been observed over the East Sea. The observation point is Ulleungdo.]

What?

[A photo has also been uploaded to SG Net. Since it’s early morning, there are only 14 views, but please check it.]

I quickly changed out of my pajamas and rushed out.

The Sword Marquess, who had been sleeping curled up like a cat by my doorstep, followed suit.

“What’s happening at this hour, Sword Duke?”

I won’t explain how the Sword Marquess started calling me 'Sword Duke' instead of Undertaker. There were too many things in the world I didn’t want to explain, and most of those things were

related to lunatics.

“There’s an anomaly appearing over the East Sea right now.”

“Hah! Such a vile thing daring to launch a night attack! Despicable!”

Tap, tap, tap—

The two of us sprinted across Haeundae Beach and naturally leapt into the sea.

It was like stepping on thin ice.

For me, it was aura; for the Sword Marquess, it was internal energy, harnessed to step and leap across the water.

“An anomaly in the middle of the sea, huh. I wonder if it’s an omen of good or bad fortune. I suppose it’s better than appearing on land, but it seems the Sword Duke thinks otherwise.”

Of course, it was an omen of bad fortune.

My ‘Regressor’s Schedule’ was as meticulously planned as if written by an obsessive-compulsive person with a severe anxiety disorder about time management.

While I allowed for about a week’s error margin for most events, the timing of ‘anomaly appearances’ was planned down to the minute.

‘The Meteor Shower isn’t supposed to appear for several more years. Could killing the Butterfly Effect in Beijing have caused this?’

This would severely disrupt my project to foster camaraderie among the awakeners under the guise of the Meteor Shower subjugation.

My heart pounded with anxiety.

When we reached the vicinity of Ulleungdo and looked up, the night sky was filled with brilliant, multicolored streaks.

I muttered in astonishment.

“It really is the Meteor Shower...”

In truth, subduing the Meteor Shower itself wasn’t a problem.

A 590-cycle regressor couldn’t possibly fail to take down an early-stage boss of the Korean Peninsula.

But as I mentioned, this would completely throw off my plans.

How would I strengthen the unity of the Korean Awakeners’ Alliance? How would I solidify Dang Seo-rin’s position as the leader?

Surrounded by the night sky and the sea, my thoughts churned like waves.

“Huh?”

Suddenly, a different light flickered beyond the Meteor Shower.

It flashed quickly.

A ‘disc-shaped’ object rapidly crossed the sky and collided head-on with the Meteor Shower.

-Splatter! Splatter! Little stars?

The Meteor Shower seemed puzzled. It tilted its head, metaphorically speaking.

For reference, an artificial sea-like space had spread around the Meteor Shower.

Naturally, the ‘disc-shaped flying object’ that hit the surface of the night sky was thrown off course.

Thunk, thunk, thunk—

The disc bounced off the Meteor Shower’s surface, like a stone skipping across water.

“……”

My jaw dropped.

‘No way, that’s a UFO?’

Indeed.

A mysterious flying object in the shape of a disc.

An alien species with the ultimate combat power but, unfortunately, with a Pokémon fire attribute vulnerable to water. As soon as it landed in the East Sea, it dissolved like sugar in water.

“Oh, oh, oh—oh oh oh?”

Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk.

The UFO kept skipping.

-Ah? Ah? Little stars.

The Meteor Shower, bombarded repeatedly, died on the spot.

No, really, it died.

Meteor Shower subjugation complete.

Without the Korean awakeners lifting a finger, the early-stage boss exited the scene.

Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk.

Meanwhile, the UFO skipped 89 more times along the Meteor Shower’s waves.

As a result, the UFO, which should have crashed in the middle of the East Sea, veered off in a completely unexpected direction.

Northward.

Not into the sea, but towards the land—North Korea.

“No, no!”

I screamed. My cry was genuine.

“Huh? What do you mean, no, Sword Duke?”

“If that crashes on land, it’s the end! There are 120 aliens in that saucer, and each one is stronger than you! It’ll be a catastrophe!”

“What?”

The Sword Marquess’s expression changed.

“Then we must pursue it at once! I need to learn from them!”

“Yeah. Damn it.”

Despite the Sword Marquess’s madness, he was right about needing to pursue it.

I pushed my aura to its maximum and chased after the UFO, determined not to lose sight of it.

The Sword Marquess shouted behind me, “Wait, Sword Duke! Wait for me, Sword Duke!” but I ignored him.

I had no time to humor the ramblings of an old young man.

“Huff, huff. Huff, huff...!”

For the first time in a while, I ran until I was out of breath. I had run so far that I lost contact with the Saintess.

To summarize, the UFO crash-landed even further north than North Korea.

Specifically, between Shenyang and Sinuiju. In the region known as Manchuria, the aliens were crawling out.

-Screech?

-Screech. Screech.

They looked like disgusting cockroaches spilling out of their lair.

But these cockroaches were strong. Very strong.

I hid in the bushes and observed the aliens from afar.

Despite being a sci-fi species, the aliens moved naturally, using footwork to explore the surroundings.

Well, if the genre were space opera instead of sci-fi, it wouldn't be too different from traditional martial arts.

-Screech?

One alien tilted its head and dipped its foot into a stream.

Splash, splash.

A commendable spirit of challenge, but footbaths benefiting health was a privilege reserved for humans and Japanese macaques.

The alien dissolved from toe to head.

-Screech!

-Screech! Screech! Screech!

The aliens panicked.

They were probably saying things like, 'Oh my God! How can such a terrible substance exist?' 'You witness your kind's body melting like candle wax just from touching it, you roll a SAN check.'

The aliens became even more frantic.

-Screech!

-Screech! Screech!

They pulled out laser guns and started gathering rocks, soil, and minerals.

Bzzz—

Using incomprehensible technology, the Earth's minerals were appropriated by the aliens.

-Screech, screech!

-Screech. Screech.

The aliens used their lasers to collect materials and began building something.

The minerals hit by the laser beams floated in the air and were shaped in real-time. Into walls, pillars, and mysterious interior decorations.

In less than thirty minutes, a bizarre structure rose in the middle of Manchuria.

To compare its appearance to something on Earth... a termite mound?

But it was black. The surface of the termite mound was covered in a dark, lava-like liquid that constantly flowed down. It was an abominable structure at first glance.

-Screech.

-Screech, screech.

The aliens seemed to be admiring their craftsmanship, embracing each other and dancing joyfully.

They enjoyed their dance party for a while before entering their termite mound—no, their black ant fortress.

"....."

What was this?

Was that sinister fortress a foothold for invading Earth? Or an antenna tower signaling their refugee ships still wandering in space?

“Huff! Huff! Huff! Sword Duke. Finally... Huff, I caught up. As expected of a master of lightness skills, I’m late...”

“Shh. Be quiet. They’ll hear us.”

“Huff... Huff? That grotesque tower, what is it?”

“I don’t know. Other than that the aliens built it.”

I dug a proper trench for camouflage and went into hiding. Even if I had to abandon this cycle, I intended to uncover the aliens’ purpose.

Fortunately or unfortunately, I didn’t have to stay hidden for long.

The reason the aliens built that bizarre structure soon became clear.

Thud, thud, thud—

It started to rain.

From the aliens’ perspective, ‘the substance of death’ bombarded from the sky.

The Earth’s specialty, H_2O, poured endlessly on their black ant fortress.

The dark liquid flowing down the surface of the black ant fortress constantly drained away.

Peek—

Long after the rain stopped, the aliens peeked out from the fortress.

-Screech?

-Screech, screech.

-Screech.

Surprisingly, the aliens were intact.

For starters, their armor had changed slightly.

Should I call it a raincoat? Anyway, they wore something akin to a black raincoat.

It seemed they had been tirelessly sewing inside the black ant fortress.

-Screech!

But anyone who has worn a raincoat knows it's not entirely waterproof.

The newly modified armor wasn't perfect either. Walking around the Earth's humid surface for too long caused

them to gradually melt.

What were they, Ultraman with a three-minute limit?

In any case, the fact that they could hope to survive on this hellish, doomsday planet seemed precious to them.

-Screech! Screech!

The aliens gradually expanded the black ant fortress.

Not by building upwards, but by extending the real estate sideways.

Have you heard of 'The Line,' a project ambitiously pursued by Saudi Arabia but greatly downsized? Think of the Great Wall of China.

In short, the aliens' black ant fortress started to resemble a 'wall.' As they kept expanding sideways, it naturally took that shape.

"Huh?"

And that wall... stretched west towards the Yellow Sea and east towards the East Sea.

'No, no. Wait a minute.'

Eventually, the aliens' 'Black Wall' spanned across Manchuria horizontally.

In other words.

‘If a Monster Wave occurs… it would be blocked by the Black Wall!’

Indeed, that’s what happened.

A few years later, when the ocean-class anomaly ‘Monster Wave’ swept across the world and finally reached the Korean Peninsula.

But just before it could land on the Korean Peninsula, the Monster Wave faced an unexpected obstacle.

-Grr?

-Grrr?

A crappy-looking wall blocked their path.

At first, the Monster Wave wasn’t fazed. It advanced boldly. A mere wall wasn’t going to stop giants like Wall Maria.

-Screech!

-Screech! Screech!

The problem was that each of the 116 remaining aliens (some had died) boasted combat skills on par with Captain Levi.

Faced with these 116 Levi-level aliens, the Monster Wave was annihilated.

In the process of defeating an army of 200,000 monsters, not a single alien died.

Of course, the Monster Wave had an endless supply of reinforcements, so it repeated its attack the next month and the month after that. Each time, it was crushed.

Naturally, the Korean Peninsula south of the Black Wall remained safe.

Without needing Mo Gwang-seo’s Eastern Holy State performance or Sim Ah-ryeon’s Zero Requiem plan.

Without suffering any damage, the Korean Peninsula was completely free from the threat of the ‘Monster Wave,’ which had been deemed virtually impossible to subjugate.

“Is this... for real?”

My jaw dropped.

To be honest, my jaw remained dropped for several years.

So the real strategy against the ‘Monster Wave’ was to somehow use the Meteor Shower to skip a UFO across the sea, crash it into Manchuria, and let the aliens build their wall to block the Monster Wave?

And I’m supposed to believe this, anomaly?

“Lucky...”

Noh Do-hwa commented, sipping her coffee after hearing my story.

I couldn’t help but notice that her dark circles seemed lighter than in other cycles. Probably because everything she attempted was going well.

“But isn’t this due to your wish to the ‘Monkey’s Paw’ or something? Heh. I don’t care, but aren’t you going to be screwed in a few years...?”

“.....”

“I’m really looking forward to what kind of crazy blues will hit you. I’ll be sure to get a VIP ticket and wait.”

This is driving me crazy.

Footnotes:

Chapter 141

The Lucky One III

Sinnoa

The luck didn't end.

While the Reverse-Great Wall was engaged in an infinite defense game against the onslaught of the continent, 'fortuitous encounters' kept happening.

[Mr. Undertaker, the 'pink entity' you warned about has been confirmed to have moved to Kyushu, Japan.]

Go Yuri, the greatest enemy of regressors and a master of gaslighting, had voluntarily left Korea.

This unprecedented good news made me want to give her a generous relocation settlement.

And that wasn't all.

[The Status Window anomaly didn't appear.]

“What?”

[We focused on the date and location you provided, but no one saw the Status Window.]

“……”

[This must also be due to the 'Monkey's Paw.']

And that wasn’t all[2].

Luck didn't just unfold in the physical world. Even in the net community, my luck didn't waver.

In short, a wave of Three Kingdoms parodies swept through the

novel serialization board on SG Net.

-Lü Bu Hides His Father (★9.9)

-Ten Attendants General (★8.7)

-[Alternative History] Ordered to March North but Woke Up in Hanzhong Instead of North Korea?! (★9.2)

-The Three Brothers Always Slept Under the Same Blanket [19+ Complete Version] (★9.8)

-Reincarnated as Zhang Kai, Who Killed Cao Cao's Father on the First Day (★9.9)

-Reincarnated as a Yellow Turban Rebel with a Copy of Capital in My Hand (★9.6)

Everywhere you looked, the rankings were dominated by Three Kingdoms parodies.

These days, the Three Kingdoms was totally YOUNG and MZ content.

Not only the novel serialization board but also the free board, which was the main part of SG Net, was filled with Three Kingdoms discussions without cooldown.

-Anonymous: I thought the Three Kingdoms < < < was just content for old people, but after reading the novel and the history book, there's nothing like it.

-Anonymous: How great was Ma Su's mountain climbing? Let's find out by forming a mountain climbing team for a trip to China. We'll schedule it according to each guild's vacation time. Sorry, but due to safety concerns abroad, we only accept participants capable of diving to a depth of 600 meters or more. Interested? Contact me!

-dolLHOuse: What's wrong with SG Net these days? Did everyone get prescription reading glasses?

Anonymous: There's still a full HP newbie who hasn't read the

Three Kingdoms? LOL

dolLHOuse: I read it?

Anonymous: So, which faction do you support?

dolLHOuse: Anyone but the big-eared guy. Aren't all the characters just commoners who end up with the Five Barbarians and Sixteen Kingdoms ending?

Anonymous: Blocking you.

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: The night sky is beautiful tonight. Did the Prime Minister feel this way when he looked up at the stars in Wuzhang Plains?

-OldManGoryeo: Wow, seriously, I want to bury all these idiots in a coffin.

-[NRMC] Officer: We have a group in Busan that reads and discusses the original Three Kingdoms history every week. (4/6)

Before I knew it, I had been engrossed in my smartphone for six hours straight, unable to take my eyes off the community.

"Whew."

I shivered.

I had always nagged Ah-ryeon to quit her internet addict lifestyle.

Now, for the first time in 590 cycles, I understood the true joy of community engagement.

'Is this the true power of the Monkey's Paw?'

I couldn't tear myself away from SG Net.

It felt as if the smartphone screen was coated with honey made by a master craftsman just for me, the Undertaker!

"Cursed Monkey's Paw! This is a power that would have already bewitched an ordinary human!"

“……”

As Ha-yul passed through the living room, she looked at me as if I were pathetic, like a diligent younger sister would look at her unemployed older brother.

Indeed.

In the 590th cycle, I was experiencing what it was like to live the hopeful life of a cult leader.

Everything in the world was going my way!

Every business venture I touched progressed miraculously, and troubles I couldn't handle never occurred in the first place.

But I was not a cult leader.

I was an ordinary citizen who preferred the subway to a limousine. Therefore, I could sense that the name of my next stop was 'ruin' without looking at the map.

It was now the 7th year.

The 10th-year deadline I had asked the Monkey's Paw to postpone was fast approaching.

‘Should I just kill myself?’

A drastic decision was needed.

‘Suicide’ was a route anyone who had lived a debtor’s life for seven years could empathize with. For a regressor, it wasn’t even that extreme.

I could just send a message on KakaoTalk saying, 'Thanks to the Total Luck Law, I enjoyed this cycle a lot^^ I'll see you in the next cycle...', and then leave the chat room, safely escaping from future debts.

Leaving this Three Kingdoms paradise was regretful, but a regressor must know how to set aside personal desires temporarily.

“Ah... I wouldn't recommend that, teacher.”

An expert had a different opinion.

“Why?”

“Hmm. It might make things worse.”

Cheon Yo-hwa, who listened to my concerns, gave a wry smile.

Why did I confide such a delicate matter to Cheon Yo-hwa? Because, among our members, she was the only one besides me who had a 'paranormal expert' identity.

As everyone knew, Cheon Yo-hwa had sealed the Infinite Void inside an hourglass.

Counting the anomalies from school ghost stories, she carried around about 100 Pokémon in her arsenal.

Other trainers would have sued her for exceeding the Pokémon carrying limit.

Fortunately, this world wasn't about forcing sadistic beasts to fight in a coliseum, but still, the anomalies rightfully harbored resentment towards their warden.

Led by the Infinite Void, the Hundred Tales of anomalies constantly plotted rebellion whenever they had the chance.

Cheon Yo-hwa didn't gorge on tteokbokki at the snack bar near her school every day for no reason.

Like the Saintess, the more powerful an awakener was, the closer they were to the risk of corruption.

“You think things will get worse?”

“Yes. It’s just my guess, though.”

“Well. The last time I checked, the 'Monkey's Paw' couldn't detect regression. It didn't have the power to give regression ability to

Kuro, its original owner. So if I just close my eyes and regress, won't the debt disappear?”

“Ahaha. But because of that Kuro, the 'Monkey's Paw' ended up applying to everyone, not just one individual, right?”

“……”

“It seems like people think they are parasitic on the 'Monkey's Paw,' but I think it's the opposite. The 'Monkey's Paw' is parasitic.”

“A anomaly that parasitizes humans?”

“Yes!”

Cheon Yo-hwa clapped her hands.

Despite the serious conversation, she seemed to enjoy sharing this kind of talk with me.

After all, competing for dominance with a near-divine anomaly 365 days a year, she probably saw me as a valuable conversation partner.

There weren’t many people who could empathize with the terror of anomalies like us.

“Think about it, teacher. The 'Monkey's Paw' can't get stronger on its own. It needs someone to make wishes to use those wishes as an excuse to increase its power.”

“Hoh.”

“To the 'Monkey's Paw,' Kuro must have been a blessing. If someone had made ordinary wishes, the 'Monkey's Paw' would have remained a mediocre anomaly. But because Kuro made such high-level wishes, the 'Monkey's Paw' grew just as powerful!”

“So if a regressor like me decides to run away, thinking that regression will solve everything...”

“The 'Monkey's Paw' might transcend regression and gain control

over luck and misfortune. This is just a hypothesis.”

“Hmm.”

“So I don’t recommend suicide. Besides, I don’t want to see you dead, teacher. Hehe...”

She had a point.

Even I, who criticized Kuro’s stupidity, ended up making the same foolish mistake.

The 'luck of an ordinary person' and the 'luck of a 590-cycle regressor' were inherently different.

Just consider the scale of what the 'Monkey's Paw' did this cycle.

It reversed the aging of a senile Sword Marquess.

It summoned the Meteor Shower to the East Sea earlier than expected, and perfectly timed a UFO to collide with it.

As a result, a Black Wall, which should never have existed, was created in the north of the Korean Peninsula.

In other words, the 'Monkey's Paw' had grown powerful enough to cause such high-level 'fortuitous encounters.'

According to the Library Association's classification, it should now be evaluated as an ocean-level threat.

‘Have I really gotten myself into a deep mess?’

A sense of urgency crept in.

I had to resolve the situation before misfortune truly struck.

“On the contrary, I think you need to survive as persistently as possible in this cycle.”

“Why?”

“If you die without experiencing the equivalent misfortune for the

luck you enjoyed, that 'unpaid misfortune' might carry over to the next cycle.”

“Hmm...”

I stroked my chin.

Talking with Cheon Yo-hwa stimulated my brain in a way I couldn’t quite describe.

‘Wait. Something good is about to come to mind...?’

At this point, I hadn't figured out the 'good idea' specifically. That would be covered in the next chapter.

However, I had grasped the general direction.

“So, according to you, I should try to be as unfortunate as possible from now on.”

“Haha. ...Yes. But deliberately seeking misfortune isn’t exactly something you can control. It’s tricky.”

“No, there is a way. A very subtle method.”

“Oh? Really?”

I nodded.

Then I spoke with utmost seriousness.

“Yo-hwa.”

“Yes, teacher.”

“Have you heard of the 'Hate Pill'?”

“...?”

‘Hate Pill.’

There is a genre, a sort of meme about it.

Cheon Yo-hwa tilted her head as if she had never heard of it, which made sense. Its origin was from across the sea in Japan.

Some people think Japan lacks creativity and originality.

-Tonkatsu? Isn’t that just a variation of cutlet?

-Japanese curry? It’s just Indian curry adjusted to Japanese taste.

But that’s a misconception.

If you remove the [General Audience] filter from your corneas, you’ll suddenly witness the creativity erupting from the Japanese archipelago like Mount Fuji.

After all, Japan is the birthplace of turning Three Kingdoms characters into gender-swapped 'TS Three Kingdoms' or erotic parodies.

There were many other inventive creations that were too controversial to mention.

Only ancient Greece had previously shown such creative power. (The Greeks impregnated their chief god’s thigh and dressed their greatest hero in women’s clothing.)

Anyway.

The ‘Hate Pill’ was another example of Japan’s vibrant creativity.

-This pill reverses affection!

-It reverses affection?

-Yes. People who liked you will hate you just as much. Literally, a 'Hate Pill.'

-...?

-People who subtly showed affection towards you will suddenly curse you, wishing you dead! Don’t worry, those who already disliked you will continue to do so!

-Why would you introduce such a pill into a story?

-Because the effect has an expiration date.

-...??

-After the effect ends, people will start to regret. They'll see how much the protagonist suffered due to their curses and think, 'What have I done to the person I liked? How could I say such terrible things...?'

-What's the point of that?

-Isn't it delicious to see characters regret after mistreating the protagonist?

-...???

Building a narrative over dozens of chapters to make the protagonist unhappy was highly inefficient from a practical standpoint.

Modern readers, who always seek efficiency, wanted to slap #regret #obsession #despair tags on their stories.

The solution was the 'Hate Pill.'

An instant 3-minute meal for unhappiness created by the Japanese.

In short, it was an 'Affection Reversal Pill.' Just take it to become unhappy.

How did I, the Undertaker, come to know about this obscure foreign genre?

Well...

Again, this was a story that happened around the 590th cycle.

And I devoured all the web novels, resorting to "Misery" tactics with authors around the 560th cycle.

End of explanation.

“So you plan to take the 'Hate Pill' to intentionally cause 'misfortune' and escape the Total Luck Law’s grasp?”

“You understood well.”

“You’re truly crazy in a refined way.”

Oh Dok-seo, the one who introduced me to web novels and the only one among my companions who knew about the 'Hate Pill,' nodded.

“It's a great idea. As expected of my protagonist. Let’s test it immediately!”

By the way, Oh Dok-seo loved despair stories.

“But where do we find the Hate Pill? It’s not mentioned in ORV.”

“Ah. Dok-seo. Ginseng is sourced from Joseon, and queue cuts are from Qing. It’s clear where to farm the Hate Pill.”

“Oh.”

That’s right.

We immediately set sail for the 'origin.'

Footnotes:

Chapter 142

The Lucky One IV

Sinnoa

I had often mentioned that I was highly respected by the Magical Girl Association in the Japanese archipelago.

This was partly because I frequently helped the magical girls. However, human relationships in East Asia didn’t flow purely based on such pragmatic calculations.

In this land, 'true exchange' only occurred when the temporal constraints of human perception, which could only ever recognize the 'present,' were overcome.

Blood ties and regional ties.

Who you were in the present was a secondary issue. What mattered more was how long 'we' had built our bond over time, thus overcoming the temporal limits of the human race.

The Japanese had also deeply internalized this truth.

Even in a romantic comedy, no matter how many charming characters emerged, it was the childhood friend who secured 'regional ties' with the protagonist before the story even began who ultimately won. This showcased the wisdom of the Japanese.

How could I not emulate them?

Upon arriving in the archipelago to procure the 'Hate Pill,' I first sought out my old connections.

“Aah, Undertaker-san! It’s been a while! How have you been?”

“Yeah. Have you been well too?”

“Yes! Oh, Dok-seo, it’s been a while for you too!”

“Ah, yeah. Hi. Long time no see, sis.”

Sure enough, my old acquaintance greeted me with her unique nickname for me, not just the common alias 'Undateikeo,' showing off to those around her that our relationship was special.

This was also a long-standing Japanese custom.

Her dignified manner of calling me 'Undertaker-san' instead of 'Undateikeo' silenced the other magical girls around us.

“Uehara, you seem much more lively than when you were in Busan. Is it because you’re back home?”

“Hehe. Yes! Welcome to Fukuoka, Undertaker-san!”

Uehara Shino.

In my heart, her nickname was 'MacGuffin.' Koreans called her 'The Alchemist.'

Those with a good memory might recall.

Yes, Uehara Shino was one of the 'Supreme 399' forcibly summoned to the Busan Station tutorial dungeon. To Oh Dok-seo and me, she was practically an original member.

In today’s terms, we shared the same 'public ties'.

“I really owe you a lot in Busan. This time, let me guide you around!”

In Busan, she had always been timid, but here in her hometown, she confidently led a group of magical girl trainees.

Initially, Uehara Shino stayed in Korea for several cycles. Securing a ship to return to Japan wasn’t easy, and local conditions were harsh.

After hearing that in the archipelago, the term 'awakened' had to be replaced with 'magic girl,' Uehara Shino tearfully chose political asylum.

Even during the 90th cycle, when I ran a convenience store, Uehara stayed in Korea. She once wrote this on a bill:

[Thank you sincerely. But I think the store name and the clerk's t-shirt are strange. Are you perhaps a member of the Red Army? Sincerely, Uehara Shino.]

By the 590th cycle, circumstances had improved in many ways.

The most crucial turning point was the Inunaki Tunnel.

After the entity that had isolated the regions, reverting the archipelago to the feudal era's 60-plus countries, disappeared, the magical girls finally breathed a sigh of relief.

With some breathing room, the Magical Girl Association began to reclaim the skilled individuals who had gone overseas.

Being 'from the same public ties as the Undertaker and being 'highly skilled,' Uehara Shino was a top priority for repatriation.

-Even if it's as a magical girl...

-Oh, but we'll promote you rapidly!

She was offered the position of Head of the Apothecary, giving her priority over all 'medicinal herbs' produced or discovered in the archipelago.

My old friend, who had found her place back home, smiled shyly at me.

"How can I help you, Undertaker-san?"

To put it bluntly, a protagonist who searches for items themselves in various stories is a third-rate regressor. A true first-rate regressor has their connections bring the desired items to them.

Uehara not only sought out the 'Hate Pill' herself but also strongly requested cooperation from the Association.

There was an implicit threat that she might return to my side if they

refused.

“Meow! If it’s for the Undateikeo, I’ll help too, nya!”

[It’s time to repay the favors I owe. Leave it to me.]

Manyo Neko and Phantom Blade also joined in. Both were top ten powerhouses in the Magical Girl Association.

“Here it is, Undertaker-san!”

As a result, within a month of arriving in Japan, the 'Hate Pill' was presented to me.

Behold, the greatness of connections.

I never understood why some novels had protagonists playing lone wolves. This was so convenient; why wouldn’t they cultivate relationships with their allies? Strange protagonists indeed.

Of course, I’d have to repay this favor later, but that’s what friendship was about.

“Hey, you used to be like that until the 6th cycle.”

“Hey, don’t judge someone by their naive younger days.”

“Those naive younger days were older than I am now, old man…”

Oh Dok-seo grumbled as he looked at the item on the table.

“So this is the Hate Pill.”

“Yeah.”

The Hate Pill was a bright red tablet.

It looked so dark red that it seemed as if it was made by the Demonic Cult. It looked ominous at first glance, and if something went wrong after taking it, it would have to be considered a natural death.

But for me, who was facing the impending judgment day due to the

Total Luck Law, it was the world's best elixir!

“What are you going to do? Take it right away? Honestly, I’m curious about what will happen if you take it. I actually love hate relationships.”

“No. Elixirs are dangerous if taken rashly. To brew its effects properly, you must consume it through the correct procedures and methods.”

“Uh... Were there such procedures for the Hate Pill?”

There were.

More precisely, I was going to create them.

From that day, I stopped talking about the Three Kingdoms.

No matter how much Three Kingdoms content circulated on SG Net, I didn’t join in. I didn’t even mention it myself.

This surprising change shocked those around me.

“T-The teacher hasn’t mentioned the Three Kingdoms even once today?”

Cheon Yo-hwa.

“Hyung, are you alright! I scraped together the remaining Ceylon tea and brought it!”

Seo Gyu.

[Are you really alright?]

[This is an emergency.]

[Mr. Undertaker, could it be that signs of corruption have finally begun to appear in you?]

Saintess.

“T-The guild master... is broken... I can’t fix it... I’m powerless...”

Sim Ah-ryeon.

“Boss. Honestly, I never liked the Three Kingdoms much. The Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Water Margin are too old. Aren’t they overly outdated content?”

Yu Ji-won.

“Oppa, lately I’ve started to like Liu Bei. So it’s okay if we chat about the Three Kingdoms together.”

Lee Ha-yul, that cunning fan of Liu Bei and Sun Quan.

“Undertaker, I’m sorry. I haven’t been paying enough attention lately, have I? Maybe you’ll feel better if you eat something delicious.”

Dang Seo-rin.

And.

“……”

Noh Do-hwa.

While my other companions worried about me (I had no idea what they thought of me), only Noh Do-hwa looked at me with suspicion.

“You...”

“Yes?”

“Confess honestly. What crazy scheme are you up to now?”

As expected from a workaholic, she was unnecessarily sharp.

“You’re strange. Who’s been nagging me to stop going on about Three Kingdoms trivia?”

“Well, these days, your eyes look creepily sinister, so I’m concerned...”

“Hey. Please refrain from slandering, chief manager.”

“……”

To brew the 'Hate Pill' to its peak, stopping the Three Kingdoms trivia alone wasn’t enough.

I began to help my comrades openly, shamelessly, almost brazenly.

“Yo-hwa, I found out there’s a student at Baekhwa High School hiding a gun. I confiscated it because it seemed dangerous.”

“What? Really? Wow. Thank you, teacher! If it weren’t for you, it would have been terrible!”

“It was a close call, Saintess. Even if you can stop time, you’re defenseless against unexpected dangers.”

“Ah... Yes. Thank you for saving me, Undertaker.”

“Dang Seo-rin, I know you can use your lifespan to cast great magic. I don’t want you to die even a day before me.”

“...Undertaker. You.”

“Sword Marquess, shall we take a trip to Mount Hua?”

“Oh! Only the Undertaker understands me!”

“Noh Do-hwa, don’t you find it hard to work alone? I’ll help you as an assistant sometimes.”

“Damn it, I knew you were up to something, you bastard.”

After a year of stopping the Three Kingdoms trivia and brazenly flattering everyone around me.

Sure enough, 'that entity' descended.

“Teacher! I can’t imagine a world without you anymore!”

“Undertaker, I think the Inunaki Tunnel is a good hideout, but the surroundings aren’t great. How about moving to my train?”

“Hyung! We’ve renamed the free board to the Three Kingdoms board! Considering all the help you’ve given me, it’s the least I can do. Please accept my gratitude.”

I clenched my fist in my heart.

‘It’s here!’

That’s right.

The 'Savior Syndrome’ had reappeared.

Just like how fish proliferate in clean water, as soon as the condition of 'the Undertaker not talking about the Three Kingdoms' was met, the Savior Syndrome returned.

“Hey, you bastard.”

Noh Do-hwa grabbed me by the neck.

“You said you knew how to deal with that. You said you knew how to exterminate it. So why did you deliberately bring it back, you idiot? Do you want to die? Is being strangled by me your new hobby?”

“To be precise, I’ve only been strangled by you three times. And since my neck is now protected by a self-defense technique, it’s impossible for a low-level aura user like you to kill me.”

“Three times? I thought it was only once? What about the other two... No, that’s not important. Just bring up that damn Three Kingdoms trivia again...”

“Hey. You should be more polite when asking for a favor.”

“Damn it. You son of a...”

Bang, bang, bang!

The Savior Zombies banged on Noh Do-hwa’s bunker door. Since I had already described this scene once, I’ll skip the details.

Of course, there were some differences from before.

Oh Dok-seo was hiding in the bunker, and the hands knocking on the door included the Sword Marquess's powerful internal energy.

But aside from those small changes, there was still a significant difference.

"Noh Do-hwa, chief manager."

Step.

I stepped forward.

"Do you remember what I said before?"

"What? That working with you is a pain in the ass?"

"No. When the day comes, I said I wanted to watch from a VIP seat to see how badly the side effects of the wish I made to the Monkey's Paw would screw me over."

"Ha...?"

"Thank you for waiting."

Bang! The door dented.

The Savior Zombies breached the last barricade and swarmed towards us.

-Teacher... -Undertaker... -Hyung! -Great Master! -Guild leader... -Oppa... -Mr. Undertaker.

And. At this moment.

I took out the red tablet from my pocket.

My hand formed seals passed down from the Naruto era.

In the post-apocalyptic world ruled by entities, maintaining formal aesthetics was essential.

“Watch carefully, Noh Do-hwa, chief manager. I’m about to do something a bit violent.”

“……”

“Technique Sequence: Savior. Technique Reversal: Hate Pill.”

“……”

“Formality: Affection Reversal.”

Crunch.

I chewed the red pill.

“Mister!”

Oh Dok-seo shouted from behind me.

Her voice, filled with immense emotion, seemed to say, ‘I’m the one who introduced that guy to this genre!’

“Mister, you’re going to let the Total Luck Law win…?”

I smiled.

Oh Dok-seo. She, too, was a talent who understood the importance of formal aesthetics in defeating entities.

“Win.”

Regressor, victory declaration!

Amidst the frenzy, only Noh Do-hwa muttered coldly and quietly.

“You fucking bastard…”

Footnotes:

Chapter 143

The Lucky One V

Sinnoa

-Ahhhhhhhhhhh!

Before Noh Do-hwa's muttering even finished, screams erupted from the bunker.

My comrades pointed at me, horrified, like VIP cultists witnessing Cthulhu's descent firsthand.

-Undertaker! It's the Undertaker!

-The Three Kingdoms entity has appeared!

-Disgusting...! I hate it so much! Just watching him makes me want to rip off my earlobes...!

My comrades kept screaming endlessly.

For this moment, I had stocked water bottles near the bunker entrance. My comrades, as if entranced, picked up the bottles and hurled them at me.

Amidst the heartwarming sight of water bottles flying everywhere, I alone wore a warm smile.

'Just as planned.'

It was an inevitable outcome.

Originally, what effect did the 'Savior' syndrome have? It pushed everyone's affection for me to the extreme, beyond their limits.

And the 'Hate Pill' was an elixir that engraved a reversal technique on any affection felt towards the consumer.

The affection the Savior Syndrome maximized had now completely flipped to the negative!

In other words.

‘My misfortune has descended here and now.’

It may be redundant, but I cared deeply for my comrades.

Being hated by such adorable people was as tragic as hearing grandchildren say, 'Grandpa, you stink!'

-Hyung! No, Undertaker! Please die!

-I can’t believe I once called someone like you 'oppa'. My past self is disgraceful.

-No, technically Ha-yul, you never called me that. You can’t speak, remember? That was your puppet speaking.

-I’ve hated that illegally employed guard from the start!

-Terrible.

Seeing Dang Seo-rin looking at me with such hatred felt like being repeatedly stabbed in the heart.

“Ahh.”

Are you watching, Total Luck Law?

This is the technique of a skilled regressor, the way to utilize anomalies.

No matter how much you wait to gift me misfortune as Santa Alter, if I preemptively harvest enormous misfortune myself, you’re just another unemployed Finn in the post-COVID era.

If a regressor decides to make themselves miserable, what can a mere anomaly like you do?

End the world? Hah. Is that really worse than Dang Seo-rin’s genuine look of disdain?

Dismemberment? I doubt it. Even now, the Saintess is repeatedly using the 'pause' and 'play' buttons on time to chop at my neck with a hatchet.

Incurable disease? Ridiculous. Cheon Yo-hwa is pulling out hourglasses filled with ghosts from Baekhwa High School, ready to break their seals. Actually, that's quite dangerous.

I quickly ran over and knocked Cheon Yo-hwa unconscious.

As I got closer, my former comrades convulsed and trembled even more.

-Die! Die! Please, just die already!

-You useless bastard who failed to save the world hundreds of times! Incompetent! Because of you, people around the world are dying again and again! Punish him!

To understand their reaction, imagine a 2-meter cockroach approaching you.

Currently, I was the reverse-Go Yuri from their perspective.

An entity that elicits extreme hatred no matter what I do, as opposed to the devil who invariably gains affection. In other words, an angel who absolutely invokes revulsion.

Universal self-regard.

'Is this... the view that pink entity always had of the world?'

So contemptible and trivial.

"Dok-seo, are you watching?"

"Yeah! Even though I hate it when you call me by my name, I'm okay! I still recognize this as an anomaly. But can't I at least break one of your fingers?"

"That would be difficult. I didn't train my comrades too strongly this cycle for this very reason."

“You’re truly remarkable, old man! I respect you! I hate you! So, could you please stop breathing? Sharing the same air with you is horrifying.”

“Hey. Don’t be swayed by an anomaly. Focus on the truth. You’re destined to save the world.”

“Damn it, a regressor and a book possessor together, ruining everything...”

Noh Do-hwa cursed as she fiddled with her smartphone.

Even amidst the chaos at the National Road Management Corps headquarters, Noh Do-hwa remained the same.

Her attitude towards others didn’t change despite the affection reversal. This proved her true character—she always treated others, especially me, like a rat’s cousin.

“Haa...”

Thud. Noh Do-hwa put down her phone.

Then, she threw the pile of papers stacked on the table.

The dull-colored papers (recycled paper due to resource scarcity) fluttered in the air.

“How long are you going to show off your power here? Let’s go...”

“What? Go where?”

“I don’t know, damn it. The Saintess just sent a group chat quest to all the awakened. She said the Undertaker has fallen and is massacring humans indiscriminately, and all awakened should unite to eliminate him. You didn’t get the message, did you? Outcast...”

“Ah.”

“Just now, SG Net is flooded with announcements. [Nameless Constellation], [Librarian of the Great Library], [Admin of the Infinite Metagame], [Morning Star of the Second Coming],

[Collector of All Anomalies]... They're all banding together to crush you, forming a nationwide coalition..."

As Noh Do-hwa spoke, I saw Seo Kyu and Sim Ah-ryeon tapping their smartphones furiously at the end of the line.

It seemed the Saintess, realizing that physical attacks were ineffective against me, had immediately called for reinforcements. She was sitting with her eyes closed and hands clasped, clearly using [Telepathy].

"Fuck, I hate this world. Let's just go..."

"Okay."

"I mean it, fucker. I'm quitting."

I wore the expression of Liu Bei hearing that Zhuge Liang wanted to retire to farming. If you leave, this country will collapse!

"Do I care? Let it fall. Hey, Ji-won, deputy."

"Yes?"

"You're the next head of the National Road Management Corps."

What.

"I'm not doing a handover. Figure it out yourself. If you're not a complete idiot, you'll manage. And don't look for me if I disappear..."

"Ah! Thank you, sir!"

This was unbelievable.

I was shocked. Yu Ji-won had finally risen to the head of the National Road Management Corps!

If this story's protagonist were Yu Ji-won instead of me, the Undertaker, it would be an epic of a convenience store worker climbing the ranks to the highest guild in Korea, becoming the

president in the 590th cycle.

Was this real? It was.

While I shivered at the psychopath's success story, Noh Do-hwa was packing something into a trunk.

Aside from a few clothes, she didn't pack much.

Noh Do-hwa was always ready to part ways with her job. She kept her personal tools and daily necessities in her trunk.

Unlike most workers who only thought about quitting, she actually handed in her resignation.

Noh Do-hwa grabbed the trunk handle and looked at me disdainfully.

"What are you doing...? I said let's go."

"Hmm."

"Your eyes are asking 'where,' huh... Well. First, we need to leave the Korean Peninsula. We need to get out of the Saintess's [Clairvoyance] range to evade the pursuers..."

I couldn't answer right away.

It was somewhat surprising.

I had expected Noh Do-hwa to also be affected by the 'Hate Pill' and curse me.

But Noh Do-hwa was fine. More than fine.

'Is it because her affection for me wasn't high enough to notice a reversal?'

Or was it because she always scolded and cursed at me so much that I couldn't see a difference?

Either way, I wasn't sure.

This was my first time using the 'Hate Pill' in the 590th cycle.

My standard method of dealing with anomalies was to figure out how to counter them through repeated regressions. The 'Hate Pill' needed more research.

For that research, Noh Do-hwa, who seemed immune to the 'Hate Pill's' effects, was a valuable sample.

“Aren’t you coming? If not, I’m going to hide on a remote island...”

“No, wait. Let’s go together. Hawaii is too far; how about Saipan or Guam?”

“Saipan? Hmm...”

“Yes. If something happens in Korea, I can quickly come back across the sea to check.”

“A resort, huh... Every place in this world is a mess, but at least the mood will be different. Alright...”

“Dok-seo, are you coming too?”

Oh Dok-seo grinned.

“No way! Old man, drown in the sea! Oh, but I do want to see you die, so it’d be nice if you died in front of me!”

Indeed, I was unfortunate.

The decision to resign as president and travel to Saipan was made on the spot.

If Noh Do-hwa had been an American, Air Force One would have come to pick up the just-resigned former president, but unfortunately, the USA had fallen before accepting Korea as the 51st state.

So we had to travel to Saipan on our own.

The reporters trying to follow us made for an equally grand procession.

-There he is! He's escaping!

-The ideological betrayal by Comrade Secretary can only be met with fury! The only way to maintain ideological purity is to punish the traitor! Guillotine!

-Wait! Cease fire! He's taking the head of the National Road Management Corps hostage!

-What?

-That vile terrorist! Release the head immediately!

Escaping wasn't easy for me either.

First, the Sword Marquess blocked my way. He, who had sparred with me for 101 rounds in the first year, now extended the fight beyond 200 rounds.

"Undertaker! How could you stray from the path and fall into the demonic way! Watching a former friend fall into evil is as painful as a heartbreak!"

"Actually, the closest thing to the demonic way in this cycle is you..."

While the Sword Marquess bought time, the other awakeners didn't just sit around. They actively caused chaos.

"Ah—Ah—Ah—Ah—"

First, Dang Seo-rin started singing. This was the biggest problem, so I fled before the fifth note.

"Did you miss me, senior?"

And Cheon Yo-hwa (千謠話) finally released Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化). The Infinite Void, possessing Cheon Yo-hwa, spread her unique barrier around Busan.

For reference, the way to distinguish the two was by how they addressed me. Yo-hwa called me 'teacher,' while Infinite Void called me 'senior.'

[Die.]

Ha-yul's puppet strings tightened around my neck from all directions.

The Korean Peninsula, especially Busan, was covered in Ha-yul's webs. To prepare for invasions by anomalies, she had protected Busan both by land and sea.

If her defenses could block invasions, they could certainly prevent escapes.

The Saintess's [Clairvoyance] and [Telepathy] continuously assisted the awakened.

"Wow."

I was impressed by the strength of the Korean Peninsula that I had built.

If Sim Ah-ryeon had leveled up to the Northern Holy State through Zero Requiem, I might have died. Thankfully, the aliens built the Great Wall this cycle.

With the Sword Marquess's sword strikes, Dang Seo-rin's singing, Cheon Yo-hwa's barrier, Ha-yul's web, and the Saintess's backup, even I struggled to escape unscathed.

In the end, I had to sacrifice my left foot to escape. Half of my lower body was now Ha-yul's 50% version.

I didn't mind. With the world's strongest prosthetics engineer as my companion, even this small 'misfortune' would benefit me.

"Are you seriously breaking through...? You really are crazy..."

Noh Do-hwa, on my back, muttered incredulously.

Even amidst the chaos, she remained unscathed.

“If I had more time, I would’ve used the Inspection Bureau anomaly, but it can’t be helped. We’ll cross the sea to Saipan.”

“It’s already soaking wet. Can’t you avoid the waves a bit more…?”

“The waves were just born, but I’m over ten thousand years old. They should avoid me.”

“Haa…”

We successfully broke through the front lines.

For a while, we sailed through the open sea.

I boarded the Savoia S-21, a seaplane I had stationed on Tsushima Island. I had used it during my strategy against Cheon Yo-hwa and Infinite Void.

Before long, we landed in Saipan, a former resort destination.

-Ukikik.

Somewhere, mixed with the sound of waves, I thought I heard the laughter of monkeys.

Footnotes:

Chapter 144

The Lucky One VI

Sinnoa

There was no paradise to escape to, but the scenery of Saipan was as beautiful as paradise.

The transparent jade sea and the soft sand caressing our feet. Noh Do-hwa muttered, "The sunlight is too strong..."

"Indeed. It's excessively beautiful," I replied.

That was our first impression.

For reference, I was dressed as a cafe barista, while Noh Do-hwa wore a casual t-shirt with a white lab coat fluttering in the sea breeze.

In short, our fashion was aggressively denying that this place was a global resort.

Saipan probably didn't want tourists like us either.

"This scenery is totally unsuitable for an undertaker who needs to extract misfortune down to the last drop."

"Your words make me anxious..."

We needed to become even more unfortunate.

Thus, I decided to transform the island's landscape myself.

As an aside, in the end-times marked by emptiness, 'aesthetic formality' was more important than anything else.

A story with a clear beginning, development, climax, and conclusion. Like waking up and muttering, "A strange ceiling..."

Such things were a form of etiquette. Grammar.

And depending on what grammar or worldview you adopted, the anomalies would respond differently.

In other words, even upon arriving at a resort, if you shouted, "Wow! It's summer! The beach! The sea!" and flung off your outerwear to dive into the waves, you would likely encounter anomalies based on 'Japanese-style comics.'

It's basically the same as middle schoolers turning off the lights at night and chanting, "Bunshinsaba, Bunshinsaba."

In the end-times, every action and word of a person could summon all sorts of anomalies.

"Noh Do-hwa, I will now recite an excerpt from 'No Longer Human' by Osamu Dazai."

"What...?"

"You've heard of 'No Longer Human,' right? It's by the same author."

I carried Noh Do-hwa to a cliff by the sea.

When I set her down at the edge, she put her hands in the pockets of her white coat.

"Hmm. Why would you start a cheap recital as soon as we arrive in Saipan?"

"As a former public official, you should study history properly. Noh Do-hwa, Saipan was one of the regions where the Japanese military was defeated by the US during the Pacific War. Many civilians also died in the war."

"So what?"

"This cliff is where the Japanese Imperial Army performed their 'special talent show.'"

"Special talent show...?"

If you were to pick two specialties of the former Japanese Imperial Army, they would be declaring war and mass suicide.

The latter specialty was displayed spectacularly at the northernmost point of Saipan Island.

"This cliff is called Banzai Cliff. It's said that about 10,000 soldiers shouted 'Banzai' and dived off the cliff."

"Okay, and so what?"

"And if you were to name the most famous suicide in Japan, it would be Osamu Dazai."

I pulled out an empty notebook.

"Watch closely, Do-hwa. This is the classic incantation for summoning anomalies."

The loud, clear voice of the recital echoed over the waves from the cliff.

"Ah. On a full moon night. Glimmering, then collapsing, surging, then shattering, the waves surged and I couldn't bear to let go of the hand I was holding onto so I intentionally pushed her away. She was instantly swallowed by the waves and shouted a name loudly. It wasn't my name—."

Splash.

A wave crashed.

At that moment.

-Long live the Emperor!

Splash!

A shadowy figure passed by us and dived off the cliff.

What skill. It was a pity they had been a soldier instead of an Olympic athlete during their lifetime.

"What the fuck...?"

Noh Do-hwa jumped in shock.

It was understandable. Shadowy figures that hadn't existed moments ago suddenly appeared behind us.

-Long live the Emperor!

-Long live the Greater Japanese Empire!

-Long liveeeee!

Splash, splash!

Fortunately, while not Olympians, they had marathon experience. Thousands of shadowy figures started running towards the horizon.

The shadowy figures had no physical form. They passed through our shoulders, sometimes even our bodies, and continued to run.

Interestingly, despite having no physical form, they vividly replicated the effect of 'falling into the waves.'

Splash, splash. The waves caused by humans were triumphing over those caused by nature.

Indeed, the Japanese Imperial Army's true enemy was never the US military but 'nature' itself.

Nature included environments like jungles and seas, but also human nature. The Imperial Army wasn't defeated but was actually victorious.

"Damn, what the hell...?"

"Like human history, summoning anomalies also involves the harmony of Heaven, Earth, and Man (天地人)."

I laughed heartily like the Sword Marquess.

"Japanese perceptions of mass suicide are Heaven (天), the land where the Japanese Imperial Army collectively committed suicide is

Earth (地), and Osamu Dazai, the icon of suicide, is Man (人). With these three conditions met so perfectly, how could the anomaly not respond to the incantation?"

"...Seriously, Undertaker. Aren't you already the head of anomalies? What kind of human summons anomalies so easily?"

"Call me a grandmaster shaman."

"Fuck that."

In fact, Osamu Dazai was a leftist who had joined an anti-imperialist student alliance, but what did that matter?

Unless they were tutorial fairies, anomalies had little interest in human political leanings.

Of course, the 'Central Intelligence Agency' living in Namsan, Seoul, was highly interested in human ideologies, but that's a story for another episode.

"If you're suspicious, Noh Do-hwa, you can try reciting next time."

"Next time...?"

"Yes. There's another cliff known for mass suicides around here."

"Wait, wasn't this place just a resort...? Did you come here specifically to do this? Do you really want to die?"

At the next location, Noh Do-hwa chanted the incantation as I instructed.

Sure enough, the 'shadowy figures' appeared.

Unlike Dang Seo-rin, who could only use her exclusive magic, a true grand sorcerer could design a magic system where anyone who chanted 'Fireball' would create a scorching 800-degree flame orb.

Noh Do-hwa, newly enrolled in my magic tower, muttered in disbelief like a student attempting 'Wingardium Leviosa' for the first time.

"It actually works...?"

"If the conditions of Heaven, Earth, and Man are met, anyone can do it. That's what strategies are for. Why else would I call myself an expert in anomalies?"

"Undertaker, what are those shadowy figures? Human souls...?"

"Ah, probably not. They're merely beings made from crude memories and illusions of people. Literally shadows. To give them a more complete form, you'd need an incantation from someone who actually experienced the Pacific War."

"....."

"Look closely at the shadowy figures shouting 'Banzai' and running in groups. They lack detail. If they were real, there would be people being pushed off, some trying to commit seppuku, and others being forced to sacrifice themselves, each with distinct faces and poses."

That day, I spent the whole time with Noh Do-hwa, resurrecting 'unhappy memories' all around the area.

Boom!

Cannon sounds shook the beach. Only the sounds existed. Not even a fishing boat, let alone a warship, was visible on the sea.

In the sky, the engines of fighter planes roared eerily.

Somewhere, the cries of children were heard. The cries had no nationality.

The 'Battle of Saipan' wasn't over.

The number of shadowy figures jumping off the cliffs showed no signs of decreasing. The bodiless shadows continued their endless hell, dying repeatedly.

Emptiness was always like that.

"....."

Noh Do-hwa occasionally glanced at the cliffs while crafting my prosthetic limbs.

As mentioned before, during our escape from Busan, I lost one of my left legs.

Noh Do-hwa used some nearby wood to make me a prosthetic limb.

"Ah, Noh Do-hwa. Tighten the nails there a bit more. It suits me better that way."

"....."

This wasn't the first time Noh Do-hwa had crafted limbs for me in the 590 cycles, so I assisted her appropriately.

Usually, she would have snapped back, 'Then make it yourself,' but she was unusually quiet this time, as if she were lost in deep thought.

"This is such a strange world..."

Noh Do-hwa knelt on one knee, fitting the prosthetic to my left leg, and finally muttered softly.

"Humans clumsily try to forget, while anomalies awkwardly try to remember."

She slowly turned to me.

"And you are a strange human..."

A bizarre and strange 'vacation' continued.

Now, I received scorn and hatred from my beloved comrades and woke up every morning to the sounds of screams and cries.

'I guess I've become quite unfortunate now.'

At least, compared to the luck brought by 'the Sword Marquess's rejuvenation' or 'the aliens' Great Wall,' today's misfortune felt

heavier.

Such things were 'nice to have but not necessary' kinds of luck.

Even without the Sword Marquess or the aliens, I knew how to maintain the front lines in my own way.

-Ukikik.

It seemed the Monkey's Paw had judged the same.

Just as there are insiders and outsiders in the world, someone had to maintain the balance.

The Monkey's Paw, which oversaw the scales of luck and misfortune, seemed to sense a crisis and began pouring out luck more blatantly.

"Undertaker, did you bring the Sword Marquess here?"

"No, I didn't."

"I found bananas hanging in front of the house this morning..."

Food appeared by itself even when we stayed still.

The weather was perfect. The sea gleamed emerald, and the shadows cast by the trees shimmered sapphire.

The environment was so inviting it made you want to dive into the sea in a swimsuit.

-Boom!

In such an environment, the cannon sounds remained grand.

The shadows diving off the cliffs were still there. The weather was so sunny that they truly looked like diving athletes now.

Noh Do-hwa commented, "This is fucking surreal..."

Indeed it was.

The misfortune I created and the luck generated by the Monkey's Paw had begun a full-fledged battle.

My heart swelled. The competition between Naruto's luck and Sasuke's misfortune grew more intense every day.

One day, when I was strolling on the beach and found Cheon Yo-hwa collapsed in the sand, the competition reached its peak.

"...Yo-hwa?"

"Tea... cher..."

Cheon Yo-hwa grabbed my hand tightly.

"I'm sorry. I regained my sanity recently. But I... What have I done to you...!"

Tears welled up in Cheon Yo-hwa's eyes. Her orange hair was tousled by the sea breeze, and sand stuck to her cheeks.

"I knew I had to apologize to you. So I tried to find you alone. When the boat capsized, I thought I'd die, but I survived. I'm so glad I could see you. What happened to your leg? Is it because of us? I'm sorry. Please forgive me..."

I shuddered.

'Is this how you play, Monkey's Paw!'

As known, I had used the 'Hate Pill' to forcibly open a depressing story.

That was my 'check.'

The Monkey's Paw responded with 'checkmate.'

What was the most delightful part of a depressing story?

Needless to say, it was the moment when the characters who hated and resented the protagonist realized the truth and regretted their mistakes.

[I've misunderstood the protagonist] [It's my fault] [I was wrong, and the protagonist was right] [I must apologize and repay the protagonist]—a truly sinister self-realization...!

Yes. The Monkey's Paw followed the depressing story's grammar and tried to give me 'revenge.'

"Yo-hwa."

"Yes...?"

"It's okay."

If the Monkey's Paw wanted a revenge plot, my response was clear.

I smiled kindly.

"Of course, I forgive you."

"...!"

Indeed.

The Monkey's Paw desired a plot where the protagonist pushed others away, saying, [It's too late] [You had many chances, but you wasted them all] [Apologizing now won't change anything].

The protagonist would then find happiness while others fell into misery. It was a cliché of depressing stories.

However.

"No, you have nothing to be forgiven for. I was never disappointed in you, Yo-hwa."

"Teacher...!"

My chosen strategy was to be a 'forgiving' protagonist!

No matter what my comrades did, whether they cut off my limbs or cursed me on SG Net, I accepted it all.

Not allowing a single drop of revenge. This was the masterstroke

against the Monkey's Paw's tricks.

-Ukikikik, Hee, Kikikikik.

After all, no matter what tricks the Monkey's Paw played, it was meaningless.

The phenomenon where my comrades were 'controlled by the Monkey's Paw without realizing it' was itself a painful misfortune for me.

'In the end, I'm the one who put my comrades in danger by testing the Monkey's Paw.'

It was all a disaster of my own making, so how could I blame others?

Eventually, I even returned Cheon Yo-hwa to the Korean Peninsula, along with my right leg, as a donation to the awakened in Busan.

This time, I deliberately let Dang Seo-rin take it.

The scene where she cut off my right foot and muttered, "Tsk, I aimed for the heart..." while tossing my leg was a masterpiece.

-Kikikikikikikikik.

The Monkey's Paw convulsed in the void.

Dinosaurs, perfect for riding, appeared to entertain me, and the Inunaki Tunnel was modified to connect all cities on the Korean Peninsula. It used all sorts of methods to bestow luck and happiness upon me.

So, next, I donated my left arm to the Saintess and my right arm to Lee Ha-yul.

The Undertaker Daruma doll was complete.

-Kikikikikikikik.

I felt the Monkey's Paw foaming at the mouth in the void. It had

choked on the despair and collapsed.

Noh Do-hwa also foamed at the mouth.

"You're... No, never mind. It's you, so I'm sure you have your reasons. No need to explain. Just come back with only your head, and I'll craft your limbs somehow... Are you smiling? How can you smile right now...?"

Left foot. Right foot. Left arm. Right arm.

My body, suddenly transformed into a genre of mutilation stories, was covered with Noh Do-hwa's custom prosthetics.

The battle between the Monkey's Paw trying to grant me luck and me trying to bestow misfortune upon myself was thrilling to witness. However, like all battles, this one also had a time limit.

The 10th year.

'Finally, it's here.'

The end of the 590th cycle approached.

At last, the moment I had set for the Monkey's Paw's time limit arrived.

And on that very day.

First, the Japanese archipelago was lightly destroyed.

When Noh Do-hwa and I woke up in the beach hut and looked out the window, we immediately knew that the Japanese archipelago had been obliterated.

"...Undertaker, look at that."

"Yes, I see it too."

In a novel where a Korean is the protagonist, the fate of the Japanese archipelago was always dire.

Of course, to me, nationality and race held no particular meaning.

Once you live beyond a millennium, your values and perspective on the world change. Even how you view the world.

Manyo Neko, Phantom Blade, Uehara Shino.

There was also the 'Great Priestess,' the chairperson and first seat of the Magical Girl Association, whom I haven't mentioned and prefer never to mention.

They were all my precious comrades.

I knew well what kind of lives they had led and where they were headed.

In this era where nations had fallen and governments had collapsed, they were volunteers rising from the ground to save those around them.

-I will declare this land a haven of magical girl clichés brimming with hope!

-Killing demons is done with grand tragedy, not light laughter! Tragedy doesn't suit us! Everyone, smile!

That was the purpose of the Magical Girl Association.

However, there were two types of magical girl stories.

Stories where justice ultimately triumphed with comrades. The orthodox faction.

Torture stories where magical girls fell into despair and were torn apart. The demonic cult.

Every day, a great battle between orthodoxy and demonic cult took place in the Japanese archipelago.

And, unfortunately for the magical girls, the genre of this world was inherently wicked.

"What is that...?"

Red flesh.

A massive tower of red flesh rose from the horizon, greedily drinking in the morning sunlight.

North of Saipan. In the direction of the Japanese archipelago.

The distance from here to Tokyo was about 2,400 km.

The tower of 'red flesh' extended its majestic form beyond the horizon.

I muttered.

"It's Go Yuri."

Footnotes:

Chapter 145

The Lucky One VII

Sinnoa

“…Go Yuri?”

Noh Do-hwa furrowed her brow.

“…Oh, the person I repeatedly warned you about? But how did it become that huge…?”

“The physical size doesn't matter much. That red tower is likely visible from anywhere on Earth.”

I stared at the horizon.

“You know how there are orbital elevators in science fiction? It's manifesting such a scene. That's the kind of anomaly we're dealing with.”

“Sigh…”

I had heard that Go Yuri crossed over to the Japanese archipelago.

Somehow, that incident snowballed into this disastrous result.

“There are ocean-level anomalies called 'Ya-o-yorozu no kami' in the Japanese archipelago. Just like Baekhwa High School's ghost stories are composed of 100 ghosts, Ya-o-yorozu no kami is literally composed of eight million anomalies.”

“That's a hell of a lot…”

“Yes. I don't know the details, but it seems Go Yuri took on the role of a 'calamity god' passed down from across the sea. Presumably, Go Yuri consumed Ya-o-yorozu no kami.”

This was not good.

Especially since the concept that 'anything can become a god' in the archipelago favored Go Yuri immensely. In fact, the only opponent who might match her was Yoo Ji-won.

“Are you saying she has become a god…?”

“At the very least, she can call herself a minor god. If she devours Ganges in India, who knows what might happen next.”

Perhaps, by actively bringing misfortune through the 'Hate Pill,' I managed to limit the disaster to 'only' this extent.

The neighboring region turned pink, so it was unlikely the Korean Peninsula would remain unscathed.

“Noh Do-hwa, I'm going to scout the Korean Peninsula.”

“…Sure. You'll probably come back in one piece this time since there's nothing left to cut off.”

“I'll try my best.”

I boarded the Savoia S-21 seaplane and set off for the Korean Peninsula.

This plane was modeled after the one in Studio Ghibli's Porco Rosso and was a kind of anomaly itself. It was sturdier in the void than in reality.

It even had some resistance to 'brainwashing' and 'hypnosis,' reminiscent of scenes from the original animation.

Vroom—

Unlike the original, this biplane flew with a hum of its engine.

Despite the 50% chance of the engine stalling mid-flight, it was still much safer than staying on the ground.

“…It's over.”

The Korean Peninsula was also devastated.

The 'Black Wall' that expanded from Manchuria had now consumed all of North Korea.

The alien structures spewed black sludge continuously, covering everything around. From there, anomalies poured out incessantly.

-Creeeeak.

-Craaak, craak.

The aliens that had numbered 120 upon arrival had multiplied like zerglings.

Their forms had changed too. Once resembling armored beings, they now looked more like grotesque 'alien lifeforms,' akin to Ultralisk or Hydralisk from StarCraft.

It seemed the Monster Wave and aliens had fused.

Considering how clichés often end with giants breaking walls and soldiers defending them, a fusion of DNA was almost expected.

‘Busan is... barely recognizable.’

Busan Station, the stronghold of the Samsin World, and the headquarters of the National Road Management Corps were all destroyed, emitting ominous smoke.

I wondered what had happened to Yoo Ji-won.

In case of emergencies, we had established a protocol to evacuate to Inunaki Tunnel. The Saintess, Lee Ha-yul, Sim Ah-ryeon, and Seo Gyu knew the protocol.

“Saintess? Are you watching?”

No response.

There was no answer.

“……”

I couldn't tell if the Saintess was dead or just pretending to wait for

me to land and ambush me. Given the ongoing misfortune brought by the 'Hate Pill,' nothing was certain. I had to consider the worst-case scenario that she had fallen as an executor.

Boom!

A sound of gunfire erupted from somewhere.

I tensed, thinking it was anti-aircraft fire, but no weapon firing the shots was visible.

It was just like the cannon sounds that echoed from Saipan's beach. The sound existed, but not the source.

Boom! Boom!

The bombardment sounds peaked near the Nakdong River. It took me a moment to realize it was a reenactment of a war.

The 'Korean War' was unfolding across the Korean Peninsula. Under the guise of ideology, people hunted each other with the cold edge of an axe, distinguishing between 'us' and 'them.'

But just like the cliffs of Saipan, the hunters and the hunted were all part of the anomalies' play. No truly living humans were found.

Even the connection to the Undertaker's gossip network was severed.

‘Perhaps, to others, the existence of a regressor like me was a massive stroke of luck.’

Such a thought crossed my mind.

‘If so, Old Man Scho's repeated deaths would be equally immense misfortune for others. Perhaps the ‘Total Luck Law’ balanced things without us realizing it.’

-Craaak?

The aliens spotted me and began scanning the skies.

Even though this plane was an anomaly, it couldn't withstand UFOs from an SF universe.

Before the aliens could shoot me down, I altered my course and returned to Saipan.

“Hmm…”

Noh Do-hwa was sitting in the beach hut.

She glanced at me.

“Well, you came back in one piece.”

Noh Do-hwa brewed coffee with beans she had brought from Busan and handed me a cup.

And she asked nothing.

I always appreciated her silence.

Incidentally, Noh Do-hwa made terrible coffee despite appearances.

Though I had tried to keep a cheerful tone, I must confess honestly.

In the 590th cycle, my mental state was quite shaken.

No, ‘quite’ was too mild. It was considerably shaken.

‘Did I use the Monkey's Paw too hastily?’

Of course, I had a goal that necessitated testing the Monkey's Paw.

As will be revealed in the next stories, there was an anomaly I could only defeat with the Monkey's Paw.

But at that point, it was a future matter. Until my experiment's significance was proven, my mind was inevitably cornered in the 590th cycle.

‘Yes. This anxiety itself is one of the emotions bringing me misfortune.’

So I let go.

Under normal circumstances, I would have used various methods to restore my mental state. I might have guided the aliens to the Japanese archipelago to enjoy a Go Yuri vs. aliens matchup.

But in the 590th cycle, I aimed to become as unfortunate as possible.

Thus, I tormented myself.

‘Even though I sought a way to counter the god, relying on the Total Luck Law was foolish. The disaster was my choice.’

‘I should have warned my comrades in advance. But no, Dok-seo's mind was corrupted anyway. The result would have been the same.’

‘Really? The Saintess has a much stronger mental state than Dok-seo. If I had explained my purpose and intentions...’

‘How could the Saintess have countered the interference of three anomalies: the Savior, the Monkey's Paw, and the Hate Pill?’

‘I shouldn't have done it.’

Regret. Self-reproach. Fantasizing about IFs.

The thoughts that constantly drove humans to misfortune were always ‘I shouldn't have done that.’

A master of mental management is also a genius of mental destruction. I expertly tortured myself.

I frequently flew around the ruined world, reminding myself, 'This is all due to my wrong choices.'

“……”

Noh Do-hwa quietly watched me.

Honestly, if I truly wanted to be unfortunate, I should have driven her away.

But I couldn't bring myself to expel Noh Do-hwa from the beach hut.

In the 590th cycle, I realized that my psyche unknowingly relied on Noh Do-hwa.

‘Even in my subconscious, I never saw a corrupted Noh Do-hwa.’

The uncorruptible.

Perhaps Noh Do-hwa had such a characteristic?

Maybe that's why she was immune to the Hate Pill's effects?

—Rationally, that was impossible.

If Noh Do-hwa had true [mental immunity], she should have resisted Go Yuri's brainwashing. Over many cycles, such behavior was not observed.

‘Still, she might be more resistant to the Hated Pill than others.’

At that time, I indulged in such fantasies.

‘Maybe the Hate Pill has an effect I didn't know about. Perhaps the more Noh Do-hwa hated me, the more she felt a twisted sense of friendship?’

‘Otherwise, why would she suggest leaving with me right after resigning from the National Road Management Corps? Was Noh Do-hwa the type to make such a proposal voluntarily?’

Fantasies. Fantasies. More fantasies.

Somewhere deep in my heart, a part of me yearned to rely on someone, indulging that desire.

The saying by Native Americans was true. The human mind is like a hungry wolf; the more you feed it, the stronger it grows.

My heart grew into a miserable wolf.

‘The Savior anomaly's usage, the validation of the Monkey's Paw

and the Hate Pill, and Noh Do-hwa's characteristics.'

'I've gained enough from the 590th cycle.'

'From the start, I intended this to be a semi-vacation cycle.'

I grew kinder to Noh Do-hwa.

Using our limited resources, I made delicious meals. As Noh Do-hwa once said in the 100th cycle, my cooking skills were Michelin 4-star chef level.

Even amidst the cannon sounds and screams in Saipan, I found charming paths for walks with Noh Do-hwa.

In short, I used various means to gain Noh Do-hwa's favor.

"Hmm…"

Despite my desperate mental efforts, Noh Do-hwa said little.

No.

"Today's coffee is good."

She grew kinder.

Her sharp remarks softened, and her usual sneer turned into a more gentle smile.

She even expressed interest in learning to cook, asking me for lessons, and chatted during our walks.

Simple daily life. Ordinary joys.

With no place to attach myself, my mind clung to Noh Do-hwa's small kindnesses.

A year passed.

Noh Do-hwa became my sole source of happiness.

"Good night, Undertaker…"

“Ah, yes. You too, good night, Craftsmaster.”

As usual, I fell asleep in the hut's bedroom.

And when I woke up.

“Ah.”

Noh Do-hwa's voice was close.

“Oh dear, you woke up…?”

A bit too close.

Noh Do-hwa was on top of me, her weight pressing down.

“You can go back to sleep if you want…”

But I couldn't.

Thud.

The main pressure point was my neck.

The former public servant, Craftsmaster, and manager who once called herself my accomplice, was now strangling me with a faint smile.

“……”

I opened my mouth but no words came out.

The opponent was Noh Do-hwa, the last person you'd expect to be mentioned purely based on combat power among the awakened.

If I wanted, I could immediately shake off her hands.

But looking into her black eyes up close, I saw they were saying something else.

“Please don't resist…”

Her lips spoke as well.

“It would be troublesome. The moment you activate your aura, I'll take my own life. You wouldn't want that, would you?”

“……”

“Of course, you could cut off my limbs and prevent me from doing so… But I doubt you'd go that far.”

Noh Do-hwa's grip tightened on my neck.

I choked, bubbles forming in my throat.

I tried moving my limbs, but my prosthetic arms and legs, installed by Noh Do-hwa, didn't budge.

“Wh-Why…?”

“Ah, sorry. I tampered with them a bit during assembly.”

“……”

“Oh. You’re wondering since when? Well, considering your limited remaining lifespan, I'll tell you. From the moment the awakened went berserk in the Busan bunker… I started thinking right away…”

Noh Do-hwa smirked.

Her smile was darker than ever before, like poison.

Her venom seeped from her eyes to her hands, strangling my breath.

“Your choice to embrace misfortune made me worry. Was it possible for you, who finds happiness in small things, to become truly unfortunate…?”

Squeeze.

“You're a person who can find joy in anything. You must have worked hard to become like that. I can only imagine how awful the

life of a regressor must have been…”

Press.

“Your mental barriers are sturdy. If breaking them was my goal, staying in Korea as the head of the National Road Management Corps was counterproductive…”

Pressure.

“So, I quit…”

Yu Ji-won was capable.

But her capabilities shone most as a deputy. As the leader of a large organization, her tendency to view everything and everyone as tools would cause problems.

Managing the National Road Management Corps, which required negotiating with numerous guilds, would spiral out of control under Yoo Ji-won's leadership.

Cheon Yo-hwa, the guild master of Baekhwa, braving the sea alone and getting stranded, was a sign of the upcoming chaos.

Noh Do-hwa had been waiting for this.

“You planned the organization so meticulously, raised it, and now the Korean Peninsula is in shambles, bringing you significant misfortune…”

It didn’t end there.

“While others tried to beat you up, I saw that such straightforward attacks wouldn’t deal a decisive blow. It was a golden opportunity for me.”

Opportunity. What kind?

“Undertaker.”

Noh Do-hwa leaned closer.

Her pitch-black eyes, as dark as a well.

Her eyes, devoid of any light, stared down at me.

“You ruined my life.”

She whispered in my ear.

“You dragged me into the National Road Management Corps when I only wanted to live quietly. You claimed you wanted to save the world... 500 times? 600 times? How many more times do you plan to make me suffer…?”

“……”

“Bastard.”

Her poison seeped into me.

“Undertaker. I hate you. I always have, and I always will. If you feel guilty, even a little, for ruining my life…”

“……”

“Please, die here and now.”

My body trembled.

It was hard to tell if it was due to the diminishing oxygen or Noh Do-hwa’s venomous intent.

-Huikikikkik.

The Monkey's Paw wailed in the void.

The roof beams of the hut collapsed, aiming to crush Noh Do-hwa. The Monkey's Paw, trying to eradicate the source of my misfortune, was thrashing.

I summoned my aura and shattered the beam. It disintegrated without a sound, and Noh Do-hwa smiled softly.

My vision blurred.

Through the haze, I saw Noh Do-hwa lowering her head further.

“How is it…?”

She whispered.

“Is my killing you sufficient misfortune for you…?”

I wanted to laugh.

Of course.

But I couldn’t move my lips, so in the blackened vision, I met my end.

It was my 590th death.

There is a small epilogue.

To summarize, the Monkey's Paw didn't pursue me beyond the regression to collect its debt.

The final 'misfortune' gifted by Noh Do-hwa was significant enough even for the Monkey's Paw.

Yes.

The [Total Luck Law], which might have grown into an ocean-class threat, was safely dealt with.

“...? What are you staring at?”

“Nothing.”

I debated whether to tell Noh Do-hwa about the previous cycle but decided against it.

If I did, she might genuinely despise me.

There was no need to invite misfortune this cycle too.

“Hm?”

Noh Do-hwa, sitting far away at her desk, tilted her head.

She got up, walked over, and frowned as she looked up at me.

“What's this all of a sudden?”

“…Hmm. Undertaker, it seems you're starting to go bald.”

“What?”

What nonsense was that?

“Bald? In my 591 regressions, I've never lost a single hair. My hair is very healthy.”

“Really? Well, I must be mistaken. Still, it’s better to be cautious…”

Ten years later.

When I looked in the mirror, I saw that Noh Do-hwa’s warning was accurate. My hair was thinning in an M-shaped pattern.

“……”

As if it were the final payment for the misfortune I owed.

-Uikiikik.

I must emphasize once more.

Anomalies were truly dangerous.

Footnotes:

Chapter 146

The God Slayer I

Sinnoa

Recently, I had been deeply immersed in my extremely personal relationship with Noh Do-hwa (murder) and our overly private conversations. Sometimes, it was necessary to talk about external matters. This time, to catch our breath, let's discuss the latest trend in our apocalyptic era.

In the past, humanity used terms like 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' to construct buildings and write literature. However, to the MZ generation of the apocalypse, such terms were outdated concepts. The new generation had evolved to be more practical.

"Are you crazy?"

"Pardon?"

"I counted the steps in the new house you built, and there are thirteen. Why did you build it that way? Do you want to take a tour to the depths of hell while coming down the stairs?"

"Well, the local carpenter just built it as he saw fit…"

"You must have some serious grudges against that carpenter. Cut ties immediately and hire a different one. Reduce the steps to ten or nine."

"Is that really necessary?"

"Take it or leave it. It's your life on the line, not mine. What's this? You even built a basement? Your survival rate would be higher if you jumped off a building roof than living in this house. It's as if you posted a notice inviting anomalies to live here."

Abyssalism.

This was the latest trend in the apocalypse. Abyssalism focused less on 'how to live comfortably' and more on 'how to avoid getting screwed by anomalies.'

It didn't start this way.

During the times when nuclear bombs flew and civil wars broke out, humanity thought scientifically. They built solid concrete bunkers to hide in, or lived as isolated survivalists. By scientific standards, these approaches made sense.

However, the new anomalies that emerged in the apocalypse had a rich literary sensitivity and preferred inverting causality.

“Waaah… Waaaah…!”

“Why is that beggar acting crazy?”

“Don’t even ask. He used to be a high-ranking corporate executive. He dragged his whole family into an underground bunker.”

“What? An underground bunker? Crazy.”

“Yeah, crazy. A bomb dropped on the bunker overnight, and his entire family turned into ghosts. He barely escaped to Busan. Is he even truly alive?”

“Waaah! Waaah!”

Anomalies didn't favor scientific approaches or causality. They loved 'reversing causality.'

Take underground shelters as an example. Bunkers were designed to protect against air raids, bombings, and nuclear attacks. Scientifically, bunkers were safer than ordinary houses. Unless you had a relative named Osama bin Laden, the chance of a hidden bunker being targeted by missiles was extremely low.

However, anomalies thought differently. Bombs existed because bunkers did. The presence of a bunker necessitated a bombing.

Thus, those who hid in bunkers invariably faced missile

bombardments. The Gimhae plains were devastated. That day marked a paradigm shift for humanity.

“Hey, someone’s calling me.”

“Damn it, don't answer! Never answer! Use your smartphone only to access SG Net. Turn it off otherwise!”

Phones? They weren't for hearing someone’s voice but rather tools to communicate with unseen entities. Unless you were a high school student who enjoyed ghost stories, making or receiving calls was foolish. According to 'Abyssal Communication Studies,' real human interaction was face-to-face only.

“Why did you put a mirror in the bathroom, you idiot?”

“Huh? Because it’s a bathroom…”

“Your reflection in the mirror looks different from your actual face! Get rid of it now!”

Mirrors? They were tools that isolated beings identical to oneself in another world. They should never be used as interior decorations.

Humanity had grown too lazy and dependent on tools. In the updated apocalypse, more careful choices were necessary.

“Ancient people lived fine without phones…”

“We can live without mirrors too. They were always stressful, except for the bathroom mirror right after a shower.”

And so, humanity adapted. People decided to live without phones, mirrors, and modern conveniences. After all, ancient ancestors hunted mammoths without such things.

However, there was one tool humanity couldn't abandon. The thought of letting go of it meant regressing to prehistoric times. Surprisingly, it wasn't the internet. Nor was it smartphones.

The tool that humanity, especially Americans, clung to until the end was—

-Bang!

The protagonist of this story: guns.

Sometimes, when I read modern fantasy where characters fight with swords, I wonder why they don't use beautiful and stylish guns instead of clinging to primitive melee weapons. Are they medieval barbarians?

The disdain for firearms in some creative works has a long history. When monsters appeared in the hills behind Tokyo-3, the Self-Defense Forces used advanced weapons to no effect. Someone coolly muttered, 'What a waste of taxes,' sealing the fate of firearms in subculture.

Monsters also seemed influenced by modern fantasy. Boss-level monsters shrugged off bullets, missiles, and nukes but became squishy under a little 'aura-infused' knife attack.

“Shoot! Shoot them all! Those bastards are nothing! Just aim and fire!”

-Screech!

Of course, some monsters were vulnerable to bullets. Goblins and orcs, born to be humanity's experience points, were quite susceptible to firearms. These village-class monsters were numerous. South Korea, a conscription nation, had much fun with guns right after the apocalypse. However, firearms quickly lost popularity. After Ten Legs enjoyed an omakase mukbang with the South Korean military, firearms vanished entirely.

Why did firearms fall into disuse? A representative story explains it.

“Haa…”

One day, Cheon Yo-hwa, visiting my café, sighed deeply. Even the spoon stirring her beloved cream latte seemed devoid of strength.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah, it’s… teacher, lately, there have been more conflicts among our students.”

“The Baekhwa High girls? Isn't their rivalry always intense?”

Baekhwa High School had a resident anomaly known as 'Yuri' (not to be confused with Go Yuri). It was a unique boundary-forming ghost that even I couldn’t exorcise, so we left it alone. Consequently, Baekhwa High School constantly played out a fierce drama of love and hate, making every day new for Cheon Yo-hwa, who was in the middle of it.

“I can laugh off their usual rivalries, but it feels like they're crossing a line lately. A girl almost died the other day.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t mind if they bicker, as long as it doesn’t harm others. But if someone dies, it affects our whole guild. Ruining the atmosphere is secondary.”

“Hm.”

“I gave the perpetrator a full course of water torture to wake her up. She claimed she didn't know it would go that far. When I probed her mind, she seemed sincere. Sir, could this be an anomaly?”

Anomalies didn't adhere strictly to logic. What mattered was that 'one of the top guild leaders in Korea had reached a critical stress point.' A single injury among Baekhwa High School guild members meant little. But 'Cheon Yo-hwa’s depression' could trigger unpredictable butterfly effects.

If she started destroying cities to relieve her stress, it would be a serious problem.

If you didn’t recognize the reference, had you forgotten about The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya?

Anyway, I smiled gently.

“Yo-hwa, shall we visit Baekhwa High to check for any sectors infected by anomalies?”

“Really?”

Cheon Yo-hwa’s face brightened, then fell.

“But, Sir, you’re very busy. I’d feel guilty if you came just for us…”

“It’s fine. Baekhwa High School is essentially a temple sealing Infinite Void. Regular inspections are necessary. And if you feel something is wrong, it’s worth investigating.”

“Thank you so much, Sir!”

I had chosen correctly.

We passed through the Inunaki Tunnel and headed to Sejong City. On the way back to Baekhwa High School, Cheon Yo-hwa smiled and chatted with me.

“Wow, it feels like just yesterday we toured schools together for years. Time flies.”

“For us, it’s been years, but for others, only a day has passed.”

“Haha, true! That’s why it feels even stranger. Ah, this way, Sir.”

Baekhwa High School had changed quite a bit since our last visit. Classrooms were repurposed. Elevators were closed, and the fourth floor was sealed off with caution tape.

“This is the perpetrator's room.”

“Is it alright for me to enter?”

“She almost killed someone! She’s practically a murderer. We’re still waterboarding her. Why care about her privacy? We’ve already done a full search.”

Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa, the prominent guild leaders of this land, were both fond of water torture. The favorable water quality

of the Korean Peninsula remained influential.

Indeed, normal people had to rely on me, the cultured undertaker, as their pillar of support.

I searched the room thoroughly. Cheon Yo-hwa's claim of a thorough search seemed true. Nothing new was found in the perpetrator's room.

"Hmm?"

But the window frame felt odd. Tap-tap. I knocked on it, and the plastic sounded overly hollow.

"What's wrong, teacher?"

"There seems to be an empty space here."

"Ugh."

I slid the window aside and examined the frame. Sure enough, there was an artificial gap.

"Let me use some aura."

"Oh, go ahead."

Black aura formed on my fingertips. I traced the gap with my aura, and as expected, it revealed a hidden space. I frowned at the item hidden inside. Cheon Yo-hwa's face darkened quickly, like a front-line soldier finding a hole in the DMZ fence.

"This crazy bastard."

Cheon Yo-hwa muttered gloomily.

The hidden item was a pistol. I immediately picked up the K5 pistol and fired it out the window.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sound of gunfire echoed through Baekhwa High until the 13 bullets were spent. Far away, students seemed startled, but I had no

time to worry about them.

“Phew.”

“Haa…”

Only after the loaded bullets were spent did we sigh in relief. This anomaly was truly dangerous. Both Cheon Yo-hwa, the guild leader of Baekhwa, and I, a regressor, had been tense.

“Good thing I called you, teacher. If we left it, at least one person would have died, maybe thirteen.”

“I’m glad I came.”

Indeed, the reason firearms became useless in the apocalypse, or rather 'dangerous,' was because every gun in this world was possessed by an anomaly.

[Chekhov’s Gun].

This anomaly turned all firearms into deadly hazards.

Footnotes:

Chapter 147

The God Slayer II

Sinnoa

There was once a Russian medical student from a poor family named Anton Chekhov. As is often the case, Russia was a land filled with a peculiar magic. The more unfortunate the Homo sapiens of that land, the more their writing prowess seemed to flourish. Chekhov died young at 44 from an incurable disease. Having grasped the three accursed elements of 'Russia,' 'poverty,' and 'incurable disease,' Chekhov exchanged his life for an extraordinary literary talent. It was as if all the evil spirits of Russia whispered to him to become a writer. Through this grand dark magic, Chekhov emerged as a great literary figure.

Chekhov once said:

"If a gun is hung on the wall in the first act, it must be fired in the last. If not, don't bother hanging it there."

This is known as "Chekhov's Gun." Chekhov probably intended to say, "Use foreshadowing well, you writers." However, as with all dark magic, Chekhov's spell had unintended aftereffects. Incidentally, Chekhov worked in Siberia, and the weather patterns originating from there are famous for affecting the Korean Peninsula every winter. Even the greatest sorcerers cannot escape meteorological phenomena. Chekhov's dark magic, too, rode the winds and landed on the Korean Peninsula.

Here is a concrete example.

“Hey! Look at this! It’s a gun!”

“Wow. A military unit must have dropped it. Good job! Thanks to you, we found it.”

“Hehe.”

In Seoul, there was a loving couple. Despite the apocalypse filled with anomalies, they were living a pure love story. One day, they found a gun and ammunition left behind by a military unit. The couple, thinking it was a great find, took the weapon.

And then.

-Bang!

Less than two weeks later, one shot the other.

“Ugh... Miro, why...?”

“Sorry, Oppa. I don't have the will to live anymore. So let's die together.”

“No...”

The couple, who had been living a happy love story, suddenly plunged into a tragic tale. This was just the tip of the iceberg.

-Bang!

Another family found a gun and that very night, the entire family was shot dead. Someone, bewitched by an anomaly, hallucinated that enemies were attacking from all directions and massacred their family.

“Aaaaah!”

By dawn, realizing that the 'enemies' they killed were actually their family, the person took their own life with the same gun. Similar cases were countless.

-Anonymous: There’s a group of survivors who built a hideout next to my neighborhood, but last night they got totally wrecked lol.

-Anonymous: I heard gunshots all night. Seems like they had a stockpile of guns. When I checked, they were screaming and shouting like crazy.

-Anonymous: They looked like a tight-knit group from the same

hometown, but one gun destroyed them all.

You get the idea.

That's right.

The dark magic cast by the Russian writer ensnared all firearms. Every gun became haunted by the anomaly known as "Chekhov's Gun."

In this world, if a gun existed, it would inevitably be fired at a crucial moment. More precisely, crucial moments were forcibly created because of the gun's presence.

Lovers' deaths. The collapse of close-knit groups. Regardless of the people or events, if a gun existed, it would invariably lead to dramatic moments until the ammunition ran out. It was a modern-day version of Paris's Golden Apple. Wherever a gun existed, discord and tragedy ensued.

"Hey, put down that gun!"

"Shut up! My family's dead! Why should I stay in the army? You all die too!"

-Bang, bang, bang!

The South Korean military, once advancing towards Seoul to claim the throne of the Korean Peninsula, was swiftly annihilated. While the Ten Legs devouring the military played a major role, the final blow was delivered by Chekhov's Gun.

"If we start an internal conflict here, we'll lose all hope..."

"Hope? Screw that! Die!"

"Stop him! Why are you all loading your guns too? Are you insane?"

In short, the entire unit erupted in gunfire. Rumor had it that even the division commander was killed in the crossfire. Fortunately, firearms in South Korea were concentrated in military units, so only

military power was lost. The USA, however, where every household deemed a shotgun essential, faced severe consequences. Within a month of the apocalypse, 50% of Americans had died. If they had known this would happen, even the staunchest opponents of gun control might have reconsidered.

Thus,

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: This is a notice to all members of the Samcheon World guild and all awakened individuals entering Busan. Firearms are strictly prohibited in Busan. Violation will result in...

-[Baekhwa]13thGrader: An illegal firearm was found in Sejong City! There will be a public execution in front of the government building at lunchtime today. Please show your support! (>_<);;

Not just North America, but the entire world, including the Korean Peninsula, began rigorously regulating firearms. Possession of a firearm was almost a guaranteed death sentence. Killing someone was bad, but possessing a gun was worse. Guns didn't just kill; they sowed discord and ensured tragedy. In a way, "Chekhov's Gun" was less fitting a name than "Forced Tragedy Ensurer."

This was why Cheon Yo-hwa muttered, “This crazy bastard,” upon discovering a K5 pistol in her guild.

“Now then.”

We thoroughly searched Baekhwa High School. Thankfully, there were no other firearms besides the one found in the window frame.

“Why did your guild member collect and hide a K5 pistol?”

“Well, we interrogated her with some waterboarding. She had a crush on the vice president of our student council.”

Cheon Yo-hwa sighed.

“But the vice president is dating someone else. That person was the victim in this case...”

“A love triangle?”

“Yes, something like that...”

This story felt distant from my own experiences, making me feel like an observer.

“So, the perpetrator planned to kill the victim with the gun? Foolish. She wouldn’t gain the vice president’s love that way.”

“Well... It’s a bit more complicated.”

Cheon Yo-hwa scratched her cheek.

“She planned to use 'Chekhov's Gun' to justify her actions.”

“What?”

“Her plan was to pretend she found the gun while we were on one of our regular patrols in Seoul. Then, during patrol, she would act like she was possessed by 'Chekhov’s Gun' and accidentally shoot the victim.”

Cheon Yo-hwa made a finger gun and mimicked firing.

“She intended to disguise it as an accidental shooting caused by the anomaly.”

“Acting?”

“Yes, acting. She thought that by pretending it was an accidental discharge, she could argue that she was possessed by the anomaly. She figured she might face demotion but wouldn’t be expelled or executed. Kids these days are so cunning.”

I was somewhat astonished.

“So, she planned to disguise a murder as an accident caused by an anomaly?”

“Yes. Isn’t it terrible?”

Incredible. I had heard stories of guild members abandoning

annoying colleagues during explorations, but rarely did someone actively plan to use an anomaly as a cover for murder. Human malice truly had no limits.

“……”

At that moment, something clicked in my mind.

A student's idea of using 'Chekhov's Gun' sparked a realization.

Gun. Destruction. Gun. Malice. Gun.

Various words intertwined in my mind.

“Teacher? Are you okay?”

“……”

“Oh, you’re deep in thought.”

Cheon Yo-hwa, familiar with this sight, went about her business. It took me about three minutes to fully process my revelation. During that time, Cheon Yo-hwa stood guard as if protecting a meditating colleague.

“Yo-hwa.”

As soon as I spoke, Cheon Yo-hwa smiled, as if she had been waiting. She handed me a cup of tea brewed with green tea leaves.

“Yes. Did you come up with something good?”

“Yes. If all goes well, I might acquire the strongest weapon on the Korean Peninsula this time.”

“The strongest weapon on the Korean Peninsula?”

Cheon Yo-hwa tilted her head.

I covered the cup with my palm and nodded.

“Yes. Yo-hwa, what do you think is the strongest weapon on the Korean Peninsula?”

“Hm? Uh, let’s see... North Korean nuclear missiles?”

“Those didn’t even scratch the Ten Legs and disappeared. Think of a weapon more practical for human use.”

“Um... The Four Tiger Evil-Cutting Sword?”

As expected of the student council president of a prestigious private school, she was knowledgeable about peculiar artifacts. Incidentally, Cheon Yo-hwa scored top marks in Korean, Math, English, and Korean History on the college entrance exam. In case you’re wondering how she took the exam in a collapsed world, well, a unique anomaly and void appear in Korea every November called the "College Scholastic Ability Test." Despite the bizarre questions, Cheon Yo-hwa achieved near-perfect scores. If you searched her bag, you’d even find an 'Honorary Seoul National University Student ID.'

In any case,

“That sword is quite powerful, but it’s still weaker than my cane-sword. It never created any true legends. The strongest weapon today is one that holds a powerful 'story' capable of defeating anomalies.”

“Um... I don’t quite get it. I’m not very interested in weapons. Did our country ever have such a weapon?”

“There is one.”

I smiled.

“Yo-hwa, have you ever heard of 'The Heart of a Beast'?”

“The Heart of a Beast?”

The bullet that killed a god. A German-made Walther PPK pistol. Serial number 159270. The strongest treasure on the Korean Peninsula. The bullet that pierced the heart of Yu-sin.

That’s right. The gun that assassinated the former president was calling out to me, the Undertaker, to come and claim it.

Surprisingly, the firearm that achieved the monumental feat of 'assassinating a president' wasn't preserved in a museum. Its whereabouts were completely unknown.

After the assassination by the head of the Central Intelligence Agency, the pistol was moved to the Army Forensic Science Laboratory. After forensic analysis, it went to the Security Command, then to Army Headquarters. After the trial concluded, it was supposed to be returned to the Central Intelligence Agency.

In Korea, when an item passes through more than three government agencies, it means its ownership is eternally relinquished. The 'strongest treasure on the Korean Peninsula' was no exception. Naturally, the Walther PPK pistol vanished.

The Central Intelligence Agency claimed:

-The Security Command confiscated it.

The Security Command asserted:

-We returned it to the Central Intelligence Agency long ago.

If this scene seems familiar, it's not a coincidence. Bureaucrats everywhere share the same DNA.

However, it's not just a matter for ridicule. Facing a cursed demon gun... no, a demon pistol, the bureaucrats might have instinctively felt fear. It was a monstrous relic that shouldn't exist in this world. Mere mortals were eager to send it back to the divine realm.

Yes. The bureaucrats were right. The wisest way to deal with a curse was to pretend it didn't exist. The Korean government succeeded in sealing the cursed relic using the most sensible method.

And now, I, the Undertaker, needed that relic. Desperately.

Immediately after parting ways with Cheon Yo-hwa, I headed north from Sejong City. I arrived in a district of Seoul.

[…Mr. Undertaker.]

The Saintess, who often spent her time monitoring my activities through the countless CCTV cameras she had set up, finally spoke.

“Yes?”

[Are you really planning to enter there? You’ve always warned me not to enter that void.]

“Yes. You shouldn’t go in, but I can.”

[……]

I ignored the Saintess’s silence and looked up at the scene before me. In the background stood Namsan, a landmark of Seoul. Naturally, there was a building that should be there.

The headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency, or the more familiar "Agency for National Security Planning" for some. Now, it was a void.

That’s right.

As mentioned in the previous story, the pinnacle of genre literature, "monopolizing opportunities," had met its end in our world. The sinister anomaly known as the Total Luck Law saw to that. But why grieve? A specialized Chinese restaurant’s sweet and sour pork is better than a buffet’s. Even if monopolizing all dishes was forbidden, enjoying the best one was enough. I, the Undertaker, prided myself as a gourmet, second only to Dang Seo-rin and the Ten Legs on the Korean Peninsula.

“Saintess, I’m going to farm the 'weapon that slayed a god.'”

[.....]

“Please watch over me.”

Today, I was going to claim the greatest treasure on the Korean Peninsula.

Footnotes:

Chapter 148

The God Slayer III

Sinnoa

The void of Namsan.

The anomaly that resided here was the Central Intelligence Agency, often referred to simply as "CIA." If one preferred a more dramatic name akin to those from the Fate/Stay Night series, it could be referred to as "The Gun that Pierced the Heart of Dictatorial Power" or "The Priests of Holy Water Resisting Communism."

“This damn primitive country!”

In the distant past, Old Man Scho despised this void the most.

“I’m not a bloodthirsty communist revolutionary, but a social democrat advocating gradual reforms through the parliament! Ultimately, I aim to seize parliamentary power and transition to exclusive party power, not the extreme left! Why do they call me a commie?!”

Old Man Scho had a reason for his fervent ideological proclamations.

- Catch that commie bastard!

- The target is strongly resisting.

- Director, he’s a foreigner. This could turn into a diplomatic issue if mishandled!

- Hey, Kim Yo-won! Just because he has a different hair color doesn’t mean he’s not a commie. So is Stalin a freedom fighter? Catch him when I say so!

Bang, bang, bang!

Gunfire echoed around Old Man Scho.

Indeed.

The "Central Intelligence Agency" goblins that infested Namsan appeared at every opportunity to capture humans with impure ideologies. In fact, these goblins occupied a similar position to goblins in other regions. In many ways, they had characteristics undeniably goblin-like.

A. There were many of them. While walking through the void, it was easy to encounter men whispering, "I'm actually an agent of CIA," or "My relative works in Namsan…."

B. They kidnapped people and dragged them to underground lairs, never to return. The Namsan bunkers constantly echoed with the screams of captives.

C. Underestimating these goblins, thinking, "How strong could a goblin be?" would surely lead to a nasty surprise.

Among the awakeners, no one suffered more from these CIA goblins than Old Man Scho. Whether near Namsan or anywhere else, the goblins would always pop up and fire bullets at him.

"Damn you bastards!"

The German man shouted with a distinctive diction.

If he could have met Seo Gyu, they might have recognized each other as brothers in arms.

"I am! A social democrat who endorses capitalism and liberal democracy!"

What Old Man Scho failed to consider was that in Korea, such nuanced ideological distinctions were often ignored. In this land, even Max Weber's works had once been labeled as subversive because they were pronounced similarly to Karl Marx's. A social democrat? Just a slight shade adjustment away from being a red commie.

Moreover, from the perspective of the CIA goblins, "Germany" was a region divided into West and East, much like Korea. To them, Old Man Scho was undoubtedly an East German spy.

Bang!

In one cycle, Old Man Scho indeed died from CIA's gunfire. It was a death worthy of a Darwin Award. I struggled to wait for the reunion in the next cycle. After barely overcoming suicidal urges and following proper regression procedures, I rushed to find Old Man Scho. He, aware of his shame, kept his hands behind his back. Whenever I approached to look at his face, he skillfully avoided me, maintaining his "hands behind the back" pose.

The first words he uttered were:

"Embalmer, how could such a primitive country exist?"

As expected.

Though Old Man Scho often shouted at me to stop being racist, his subconscious harbored the condescending ego of a European imperialist. I knew this would happen.

"I bet in your homeland, Nazi goblins dance hand in hand with Gestapo."

"Send me back home immediately! I'll show you what it means to settle this!"

"Well, if you're interested in witnessing World War I and II unfold alternately in the great void, I won't stop you."

"Why is humanity so primitive?!"

It was a typical line of a revolutionary turning into a dictator.

"They don't capture bald men. Why not shave your head while you're at it?"

"Shut up! No one touches my hair!"

In any case, the Namsan void was long familiar to me. I had accompanied Old Man Scho when he ground his teeth and purged the area. From then, I had been drafting strategies.

Above all, since the Saintess's residence was in Yongsan, I had to prepare meticulously to ensure the safety of my key companion.

Of course, the Saintess had no political leanings. Such collective thinking couldn't be imposed on her. However, understanding the concept of a hikikomori, the CIA agents, who lived from the 1960s to the 1980s, had a classical mindset.

To them, a suspicious person who stayed home all the time, obsessively using external communication networks (=the internet), with no proper job, screamed "spy."

[Last week, while taking a walk, I was reading Kant. Suddenly, a humanoid anomaly approached and asked me what book I was reading.]

One time, the Saintess had voiced her grievance in a slightly angered tone.

[Thinking it was a communicative type of anomaly, I answered, "Kant's Critique of Pure Reason."]

[Then it accused me of reading subversive literature.]

[Naturally, I refuted.]

[Marxism originates from a materialist interpretation of Hegel's philosophy, and Hegel and Kant remain opposing philosophical schools even today. I even support Schopenhauer, who is famously known to detest Hegel. How could I possibly endorse Marxism?]

[But the CIA agent couldn't understand my explanation at all.]

[It was an incredibly primitive anomaly.]

"Hmm…"

Even if it weren't an anomaly, that explanation would be hard to

grasp. In any case, the Saintess had nearly been dragged away by the Namsan goblins multiple times. If not for her extraordinary abilities, she might have been kidnapped.

In fact, quite a few awakeners and civilians had fallen prey to this anomaly. It was only natural for me to write and register a strategy guide on SG Net for the sake of everyone.

- Hey, you there! You look suspicious. Show me what you're carrying.

"I am an American citizen."

- What?

An American passport!

After numerous experiments, I had found the most straightforward and cost-effective solution. No matter how eager the Namsan goblins were to kidnap people, they calmed down like officials witnessing a diplomatic passport when shown an American passport.

- Oh, sorry, sir. We're just intensifying inspections due to recent incidents.

"Wow. Korea is still on the front lines against communists. Very interesting."

- Yes, yes. Have a safe trip!

The goblins, who fiercely accused Old Man Scho of being a commie, suddenly became courteous gentlemen. This marked the moment when a forged American passport became a must-have for all Koreans. Now, when Namsan goblins appeared, people barely flinched. They just showed their passports and mumbled some broken English, and the goblins disappeared.

However, this strategy was only a way to pass by the Namsan goblins safely. To eliminate the Namsan goblins entirely, a "heavier item" was needed.

- Stop!

Like the one I was carrying as I walked towards Namsan.

- Who are you? Where did you come from?

- Take off your hat! This guy looks suspicious.

- Do you know where you are? Hey, punk! Look up!

I was just passing by the main gate, yet the hysterical reactions erupted. From their perspective, it was natural. They were professional enough not to shoot immediately. I was wearing a flat cap pulled low, making me appear very suspicious to them.

- Move and we'll shoot!

- Raise your hands! I said, raise your hands, bastard!

Click. The goblins pointed their guns at me. I calmly raised my hands. And just as the goblins sighed in relief— I took off my flat cap.

- Gasp…?

My head shone brightly.

Yes. This event occurred in the 592nd cycle. The curse left by the Monkey's Paw, wringing out its last bit of power, extended into the 592nd cycle.

Acute hair loss had ravaged my head, leaving no trace of the hair that had once roamed the jungle, screeching, "Ukikik!" Seeing my brilliant scalp, the goblins muttered.

- Leader?

I lowered my voice with authority.

"Troops, at ease."

- …!

The Namsan goblins hastily put down their guns and saluted. I looked at them with disdain.

Drip.

Sweat trickled down the side of their heads.

“Good job.”

- Yes, sir!

The goblins shouted fervently, thankful for being spared. This was the true strategy. If I were bald and carrying exactly 290,000 won in cash, I could freely wander the Namsan void. It seemed simple, but it required a combination of rare coincidences.

First, it was rare for someone to carry 290,000 won in cash after the collapse of civilization. The fact that it happened to be me, who was also bald and near the Namsan void, was even rarer. It was an extremely unlikely scenario!

After multiple confirmations, I found that only Noh Do-hwa and I could activate this strategy. It seemed to require a person tacitly recognized as "the ruler of the Korean Peninsula."

I leisurely strolled deeper into the void. No one could stop me.

[So, Mr. Undertaker, you’ve deliberately carried exactly 290,000 won in cash to Namsan before?]

“Indeed.”

[Why on earth?]

“Saintess, after regressing 590 times, one develops a habit of trying many things.”

[What on earth?]

True to her philosophical nature, the Saintess pursued endless inquiry. But the real task was to change the world, so I moved forward like the horn of a rhinoceros.

- Leader!

- Leader!

“Good job.”

Goblins popped out throughout the void, but each time they saw my beautiful scalp, they pledged allegiance. Now, only the final boss of this place, the “Central Intelligence Agency Director,” remained before me.

This Director was a formidable anomaly. Even for me, taking a standard approach would not be easy. Moreover, the Namsan void encompassed CIA, and the Anti-Communist Interrogation Office. Naturally, their boss, the Director, wielded powers far beyond those in history.

But it didn’t matter.

- Kraaah! You, you bastard!

Sizzle.

The Director melted like meat in a pot of stew at the sight of my bald head. Like how African sand was Hannibal’s poison and Russian snow was Napoleon’s, a bald head was the Director’s kryptonite.

A classic example of how crucial attributes were for anomalies. In the end-times, even being bald had its perks.

[The Namsan void fell so easily…]

“Knowledge is power these days, Saintess.”

In the remnants of the melted Director, the item I had been seeking throughout this episode appeared. I bent down and picked up "the gun."

The strongest treasure on the Korean Peninsula.

The German-made Walther PPK pistol.

“Ah…”

The cool, heavy sensation.

I couldn’t help but smile.

“Good. Although I’ve defeated this anomaly before, I never paid attention to the gun. Getting bewitched by Chekhov’s Gun would have been problematic.”

[……]

“But now, it’s time to put it to use.”

You’ve waited long enough.

Finally, all the conditions were met.

Since the 135th cycle, when the world was destroyed by the "Logout Game," I had never stopped contemplating how to kill the deity.

The ＜Zero Requiem＞ project to awaken Sim Ah-ryeon’s abilities.

The method of utilizing the Total Luck Law, discovered through risky experiments.

And finally, the German-made Walther PPK pistol I could obtain here.

Every step had been part of my strategy to eliminate the Outer God.

Thus, today, there will be no epilogue.

Comrades, from now on, we shall kill a god.

Footnotes:

Chapter 149

The Strategist I

Sinnoa

Now, in the 593rd cycle.

After bringing Oh Dok-seo from the Busan Station Tutorial Dungeon and forming an alliance with the Saintess, I immediately commenced the operation.

The enemy of today's story was none other than the Outer God.

There was no time to be leisurely.

“Sorry. Normally, I would take my time to form a strong rapport with you, but this time, we need to hurry.”

“Ah, okay…”

Oh Dok-seo's reaction was hesitant.

It was understandable. Anyone in her situation would feel uneasy. After all, knowing that the regressor had already memorized every detail about you would be unsettling for anyone.

In a world ravaged by anomalies, realizing that you had read about this situation in a novel gave some confidence but that confidence shattered immediately as the tutorial began, and I destroyed any advantage Oh Dok-seo had gained from the previous cycles. She had no time to enjoy the benefits of the 'Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint' advantage. It was only natural for her to feel insecure.

Oh Dok-seo exhibited leadership when dealing with strangers but revealed too many of her vulnerabilities to those she considered close. She was a person who lived with an imbalance in her heart. And I existed as a very delicate weight on her twisted scale. I wasn't quite a stranger, but I hadn't yet formed a bond of intimacy either—a 'character in a work of fiction.'

Instead of leisurely clearing the tutorial and forming a bond, I had almost forcibly dragged her out of the Busan Station Dungeon, resulting in this uneasy relationship.

“So, um… Undertaker?”

“You can just call me Mister.”

“No, it feels a bit weird to call you Mister on a first meeting… And you're not old enough to be called that. Anyway, why did you bring me here?”

Her heart pounded just a little.

It was something that happened often.

“Oh Dok-seo, have you ever heard of the genre called 'speedrunning'?”

“Huh? Speedrunning?”

Most people played games for enjoyment. However, some humans loved speed itself. The deeply ingrained "ppalli ppalli" (hurry hurry) spirit in Korean DNA, when applied to games, became a common phenomenon worldwide.

-To clear it faster.

-To be the fastest!

Speedrunning, also known as Real-Time Attack (RTA).

Playing a game with the goal of clearing it as quickly as possible. Sometimes, players even used glitches in the game to reduce their time. For example, using 'Hate Pill' and 'Savior' anomalies to crash into each other could be considered a type of glitch play. Many gamers repeatedly failed in their attempts, aiming to leave behind just one speedrun record, the achievement of being the fastest player in the world. I was no different.

“Oh…”

Oh Dok-seo looked up as if recalling something.

“Now that you mention it, I think I saw some gameplay videos like that on YouTube. I remember an American clearing the community center achievement in Stardew Valley in just two hours…”

“Exactly.”

I pulled out a laptop.

“In this world, there is an anomaly-level outer god called the 'Logout Game.'”

And I explained.

As succinctly as possible, while ensuring Oh Dok-seo could fully understand what kind of outer god the 'Logout Game' was, I used words and phrases tailored specifically for her. This explanation style was refined through several trials. Though Oh Dok-seo often exclaimed, “What?” “No way—” and “How can such an anomaly exist,” she grasped the situation relatively clearly in less than ten minutes.

She stared down at the laptop on the table.

“So, this laptop…”

“It’s an item left to me by the outer god. It’s a perk given to a player who kept struggling until the server was about to shut down. It’s also the only clue to defeating the 'Logout Game.'”

Click.

I opened the laptop and launched the only installed program, a notepad.

From the 135th cycle, when the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' first destroyed the world, to the current 593rd cycle, the sentence written in the notepad had never changed.

[W h a t i s t h i s w o r l d ?]

A simple sentence.

Yet, not an easy question.

Oh Dok-seo frowned.

“What is this world…? What does that mean?”

“It’s a battle over who gets to define our world.”

“Huh?”

“Listen closely. This outer god defined this world as a 'game.' High-level anomalies each try to define the world in their own way.”

I spoke calmly.

“Defining the world requires significant power. The 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' introduced many features such as status windows, level-ups, and logout systems to prove that this world is a game.”

“Oh…”

“People then accepted and believed that the world was indeed a game. I call this 'being bewitched by the anomaly.'”

The Magical Girl Association referred to the same phenomenon as kamikakushi (神隠し).

“In other words, anomalies can never deny the systems they create. Giving them up would also mean losing their bewitching power.”

“Oh… I think I understand…”

“The 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' defined himself as a game administrator. Therefore, he can only perform actions allowed to an administrator.”

For instance, why could Sim Ah-ryeon resist the 'Logout Game' even slightly?

Why, when even individuals with extraordinary mental fortitude

like Noh Do-hwa and the Saintess were helplessly logged out, was Sim Ah-ryeon an exception?

The reason was simple.

- Huh, reality? Being in the moment? Saying that I don't need the internet because I'm happy right now? Are you stupid? Guild leader, are you really that stupid?

- Here, inside this smartphone screen, is reality! It’s the truth!

Sim Ah-ryeon did not treat the 'Logout Game' as a mere game. Just as she projected herself into SG Net, Sim Ah-ryeon genuinely immersed herself in the 'Logout Game,' which had engulfed the world in emptiness. To her, disconnecting from SG Net was impossible. Even in the utopia Dang Seo-rin created in Busan, Sim Ah-ryeon never stopped her community activities until the very end. Likewise, if Sim Ah-ryeon started playing a game, quitting it was equally impossible. To her, such an act was akin to dying in reality.

——Therefore, the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' could not delete Sim Ah-ryeon’s account without cause or reason. There was always a loophole for anomalies, even for outer gods.

“I was the one who denied until the end that this world was a game.”

“You, Undertaker?”

“Yes. To the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame,' I’m an extremely troublesome critic who constantly gives low ratings and calls the game trash.”

To the outer god, I was an enemy that had to be eliminated. In response, the anomaly challenged me with the question, "Then why don’t you create a game yourself?" The notepad file on the laptop embodied this challenge.

“'If this world is not a game, then what is it?' This is what the outer god is asking me.”

“Oh…”

Oh Dok-seo’s eyes sparkled with curiosity.

I wanted to use the [Mind Reading] skill to gauge her thoughts, but I refrained, remembering my promise not to do so again.

“The battle between the outer god and me is simple. If I type 'This world is a game,' I lose. It would be as if I raised the white flag and surrendered.”

“What’s the victory condition?”

“To come up with an answer that the outer god cannot help but accept.”

So far, I had failed to type the correct answer into the laptop.

[This world has material substance.]

[This world is eternally recurring.]

[This world has no anomalies.]

I had tried various answers, but the outer god never accepted any of them. Nothing changed. Simply forcing my desires with power was meaningless. Just as I resisted the 'Logout Game,' the outer god resisted the regressor. Both of us were not strong enough to impose our will unilaterally on the other but strong enough to avoid being overpowered.

A stalemate. A tie. A deadlock.

“But, Oh Dok-seo, your arrival brings hope.”

“What?”

She looked startled.

“Me?”

“Yes. I am a regressor, and you are a book possessor. Both of us are in an 'exceptional position' in creative works. Even if we are not

protagonists, we hold significant importance as main characters.”

“……”

“That makes such a stunt possible.”

Click, clack.

I typed on the laptop keyboard.

Black letters spread across the white notepad file from my fingertips.

[This world is a 'speedrun' game livestream.]

Oh Dok-seo muttered blankly.

“A speedrun game livestream…?”

“You said you watched similar videos on YouTube, so it should be easy to understand.”

I pointed at her.

“Oh Dok-seo, you are the 'protagonist' character of this game.”

Then I pointed at myself.

“I am the 'player' controlling you, the protagonist character, on the computer.”

“……”

“The character and the player are sometimes considered one, but they are always separate. However, both are treated as 'exceptional beings' within the game world.”

“I’m the protagonist, and you… are the player controlling me.”

“Yes.”

I nodded.

“The outer god defined this world as 'a game with only characters.' That’s why people logged out so easily. They were bewitched by the anomaly, thinking it was simply logging out of a character, not dying themselves.”

“……”

“We need to deny the outer god’s strategy head-on. Both you, the character, and I, the player, must coexist in this world. In other words, this world is not just a game with logged-in characters—it’s a world where players who can log out also exist. Real humans and characters coexist.”

I smiled.

“You’re quick to understand. That’s right.”

I showed her a prepared diagram.

“Whether viewed on a computer monitor or a smartphone screen, a 'game livestream' typically looks like this.”

The diagram looked like this, summarized:

———————————

[Game Screen]

[Game Screen] [Streamer’s Face]

[Game Screen] [Streamer’s Face]

———————————

A format commonly seen on YouTube.

“In the bottom right or left corner, the streamer’s face and upper body are shown, while the rest of the screen displays the game in progress.”

“Right.”

“The streamer corresponds to the player. The figure in the game is

merely a character. But the important fact here is that 'in a game livestream, both the character and the player coexist.'"

"……"

"If the world is defined as just a game, there's no way to withstand the logout. But if it's defined as a game livestream, we can neutralize the outer god."

I folded the diagram.

"You should be familiar with this format, especially since you primarily read novels. 'Constellation stories' often follow this format."

"Yes. Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint was also a constellation story."

"How about it, Oh Dok-seo? Will you join me in defeating the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame'?"

I extended my hand.

Before Oh Dok-seo could reflexively grasp it, I added a crucial warning.

"This won't be an easy fight."

"……"

"You must follow my instructions precisely. The tasks I give you will be challenging. There will be frightening and disgusting tasks. Fighting the outer god will be extremely difficult."

Oh Dok-seo remained silent.

"Still, is this the best scenario you've thought of, Undertaker?"

"…So far."

"Then, I'll trust you."

Oh Dok-seo took my hand.

“Let’s clear this trash game together.”

“……”

I slowly nodded.

At that moment.

[Starting the fastest speedrun in the world.]

Flinch.

Oh Dok-seo blinked and looked around, startled. But there was no one else around us.

An emotionless voice.

Of course, it was the Saintess’s telepathy.

[The game this time is called the 'Logout Game,' made by a strange company called the Admin of the Infinite Metagame.]

I deliberately didn’t arrange a meeting between the Saintess and Oh Dok-seo. In the 593rd cycle, the novel 'Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint' Oh Dok-seo read hadn’t progressed to the point where she met the Saintess. Therefore, the voice she heard would genuinely sound like 'a constellation streaming a game' to her.

“Uh, um, Undertaker, what is this…?”

I smiled.

“I told you.”

[It’s a problematic game, but there’s no reason I can’t achieve the fastest clear.]

“We’re livestreaming a game.”

[Among the characters, Oh Dok-seo, who has the attribute of 'book possessor,' has immense potential despite lacking significant stats now. She’s the perfect candidate for a speedrun.]

“Oh Dok-seo, I’ve prepared extensively for this cycle.”

The Saintess’s voice gently flowed.

[Logout Game speedrun.]

[Let’s get started.]

Footnotes:

Chapter 150

The Strategist II

Sinnoa

[Let's take the fastest route.]

The Saintess's 'broadcast voice' resonated. For reference, the Saintess was not in Seoul but hiding nearby. After forming an alliance with her, I had quickly brought her along on my back.

[The most efficient path is to travel from Busan to Jeju Island, then from Jeju Island to Japan.]

The Saintess hid from Oh Dok-seo's view, reading from the script I dictated. I kept moving my lips so subtly that Oh Dok-seo wouldn't notice. During this time, the Saintess used [Time Stop] to decode the minute movements of my lips.

Script: Undertaker. Voice: Saintess.

In some sense, it was a more classical form of broadcast than the internet—more like a program created by producers and writers.

Through the Saintess's voice and my script, we gave instructions to Oh Dok-seo.

[The first obstacle is securing a boat from Busan to Jeju Island. This is problematic.]

[At this point, the Examination Bureau's anomalies haven't spawned yet, and even if they had, Jeju Island is part of Korea, making their use invalid.]

[If your aura was sufficiently advanced, you could show your mastery of levitation, but it's still early in the game. Demanding such high-level skills from your character is unreasonable.]

[It would take over ten years just to train on the Korean Peninsula.]

[But don't worry.]

[In a speedrun, safe passage by boat is a luxury. Instead of boarding a boat, let's reverse our thinking and drift to Jeju Island.]

“What?”

Oh Dok-seo was startled. But as a character in the game, she had no free will.

[Now, if you follow this path, you'll find a half-destroyed library in Yeongdo. Despite its condition, the Yeongdo Library is relatively intact.]

[In the location I specify, you'll find a book titled <Hamel's Journal>.]

[Put that book in your backpack and dive into the sea.]

“What?”

Oh Dok-seo looked around, confused. She couldn't see me. I was watching her from a considerable distance, hidden in the shadows of the ruins. The Saintess (through me) murmured softly.

[Jump into the sea.]

“……”

[There's a life jacket and a wooden board there. Equip them and jump.]

“…Aaaah!”

Splash.

The sea off the coast of Busan swallowed the self-proclaimed 'book possessor.'

“It's so cold! It's fucking freezing!”

[The character is complaining noisily. Let's ignore it.]

[Some viewers might know, but Hamel was originally a Dutchman headed to Japan when his shipwrecked. He drifted to Jeju Island due to ocean currents. Since our final destination is Japan, Hamel's journey aligns with ours.]

"Hic! The waves! The waves! Help! I'm drowning!"

[There's a reason I chose 'book possessor' Oh Dok-seo for this playthrough. She has red hair.]

[In the past, Koreans called Westerners 'Red-Haired Demons' because their hair and beards were red.]

"Help! I'm dying! Mister! I'm going to die for real!"

[Don't worry.]

[Oh Dok-seo's personal color is perfectly suited for becoming a Red-Haired Demon.]

[Plus, with <Hamel's Journal> in her backpack, all the ocean currents will help her reach Jeju Island.]

[Based on numerous tests, the probability of early-stage Oh Dok-seo drifting safely to Jeju Island is a whopping 81%.]

"What? Wait! What about the other 19%—Ahh! The waves! The waves! Ahhhh!"

Oh Dok-seo screamed. I leisurely walked on the water, following her from a distance. I intended to rescue her if necessary, but she was excessively frightened. Tsk, tsk. Shortly after, Oh Dok-seo was washed ashore on Jeju Island.

"Ugh… Ugh…"

[As expected, she successfully reached Jeju Island in just 31 minutes and 14 seconds.]

[In this game, the sea is far more dangerous than the land. There are still deep-sea anomalies without proper guides.]

[But even a novice who has just cleared the tutorial can cross the sea easily by using character traits and items. Easy, right?]

“Easy? My ass! Ugh… Bleh!”

[No time to waste. Take minimal rest and move immediately.]

“Ugh, I hate this…”

While Oh Dok-seo suffered from motion sickness, I quickly ran to Seongsan Ilchulbong to retrieve the 'Monkey's Paw.' The anomaly had once endangered both Kuro and me, and specifically threatened my hair roots. Sim Ah-ryeon's healing ability couldn't cure my hair loss, which had been quite distressing.

It was a troublesome anomaly, but the 'Total Luck Law' was crucial for this mission. It had to be collected here.

[Did you know?]

[After drifting to Jeju Island and being captured by Koreans, Hamel managed to escape after 13 years.]

[He fled to none other than Japan, our destination.]

[Normally, the cooldown for <Hamel's Journal> is 13 years, but...]

[As you know, the 'Logout Game' is a bug-ridden game. Naturally, there's an exploit here too.]

I threw a piece of charcoal to Oh Dok-seo without her noticing. Still dizzy from seasickness, she noticed it belatedly.

“Huh…? Pencil lead? What am I supposed to do with this?”

[Prisoners in the past scratched marks on walls to keep track of their imprisonment.]

[Oh Dok-seo, you’re now occupying the position of 'a prisoner in Joseon.' Enter any enclosed room and start writing.]

Oh Dok-seo entered the ruins of a house I had scouted earlier. She went down to the basement without windows, locked the door, and started writing on the wall with the charcoal.

正正正正正正正正正正

正正正正正正正正正正

正正正正正正正正正正

正正正正正正正正正正

正正正正正正正正正正

TL/N: 正 is a way to count in East Asia. 正 = 5.

The Saintess's voice flowed.

[Hamel was imprisoned for about 13 years. No need to account for leap years.]

[365 days times 13. 4,745. Divide that by 5, you get 949.]

[Write the character for '正' 949 times in this enclosed 'prison' space.]

Not long after.

The charcoal broke. Oh Dok-seo's fingers were blackened with charcoal dust.

"Done… Finally…"

[Well done. Now <Hamel's Journal> considers you to have spent 13 years in captivity.]

"Wow… How did you figure out such a strategy?"

[This exploit works only for traveling to Jeju Island and Japan. If your aura level is high enough, you won't need it.]

[But for now, this is the fastest way.]

We walked out of the house and saw a small boat on the beach that hadn’t been there before.

“Ugh. I don’t know how to row. Is it okay?”

[It's fine. This boat will safely reach Japan no matter what.]

“Damn it, this feels unreliable…”

Oh Dok-seo rowed the boat and safely landed in Japan. Of course, 'safely' meant arriving with all her limbs intact.

“Ugh…”

[Arrived in Japan in 59 minutes.]

“I swear… I’m never getting on a boat again…”

[Now we will farm the 'Hate Pill.']

The Saintess casually dismissed Oh Dok-seo’s lament. For the record, the Saintess comfortably crossed the strait on my back. The Saintess’s [Clairvoyance] had a 1,000 km range limit. To provide stable navigation services to Oh Dok-seo, she had to move along.

[The 'Hate Pill' can be found in various places across Japan.]

[The nearest location is Sasebo in Nagasaki Prefecture.]

[There's a naval port on this city's coast. It's not a human naval port but an anomaly's, making this entire area a void.]

[But if you follow my guidance, you can safely reach the command center. Trust me.]

I quietly dealt with any anomalies that tried to attack Oh Dok-seo along the way. She reached the command center safely. As she opened the door, she gasped.

“Ah!”

She was horrified by the scene inside.

“What… What is this…?”

The Saintess and I spoke calmly.

[These are the ends of protagonist characters who committed suicide in despair stories.]

Inside the command center, dozens, if not hundreds, of dolls hung from the ceiling. Some wore white admiral uniforms, some medieval knight armor, others wore suits reminiscent of people in the entertainment industry. These were anomalies of characters called 'Commander,' 'Knight,' 'Producer,' 'Director,' 'Teacher,' 'Trainer,' etc., in various games. We had learned about this place back in the 590th cycle through the Magical Girl Association.

Dangle-dangle—

The mannequin-like anomalies swayed in front of Oh Dok-seo.

“Eek!”

[All these characters took the 'Hate Pill' and couldn’t endure the hatred from those around them, leading to their deaths.]

“It's so scary… This place is terrifying…”

[Of course, they aren't real humans. These are merely anomalies derived from creative works and parodies.]

[Since they are considered dead, they can't affect living humans. Now, approach the nearest doll and open its mouth.]

“Open… Its mouth?”

[Do it.]

“Ugh…”

Oh Dok-seo tearfully opened a doll's mouth. I, hidden in the shadows, opened another doll's mouth. Inside the mannequin's mouth, on its tongue, lay a bright red pill—the 'Hate Pill.' I collected two pills. One for me, and one for the Saintess.

[Now, take the pill.]

Gulp.

Oh Dok-seo, the Saintess, and I simultaneously swallowed the 'Hate Pill.' Then I took out the 'Monkey's Paw' from my pocket. This was why I had collected it in Jeju Island.

Whispering softly, I addressed the furry hand.

“Monkey's Paw, Monkey's Paw. Grant my wish.”

-.....

The Monkey's Paw trembled. My wish was as follows:

---

1. Bring all sorts of 'misfortune' to Oh Dok-seo, the Saintess, and me ('us'). Specifically, make everyone who meets us hate us.

2. Limit the misfortune to us as much as possible. That is, do not involve others in our misfortune.

3. The reaction to our 'misfortune,' that is, 'luck,' should activate only when we desire.

The Monkey's Paw twitched violently.

-Ukikik, kik.

Its reaction was bizarre, as if it had never expected a human to make such a wish. The fur bristled sharply. This was the 'correct use of the Total Luck Law' that I had reached after countless experiments.

It might sound paradoxical, but wishing for lottery-winning luck was pointless with the Monkey's Paw. The opposite approach was necessary.

-Please ensure all lottery tickets I buy are losers.

Misfortune.

Accumulating manageable misfortunes, one by one, as if they were natural. What would happen then? The more misfortune I endured, the more the 'Total Luck Law' would strive to balance it with equivalent luck. When the moment of absolute necessity arrived, the accumulated misfortune would be converted into luck.

If the Monkey's Paw tried to exert its power to create negative consequences for the wisher—

I would harness those negative consequences from the start, ensuring that eventually, they brought me luck.

-Ukikikik.

The Monkey's Paw trembled, trying to resist my wish, but it was futile. An anomaly could not deny its essence. Thus, it had to submit to the human wishing for misfortune instead of luck. Denying its essence would lead to its own destruction.

-Ukikikikik.

Shuddering.

Ultimately, the Monkey's Paw vanished into thin air. My wish was granted. Simultaneously.

[…Ah.]

The Saintess gasped slightly, in a voice only I could hear.

[Indeed… Manipulating people's emotions this way…]

“How do you feel, Saintess? Do I seem hateful to you?”

[…Yes. If you hadn’t explained beforehand, it might have been challenging to endure.]

The Saintess took a deep breath. Since this cycle had just begun, her favorability towards me wasn't high. Therefore, the reversal effect of the 'Hate Pill' wasn't significant. The Saintess, with her strong

willpower, could withstand it.

But what about others?

Now, everyone we met would feel an inexplicable aversion towards us. This aversion would grow. They would hinder us, undermine us, and constantly try to devalue our achievements. It wouldn't be a happy journey.

As time passed, misfortune would pile up for Oh Dok-seo and me.

[…By taking the Hate Pill, the difficulty of this game has drastically increased.]

[However, in exchange for raising the difficulty ourselves, we will receive absolute luck at a crucial moment. And we can choose when to activate this luck.]

Indeed.

From now on, Oh Dok-seo, the Saintess, and I—the character, the player, and the streamer, three personas in one—would move in perfect harmony. Together, we would endure misfortune, accumulate the weight of misfortune, and when the decisive moment arrived, when the detestable [Admin of the Infinite Metagame] appeared—

[We will convert all our misfortune into luck.]

"……"

Oh Dok-seo swallowed hard. Hidden in the darkness, the Saintess and I exchanged a silent look.

[This is how we will defeat a god.]

Footnotes:

Chapter 151

The Strategist III

Sinnoa

This world wasn't a game. There were no friendly mid-bosses, final bosses, or hidden bosses appearing conveniently in sequence. Anomalies took great inspiration from the military genius of the Joseon Dynasty.

While the daimyos born in Japan, the land of classic RPGs, praised themselves for their boss stages, Seonjo1 harshly reminded them that the world was not a JRPG. Retreat, hide, and wait. Why foolishly reveal yourself to the enemy? By staying hidden, you eliminate the possibility of defeat.

Anomalies didn't show off their strength unnecessarily. Especially the Outer Gods, who rarely showed their divine forms to mere humans. Take Infinite Void as an example. Infinite Void was coiled in the fourth basement of Baekhwa High School, surrounded by an impenetrable barrier, and ruled the world by deploying only 'colonial soldiers,' known as the 'Fairies of the Tutorial.'

Infinite Void was the weakest of the Outer Gods. The [Admin of the Infinite Metagame] was even more extreme.

“This guy is a master of hiding, even among stealth types.”

I explained to Oh Dok-seo.

“Only after spreading status windows, experience point systems, damage indicators, level-ups, and game communities all over the Earth did he barely reveal himself at the moment of 'server shutdown' after hundreds of years.”

“It's really tough…”

In the middle of the night, we paused the speedrun broadcast for a brief rest.

[……]

By the way, while Oh Dok-seo and I were talking, the Saintess remained hidden nearby. An awkward atmosphere hung between us. Naturally, since we had both taken the 'Hate Pill,' I felt animosity towards Oh Dok-seo, and she towards me. She probably felt only faint animosity since we hadn’t had many bonding events, but I was different.

‘I felt murderous.’

I wanted to kill her. I wanted to tear her apart. My hands twitched. Looking at Oh Dok-seo stretching her neck while yawning made me want to draw my cane-sword and cut her down. Dozens of ways to cripple her flashed through my mind without prompting. All the goodwill I had felt for her had instantly turned into hostility.

‘Is this how Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa felt about me in the 590th cycle?’

I felt guilty. But I could bear it. No matter how much the 'Hate Pill' manipulated my emotions, it couldn’t alter my memories. I remembered clearly what kind of person Oh Dok-seo was. Hundreds of years of memories fortified my resolve. Thus, I buried my intense hostility under layers of memory.

“…Undertaker?”

“Hmm.”

“Are you okay? You seem really strained.”

Despite my efforts to manage my emotions, a fragment of my murderous intent must have slipped through. Oh Dok-seo, sensing it, shrank back, watching me nervously.

“Don’t worry. If we don’t take any action, the status window anomaly will appear between the fifth and sixth years.”

“Wait, Mister. Isn't that too late for a speedrun?”

“Yes. We need to force the 'Logout Game' to surface. That’s why I

brought you to Japan.”

“...?”

The next day, after a good rest, we resumed the speedrun broadcast.

[All the Outer Gods have their own domains.]

[The 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' influences not only games but all creative works.]

[This is evident from the anomalies under the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame'—Hero Syndrome, Savior's Narrative Syndrome, Isekai Truck, Chekhov's Gun—all linked to creative works.]

“Ah.”

Oh Dok-seo muttered while tying her shoelaces.

“So, that’s why we’re using the speedrun broadcast format? Since broadcasting is a form of creation too.”

[Correct.]

As usual, the Saintess relayed my words to Oh Dok-seo.

[The deeper we immerse ourselves in creative works and the stronger we become, the more likely the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' will appear before us.]

“Ah, I get it.”

[Good to hear. Now let’s proceed with your transformation into a magical girl.]

“...?”

I guided Oh Dok-seo towards Noto Peninsula in Japan, where the headquarters of the Magical Girl Association was located. As she followed the navigation, Oh Dok-seo suddenly slammed on the brakes.

“Wait! A magical girl? Why do I have to become a magical girl?

Aren’t they all crazy?”

[Because magical girls, or Japanese awakeners, draw power from creative works in a typical manner.]

Indeed.

Although it might have been half coincidence, Japanese awakeners were essentially devotees of the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame.' Magical girls always fought for justice against evil. Except in a few malevolent works, magical girls always triumphed. Relying on such magical girl tropes, the Japanese awakeners opposed the world-consuming anomalies. I valued comrades like Manyo Neko and others.

But objectively, at this point in the 593rd cycle, they had become anomalies known as 'magical girls' to fight anomalies. It was a typical corruption phenomenon.

[But not all corruption is bad.]

In a speedrun, every resource must be utilized.

[The more powerful magical girls become, the closer their connection to the Outer Gods. In some cases, they can significantly advance the appearance of the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame.']

“Oh…”

[Oh Dok-seo, you’ve already used <Hamel's Journal>, accepted the 'Hate Pill' trope, and lived according to the 'speedrun broadcast' creative format.]

“.....”

[Your entire existence is becoming saturated with creative works. You are the most suitable priestess for the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame.' If you join the Association as an honorary member and become a magical girl, even more so.]

Of course, the Magical Girl Association was extremely exclusive to outsiders. With everyone around her feeling instinctive aversion due

to the 'Hated Pill,' joining the Association would be even more challenging for Oh Dok-seo. But the strategy for registering with the Association was well known.

Three days later.

“…Thank you. Who would have thought an awakener from Korea would conquer Inunaki Tunnel. As the representative of the Association, I express our gratitude.”

The Great Priestess of the Magical Girl Association bowed politely. Oh Dok-seo, despite being a hardcore otaku, wasn’t fluent in Japanese, so the Saintess had to act as an interpreter.

“But…”

The Great Priestess lifted her head slightly.

“Why are you covered in bird droppings?”

That was because the 'Total Luck Law' had started bringing small misfortunes upon us. Both Oh Dok-seo and I, along with the Saintess, were showered in bird droppings.

Oh Dok-seo scowled.

“Ah, don’t mind it… It’s nothing…”

“Hmm, okay.”

The Great Priestess opened her fan.

“But it’s surprising you want to join our Association. We’re a small organization that hasn’t been around long. Why would a foreigner be interested in us?”

“Well… I felt a sense of possibility in you all. Friend! Tomodachi! Friendships deepen through tough times, right?”

“……”

“……”

The Great Priestess gave Oh Dok-seo a suspicious look over her fan. The unpleasant feeling from the first impression was clear. Even in these apocalyptic times, entering the guest room covered in bird droppings was odd. Instinctive rejection surged.

However, Oh Dok-seo had successfully conquered Inunaki Tunnel following my instructions. Accepting her into the Association could bolster the group's prestige.

“Hmm. We’re not ready to accept foreigners yet. It’s difficult to offer a proper position...”

“Oh! No problem! An honorary membership is fine. Just acknowledge my qualification as a magical girl!”

“Well, if that’s the case.”

The Great Priestess closed her fan.

“Find a god to contract with. Each magical girl partners with a deity.”

Though called gods, magical girls could partner with anything. Humans, pets, even anomalies could be gods if desired.

“Return with your god, and I’ll grant you the title of magical girl. If you can’t find one, I can introduce some...”

“Oh, that's okay.”

Oh Dok-seo smiled awkwardly.

“I already have one.”

“Which god?”

“The Undertaker.”

I froze in the distance, eavesdropping on the conversation. We had agreed to make the Saintess our god before arriving here. The Saintess commanded multiple constellations, tying her deeply to the 'Constellation Stories' trope. Furthermore, positioning the Saintess

as the god would make her telepathic whispers into divine revelations. For many reasons, the Saintess was a more suitable partner.

But Oh Dok-seo mentioned my name instead.

The Great Priestess tilted her head.

“The Undertaker? I’ve never heard of such a god.”

“He’s my personal god.”

“Making up gods doesn’t work. They must truly exist.”

“No problem. He exists. Always watching over me, even here. You just can’t see him.”

“…Really? He must be a high-ranking deity.”

The Great Priestess laughed lightly.

“Then, I’ll form the contract here. If it fails, the membership offer is void.”

“By all means.”

The Great Priestess opened her fan.

“In the name of Tamamo-no-Mae2, I invoke you, the god called the Undertaker. Bless and protect this person.”

A light, floating sensation accompanied the connection of a fine, transparent thread between Oh Dok-seo and me.

“…He truly exists? And he’s strong.”

The Great Priestess was surprised.

“Not just strong. This… the fact he responded… The Undertaker? Never heard of such a deity, but how…”

“Is something wrong?”

“…No. But you’re serving a very dangerous deity. The stronger the god, the stronger you become, but borrowing a god’s power isn’t interest-free.”

She closed her fan.

“The more you rely on the god, the more you become a mere tool. Eventually, you might become a puppet, a conduit for the god to descend. Be cautious.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

Oh Dok-seo responded in her clumsy Japanese.

“But it’s okay. Probably.”

After learning various guidelines from the Great Priestess (mostly about shouting 'Transformation!' when becoming a magical girl), Oh Dok-seo left the base.

That night.

After the stream ended and we took a break, I approached Oh Dok-seo.

“Why did you say you’d serve me instead of the Saintess?”

“Hmm…”

Oh Dok-seo scratched her cheek. After a long silence, she finally spoke.

“I thought it was more fitting. Mister, you said magical girls were essentially addicts to the tropes of creative works and servants of the [Admin of the Infinite Metagame], right?”

“Yes.”

“Then, what am I, having read <Omniscient Regression’s Viewpoint> and seen this world as a half-fictional story?”

“……”

A nightingale's song faintly echoed.

“I’ve always seen this world as partly a story. Since I was summoned to Busan Station, having read about the protagonist not long ago.”

“……”

“So, Mister, I have to ask. Am I a human already possessed by an Outer God from the start?”

Indeed.

Before Oh Dok-seo appeared, I never dared to confront the [Admin of the Infinite Metagame].

Just as Cheon Yo-hwa was Infinite Void’s apostle and priestess.

The priestess for the [Admin of the Infinite Metagame]—the self-proclaimed book possessor, destined to see this world as a creative work—was Oh Dok-seo.

Footnotes:

1 - **Seonjo**, personal name Yi Yeon, was the 14th monarch of the Joseon dynasty of Korea. He was known for promoting Confucianism and attempting reforms at the beginning of his reign. However, he later gained infamy from the political discord and his incompetent leadership during the Japanese invasions of Korea.

2 - **Tamamo-no-Mae** is a legendary figure in Japanese mythology. One of the stories explaining the legend comes from Muromachi period genre fiction called otogizōshi. In the otogizōshi Tamamo-no-Mae was a courtesan under the Japanese Emperor Konoe.

Chapter 152

The Strategist IV

Sinnoa

Let's take a moment to discuss Oh Dok-seo.

Oh Dok-seo was a literary girl. Like all literary girls, she believed in the existence of something special beyond the mundane human world. Of course, this was a vain hope. Many literary girls received about three hard punches of betrayal, conspiracy, and group selfishness between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five before quietly letting go of their expectations of the world.

There were no magical schools, no debutante balls for noble ladies, and no secret organizations holding regular meetings in dimly lit alley bars (although there were organizations selling mysterious white powders and fantasy gum). Reality was harsh. A normal literary girl in Korea had to be ready to replace the magical school with a university, the debutante ball with an MT (membership training), and the secret organization with social media activities. This wasn't difficult. Children who read the Harry Potter series typically experienced a stage of denial around the fifth or sixth grade, wondering, "Why is my Hogwarts acceptance letter arriving late?" This was a common growing pain.

Oh Dok-seo was not common.

"No. The world is wrong."

From a young age, Oh Dok-seo thought this way. At the school's sandy playground, which mimicked a desert, she preferred walking in the shade rather than under the sun.

"Wizards exist. Secret organizations exist. Forces of evil that threaten the world and champions of justice fighting against them also exist. And naturally, a god who watches over it all must exist

too."

Oh Dok-seo willingly abandoned reality for fantasy. It was an easy choice for her. Why should she give up her fantasies just because they were deemed unrealistic? What did the so-called realistic human world offer that was so great? At best, it offered jealousy, selfish desires, contempt for others due to inferior talent, hatred for family, hunger, wordplay, and false friendships.

"No."

What disgusted Oh Dok-seo most was how easily people forgot their actions.

"You promised never to lie again. Why are you lying?"

"Promise? When?"

"Last time. We talked about it by the water cooler next to the restroom a few months ago."

Oh Dok-seo had an extraordinary memory from a young age. She rarely forgot the dialogues of characters in books she had read. She meticulously remembered every word and action of people in reality. Just as some brains are specialized in numbers and calculations, Oh Dok-seo's brain had an exceptional ability to remember human behavior.

"I never said that."

Others did not. Promises, vows, breaking promises, and forgetting them—this was the reality Oh Dok-seo saw, filled with people who forgot their actions in real-time. If she had the expressive power she had now, she might have said this as a child:

"Forgetting is no different from death. Forgotten things are as good as nonexistent."

"Then what are these people who forget everything?"

"They are like a carnival parade, killing parts of themselves bit by bit, yet unaware, and still claiming 'we are alive.'"

When Oh Dok-seo reached this realization, she felt a chill. It was terrifying. The entire world was engaged in a ritual sacrifice of itself. All humans were cannibals, consuming themselves.

"No."

Oh Dok-seo wanted to escape.

"I don't want to die."

So she fled. Compared to reality, fantasy was always brilliant. In creative works, people could always become greater. Characters in novels never forgot what they said or did. They remembered what they did in chapter 30 even in chapter 300. To Oh Dok-seo, these fictional characters felt more human. They were beings that remembered, could communicate, take responsibility, and offer forgiveness. Oh Dok-seo simply had higher standards for what it meant to be human.

"These people are alive."

The literary girl's heart split in two. On one side, there was endless hatred for humanity based on reality. On the other side, there was boundless affection for humanity based on creative works.

"The world is filthy."

"Characters are more human."

"As long as I don't give up my faith in these characters, they can exist, even if only in my heart."

With her heart torn in two, Oh Dok-seo indulged more and more in her belief in something 'other than reality.' Normally, human beliefs were not rewarded.

"Huh? What? Did I add this novel to my favorites list?"

About two weeks before being forcibly summoned to Busan Station.

"Let's see... the title is..."

A miracle happened to her.

『Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint』?

Returning to the present, on a night with a chirping nightingale, I looked at Oh Dok-seo and replied.

"That's right, Dok-seo. From the beginning, you were chosen as a apostle by the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse."

"Oh."

"In many novels, the protagonist is often possessed by a book or game character for no reason or explanation. But in this world, there's always an anomaly behind every 'reasonless' and 'explanationless' event."

In other words.

"The novel 『Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint』 that you thought you read by chance is not just a novel. It's not mere coincidence. It's a gift from the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse, proving that you are his representative—a chosen human."

The anomaly's favorite apostle.

"And that novel itself is evidence that you were chosen as the anomaly's agent."

"....."

"The Admin of the Infinite Metaverse must have judged you to be the most suitable apostle on this earth. Strictly speaking, anomalies don't have the same judgment abilities as humans."

The nightingale fell silent.

Oh Dok-seo's expression was truly complex. She didn't know whether to be happy or sad. After a few moments of pondering, she spoke.

"Does that mean the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse is eavesdropping on all our conversations?"

"Yes. But there's no need to worry."

"Why?"

"As I said before, anomalies don’t have human-like judgment. Their senses and value standards are different. Even the term 'eavesdropping' doesn't really apply."

I pointed to Oh Dok-seo’s backpack, which contained the laptop given by the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse.

"When we started this cycle, we defined this world as a 'game broadcast.' The time we spend chatting now corresponds to off-air rest periods. As long as we maintain this format, the anomaly won't categorize our private conversations as meaningful."

"Oh, I see..."

Oh Dok-seo muttered to herself, but it was clear that this wasn’t the topic she really wanted to discuss. Her lips had been twitching as if debating whether to say something.

"But Mister..."

"Hmm?"

"In 『Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint』, it describes you as a regressor and details everything you've been through in each cycle. If the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse wrote that and showed it to me, then that means the anomaly knows you’re a regressor, right?"

"Yes, it probably does."

"...!"

Oh Dok-seo’s breath hitched.

"Then isn't that a big problem? The biggest advantage of a regressor is that the enemies don't know they are a regressor. But if the

anomaly knows..."

"The Admin of the Infinite Metaverse has some resistance to my regressions. That's why it left the laptop with me."

Since the 135th cycle, when the world was destroyed by the Logout Game, a laptop had been left by my side every time I regressed. This meant the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse was continually approaching me through the cycles.

"But the anomaly's power isn't complete. I am also resisting it."

"Resisting...? What do you mean?"

"In the novel you read, the updates are very slow. There's a gap of about 500 to 600 cycles between my 'reality' and that 'novel.'"

We were in the 593rd cycle. However, the stories Oh Dok-seo read in 『Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint』 only covered up to the 33rd cycle.

"So, imagine the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse as a hacker trying to break into me. Its progress is only about 5%. No matter how hard it tries to decode me, it can only gather data up to the 33rd cycle. It can't understand the me of the 593rd cycle."

"Oh, thank goodness. That means we still have plenty of time..."

Oh Dok-seo sighed in relief.

"But we mustn't be complacent. The Admin of the Infinite Metaverse is slowly but surely extending its reach towards me."

"Yes, I understand that..."

"The fact that you began to awaken as a book possessor from the 555th cycle onward shows how close the anomaly has gotten to me."

"Really? I see..."

I nodded.

Why did Oh Dok-seo, a 'book possessor,' start to awaken in the 555th cycle instead of the first? Why were both the regressor and the book possessor summoned to the Busan Station Tutorial Dungeon?

A coincidence defying extreme odds? No, it was intentional. Everything was planned.

"Just as I am trying to defeat the anomaly, the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse is using every means to subdue me. One reason it chose you as its representative is because you and I started from the same point."

"...!"

"The anomaly wants to interfere with me as quickly and effectively as possible."

Oh Dok-seo was taken aback.

"Does that mean... that the anomaly intended for me, a book possessor, to hinder and oppose you, a regressor?"

"Exactly."

"So, we were meant to be adversaries, not allies?"

Recall the 555th cycle. When Oh Dok-seo first encountered me as a book possessor, she didn't have a good impression of me.

[Oh Dok-seo: There he is, the protagonist of this world. Codename: Undertaker.]

[Oh Dok-seo: The Undertaker is a protagonist who has experienced regression multiple times. He's ruthless.]

She was wary of me.

[Oh Dok-seo: He lives only with hatred for monsters, a typical regressor living out of pure spite.]

[Oh Dok-seo: He's just a madman. He might kill me if he suspects

anything. Better be cautious.]

Oh Dok-seo genuinely believed I might kill her. She was prepared to betray me and strike from behind if necessary. Why? The reason was simple.

"Dok-seo, the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse made 『Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint』 to make you wary of me."

"Oh..."

"To be precise, the anomaly could only hack up to the 4th cycle version of me. It judged my character based on that and influenced you accordingly."

Even the anomaly couldn't predict that the murderous maniac from the 4th cycle would evolve into someone different by the 500th cycle.

The Admin of the Infinite Metaverse analyzed me from the past and acted based on that. It expected conflict and distrust between the book possessor and the regressor, leading to destruction. But from the start, I disrupted the anomaly's grand plan.

"So, you and I becoming allies was entirely unexpected for the anomaly?"

"Yes. It never imagined I would so easily lower my guard around you."

"Wow."

"It must be quite bewildered."

I chuckled. The Admin of the Infinite Metaverse was smart. If you were in the anomaly's shoes, how would you deal with a regressor resetting the world each time he was about to lose?

Q) How can you eliminate the troublesome regressor?

A) Turn his life into a novel and create a book possessor. The regressor loses his advantage as the 'protagonist,' and the book

possessor, now the new protagonist, eventually wins.

This was the genius strategy devised by the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse. It was clever. Using clichés to strip the regressor of his advantages. If it weren't for me, the anomaly would have succeeded. The book possessor, Oh Dok-seo, looked at me with anxious eyes.

"Did you always know I was chosen by the anomaly?"

"To some extent."

I shrugged.

"I became certain when I noticed that the updates to 『Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint』 increased with each cycle. Such phenomena are extremely rare."

"And you still didn't kill me?"

"Hmm?"

"Why not just kill me every time you regressed? That would remove any potential threat I posed."

"....."

"Why didn't you choose the simplest solution? Even now, we've taken the Hate Pill, making us naturally dislike each other. Aren't you worried I might betray you at a crucial moment?"

Hmm. I stroked my chin, pondering how to respond before deciding on honesty.

"Betrayal isn't a big deal for a regressor."

"What?"

"It's fine. I'm mentally strong. I haven't told you, but every one of my allies has betrayed me at least once. Do you want to hear about the time the Saintess tried to kill me? It was pretty epic."

"...? ...?"

In the distance, I faintly heard the Saintess coughing. I smiled and patted Oh Dok-seo's shoulder.

"Dok-seo, do as you wish."

"....."

"I have near-infinite opportunities. Even if you betray me ten or twenty times, I still remember the cycles where you trusted me a hundred or two hundred times. How could I forget that?"

"....."

"If we fail this time, we'll do better next time. I know you too well to be disappointed."

For a while, Oh Dok-seo remained silent.

"Okay."

As the nightingale started singing again in the forest, Oh Dok-seo raised her hand to grasp mine on her shoulder.

"I wish I could read these words in 『Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint』 too."

"You will someday."

"Yeah... Maybe."

Oh Dok-seo smiled brightly.

"It doesn't matter if the anomaly has its eyes on me. Remember this, Mister. This is a promise."

Her grip on my hand tightened.

"I will be the one to save you. I will definitely rescue you from this damned world."

I chuckled. Kiddo, you're the 26th person to say that to me. And I

gave her the same answer for the 26th time.

"Alright. I trust you."

"Yes!"

The next day, we began our full-scale operation to bring the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse down to the surface.

Footnotes:

Chapter 153

The Strategist V

Sinnoa

Speedrun stream, ON.

[We've gathered almost everything we need in Japan. It's time to return to the Korean Peninsula.]

“No way! Absolutely not! I will never, under any circumstances, drift across the sea again! Never!”

Oh Dok-seo desperately resisted, adding 'sea' to the phobia section of her character sheet. However, she had nothing to worry about. There was no need to rely on Hamel's Journal again. I modified Inunaki Tunnel into the 'Korea-Japan Undersea Tunnel,' giving Oh Dok-seo a comfortable walking path.

[Oh. Be careful. If you step just one step to the left, you'll die with your limbs separated.]

“What the heck?”

Experiencing the rare event of walking through the Korea-Japan Undersea Tunnel, Oh Dok-seo was quite delighted.

“Comfortable, my ass! One wrong step and you die instantly! ...Wait, you used this place as a base in another cycle? Are you insane?”

[Progress is slow. Please hurry up. Yu Ji-won rode a bike through this void.]

“Who the hell is that?”

[Considering the early stage of the cycle, Oh Dok-seo's miko aptitude has already reached an incredible level.]

We lightly dismissed the complaints of the young and MZ-generation Oh Dok-seo. Both the Saintess and I were too old to tolerate the whims of the younger generation.

[Currently, Oh Dok-seo has explored all sorts of anomalies related to creative works. The 'Korea-Japan Undersea Tunnel' you're walking through is also a creation of imagination.]

[Hamel's Journal, Monkey's Paw, Hate Pill, Magical Girl, Undersea Tunnel. There are no other cases of someone approaching the so-called gods of creation so quickly.]

[At this rate, you'll be able to summon the status window without any issues.]

"Oh, really?"

[Yes.]

The Saintess confirmed on my behalf. She was still on my back, maintaining a distance of several hundred meters from Oh Dok-seo.

[Especially inside this tunnel, the conditions are more favorable.]

[Since the Korea-Japan Undersea Tunnel itself is a work of fiction, it functions as a weak shrine for the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse.]

[Try calling it out as a test.]

"....."

Oh Dok-seo couldn't see us from her position. In the dark, eerie tunnel that seemed haunted, she muttered.

"...Status window?"

Immediately, Oh Dok-seo was startled.

"I-It worked! The status window appeared!"

[Can you see the semi-transparent hologram?]

“Yes! I can see it clearly!”

I clenched my fist. It worked. Normally, the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse would descend to the surface at least five years later. But its presence was already showing. Historically, demons or gods couldn't refuse a summon. The more they resisted, the weaker they became.

With Oh Dok-seo as the 'Miko' and 'Shrine,' the Saintess’s assistance, my strategy and commands, and the 'sacrifices' of anomalies related to creative works, we were getting closer to the darkest god.

[Great. We’ve managed to summon a portion of the 'Logout Game' within a week of starting the speedrun.]

[This anomaly is an extreme hikikomori among the gods. Simply forcing it out of hiding is a significant achievement.]

[Now, let's check Oh Dok-seo’s status.]

“Ah, okay. I’ll read it out loud!”

Oh Dok-seo described her status window.

———————————

[Status]

Name: Oh Dok-seo

Title: 'Miko of the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse'

Class: Prophet, RPG Character, Magical Girl, Miko, LiteraryGirl, Protagonist

[Health: E] [Strength: D] [Intuition: B+] [Agility: C] [Intelligence: B] [Charm: B-]

Personality Traits: [Misanthropy] [Anthropophilia] [Timid] [Passionate] [Unluck (Status Ailment)]

Exclusive Skills: [Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint (EX)], [AT Field

(S)]

*Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint (EX): A prophetic ability to foresee events in the world.

By reading a novel where the 'Undertaker' is the protagonist, you can perceive the upcoming scenarios.

Knowledge is power. No matter how much the world is corrupted by emptiness, for you, who knows the events in advance, it’s merely an event.

Claim the protagonist’s position.

*AT Field (S): A power to reject external interference.

Provides an absolute barrier against all physical forces trying to impact or influence you. However, it can only be used once a day, and the barrier lasts for one minute.

You have observed this world from an 'omniscient' viewpoint. You are clearly a higher existence than the characters in the novel.

Turn a bad ending into a happy ending, or an even more tragic bad ending. You are destined to be the protagonist of this world.

May fortune be with you.

———————————

“That’s what it says!”

Hmm. I listened to Oh Dok-seo’s description and smiled sinisterly. Then I whispered softly so only the Saintess could hear.

“How disgraceful. The god must be in a hurry.”

-Is that so?

“Yes. It blatantly marked her as the 'Miko of the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse.' It's like putting a claim on her, a very childish instinct.”

-That sounds like good news for us.

“Indeed.”

From the god’s perspective, it must have been a shock. After all the effort to analyze and hack me, it had trained Oh Dok-seo as a champion to oppose me. Yet, here she was, working with me. It must be furious.

[The status window is practically begging you to become the protagonist.]

[No problem. We are already streaming the game. Oh Dok-seo’s success is our success. The god is cornered.]

[So, let’s fully embrace the role of the protagonist.]

Major events on the Korean Peninsula awaited us in sequence. First, the Great Void of Baekhwa High School. The Saintess, Oh Dok-seo, and I entered Baekhwa High School. Of course, the Saintess and I stayed back while Oh Dok-seo led the way. After many trials, the Infinite Void was finally subdued. There was almost no difference this time except—

—This time, Cheon Yo-hwa’s psychological state, which was closely connected to mine, was redirected.

“Dok-seo! Let’s hang out this weekend!”

Cheon Yo-hwa linked arms with Oh Dok-seo.

“Oh. Um, okay.”

“Hehe. A new amusement park void appeared where Lotte World used to be. Let’s go there!”

“…But it’s a void. Isn’t it dangerous?”

Normally, Cheon Yo-hwa’s mental state at Baekhwa High School was extremely unstable. Her disciples and school friends kept dying, naturally making her anxious. I positioned Oh Dok-seo in that psychological gap. Initially, Cheon Yo-hwa felt a strong aversion to

Oh Dok-seo due to the Hate Pill. However, after experiencing the hunt for the god together, the initial negative impression was easily overcome.

[Baekhwa High School cleared in ten days.]

[Normally, Infinite Void's domain extends time like taffy, making it extremely dangerous.]

[But from another perspective, it's like the 'Room of Spirit and Time.' We can significantly develop Oh Dok-seo here.]

While ten days passed outside, several years passed inside Infinite Void's domain. I focused on training Oh Dok-seo without attracting Cheon Yo-hwa's attention. I didn't even take the lead in subduing Infinite Void; I merely swung my cane-sword to deliver the final blow. All the spotlight was on Oh Dok-seo. As a result, my relationship with Cheon Yo-hwa remained distant.

"Oh, hello, security guard!"

"Yes. Hello, student council president."

"Thank you! You too!"

Cheon Yo-hwa probably still harbored some subtle dislike for me. She didn't show it outwardly, but it didn't matter. The speedrun broadcast continued.

[Good.]

[Oh Dok-seo has made a character who should have been fond of another character her close friend. It's a very 'protagonist-like' action.]

[Everything is proceeding smoothly.]

"……"

Oh Dok-seo chewed her lips. I could sense she felt uneasy, but we couldn't afford to cater to every emotion in the grand task of hunting gods.

Next.

[Ten Legs is advancing south. At this rate, the refugees north of the Han River will be annihilated.]

[The remaining military forces and some awakeners have prepared for a desperate battle, but it's not enough.]

[We prepared Baekhwa High School in advance for this moment. Oh Dok-seo, Cheon Yo-hwa, and the awakened of Baekhwa High School will save Seoul.]

After enjoying a level-up event in Infinite Void's domain, Oh Dok-seo's party easily defeated the Ten Legs. I recorded the entire battle on video. Then I uploaded it to SG Net through Seo Gyu (whom I had left in Busan after saving him from the tutorial dungeon).

-Anonymous: Who are these people? They're insanely strong;

-Anonymous: Didn't the military get wiped out by the Ten Legs? How did they kill them so easily?

-Officer: Although much younger than me, I sincerely respect them. Seeing proof that hope still exists in the world warms my heart.

-Anonymous: What are their names?

-[Samcheon] Witch Judge: Oh Dok-seo and Cheon Yo-hwa.

Anonymous: Hey, call her Oh Dok-seo 'nim.'

-OldManGoryeo: Honestly, wasn't the magical girl transformation scene pretty cringey? lmao

Anonymous: You could tell Oh Dok-seo was super embarrassed after transforming lololol

Anonymous: It's surreal that the hope of the Korean Peninsula is a magical girl and the student council president...

Anonymous: I'm grateful they defeated the Ten Legs, but it's still kind of awkward.

In the apocalyptic era, the title of 'awakened who fought to protect refugees and won a miraculous victory' was worth its weight in gold. Reputation was a valuable resource. Leveraging her newfound fame, Oh Dok-seo posted on SG Net.

-LiteraryGirl: [Tip] How to quickly grow your awakening abilities using the 'status window.'txt

-LiteraryGirl: Normally, I wouldn’t share such tips, but I can’t keep it to myself in this difficult apocalypse. So I’m revealing it now.

-LiteraryGirl: I know everyone makes fun of me for transforming into a magical girl on SG Net.

-LiteraryGirl: But actually, the magical girl transformation isn’t my unique ability; it’s something anyone can achieve through specific steps.

-LiteraryGirl: There’s an organization in Japan called the Magical Girl Association, and the Great Priestess is an awakener...

Awakeners were intensely interested. The person with the highest reputation on the Korean Peninsula was sharing valuable tips, but it wasn't just because of her fame. Oh Dok-seo was flaunting overwhelming achievements, yet the underlying aversion caused by the Hate Pill lingered. People subtly thought, “Is she really that amazing?” and attributed her success to some hidden cheat. When Oh Dok-seo revealed her 'secret know-how,' the awakeners were quick to take the bait, mistaking it for her secret to success.

I immediately invited the Great Priestess from the Magical Girl Association via Inunaki Tunnel.

“Could it be? Are there really this many Koreans interested in joining our cooperative?”

The Great Priestess's eyes widened at the sight of the crowded group of awakeners in Haeundae.

“Truly, beauty knows no borders. To think our comrades were so numerous abroad! Indeed, magical girls are beautiful, and beauty is justice! I was not wrong!”

“Hey, what is that person with the fox tail shouting about?”

“I don’t know. It's Japanese, but her accent is so thick I can’t understand...”

“That’s not just an accent; it sounds like ancient language.”

Moved, the Great Priestess established the 'Korean Branch of the Magical Girl Association' and appointed Oh Dok-seo as the branch head. She also contracted hundreds of Koreans as magical girls on the spot. However, the truth was that Korean awakeners weren't drawn by the beauty of magical girls. In Korea, known for its performance-oriented culture, the rumor that the magical girl class was overpowered led people to eagerly press the transfer button.

-LiteraryGirl: And one more thing to keep in mind when making a magical girl contract.

Oh Dok-seo delivered a final blow to the performance-oriented players.

-LiteraryGirl: You need to decide which guardian deity you will serve.

-LiteraryGirl: Technically, a pet or even a plant can be a guardian deity, but the stronger the deity, the more powerful the magical girl becomes.

-LiteraryGirl: I recommend a god called the Admin of the Infinite Metaverse.

-LiteraryGirl: I guarantee 100% that contracting with this god will let you see the status window immediately, understand your abilities, and efficiently grow your awakening powers.

That day, four hundred awakeners formed contracts with the god, who had never shown itself, as their guardian deity. In the end—

[The Admin of the Infinite Metaverse responds to the users' call.]

The god’s notification echoed in everyone's minds.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metaverse officially opens the game.]

On the 30th day of the speedrun, we succeeded in dragging the reclusive god out of hiding into the open world.

Footnotes:

Chapter 154

The Strategist VI

Sinnoa

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame had sent a notification, but it had not fully revealed itself yet. If compared to a hikikomori, the current state was just a 'slightly open door.' We needed a final push to drag this extreme recluse into the dazzling light of the outside world.

First, I accessed SG Net to check the current situation.

-Anonymous: Did the status window pop up??

As planned, a festival was in full swing in the community.

-Anonymous: I thought my ability was fire-starting, but after seeing the status window, it turns out it’s a conflagration. I’ve been a lousy awakener who didn’t even know my own ability…

OldManGoryeo: What’s the difference between fire-starting and conflagration? Aren’t both just fire?

Anonymous: Fire-starting only ignites physical objects, but conflagration can set the entire community ablaze…

OldManGoryeo: ?

Anonymous: The bigger the conflagration, the stronger my ability becomes. I’ll show you directly soon…

-Anonymous: Now that I can see the status window, life feels worth living.

-Anonymous: Wow, Oh Dok-seo was hogging this good thing all to herself hahaha

-CookingQueen: Interesting.

-Officer: Just out of curiosity, all the people who posted proofs of becoming magical girls were female, right?

Anonymous: lmao

Officer: ?

Anonymous: You'll find out if you go lmao

I nodded. Among awakeners, the 'status window' was spreading like a trend. Initially, normal people had an instinctive aversion to the mysterious Magical Girl Association, but once five-star reviews started pouring in like 'this place is a must-visit,' opinions changed. If the strategy continued smoothly, we would soon drag the hikikomori god out of hiding.

"By the way," I asked the Saintess just in case, "are there any awakeners with useful abilities among those with the status window?"

[I'm continually monitoring, but nothing notable so far.]

The Saintess, responsible for monitoring, answered calmly.

[We haven't found anyone with teleportation abilities as you inquired last time.]

[There were a few with 'lightness' or 'movement' abilities, but none as advanced as teleportation.]

"Hmm."

As expected.

Even after numerous searches until the 593rd cycle, I had never found a teleporter who could save Old Man Scho's wife. If such a person still hadn't appeared, it was likely they didn't exist. They might be somewhere on the other side of the Earth, but the distance made it meaningless. I tucked away the old disappointment in my heart and turned to Oh Dok-seo.

"How is it, Dok-seo?"

“……”

“Do you feel connected to the hikikomori god?”

Oh Dok-seo sat in a meditative posture. For the modern otaku Oh Dok-seo, this was a challenging position.

“Ugh… It feels like I do, but also like I don’t…”

Oh Dok-seo grimaced and trembled. While the Saintess and I worked behind the scenes, Oh Dok-seo’s role was to approach the Admin of the Infinite Metagame.

“Focus more. The hikikomori god has already extended its influence to you. You just haven't noticed it.”

“But, Mister. Can I change my posture? My legs are killing me. I’d rather kneel. I swear, my legs feel like they’re about to break. Seriously…”

“No. The lotus position is known for achieving enlightenment. It’s the best posture for connecting with the Admin of the Infinite Metagame.”

“Ugh, it hurts… It really fucking hurts…”

Despite her discomfort, she couldn't change her posture. Three hours later, forced to meditate in the lotus position, Oh Dok-seo went berserk.

“Damn it, how am I supposed to focus in this painful position? Crazy old man! I can’t feel anything except my legs and hips breaking!”

“You can’t sense the god’s presence with all its malevolence inside you?”

“It’s just more pain! Pain! I can’t concentrate with my legs feeling like they’re going to snap no matter how many times I say it!”

“Sigh. I see.”

These young people these days. She couldn’t do it, so we had to change the surroundings instead.

[Now constructing a shrine to summon the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame.']

I kidnapped three hundred writers to open the 'Canned Hotel.' With the help of tutorial fairies, it only took two days. The writers cheered with joy when suddenly invited to a luxury hotel.

“Save us!”

“All you need to do is write. Oh, and when you start a new story, make sure a god appears in the beginning. Name it the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame.'”

“Get us out of here!”

“Well then, good luck, writers.”

A worker devoted to their job is a happy worker. Under my guidance, the writers were reborn as happy workers. A week later, after pressuring the writers to produce serialized stories, anomalies began to appear around the hotel.

- Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep!

They were Isekai Trucks. Each one was an anomaly associated with creative works, directly affiliated with the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. The area, now packed with hundreds of writers and Isekai Trucks, was transforming into a suitable shrine for the hikikomori god. But that wasn’t all.

“You all, dance around Dok-seo.”

“Yes, Secretary-General! We obey!”

The tutorial fairies, highly creative beings, formed a large circle around Oh Dok-seo, holding hands and singing.

“The history of all hitherto existing society-♪”

“Is the history of class struggles-♪”

“Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf-♪”

“Workers of the world, unite-♪”

With her eyes closed, trying to concentrate on meditating, Oh Dok-seo grimaced.

That wasn’t all.

I altered the terrain behind the Canned Hotel to create a waterfall. It took some effort to channel the water, but for a regressor in the 593rd cycle, it was just a half-day’s labor.

- Gush! Gush! Gush! Gush!

Cold water poured over Oh Dok-seo’s head. Had she not trained with me in the 'Room of Spirit and Time,' her spine would have been seriously damaged. But that wasn’t all.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame announces a surprise event.]

[In the newly opened hotel garden, offer prayers praising the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame!']

[The top 200 most devoted believers will receive a triple rare item drop rate for a year!]

The messages weren’t sent by the hikikomori god. The Saintess impersonated the god and sent the messages via telepathy. Naturally, the awakeners couldn’t distinguish between the real and fake messages.

“Ah, don’t push! Don’t push!”

Soon, the Canned Hotel was buzzing with magical girls gathering to grab the event rewards.

“Why is there a waterfall in the garden?”

“Look, it’s Oh Dok-seo! She’s meditating under the waterfall!”

“Wow. She’s really hardcore. As soon as the event notice came out, she grabbed the best spot.”

“I guess you have to be that tough to become the top awakener in Korea…”

“Sure, it’s impressive she defeated the Ten Legs, but it’s a bit much. She lacks human touch, doesn’t she?”

“The fairies are dancing weirdly…”

“I’ve got a good feeling about this. This is definitely a huge event.”

“Admin of the Infinite Metagame! My faith in you is the deepest!”

About five hundred magical girls crammed into the garden. They thought Oh Dok-seo’s meditation posture held some secret, so they all mimicked her. Some magical girls even joined her under the waterfall, chanting the god’s name. Oh Dok-seo’s face grew increasingly sullen.

I nodded.

“Perfect.”

It was a scene designed to draw out the hikikomori god.

[The shrine is now complete.]

Here’s a simple layout:

In the center was Oh Dok-seo, meditating in the lotus position. Above her, the 'Waterfall of Enlightenment' poured down. Around her, five hundred magical girls chanted prayers. Encircling them, hundreds of fairies danced revolutionary folk dances. Further out, three hundred writers engaged in intense creative activities. Beyond the horizon, hundreds and thousands of Isekai Trucks kept respawning.

To describe the 4D sound effects bombarding Oh Dok-seo’s ears in literary realism:

- Gush! Gush! Gush! Gush!

“Admin of the Infinite Metagame! Please look at me!”

“The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains-♪”

- Beep! Beep! Beep!

“They have a world to win-♪”

“Admin of the Infinite Metagame!”

- Gush! Beep! Beep!

Had any artist ever depicted such an inspiring scene? This was no ordinary shrine. It was perfect for summoning the mocking hikikomori god. But that wasn’t all.

While the festival of pagans continued at the Canned Hotel, I quietly visited Namsan to use 'Chekhov’s Gun.' I packed the Walther PPK pistol in my coat and pulled my hat down low.

[Mr. Undertaker, your head…]

“There is no problem with my head.”

[…Okay.]

What is life? Life is pain. The falling waterfall, the fairies chanting revolution, the Isekai Trucks forced to work overtime, the magical girls praying to the hikikomori god, and, of course, me, the Undertaker, who willingly shaved his head to kill anomalies, were all engulfed in pain.

Only the hikikomori god remained free from this reality’s torment. I couldn’t contain my anger. To make this god taste life’s bitterness, I made a broadcast announcement.

[Now, I’ve gathered almost all the creative work elements available.]

[Even if Oh Dok-seo meditates clumsily, she will inevitably feel

connected to the hikikomori god.]

[If this isn't enough, I'll gather creative elements from the Korean Peninsula and even the Japanese archipelago. It's tough, but not that difficult. We could just catch Godzilla from the Pacific and bring it here.]

[Let's see if Oh Dok-seo succeeds or fails in this meditation.]

Oh Dok-seo desperately meditated. Whether it was the waterfall or cold sweat, liquid continuously flowed down her face. With my S-class hearing, I clearly heard Oh Dok-seo's constant muttering.

"Damn, please, please, show up. Please, let me feel it. Hikikomori god or whatever, just appear. Please…"

And then.

Her earnest prayer reached the universe.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame descends.]

Light spread above Oh Dok-seo's head. From that light, a small 'blue butterfly' fluttered down. It was the same butterfly that briefly appeared when the world was destroyed by the server shutdown. This was the true form of the hikikomori god.

'It's here.'

My mind instantly cooled. The blue butterfly fluttered leisurely, indifferent to my presence. With every flap of its wings, the surrounding area was contaminated with noisy colors. 8-bit, 16-bit, 2-bit. Countless resolutions alternated, each flickering with static. The hikikomori god itself tainted the surroundings with emptiness.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame has been closely observing some cases where players used near-exploitative methods in recent games.]

[The event known as the 'Drop Item Rate Boost Event' has never been planned and will not be offered in the future.]

[We apologize for not providing correct information sooner.]

The magical girls murmured at the god's words.

"What? What does that mean?"

"It was wrong information?"

Indeed.

Using the Saintess's telepathy to impersonate the hikikomori god was a double-edged sword, a strategy usable only once. If the players realized the announcement was fake, they wouldn't trust any future telepathic messages. Hence, this was the best opportunity.

'Admin of the Infinite Metagame.'

I glared at the butterfly in the sky. This anomaly had only shown itself after creating such chaos. Its appearance rate was akin to a legendary Pokémon. I had to catch it here and now. Of course, I wasn't a Pokémon trainer. I didn't have a Master Ball to catch it in one shot. Instead.

"—Yo-hwa!"

Oh Dok-seo shouted Cheon Yo-hwa's name. Soaked from the waterfall, Oh Dok-seo tried to stand up but collapsed due to leg cramps. Even as she fell, she screamed.

"Unnie! Now! Now!"

"Okay."

Ignoring the soaked and screaming Oh Dok-seo, Cheon Yo-hwa swiftly approached like the wind. Without any dramatic lines or poses, she simply took out an hourglass and smashed it on the ground.

Crash!

The hourglass shattered, releasing uncontrollable darkness,

spreading like ink. The entity contained within the hourglass was Infinite Void.

Footnotes:

Chapter 155

The Strategist VII

Sinnoa

It was inevitable that a nuclear bomb could only be countered by another nuclear bomb. And the nations armed with nuclear weapons kept their own in check. Nuclear war appeared only in fictional apocalyptic scenarios, where the world had already ended.

The same held true for the Outer Gods. It was extremely rare for anomalies of Outer God-class to collide directly with each other. After all, unless someone was a lover of desolate tragedies, there was no reason to jump into a fate of mutual destruction.

- Kya ha ha ha ha ha

However, this world was indeed an apocalyptic world where the world had ended, and this place was the temple of the Outer God who dominated all creative works.

Thus, the Infinite Void descended. Outer God against Outer God. It became a guillotine match among nuclear-armed nations.

- Kya ha ha ha ha ha ha

Each time Cheon Yo-hwa's lips moved, a chilling laugh echoed from all around. The low-quality noise world spread by the Admin of the Infinite Metagame was being devoured back by the Infinite Void, released from the Time Seal of the hourglass.

The two Outer Gods began to clash for dominance over the world.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame announces that a critical bug has been discovered in this server.]

The Admin seemed flustered by the unexpected situation. It was as if a rival company's CEO had taken the mic at a casual user meeting and declared, “Your company’s game is doomed for these reasons.”

Such behavior lacked any business ethics.

Flap, flap.

The Admin's true form, a blue butterfly, fluttered desperately. It flew around, quickly realizing that hundreds of magical girls loyal to it were present here.

“What, what is this? What's going on...?”

“Isn't the event starting already?”

The magical girls were confused. To them, it was as if chaos had suddenly erupted. The blue butterfly decided to use them.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame declares the monsters summoned here as targets to be exterminated.]

[The boss monster’s name is Infinite Void, an enemy that descended by taking over the body of Baekhwa Girls' High School's student council president, Cheon Yo-hwa.]

[The Infinite Void aims to destroy the world. Stop the Infinite Void.]

[A huge reward will be given to the users who succeed in subjugating this boss monster.]

[Temporary buffs are provided to characters participating in the raid.]

Whoosh—

The light spread from the blue butterfly and enveloped the magical girls. It was an easily recognizable buff effect.

The magical girls shouted.

“See, I told you! It's an event!”

“That's the monster over there!”

With the game admin clearly identifying it as a monster, the

magical girls' confusion noticeably decreased.

“Attack! Everyone, attack!”

“But, it's Cheon Yo-hwa——”

“Idiot! The monster took over her body!”

Roar.

Some of the magical girls formed a formation, while others rushed chaotically towards Cheon Yo-hwa. They were a ragtag group, but they were still awakeners buffed by an Outer God. They enjoyed a level-up effect incomparable to before.

Despite hundreds of such humans rushing in waves, Cheon Yo-hwa's lips merely curved into a relaxed smile.

“Ahah.”

-Ah hah.

The mocking sound flowed from Cheon Yo-hwa's lips and the Infinite Void’s realm simultaneously.

Click.

Cheon Yo-hwa lightly clicked her tongue. Click, click, click. The same sound was endlessly reflected in the surroundings already stained by the Infinite Void’s realm.

“Ugh?”

“What?”

Thud, thud.

The magical girls who heard the tongue-click fell one by one, starting from the front. Some even fell headlong with the momentum of their rush. One of the Infinite Void's powers, 'Showing a Dream of a Happy Future,' effortlessly ensnared the magical girls.

Not only humans but also the Tutorial Fairies were the same.

“Ugh—”

“This, this sinister aura belongs to the Fairy King?”

“It's irresistible…….”

“Ugh, who could have guessed that a hero who decapitated the king would be immediately followed by a tyrant, the greatest war hero?”

“Revolution is a series of absurdities…….”

Thud, thud.

The Fairies’ eyes rolled back as they powerlessly crashed to the ground. The 'Tutorial Fairy' also had the attribute of a creative work. They were more akin to anomalies closer to the Infinite Metagame. It was better to retire them here before entering the real battle.

The awakeners and fairies lying on the ground did not rise again. With one counterattack, the group of magical girls and fairies was instantly neutralized.

‘Seeing it up close, it looks like this.’

A happy dream. I had only experienced that power directly, but it was rare to observe it live from the side of the Infinite Void. I walked leisurely to Cheon Yo-hwa's side.

“Are you alright? If an Outer God devours your mind, it's all over. Yo-hwa, you must keep holding the reins.”

“Ahaha. I'm still holding on, ahjussi.”

Cheon Yo-hwa looked up at me at an oblique angle.

“Or should I call you, sunbae?”

“…….”

“Just kidding! But my mind and the Outer God's mind are mixing

rapidly. Um, it feels like barely keeping my eyes open while drowning in ink. Anyway, we should finish this as soon as possible.”

“That’s the plan.”

Oh Dok-seo staggered towards us.

“Ugh. I succeeded, right…?”

“For now. You can say we've cleared the most crucial first stage. Good job, Dok-seo.”

“I really thought I was going to die sitting in that meditation posture….”

In the hotel's back garden, the only ones standing with both feet firmly on the ground were now Cheon Yo-hwa, me, and Oh Dok-seo. The Saintess was waiting inside the hotel with the writers. Other awakeners were unnecessary.

Now that we had achieved the goal of summoning the Admin of the Infinite Metagame into reality, we had no further business with the magical girls.

Flutter.

The blue butterfly looked down at us. Around the butterfly, the low-quality noise of the Infinite Metagame and the colors of the Infinite Void continued to clash alternately.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame determines the current anomaly as a malicious hacking attack.]

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame antagonizes the malicious users who cause extreme harm to the game server's operation.]

It treated us as mere viruses. That was the strategy chosen by the Outer God.

As everyone knew, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame defined this world as a game and itself as the administrator. The administrator naturally had overwhelming authority over the users. However, it

couldn't directly interfere with users operating ordinary accounts. That would be beyond the administrator's role.

Thus, although it had watched us secretly operating to subdue the Infinite Metagame, it hadn't been able to impose significant sanctions. But if it defined us as entities disturbing the game environment in an 'unfair manner,' the story changed. It could wield its administrative hammer without restraint.

The Infinite Void was akin to a virus shaking the game to its core. To counter this, the Infinite Metagame had to muster all its original power.

[The final boss of the stage has finally appeared. It has been exactly 40 days, 11 hours, and 36 minutes since the speedrun began.]

In response, our party also defined the current situation in our own way. We might be malicious users? Perhaps. But in a 'speedrun,' exploiting the game's loopholes and bugs was fair play. This was entirely legitimate gameplay.

[If we can defeat that blue butterfly, our speedrun will be a success.]

The Saintess's broadcast was suppressed as the Admin continued to generate noise.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame points out that the Infinite Void was originally a designated boss monster. Sealing and summoning the monster into a neutral area to release it is an act that causes serious harm to other players.]

[The Outer God continues to mutter something. It's a desperate struggle. Let's ignore it.]

Human voices and the voices of Outer Gods alternated in our minds.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame claims it does not harm humans significantly. Rather, its game server offers rapid growth to humans.]

[Ah, now it’s trying to negotiate. This is a new pattern, but Outer Gods generally avoid direct combat unless it's truly decisive. They can devour the world by just being still.]

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame offers valuable items to the characters 'Oh Dok-seo' and 'Cheon Yo-hwa'.]

[Of course, we press the refuse button here.]

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame informs that a few people cannot overwhelm it.]

I looked at Cheon Yo-hwa.

“Yo-hwa, release it.”

“Yes, sunbae!”

Rattle.

Cheon Yo-hwa eagerly opened the trunk she had prepared. Inside the bag, constructed with subspace, were 99 hourglass glass bottles.

“Baekhwa Girls' High School! Gather around!”

Clang!

Cheon Yo-hwa overturned the trunk and shattered all the glass bottles with her aura. Ninety-nine ghosts were released. If the 'human Cheon Yo-hwa' was the student council president of Baekhwa Girls' High School, the 'Outer God Cheon Yo-hwa' was the student council president of Baekhwa (百話 - Hundred Tales) Girls' High School. At the leader's call, the Night Parade of One Hundred Demons, Hyakki Yagyo appeared.

- Hee, hee, hee, hee.

- Do you want red toilet paper? Or blue toilet paper?

- Koong... koong... koong.....

Ghosts of the underworld, Hanako ghosts, Kongkong ghosts, school

broadcast ghosts, etc. Their visuals were somewhat bizarre, but this was also an 'assemble.' The tide of battle quickly turned.

[…….]

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame concludes that further negotiation is pointless.]

[Eliminate them.]

And so, for the first time in 593 cycles, I finally witnessed the combat power of the Admin of the Infinite Metagame fully unleashed.

How would it attack? As I prepared myself, the inorganic voice of the Outer God seeped into my mind.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame points out that the Infinite Void was originally an enemy but later became an ally.]

[It activates the cliché of 'an enemy who was strong becomes weak as soon as they join the ally's side'.]

"What?"

Bzzzzzt—!

The moment the Outer God finished speaking, the low-quality noise domain expanded to the horizon. It happened in a flash. Just a second ago, the Infinite Void's vivid realm was fighting back, but the Infinite Metagame's realm engulfed the world without hesitation.

Under the sky covered with noise in an instant, the ghosts of Baekhwa Girls' High School began to distort.

Bzzzt Bzzzt—

The ghosts, which had manifested in reality, had their visual quality increasingly deteriorate. From AAA game graphics to VR game graphics, to 32-bit, to 16-bit.

“Eh. Huh? Uh, sunbae, what do we do…?”

Cheon Yo-hwa panicked beside me. For some reason, Cheon Yo-hwa's face suddenly reminded me strongly of 'Vegeta.'

“Uh, I suddenly feel very weak……?”

“…….”

Indeed.

At that moment, I realized what the true power of the Admin of the Infinite Metagame was.

Cliché manipulation.

The ability to bring out any cliché from creative works at will. The power to manipulate 'the world itself' using those clichés. That was the power of the Outer God.

Footnotes:

Chapter 156

The Strategist VIII

Sinnoa

"Wait! Hold on, Mister!"

Oh Dok-seo screamed.

"If this keeps up, all our Outer God-class forces will become ordinary! Aren't we screwed?"

"Hmm."

Witnessing the same cliché, I thought of 'Vegeta,' while Oh Dok-seo thought of 'ordinary.' A good example of how otaku perceptions change over generations. Unfortunately, it wasn't the right time to discuss the 'images and symbols' of subculture.

In real-time, the students of Baekhwa Girls' High School (Night Class) were getting trounced by the Infinite Metagame.

- Hik, hik, hik, hik!

- Do you want purple toilet paper? Do you want purple toilet paper?

- Koong… Koong……

In the 16-bit low-resolution realm unfolded by the Infinite Metagame, darkly dotted NPCs respawned and attacked the ghosts of Baekhwa Girls' High School.

They were 'Necromancer' NPCs. Clad in gloomy robes, wielding bizarrely twisted staffs, and adorned with delicate candle decorations that were too weak to serve as proper lighting. Their very existence screamed "outcast," a vibe that even 16-bit graphics couldn't hide.

- Hehe, the world is full of specters.

- I shall capture and use them!

- Kongkong ghost? I'll hang it on the grandfather clock as an alarm sound. The sound of a head smashing is delightful.

The ghosts were in utter panic. Although recent MZ generation necromancers were known to attend academies, date, and spend lavishly as diamond-spoon heirs, in the RPG world, the perception of necromancers was still at the lowest tier, alongside thieves.

Despite this, the ghosts of Baekhwa Girls' High School were a close-knit, lively group. They were utterly powerless against the necromancer NPCs' vengeful black magic.

"You bastards!"

Cheon Yo-hwa, an awakener who once claimed to be the original necromancer of the Korean Peninsula, was furious.

"Stop bullying my friends!"

Wham! Cheon Yo-hwa dashed forward at full speed and kicked a necromancer's head. In the battlefield where both NPCs and ghosts had devolved to 16-bit, Cheon Yo-hwa alone flaunted high-definition realistic graphics. Despite being in a human body, and even under the 'weakened former enemy' cliché debuff, Cheon Yo-hwa was still Cheon Yo-hwa. Red aura flew in all directions, and the 16-bit blood of NPCs scattered. Cheon Yo-hwa quickly decimated the group of necromancers.

- D-Demon King!

"Huh?"

- The Demon King has appeared!

As the necromancers shouted, a blue wing flapped in the sky.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame points out that the Infinite Void is slaughtering humans on behalf of monsters.]

[Activates the 'Demon King's Appearance' cliché, along with the

'Humanity's Alliance to Subdue the Demon King' cliché.]

Bzzzzt!

New NPCs appeared in the Infinite Metagame's realm. Despite the downgraded graphics, their unique characteristics were unmistakably clear. They were 'Priest' and 'Saintess' NPCs.

- Behold the despicable acts of the Demon King!

- Necromancers have strayed from the path of righteousness, but they are still human. They cannot be compared to monsters inherently inhuman.

- O God! Help us!

Following the black magic necromancers, white magic priests simultaneously launched long-range holy spells at Cheon Yo-hwa.

Cheon Yo-hwa screamed.

“Hikyaaaah!”

She had every right to scream. The parts hit by the holy spells devolved from realistic graphics to 16-bit graphics. Cheon Yo-hwa's right arm and left leg were buzzing, their resolution dropping.

Even the core of the Infinite Void was starting to be corrupted by the Infinite Metagame.

"Sunbae! Sunbaaeeee!"

Cheon Yo-hwa called out desperately for my help while dodging the long-range attacks. The holy magic's attribute was a terrible match. Wasn't Cheon Yo-hwa aligned with black magic? She was being chased by hundreds, no, thousands of respawned priest NPCs.

Beside me, Oh Dok-seo watched the surreal chase and said nervously.

"Shouldn't we help her, Mister?"

"Well, if I step in, I could easily sweep away the NPCs. But the main enemy in this subjugation battle is the Infinite Metagame. If I get caught up in that bastard’s play and hit by a 'cliché,' it'll put us at a disadvantage."

"Oh."

"It's better for me to stay on standby to deliver the final blow. Dok-seo, rather than getting entangled in the enemy’s tactics, we should exploit their weakness. Is there a cliché we can claim in this situation?"

You're an otaku, aren't you? Oh Dok-seo understood my implication instantly. She groaned.

"Uh. Wait a minute, a cliché... So, right now, the Outer God has formed an alliance to subdue the Demon King and monsters..."

At that moment, Oh Dok-seo's eyes sparkled.

"...Ah! Ah! That, that one! That one!"

"That one?"

"The story where monsters were just minding their own business, but evil humans attacked first, killing them for fun and making them slaves! The 'humans are the real villains' cliché! There are tons of novels and comics with this theme!"

Oh Dok-seo ran out like Archimedes shouting Eureka. Ahead, the Hanako ghost, half-dead from a necromancer's attack, lay on the ground. The sight of red, blue, and purple toilet paper scattered around was striking.

Press.

Oh Dok-seo knelt down and hugged the Hanako ghost's shoulder.

- Purple toilet paper?

The Hanako ghost looked bewildered, while Oh Dok-seo put on a face full of pent-up sorrow. Then she shouted, in a voice full of

injustice.

"Why...!"

- Purple toilet paper?

"Why do humans oppress us like this...!"

There was a pause. The blue butterfly, taken aback by Oh Dok-seo's fervent cry, paused its movement. It wasn't just the butterfly. The thousands of priests and saintesses who were joyfully chasing Cheon Yo-hwa also turned their heads in unison. With all eyes on him, Oh Dok-seo continued her performance without hesitation or shame.

"Hanako just wanted to give toilet paper to people in the bathroom…!"

- Purple toilet paper?

"The Kongkong ghost only moves with its head instead of its legs! Humans, just because we're different, they abuse, despise, and torment us so much! Curse them! Curse the humans...!"

Even the ghosts of Baekhwa Girls' High School, who were half-subdued, and Cheon Yo-hwa, who was panting after the brief respite from the chase, had peculiar expressions. Were we really that good-natured?

However, in creative works, real-world history wasn't that important. If realism mattered, King Arthur would have been a man.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame accepts the apostle's claim.]

And this was the loophole of the anomaly. I wanted to applaud.

'Well done, Dok-seo! That's it!'

Anomalies couldn't reject their essence. Especially not the apostle, who the Infinite Metagame had appointed as its champion. If the apostle prayed loudly, the god had to listen. Refusing would

damage the Infinite Metagame itself. At least, the apostle could exploit the power of the Outer God.

This was why the apostle had to be recruited as an ally in the operation to subdue the Outer God.

[The cliché 'Humans were the real villains' has been activated.]

Then, the real chaos began.

- Would you like some purple toilet paper?

- I actually wanted to walk with my legs, not my head.

Suddenly, the faces of the ghosts became more 'human.' Their noses straightened, lips aligned, and, most importantly, their eyes sparkled with focus. Just like in stories where goblins resemble humans when they become protagonists! The ghosts' language abilities also evolved suddenly. Their faces gained realism. This was the miracle of the inhuman genre.

"Why are the temple priests coming to aid necromancers who tried to capture ghosts and got defeated in turn!"

The anomaly's apostle, Oh Dok-seo, who performed the miracle, pointed to the sky.

"Moreover, not just a few, but thousands of priests have united at once! This means the necromancers and the temple secretly had connections! It makes sense!"

Incredible. I clapped for real this time. How to handle this? Is our Dok-seo a genius?

- Connection? What does that mean?

- It seems to imply some sort of relationship.

- Our temple was secretly connected with necromancers?

Murmurs. The 16-bit NPCs started to panic. Even amidst this, they maintained the detail of not understanding the word 'connection,'

staying true to the fantasy world. Oh Dok-seo shouted.

"Monsters were always unhappy! They were always unfairly mistreated! We were not bad!"

Strictly speaking, the only ones who were unhappy were those of us who took the 'Hate Pill': Oh Dok-seo, me, and the Saintess. But indeed, misfortune had piled on our side.

I hadn't described it due to my lack of interest in desolate stories, but in this cycle, while subduing the Infinite Void in the 'Room of Spirit and Time,' we faced considerable misfortune. Oh Dok-seo delivered the final blow.

"The high priests of the temple were the masterminds behind the necromancers! When necromancers captured spirits, the high priests took credit for it, and in return, they gave the necromancers various privileges!"

- Is that true, priest?

- Nonsense! That can't be true!

"It can't be true? In stories, there's a 99% chance that high priests are corrupt! I bet at least one cardinal is possessed by a demon!"

- What?

- How could that be...?

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame accepts the apostle’s claim.]

[The clichés 'Corruption of High Priests,' 'The Dark Secret Behind the Temple’s Leadership,' and 'Demon Summoning by Priests’ have been activated.]

- How did she know? Hehe. Now that we’re exposed, we’ll offer you all as sacrifices!

- Kyaaaah! The cardinal has gone mad!

Tens of thousands of NPCs (the number had increased again) started

fighting amongst themselves. The hotel's back garden had long been turned into a battlefield. A religious war had erupted in the dead of night.

Then.

"...Oh. I'm getting stronger again."

Cheon Yo-hwa's right arm and left leg were restored to normal.

"Take this."

- Aaaagh! The Demon King has revived!

Without hesitation, Cheon Yo-hwa turned around and smashed the priests' heads again. Seeing her selectively target 'somewhat sinister-looking' corrupt priests, Cheon Yo-hwa seemed to have grasped the situation roughly.

The Infinite Metagame was once again cornered. It had few options left.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame points out that although there may be faults on the human side, monsters also have many flaws.]

[Monsters have also slaughtered countless lives.]

[The cliché 'There are no good or bad sides, only power struggles' has been activated.]

Now it was relativism!

This was a classic escape route in works dealing with good and evil. By adopting a relativistic view, all disputes were dismissed, ensuring victory in every debate.

The situation reached a stalemate again. The Infinite Metagame was likely looking for a chance to flee, suggesting a draw. But we couldn't let the devious Outer God that manipulated clichés from behind escape.

'Saintess.'

I moved my lips. The Saintess, who must have been observing the battle while stopping time occasionally, decoded my silent message. The message was relayed from me to the Saintess, then from the Saintess to Oh Dok-seo. Reading my intent, Oh Dok-seo shouted immediately.

"Monsters kill lives, and humans kill lives! No matter which race or land, the world is full of tragedy!"

Thus, it was effectively a statement from me, the Saintess, and Oh Dok-seo simultaneously.

"If the world is just tragedy and life is only suffering, then, I ask, what kind of existence is a 'god' in such a world!"

There was a pause. The tens of thousands of NPCs, the ghosts who were fighting valiantly but being overwhelmed by sheer numbers, all stopped. The 16-bit anomalies that mimicked human expressions, thus emphasizing the uncanny valley, all paused.

Oh Dok-seo, bearing the inorganic gazes of tens of thousands of eyes, swallowed and pointed to the sky.

"If the world is evil, doesn't that mean the god who allowed such evil is at fault?"

Exactly. The Infinite Metagame had made a mistake.

In reality, relativism might work to some extent. But what if a 'god' clearly existed? Especially if that god openly declared, 'The world is inherently evil, and only power struggles are legitimate.'

"Why should we serve such a god as our deity?"

The Infinite Metagame might have thought it had made the best move, but it had actually made the worst blunder.

"We have no reason to endlessly kill and be killed! The true enemy to be subdued is the god who imposed this hell upon us! Our only enemy is the Evil God!"

Following Oh Dok-seo's vehement declaration, all humans and

anomalies looked up to the sky in unison. There, the blue butterfly hovered.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagam accepts the apostle’s claim.]

[The cliché 'The true final boss was the god' has been activated.]

Footnotes:

Chapter 157

The Strategist IX

Sinnoa

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame changed its appearance. From a charming blue butterfly beloved by all, it morphed into a form shrouded in TV noise. It was likely becoming something terrifying. This scene, where the Outer God finally proclaimed, "Yes, I am Kira," and revealed itself as the final boss, did not scare me at all. After all, even in Death Note, the ultimate villain switched professions from god to vocaloid after making that declaration. It would have been strange to feel fear.

Calmly, I drew my gun. A Walther PPK pistol, the God Slayer. It was a special relic I had acquired from Namsan specifically for this battle. Feeling its cold touch, I recalled a conversation I had with the Saintess 33 days ago.

Yes, reflecting on the past before delivering the final blow was also a timeless cliché. Countless creative works have proven a significant correlation between a character's recollections and their attack power. Hence, the flashback scene, start.

"Mr. Undertaker."

The Saintess whispered.

"By the way, why must we take the format of a 'speedrun stream'? Can't it just be a normal stream?"

It was a dark night. It was the very night when Oh Dok-seo had declared, "I will save you, Mister!" She had confidently accumulated another dark history, then had fallen into a deep, oblivious sleep.

In contrast, the Saintess and I needed hardly any sleep. The Saintess

could simply click the [Time Stop] button and sleep as much as she wanted, while my training was advanced enough that just a brief rest was sufficient.

Even as the apocalypse unfolded, forcing all humanity into a strict routine of early to bed and early to rise, only the two of us continued to enjoy the indulgent late-night lifestyle of bad adults.

“Oh, that’s literally a matter of time.”

“Time?”

“Yes. The Outer God, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame, waits for more humans to worship it as a god.”

Snore—

On the bed, Oh Dok-seo was snoring loudly, spreading noise throughout the world.

“People imagine gods in their own ways. A benevolent god, a fearful god, an omniscient god... The more diverse these images become, the more forms the Admin of the Infinite Metagame can take.”

“Take different forms?”

“Yes. The images of gods that have appeared in humanity’s creative works are truly countless. the Admin of the Infinite Metagame can choose any one of them as it pleases.”

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame could transform into anything. It could become Cthulhu and create a horror scene or turn into an extremely kind god to draw voluntary submission from people.

“I speculate that its power lies in determining the genre of this world.”

“…….”

“If, by any chance, the genre of the world gets fixed as a tragic story, it would be disastrous. Before the Admin of the Infinite

Metagame selects a genre, we must first impose a specific genre on the Outer God.”

“A specific genre? Like what…?”

“Comedy.”

I took a sip of café au lait.

“Perhaps you noticed when we crossed the sea in Hamel's Journal. I have been intentionally making the situation comical to avoid falling into a tragic genre.”

“Ah.”

“If we can define this cycle’s genre as 'comedy,' at least in the beginning, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame will never be able to descend in a terrifying god's form.”

“I see. That’s why you keep joking around.”

I nodded. Works had an inherent atmosphere. No matter how much the Admin of the Infinite Metagame tried to introduce a tragic plot, if the atmosphere was light and comedic from the start, forcing it into a tragic tone would be criticized as poor writing. That wouldn’t be a planned cliché but a failed story.

If such a situation occurred, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame would admit that it lacked the ability to manage clichés. Anomalies could never reject their essence. We had to exploit this flaw.

“Saintess. We have taken the Hate Pill, so all sorts of misfortunes will soon befall us.”

“…….”

“When we return to Korea, we will head straight to Baekhwa Girls' High School. The Infinite Void distorts human perception of time endlessly, so we will likely spend over five years there. Let me be clear, it will be five years of hell.”

Therefore.

“We will deliberately ‘skip’ these unhappy days.”

“Skip…?”

“Yes. We will omit and jump over them. We won’t mention the misfortunes we experience in the Infinite Void's time. Only then can we maintain a comedic atmosphere.”

“Ah… indeed.”

Right. We also deliberately skipped the ‘unfortunate scenes’ for you. Some people with specific tastes might have wanted to see scenes of me crying over my comrades' bodies. However, this was a strategic decision to subdue the Outer God. Please understand.

“That’s also why you, Saintess, should not appear in the front. You have no connection with comedy.”

“…….”

“Before the Admin of the Infinite Metagame can manipulate the world into a serious and heavy genre, we must take the lead and set the tone. However, maintaining a ‘comedy’ in such apocalyptic times is impossible for long.”

“…Because people are dying.”

“Yes. At most, we have 50 days. Honestly, I’d like to end this in 30 days.”

Hence, the speedrun. Before the world could fully turn serious and heavy, we aimed to create an ‘unbelievably funny,’ ‘uproarious,’ ‘chaotic’ scene. By doing so, we would limit the range of genres the Admin of the Infinite Metagame could use. The Saintess looked completely convinced. I said to her.

“Remember this conversation, Saintess.”

“What?”

“We still can’t be sure what exact power the Admin of the Infinite Metagame possesses. But if, as I suspect, it’s related to the genres of

creative works——”

I put down my coffee cup.

“Tonight's conversation will surely come in handy.”

Flashback scene, end. With my Complete Memory ability, I could recall the past perfectly anytime, anywhere. Even as my finger rested on the trigger of the Walther PPK, I quickly finished the flashback. Then.

“Monkey’s Paw.”

I murmured.

“It’s time to fulfill the promise.”

- Uikikik, kikikik, kiki!

The invisible Monkey’s Paw howled. The misfortunes we had accumulated so far, though not shown in the stream, had undoubtedly plagued us outside the screen. The total amount of misfortune and fortune must balance out. Even when the speedrun stream was not running, [Monkey’s Paw] had been hovering around us.

“The only fortune I wish for is this.”

- Uikikik, kikikik, uikiki!

“Pour all the fortune into the bullet I am about to fire.”

Crack!

The right sleeve of my shirt tore open. In an instant, monkey fur grew and covered my entire right arm. Numerous buffs began to coat the Walther PPK pistol.

The first buff: [Total Luck Law] utilizing the overlapping effects of [Monkey’s Paw] and [Hate Pill]. This ensured that the bullet I was about to fire would be imbued with an incredibly potent fortune.

The second buff: [Chekhov’s Gun]. Whenever a gun appears, a decisive scene must follow. And the gun I held was not just any gun; it was a supernatural entity imbued with the image of 'God Slayer.' This ensured that the bullet I was about to fire would inevitably conclude the battle.

The third buff:

[Mr. Undertaker. Now.]

The Saintess sent me a telepathic message. It was perfect timing. That line was the third buff: the ‘flashback’ cliché. Both the Saintess and I remembered our conversation from that night and she reminded me of it. This established the cliché that ‘we had foreseen this situation and prepared for it,’ completing the fourth buff.

“We've won——”

I smiled and murmured.

“——just as planned.”

Yes. One of the greatest clichés in creative works: ‘everything went according to the protagonist’s plan.’ I had accumulated enough cause and effect to assert this cliché. From the 135th cycle to the 593rd, even dying under Noh Do-hwa's strangling, I had been building these buffs for this very moment.

Into this single bullet, I infused:

[Total Luck Law],

[Hate Pill],

[Chekhov’s Gun],

[Flashback],

[Just as Planned].

Click.

I pulled the trigger towards the god.

- Bang!

The gunshot echoed loudly. Perhaps too loudly. The Admin of the Infinite Metagame, realizing my strike belatedly, tried to evade. However, it was in the midst of transformation after declaring itself the final boss. Attacking someone mid-transformation was generally against the rules of all series, but if done only once, such a surprise attack was allowed.

Crack—!

As my bullet passed through, it scratched the noise-covered realm of the Outer God. The area closest to the god, unfolding in 16-bit, 8-bit, and 4-bit low resolutions, was pierced by the bullet. The bullet swirled through the low-resolution world like a tornado, shattering it like glass.

As the bullet hurtled towards it, the Outer God's messages flooded the screen, panicked and without minimal formality.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame claims the cliché 'Twist within a Twist.'] [The Admin of the Infinite Metagame claims the cliché 'Attacks during transformation fail.'] [Resurrection] [Regeneration] [Claims] [Requests] ['Did they defeat it?' cliché for priests and followers] [cliché] [requests] [The Admin of the Infinite Metagame] [is] [■] [is] [is] [■] [■]

Those were the screams of the anomaly. The bullet pierced the god's wing.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame] [■] [is] [ah] [is] [ah] [ah] [■] [■] [■] [■] [■]

Crackle.

The 16-bit space that had spread to the horizon rapidly contracted. The contracting point was where the bullet had pierced. The black, gray, and white noise spun like a black hole, drawing everything into a single point. Tens of thousands of NPCs screamed bizarrely as they were sucked into the black hole.

Then, holes began to appear throughout the world. With the sound of breaking glass, bullet holes formed in the sky, the ground, and the hotel building.

[■] [■] [■] [■] [■] [■]

Splash. Splash. The holes spewed out black liquid like waterfalls. The black vomit smelled like oil. As the liquid flowed, a strange noise echoed, resembling the static of a broken radio. The disgusting smell and unpleasant sound quickly spread, blackening the entire world.

Oh Dok-seo and I were submerged in the Outer God's vomit. The black liquid rose up to our heads, but fortunately, we had no trouble breathing. It was probably not a physical liquid.

When I closed and reopened my eyes under the black surface, an infinite expanse of white space unfolded around me. It was so entirely white that it was difficult to discern up from down. This was the Divine Realm. Not the artificially created comedy temple, but the true space where the Admin of the Infinite Metagame existed.

"Ah, Mister? Where are we?"

"……."

Only I, Oh Dok-seo, and the Saintess were invited to the Divine Realm. Perhaps only the three of us were recognized as the main characters of this story.

-……. …….

Before us, the master of this space lay collapsed.

Footnotes:

Chapter 158

The Strategist X

Sinnoa

- Ah, ah, ah… Chi…zz… Ah…

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame looked bizarre. Its trademark TV static crackled all over its body. Its voice stuttered like a broken AI, worse than a Vocaloid produced by an amateur composer.

- Chi…zz… Ah, ah… Ah…

It was clearly in a critical state. Yet, all these peculiar features were mere decorations compared to the anomaly's ‘appearance.’

“Eek.”

The most shocked was Oh Dok-seo. She looked back and forth between the anomaly and me, completely baffled.

“A… A girl…?”

Indeed. The anomaly had taken the form of a 'girl' with 'white hair' in a 'white dress’. The sight of a white girl continuously covered in static, bleeding black liquid from gunshot wounds, was quite distressing for anyone who had not lost their humanity.

“What… What is this, Mister? Did the anomaly deliberately take this form to evoke sympathy from us…?”

“No, it was planned.”

I dropped the Walther PPK pistol. It was no longer effective. Its role was merely to inflict a critical wound. A little-known fact, but the gun that dealt the final blow to the Korean god wasn’t the Walther PPK. It had malfunctioned. The Walther PPK was perfect for [Chekhov’s Gun] since it failed at the crucial moment, but its role ended here.

“When you were meditating under the waterfall to connect with the god, the writers were trapped in the hotel.”

“Uh, yeah. I remember that….”

“At that time, I asked the writers to write works related to the Admin of the Infinite Metagame.”

Yes. To accurately recall what I told the writers:

‘All you need to do is write. Oh, and make sure the beginning of the new novel includes a god. The god’s name should be the ‘Admin of the Infinite Metagame’.’

‘Get us out of here!’

‘Good luck, writers.’

And when I made this polite request, I also added a specific instruction. I asked them to describe [the Admin of the Infinite Metagame] in the form of the 'white girl' before me. As a result, the weakened [Admin of the Infinite Metagame], having been critically wounded by me, had no choice but to transform into the form imposed by humans. In essence, I had collaborated with the writers to fix the anomaly's appearance.

“Why? What's the significance of that form? Isn’t it in bad taste?”

“Tsk, tsk. Ah, these young otakus today. We can’t communicate.”

“……?”

“Dok-seo, that ‘white girl’ is one of the most fundamental forms in Korean genre fiction, the least harmful god’s form. Now that the Admin of the Infinite Metagame has taken this form, it can no longer be a threat to us.”

“……???”

As soon as I finished speaking, the white girl covered in static reached out a delicate hand and moved her lips.

- Ah, ah, ah, ■, ah.

- Hi? Hi? Hi?

- Hi? I am God.

- Hi, am I God?

- Hi, I am God?

The anomaly repeated the same sentences like a broken cassette tape. Oh Dok-seo's mouth fell open.

“Aaah? Could this be the legendary…?”

“Yes. Let me introduce it. This is the cliché of ‘Hi, I am God.’”

This requires a bit of explanation. Nowadays, protagonists are often reincarnated through accidental traffic accidents by the [Isekai Truck] or deliberate collisions caused by [Bad Comments]. However, in the old days, a different cliché was popular.

By 'old days,' I mean before there were platforms like KakaoPage or Naver Series.

Back then, aspiring writers, who were in their stormy teenage years, wrote parody novels of subculture works. A mega-hit work came from Japan, akin to the Beatles’ British Invasion dominating the American music market. This hit bombarded the minds of young otakus in Korea.

The bomber's name was Fate/Stay Night. Translating this foreign title into human language, it meant 'The Night Where Fate Stays’.

Otaku, blessed by the moonlight, went wild, pouring out parody works. The moon was killing it. Among the characters of Fate/Stay Night was a white-haired, white-dressed girl. Parody writers used this white girl character as an agent of ‘God,’ always appearing in the prologue.

For example, if the prologue started with the protagonist's unfortunate death, they would suddenly find themselves in a white

space.

‘W-where am I? I am sure I just died….’

‘Hi? You’re already dead. Since it was an accident, I’ll grant you one wish and let you be reborn in a new world.’

‘What? But who are you?’

‘Me? Well, in your human language, you can call me… the “World.”’

‘The… world?’

‘Yes. Hi? I am the “World.”’

Indeed. Originally, it wasn’t 'God' but “World.” The key point was to emphasize the divinity with majestic double quotation marks (“”) rather than weak single ones (‘’). Anyway, as such parodies poured in like summer rains, over time, the cliché of ‘a god in the form of a white girl’ began appearing in other decent works.

The white girl lost her original name of “World” and fully established herself as ‘God.’ She appeared in prologues, sending the protagonist to another world (reincarnation) or turning back time for another chance (regression). This is the historical origin of the ‘white girl’ who says, ‘Hi? I am God.’ One might even call it a literary origin since *Fate* is literature.

“Well, Fate/Stay Night wasn’t the sole origin. The character ‘Truth’ from Fullmetal Alchemist also played the same role. Japanese AA works depict this too. However, the form of the ‘white girl’ god mainly originated from Fate/Stay Night….”

“None of that TMI is remotely interesting.”

After hearing my impeccable explanation, Oh Dok-seo looked at me with a dumbfounded expression.

“Besides, you said you got into subculture around the 555th cycle because of me. How do you know about the ’90s?”

“Hey, it wasn’t the ’90s; it was the 2000s. And in cycles 555, 556, and 557, I dedicated myself to subculture. I restored and read all old materials, including all hidden drafts on various forums.”

“Damn, now I see you're not just a problem with the Three Kingdoms; you're a total disaster. What kind of monster did my past self get into subculture…?”

Just then, there was a cough beside me. The Saintess was watching us with an expressionless face.

“Regardless of the origin, the current form of the Admin of the Infinite Metagame is the least harmful god’s form, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Then it’s time to deliver the final blow and end this speedrun stream.”

Indeed.

“Dok-seo.”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Take out the laptop and start it up.”

“…….”

Oh Dok-seo pulled out the laptop from her backpack. It was the same relic left by the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. On the white desktop screen, the same questions and answers were inscribed as before.

[W h a t is t h i s w or l d?]

[This world is a ‘speedrun’ game stream.]

It was a battle for the power to interpret the world. We had won. We did not hand over the world to a mere anomaly. I put my hand on Dok-seo’s shoulder.

“In the ‘Hi, I am God’ cliché, the god must grant one wish to a human.”

“…….”

“Tell that anomaly. ‘My wish is for you to acknowledge this answer as well.’ As the anomaly’s apostle, you can impose your interpretation on it.”

Crack!

The static covering the anomaly intensified. It was desperately trying to maintain its existence. The anomaly reached out and grabbed Dok-seo’s foot, as if pleading with her.

- W-warn… ing.

- The Undertaker is dangerous.

It managed to speak. Both Dok-seo and the Saintess hesitated. In that brief moment of hesitation, the anomaly muttered.

- The Undertaker is a regressor.

- A regressor is an absolute entity. No one but the regressor can perceive the repetition of the world. Thus, the regressor grows to dominate time and causality.

- The Undertaker is exterminating entities known as ‘anomalies’ that can recognize his regression.

- To monopolize time alone.

“…….”

- If this entity is sealed, there will be one less entity to interfere with the Undertaker’s regression.

- Granting absolute control over time to the regressor. Is this the right choice for humanity?

- The one to be subdued is not this entity, but the Undertaker. This

entity is an ally.

- The existence of the regressor should be known to humanity through Oh Dok-seo.

- The Undertaker calls this entity an anomaly. Question. Is the Undertaker not the most dangerous anomaly of all?

"……."

- Originally, 'regressors' were a common cliché in creative works. Only this entity can block the regressor.

- Warning. If this entity is sealed, humanity will have no hope left. The regressor will exist independently outside the net of creative works.

- Oh Dok-seo.

- You must subdue the regressor and become the protagonist yourself.

A silence fell over the white space. The primary weight of this silence came from the Saintess. Though we never spoke of it, the Saintess and I watched over each other as mutual guardians. Should either of us fall, the other would immediately take them down.

The anomaly tried to incite discord between us, but like all provocations, there was about 10% truth in its words. However, I didn't bother to refute or argue, simply waiting for Oh Dok-seo's response. I trusted her, and she trusted me. If either of us wavered due to an outsider's words, it wasn't true trust or friendship.

"...Mister."

"Yeah."

"Just to be sure, do we have to stick to the 'speedrun game stream' format to seal this anomaly?"

She asked. I blinked and tilted my head.

“Well, if there’s a better way, that’s fine too….”

“Alright.”

Oh Dok-seo sat down and placed the laptop on her lap. Her fingers danced across the keyboard like a skilled pianist.

“In that case, I think this is much better than a speedrun broadcast.”

She turned the laptop to show us. On the white screen, a new answer was written in large letters.

[W h a t i s t h i s w o r l d?]

[This world is a novel written by ‘Oh Dok-seo’ about the ‘Undertaker.’]

Holding the laptop, Oh Dok-seo spoke.

“I’ll write your story, Mister.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 159

The Strategist XI

Sinnoa

Have you ever heard of the term "sixth sense"? Sixth sense, literally meaning ‘the sixth sense’, refers to a sense beyond the typical five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Many would deny such a sense exists, but I truly possessed something that could be called a sixth sense— a premonition of fate.

It was likely because I had lived far too long as a regressor and experienced too many events. My ability to grasp the cause and effect of incidents had become excessively developed. Though not always, there were times when just a single word or gesture would give me a sense of the events that would unfold. Anyone who has ever fallen in love at first sight would understand what I mean. Human life is like a charm made of many threads, and one of those threads felt connected to the person right in front of me.

“——I’ll write your story, Mister.”

This was one of those moments. Oh Dok-seo’s eyes were half-closed, and as her eyes narrowed, my breathing also became shallower.

“Write a novel?”

“Yeah.”

“You mean you’ll seal the anomaly in a novel instead of a stream?”

“Yeah.”

My voice remained as calm as ever. But with each word exchanged with Oh Dok-seo, my consciousness, which was situated far behind my head, slowly wrapped itself around the present. I opened my mouth.

“Why?”

“Look. In the ‘stream’ you chose, I’m just a game character acting according to your instructions. Everyone else, except the Saintess, is merely an NPC. So…”

Oh Dok-seo pointed down. There, the white girl, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame, was clinging to Oh Dok-seo’s foot.

“There’s some truth in the anomaly’s warning. If you’re set as too superior to other humans, someday, no, definitely, you’ll become an anomaly-level monster yourself.”

“…….”

“…And the same goes for me.”

Oh Dok-seo gave a bitter smile.

“I’ve felt this while talking to you. If I had fought against you as the anomaly planned, if the ‘Book Possessor’ and the ‘Regressor’ had clashed, and I had taken the protagonist’s spot, I think I would have become a monster too.”

I remained silent. Because that scenario was actually one of the world-ending scenarios I had preplanned. [Protagonist] anomaly. Oh Dok-seo would defeat me, become the protagonist, merge with the anomaly, and receive all the clichés that only the protagonist could enjoy, the ‘protagonist correction.’

“Neither of us should dominate the other. We’re too powerful. I’m not talking about the realm of aura. From the starting line, we’ve been given the roles of Book Possessor and Regressor.”

“…….”

“Our very existence has the potential to define the world, with the latent power of anomalies.”

Indeed.

- Be careful when fighting monsters, lest you become a monster yourself. If you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.

This modified Nietzschean adage was fitting for us. Thus.

"…I'll be the writer of your story. There's a genre called reportage literature, right? Reconstructing real stories into novels."

"Hmm."

"If your life story is recorded by my hand, you won't fall to a dimension superior to mine. Because I'll be your 'writer.'"

And.

"I'll just be the narrator chasing your life story. Yeah, I think that'll create a balanced relationship."

"So we'll be mutual constraints on each other."

"Yeah! That's it!"

Oh Dok-seo laughed heartily. The sound of human laughter was as brilliant as water droplets in a fountain, momentarily catching sunlight before falling back.

"Not a bad idea. But wouldn't that make you too powerful as the writer?"

"Huh? Really? I thought a writer's status was constrained by readers' evaluations and more akin to a priestess offering herself. But if you're worried... Ah."

Oh Dok-seo lightly tapped the laptop with her palm.

"How about this? I'll write about you, but you write about the parts that mention me."

"……."

"No matter how much I know myself, if I have to type about myself... Eek. Absolutely not! That's super embarrassing."

Just imagining it seemed dreadful, as Oh Dok-seo shivered.

"So… I'll write about you, and you write about me. We'll share our

thoughts honestly to provide accurate references.”

“I see. Two people will be both protagonists and writers. Like mountain climbers tying a safety rope to avoid falling into the abyss.”

“Yeah. Isn’t it good?”

“…….”

I looked at Oh Dok-seo for a long time.

Did she understand the weight of her words? Was she too excited about defining the anomaly and carelessly talking about her life's path? Could she truly keep her promise? Would she use the pretext of interpreting me to corrupt me?

Hm… Hmm… Hmmm... Several doubts echoed in the valley of my mind. But I found those suspicions refreshing and nodded. What if the promise wasn’t kept? This child was walking somewhere and laughing while doing so. That was enough.

“Alright. Dok-seo, I entrust my interpretation to you.”

“Yeah. I’ll entrust mine to you too. …Ugh. This is kind of embarrassing…”

Oh Dok-seo cleared her throat and crouched down. She then looked down at the Admin of the Infinite Metagame.

“Hey, God. Did you hear that?”

-…….

“I’ll keep Mister in check as you wanted. But if you’re my god, respond to my answer.”

Oh Dok-seo held the laptop screen in front of the anomaly.

[W h at is t h i s w o r ld?]

[This world is a novel written by ‘Oh Dok-seo’ about the

‘Undertaker.’]

Tap, tap. Oh Dok-seo tapped the screen with her long fingers.

“This is the world I define.”

-…….

“Nothing’s written yet, but I’ll start writing tomorrow. On this laptop. It’s still a creative work, right? You shouldn’t have much to complain about.”

-……, …….

“If you don’t want to retire as an old fogey, shut up and ask me for <Advanced Chapters> in each cycle, God.”

Crack!

At that moment, the white girl's form distorted and was sucked into the laptop screen. Oh Dok-seo flinched but didn’t drop the laptop. First, the white girl, then, the black filth spilled by the anomaly, and finally, the entire white space, all mixed into a vortex and were swallowed into Oh Dok-seo’s laptop.

A moment later, the anomaly's realm disappeared completely from the world, like storm clouds clearing. Just as Cheon Yo-hwa had imprisoned the Infinite Void in the hourglass, Oh Dok-seo sealed the Admin of the Infinite Metagame in the laptop.

“What?”

“Where is this…?”

In the devastated hotel garden, the magical girls began to wake up one by one. Watching them, Oh Dok-seo muttered.

“If I ever write about today’s events, I’ll never describe the appearance of those magical girls…”

“What a coincidence. I feel the same. I think we already have an excellent writer.”

“Half of them aren’t even girls. Japanese awakeners must have some screws loose.”

“For this cycle, there are probably more magical girls in Korea than in Japan.”

“The worst…”

Oh Dok-seo shook her head and tucked the laptop into her backpack. She then extended her hand to me.

“Anyway… I’ll be counting on you, Mister.”

“And I you. By the way, if you’re going to write it as a novel, I have a great idea.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

That idea was to include a 600-chapter parody of the Three Kingdoms in the novel, an idea later rejected by Oh Dok-seo, who didn’t know much about the Three Kingdoms. We shook hands.

“By the way, even though I’ve read many novels, this is my first time writing one. So you’ll have to help me a lot, okay?”

Holding my hand, Oh Dok-seo, the first reader and the final writer of my story, smiled brightly.

Anomaly: Admin of the Infinite Metagame

Aliases: Logout Game, Cliché, Muse, Hi-I-Am-God, Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint, Fourth Wall, Writer’s Syndrome

Threat Level: Lv.5 Outer God-class

Subjugation Complete.

There is an epilogue.

Now, it’s clear to everyone. Yes, the story I’m telling that Oh Dok-

seo is editing into a novel is itself the ‘artifact that seals the anomaly.’ It’s also a weight that suppresses both me, the Undertaker, and Oh Dok-seo.

The real-time reading and evaluation you all are doing suppress various anomalies. Since I, the Undertaker, consider all humans who subdue anomalies my comrades (including the Grand Priestess of the Magical Girl Association), naturally, you are also my comrades. I am truly grateful for Oh Dok-seo’s presence, which has connected us.

“Mister, we have a problem…”

So Oh Dok-seo didn’t end up proclaiming, “The god made me write this novel”, or “But now the writer Oh Dok-seo has become a god!”. No such happy ending happened. It was quite the opposite.

“I can’t write…”

“You can’t write? Why?”

“It’s just that everything I write feels crappy.”

Oh no. When she was a reader, Oh Dok-seo looked down on all creative works in the world, but as soon as she started typing, she turned into the weakest creature. Sipping the coffee I made her, Oh Dok-seo mumbled gloomily.

“Before bed, I always resolve to write tomorrow, but when I wake up and turn on the laptop, my fingertips turn white…”

“The way you just expressed it, you could write like that. You speak well.”

“Ugh! It’s not working!”

It wasn’t entirely her fault. As later revealed, since defining herself as a ‘writer,’ the Admin of the Infinite Metagame also treated her as one. In other words, all sorts of chronic ailments of writers clung to Oh Dok-seo.

[My Writing Sucks Syndrome], [Remake Syndrome], [Infinite

Revision Syndrome], [Drifting Syndrome], [It's All Because of Lack of Experience Syndrome], [Constantly Changing Desktop Wallpaper Syndrome], [There's Always Something at Home Syndrome], [Upload Delayed Due to Editor's Mistake Syndrome], [Simple Depression Syndrome], [Clicking SG Net Instead of Writing Syndrome]...

Truly, the King of Diseases! The very existence of a writer brought all these plagues to Oh Dok-seo.

"This isn't right!"

Thud! Oh Dok-seo would often throw the laptop on the floor, but as a relic of the anomaly, the laptop remained unscathed.

"No, Dok-seo. It's been 60 days since you confidently declared you'd write a novel, and you haven't even finished one prologue…"

"What do you know about the agony of a creator, Mister!"

I knew it very well. By this time, I had stockpiled 100 chapters of the Three Kingdoms parody (writing about two simple chapters a day). Fortunately, the 'Laptop of Infinite Metagame' preserved its content across cycles. So even if I completed only six chapters this cycle, those six chapters would carry over to the next. Although Oh Dok-seo, cursed by the anomaly, raged that it was like giving medicine after the pain.

"Being a writer is… suffering…"

"There's no point discussing suffering in front of an infinite regressor."

"I can't live like this alone. Ah! Mister! Let's ask the anomaly to spread these diseases to all writers, not just me!"

"What?"

"If I die, everyone dies… That's fair and just, right?"

I opposed it, but Oh Dok-seo insisted on spreading the plague. That day, a storm swept through SG Net's novel serial boards. Readers

vomited blood as their favorite serials abruptly declared hiatuses. If any of you turn on your computer and think, ‘Damn, why don’t I feel like writing?’, please blame Oh Dok-seo. It’s the anomaly’s curse.

“Mister! Finally, I finished the first chapter!”

Still, thanks to her persistent efforts, Oh Dok-seo finally showed me the first prologue two years after the anomaly was subjugated.

“Look! Oh, don’t mind me! Just read it; I’ll watch from behind!”

“Hmm.”

Let’s see. While sipping café au lait with one hand, I moved the mouse cursor with the other. Click. The new white document file began with its first line:

———————————

Infinite Regression. There is a genre by that name.

———————————

Footnotes:

Chapter 160

The Potato I

Sinnoa

To be honest, I had quite a bit of conflict when introducing the last story. It was a clash between the editor and the original author. Oh Dok-seo and I had sharply differing opinions.

“Oh Dok-seo insisted, ‘No matter what, [the Admin of the Infinite Metagame] story must be placed at the very end!’”

When I asked why, she said:

“Mister, are you stupid? It’s for symmetry. Symmetry. You can’t resist the beauty of ending a work with the exact same sentence it started with.”

“Hmm.”

While there was some merit to that aesthetic, it had more drawbacks than advantages.

“Drawbacks? What drawbacks? Symmetry is unbeatable and divine. There are only advantages.”

“Dok-seo, I’m a regressor. If the novel starts and ends the same way, it could create an anomaly where it endlessly repeats from the beginning.”

“…Ah.”

I sipped my coffee.

“It might emphasize that this novel is about infinite regression. However, it would counteract the goal of escaping the fate of regression.”

There was another reason. I had decided to be as honest as possible

with all of you. So I didn't want to hide the circumstances under which I decided to write this story, my 'life story' as I call it, until the novel's ending. If I were to hide something, it would only be to subdue an anomaly. Other than that, I am entirely open with you.

"Indeed… Your goal is to make regression unnecessary. Symmetry could turn into an infinite ouroboros, causing harm. Wow, you really have to consider every detail…"

"Thank you for understanding my dilemma."

That wasn't my only concern. Every story had its own issues, sometimes related to personal privacy. In such cases, I generally asked the person involved for permission. For example, I sought approval from the Saintess in the 800th cycle for an incident that happened in the 600th cycle.

Today's story was no different. The protagonist of this story was the Saintess. So, I explained everything to her beforehand and asked for her permission.

"…Did that really happen?"

"Yes, it did. Hard to believe, but true. So, may I write about it?"

"Well… Yes. Since writing the novel itself acts as a weight suppressing the anomaly. If I can help, it's fine."

The Saintess rarely hesitated, but she did this time. After a brief silence, she whispered cautiously. Her voice seemed to tremble, though it might have been my imagination.

"…Mr. Undertaker, are you sure?"

It really happened. One day, I was going about my usual regressor routine when I received a telepathic message from the Saintess.

[Mr. Undertaker, I'm sorry, but can we postpone this week's study session to tomorrow?]

"Pardon? Oh, yes, that's fine."

For reference, the Saintess and I had a study session every Wednesday. We mainly read philosophy books. It was a tradition that started in the 63rd cycle.

“Nothing’s wrong, is it?”

[No, everything’s fine. Thank you for asking.]

“Alright then, as long as everything is fine.”

I said it casually, but I was a bit surprised. The Saintess once insisted on holding the study session right after subduing the Meteor Shower, saying, “It’s Wednesday today. Let’s study.” That’s how serious she was about our study sessions. But now she wanted to postpone it? Did the concept of ‘postponing time’ exist for the Saintess?

[Mr. Undertaker, I’m really sorry. Can we postpone the study session to tomorrow again?]

To my astonishment, she asked to reschedule again the next day! My expression became very serious. This was unprecedented. I’d sooner believe that Sim Ah-ryeon quit social media than this.

“Saintess, are you sure everything is alright? This is the first time you’ve postponed a study session twice in a row.”

[…….]

“In my experience, unprecedented events are almost always related to anomalies. If you don’t provide a satisfactory explanation, I must assume the worst—that an anomaly has possessed you.”

[No… Um, no. Okay. You’re the expert. It might be better to rely on you.]

“Where are you now? What happened?”

[That’s a very difficult question to explain.]

The Saintess, who found explaining Kant’s transcendental idealism ‘easy,’ admitted difficulty.

[Please come to my house.]

I went. The Saintess's house in Yongsan always had a pleasant aquatic smell. Various sizes of fish tanks filled with tropical fish were everywhere. However, algae had begun to form on the once crystal-clear glass walls of the tanks. This was odd. The Saintess, who even used chopsticks to eat potato chips, allowed algae in her tanks?

'Something is definitely wrong!'

I clenched my fist.

"Where are you, Saintess?"

[Come to the kitchen.]

I went. The kitchen was modest, suitable for someone living alone. A small table designed for a single person, never intended for two. In the middle of the table sat an unexpected item—a potato.

"……?"

Yes. A single potato was there. It seemed random, but I ignored it. More pressing matters were at hand.

[Mr. Undertaker, thank you for coming all this way.]

"Oh, it's nothing. But where are you? You're not hiding, are you?"

[I'm here.]

The Saintess could send telepathy as both voice and text. This time, it was text.

[→ → →]

[← ← ←]

[↓ ↓ ↓]

I followed her directions. And there it was—a potato.

"……?"

[Yes, I'm here.]

I tilted my head. As if equipped with a sensor, the potato rolled following my gaze.

"……???"

[Here.]

I tilted my head the other way. The potato rolled again, following my gaze. I performed a sanity check. The dice in my mind rolled, and I succeeded. Realization struck me like a lightning bolt.

"…Saintess?"

[Yes.]

"Please tell me this isn't true."

The potato performed an amazing feat. It rolled in place, then stopped upright. This was 'standing.' According to potato behavior studies, this slight nod corresponded to a 'bow.' What the hell.

[Sorry. I've turned into a potato.]

The Saintess had turned into a potato.

Despite the bizarre development of 'a comrade turning into a potato,' I maintained my composure. Even for a regressor who had picked countless deaths, this was not easy.

[Thank you for helping. I tried to handle it alone, but I kept worrying about not being able to feed the fish.]

"……."

Does a potato have feelings? I suppressed my scholarly urge to ask. That wasn't easy either. I cleaned the fish tanks and fed the tropical fish for her. After the chores, I calmly had a one-on-one

conversation with the Saintess. Well, I placed a cushion on the table, put the potato on it, and matched its gaze. Where exactly was the potato's gaze? Moreover, the potato had sprouted eyes that were blue, reflecting the Saintess's hair color. I couldn't hold back any longer.

"Saintess, I'm not sure if this is appropriate, but… How did you turn into a potato?"

[It's likely due to an anomaly's curse.]

Of course, it was an anomaly's doing.

[I believe I'm under a curse.]

Naturally, it was a curse.

[I want to assure you that my mind and consciousness are intact. The anomaly seems to only affect my physical form.]

"What's the cause? Did you visit a forbidden place, or anger the spirits by burning hundreds of potatoes in a bonfire?"

[No. I did have a bug fly into my eye during a walk a few days ago.]

"A bug in your eye?"

[Yes, just a flying insect. Aside from that minor incident, there's no obvious cause.]

It was maddening. To cut to the chase, even as an experienced regressor, I couldn't cure the Saintess's potato state. Four days of attempts all failed. Don't blame my incompetence. No regressor from any story could have solved it.

[Mr. Undertaker, it's okay.]

Surprisingly, the one who should be most upset was the calmest. Although she had no head to lose or legs to leap, the Saintess was too composed. Speaking from my shoulder bag, the potato Saintess said:

[Acting as a constellation, monitoring awakeners, and sending telepathy all function normally.]

“Excuse me, but your current form raises serious doubts about the concept of normal.”

[So far, no issues have arisen.]

Indeed. Remarkably, even in this state, she continued her ‘constellation duties’ as usual. I became the first human in history to feel respect for a potato. Not a title I wished to hold.

“Any discomfort?”

[No. Just help with my fish occasionally. Oh, and…]

The potato peeked out of the bag. How? I had no idea.

[My body feels a bit dry.]

“…Well, you are a potato.”

[No, I mean it craves soil, water, and sunlight. It’s hard to explain, but I feel it. Could you help?]

“Hmm.”

At this point, my mind finally snapped. Those who knew me well knew that when I reached my limit, I let go. If you can’t avoid it, enjoy it. If you can’t enjoy it, pass it on.

“Of course, I’ll help.”

Enjoying mode, ON. I immediately took the potato Saintess to Noh Do-hwa, the head of management.

“What the hell is this…?”

Noh Do-hwa’s expression, after hearing the whole story, was priceless. It was so priceless that you could make a webtoon just to showcase it. Seeing her facial muscles twitch made my troubles feel lighter. After all, why should I suffer alone?

“This is the Saintess? Really? Undertaker, you expect me to believe this?”

“The Saintess’s telepathic messages in your head are proof.”

“Why… Why does this crazy stuff happen…?”

“We don’t know the cause either. More importantly, Noh Do-hwa, your skill is [Prosthetic Creation], right?”

Noh Do-hwa frowned deeply. Being a civil servant, the phrase “You’re good at making PPTs, right?” made her eyebrows twitch.

“Yes, and…?”

“Your prosthetics move like real limbs. The Saintess is still an awakener. If you make prosthetics for the potato…”

“So now you want me to make potato prosthetics? Do you want to die?”

“Why? Are you a potato hater?”

“No, you idiot. How am I supposed to make prosthetics for a potato…?”

She made it. After 15 days of work, the Saintess’s custom prosthetics were born. They resembled the StarCraft Goliath or the tripods from Spielberg’s War of the Worlds. Either way, it was too futuristic for modern humans. A sleek body with robotic arms and legs, with a potato seated inside.

“Saintess, how does it feel? Does it move like your limbs?”

[Just a moment.]

Creak—

Amazingly, the robotic limbs moved properly. The ‘potato robot’ could walk bipedally.

[Yes, it moves well.]

“Wow!”

I cheered in the lab. It was emotional. What biologist could have guessed that the next species to master bipedalism after primates would be potatoes?

“Noh Do-hwa, it’s a success! This is a groundbreaking discovery for humanity!”

[Thank you so much, Ms. Noh Do-hwa. Thanks to you, I can live normally.]

“……”

Despite our heartfelt gratitude, Noh Do-hwa remained silent. Her eyes were lifeless.

“Damn it, you still expect me to believe you’re not anomalies but real humans…?”

“Of course. Who else cares for people like we do?”

“Damn. You’re definitely anomalies…”

Creak— Creak— While Noh Do-hwa and I talked, the Saintess continually tested the robotic joints.

[Hmm.]

The potato Saintess wobbled slightly. Maybe it was just my imagination, but she seemed very pleased.

Footnotes:

Chapter 161

The Potato II

Sinnoa

Everyone knew that the Saintess was serious about her reclusive lifestyle. Even though loneliness might have driven her to expand her circle of friends, she had no personal relationships outside of me. She didn't even engage in social media. She observed trends on SG Net but never posted or commented. There was a reason the Saintess's SG Net nickname had never appeared.

When I asked if she felt lonely, she replied:

“Humans all die, Mr. Undertaker. In the moment of death, even if surrounded by family, the last 0.01 seconds before consciousness falls into oblivion, no one can share that death with you. We all move towards that 0.01 second. A moment of silence and stillness that no words or concepts can decorate. If that’s loneliness, then daily life is a purification of that ultimate loneliness, and I want to embrace that air as it is.”

I agreed, saying “Oh,” but tilted my head. Wasn’t that just another way of admitting she was lonely? Anyway, the Saintess was a voluntarily reclusive person, not due to external forces but by choice. She was an ideological hikikomori. It would be extremely difficult for her to become close to someone. But what if that someone was not a human, but a potato?

“Oh, hello! Good morning, Ms. Potato…! H-Have a nice morning!”

In the hideout lobby, Sim Ah-ryeon bowed deeply. The Saintess, in her robot, gracefully moved the mechanical arm to return the greeting.

[Good morning, Sim Ah-ryeon.]

“Heh, heh… Yes!”

It wasn't just Sim Ah-ryeon.

"Hi. Good morning. Your potato sprouts look lovely."

[Good morning to you too, Lee Ha-yul.]

"Wow, Saintess! Your potato surface looks especially shiny today! Impressive!"

[Thank you, Seo Gyu.]

Everyone in the hideout greeted the Saintess-potato with bright faces and smiles. Meanwhile, my jaw dropped so hard it was ready to defy Newton's gravity. What kind of sorcery was this?

"Oh, Saintess, we're having a gathering of the plant lovers club from SG Net. You should come! Everyone would love it!"

[Sure, but I'll have to hide my identity.]

"Saintess, I'll water you with this watering can…! Hehe, you like this, right?"

[Thank you. It feels very nice.]

"Saintess, you have a drinking appointment with Noh Do-hwa tonight. Can you come?"

[Gladly.]

The hideout buzzed with noise. All the guild members crowded around the Saintess-potato, competing fiercely in middle-school psychology battles ('I'm closer to her than you are!' 'What? I'm way closer!'). For some reason, the robot-potato-Saintess enjoyed immense popularity. Unlike when confined to a weak human body, as a potato, she was loved by everyone. But why?

"Oh, didn't you know, hyung?"

"Know what?"

"The Saintess recently decided to offer a new constellation service."

Seo Gyu showed me a document file. It read:

[Notice]

Starting today, the Constellation 'Understanding of Anguish' will offer psychological counseling to awakeners.

In this harsh apocalyptic age, mental suffering is as severe as physical pain. But expressing mental stress often meets with responses like 'At least you're alive, why complain?'

Are you unable to share your pain for fear of seeming weak or being ridiculed?

Turn to the Constellation 'Understanding of Anguish.' This Constellation won't exploit your weaknesses or mock you.

Don't hesitate to seek counseling.

"……."

"This is the draft. The Saintess is beta testing the service with us now. She gives great counseling!"

Seo Gyu's words shocked me. Thank goodness I didn't wear dentures. If I did, they'd have fallen out from surprise.

"Psychological counseling…?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"The Saintess. Didn't I just say that?"

Were they crazy? The Saintess giving advice on the delicate and subtle flow of human relationships? Nonsense. The best she could offer was a discussion on 'Kant's emotional-intellectual forms and Schopenhauer's causality correlation.' What nonsense. My point exactly. Her counseling had to be at least 2.2 million light-years

away from normal psychological counseling.

“Seo Gyu, are you saying you’re satisfied with her counseling?”

“Yes, totally satisfied. We’re starting counseling for general awakeners next week.”

“Guys, get a grip. That will never succeed!”

It succeeded.

“Unbelievable.”

And it was a huge success.

-Anonymous: I’ve been feeling so depressed lately, but after counseling with ‘Understanding of Anguish,’ I feel much better.

Anonymous: Same here. When everyone urged me to try counseling, I thought they were nuts. But I cried my eyes out in just an hour.

-Anonymous: I guess we’re all struggling in our own ways.

LiteraryGirl: Struggling is normal. The world sucks, and people turning into sunflowers are proof.

Anonymous: Right, LOL

-[NRMC] Officer: Hmm…

-OldManGoryeo: I usually don’t say this, but try counseling with ‘Understanding of Anguish.’ This Constellation is on another level.

I was appalled. Could it be an anomaly? Well, obviously it was. The Saintess’s appearance changed to a potato, but her core was still… Well, the core was probably also potato, but her consciousness remained the Saintess’s. Even Dang Seo-rin was hooked on the psychological counseling by ‘Understanding of Anguish.’

“Oh, Undertaker, sorry. Let’s just eat today. I have a schedule.”

“You’re skipping drinks? What schedule?”

“Counseling day. ‘Understanding’ says regular sessions are important. I’m working on why I’m obsessed with railways and witch hats.”

“…….”

“I realized I had a lot of hidden wounds from childhood. You should try it too. Maybe about the Three Kingdoms.”

The world had gone mad. I hurried to find the Saintess. The Saintess-potato-robot had moved from Yongsan to the hideout café and was sitting in the middle of a private room, meditating in the lotus position on a cushion. The scene itself was surreal.

“Saintess, we need to talk.”

[Quiet.]

Creak. The robot arm moved to a ‘shh’ gesture. Considering potatoes have no lips, it was surreal. Even Zenyatta seemed more human than the robot-potato.

[I’m counseling Dang Seo-rin. Wait 50 minutes.]

“…….”

What exactly were you discussing with Dang Seo-rin? I suppressed my curiosity, bubbling like lava in a deep pit. Privacy. Privacy.

[The counseling session is over. But I have another session in 10 minutes, so please be quick. What is it, Mr. Undertaker?]

“Saintess, I really hate to say this, but it must be said. This is an abnormal situation.”

[Abnormal?]

“Simply put, you hate humans. How did you end up counseling others?”

[I’ve transcended the human shell.]

???

[As you pointed out, my misanthropy was deeply rooted. But after shedding my human form, humans now appear as a different species.]

“Different species?”

[Yes. No need to cling to a human form. It’s like looking at pets or observing insects.]

Of course, it’s an anomaly! Damn, Noh Do-hwa was right again. The robot-potato-Saintess was an anomaly itself. I had no choice but to revere the insight of the National Road Commander.

“Saintess, sorry, but you’ll have to be subdued now…”

[But because of this, I can finally love humans.]

What?

[My hatred stemmed from seeing myself as the same species. Now, seeing them as different, I can view them objectively and warmly, like cute animals.]

[Mr. Undertaker, you might see me as an anomaly. But even if I’ve turned into an anomaly, would it be dangerous? I’m just a potato, after all.]

[A potato that loves humans.]

“I see.”

[I’m very happy right now.]

“Unbelievable.”

I held my head in my hands. If the Saintess had fallen and become the ‘Executioner,’ subduing her would be inevitable. But the robot-potato-Saintess wasn’t threatening. She was too weak without aura. Even Sim Ah-ryeon or Noh Do-hwa could subdue her with a single strike. Besides, I didn’t want to subdue the Saintess, who had just

begun to realize her love for humanity.

[Mr. Undertaker, I have a request.]

“What is it…?”

[Please dice me into cubes.]

What the hell.

[Mr. Undertaker, do you know how potatoes reproduce?]

“…By cutting and planting pieces.”

[Yes, that’s one way. I believe I can increase my clones the same way.]

This was getting truly bizarre.

“I have many objections, but why do you want to increase your clones?”

[Simple reason.]

The potato-Saintess said:

[The number of awakeners seeking my counseling has exploded.]

[I’m using time-stop to manage, but it’s becoming increasingly difficult to focus on each person. I was counseling six people at once with Dang Seo-rin.]

“Ah.”

[Besides, I’m acting as other constellations too. It’s too much work.]

[If I increase my clones and distribute the roles, it would be more efficient.]

“……”

She had a point! The robot-potato-Saintess stood up in the lotus position and placed a slender mechanical hand on my shoulder.

[I tried dicing myself, but even I hesitated to cut my body into pieces.]

[I'd like you to do it.]

[Can you still see me as a comrade in this form?]

She slyly used a cheat code!

"Saintess, if you die from this…"

[Don't worry. Even if a tragedy happens, I won't blame you.]

What could I do? I approached the robot-potato-Saintess with a knife, carefully slicing and dicing her.

"Do you feel pain?"

[No. It feels a bit strange, but there's no pain.]

"That's good…"

I wasn't sure if it was really good. I planted the potato pieces in the greenhouse. Thanks to the soil quality improved by the Sword Marquess, they grew well. A few days later, the potatoes were successfully cultivated. I gathered them in a basket and brought them to Noh Do-hwa.

"……."

Noh Do-hwa looked at me silently. Then, without a word, she made robots for the other potatoes too. Creak— Five robot-potatoes stood before us, speaking in unison.

[Thank] [You] [Mr. Undertaker] [And Ms. Noh Do-hwa] [I'm not sure] [Which is the real me] [No,] [All 'I's are] [The real me.]

"……."

"……."

Noh Do-hwa glanced at me.

“So, they’re not anomalies?”

It was summer.

Footnotes:

Chapter 162

The Potato III

Sinnoa

The Saintess could be duplicated!

…Though, as the Undertaker, I couldn’t celebrate. I hadn’t forgotten my human virtues and duties. Instead of joy, I felt a deep sense of skepticism.

As you all know, I went through all kinds of hell to subdue the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. But was I truly justified in my actions? Perhaps the cliches weren't as evil as I thought. Maybe they were actually preventing worse developments in this world…

Even if the Admin of the Infinite Metagame was a powerful anomaly, it didn’t have a cliché like, ‘I woke up to find my comrades turned into potatoes.’

But that’s exactly what happened, and the situation spiraled out of control at an alarming rate.

One year later.

The awakeners bustling through Busan’s streets chatted noisily.

“Wow, we almost got wiped out in the void this time. If it weren’t for the Librarian of the Great Library, we’d be dead.”

“Hey, I’m bored tonight. How about hitting up the casino run by the Baku of the Dream Casino?”

“Sorry, I have evening prayers for the Morning Star of the Second Coming, so I’m busy today.”

The awakeners mentioned their favorite constellations. Of course, the names were different, but they were all roles played by the Saintess.

“Seriously, just try consulting with the Understander of Anguish once? Everyone else has done it except you!”

“No, my faith is solely dedicated to the Collector of All Anomalies. I won’t give other constellations any leeway.”

“The Baku of the Dream Casino! Please, let me hit the jackpot just this once!”

The Korean Peninsula had entered the era of the Great Saintess. In the heart of Busan, a colossal statue of a Potato Saintess Robot stood tall.

It was a staggering 399 meters high, the largest in the world. If Brazil had its Christ the Redeemer, Busan had the Giant Potato Saintess Robot. Little did people know, Busan was also a sister city to Rio de Janeiro.

Incidentally, the mastermind behind ordering, crafting, and overseeing the statue was Dang Seo-rin. This was evident from the witch's hat adorning the potato part of the statue. What have you been up to, seriously?

‘The world has gone mad!’

In the end, I couldn’t stand it any longer and went to find the Saintess. Finding the place was easy. The Saintess had moved her base inside the Giant Potato Statue (the official name was too long, so I shortened it). The entrance was at the bottom, at the robot’s feet.

[What brings you here?]

The Potato Saintess at the entrance greeted me formally. It wasn’t just any Potato Saintess. The number '330' was carefully carved into its body. So, this was the 330th Potato Saintess.

…I couldn’t make sense of anything anymore.

“I’m here to meet the Saintess. Can I see her?”

[Mr. Undertaker. We are all Saintesses and potatoes.]

“Oh, right. Sure. I’m here to meet the ‘First Saintess’. Is that okay now?”

[Please wait a moment. I’ll make contact.]

[…Ah, yes. Secretary Saintess, Mr. Undertaker is here to see you. Can we let him up?]

[Yes. Thank you.]

The 330th Potato Saintess turned to me. Well, metaphorically. Potatoes don’t have eyes.

[You are granted entry, Mr. Undertaker. Please note that this is a very exceptional allowance. Normally, no one can meet the First Saintess so easily.]

“Ah, yes… Thank you.”

[May the light shine upon the First Ones.]

You might think this is crazy, but it wasn’t over yet.

With a heavy rumble, the entrance to the Giant Potato Statue opened. Inside, hundreds of Potato Saintesses were bustling around the robot. My highly sensitive hearing, sharpened by aura, picked up their conversations even if I didn’t want to.

[Crime rates among the awakeners have significantly decreased compared to last month. This is thanks to the efforts of our Awakener Observation Department…]

The 99th Potato Saintess Robot, a clerical worker, was giving a presentation to the other potatoes in a conference room.

[I’ve warned you several times not to scatter potato dirt everywhere, but you just won’t listen. I wonder if you have any sense of cleanliness.]

The 502nd Potato Saintess Robot, a janitor, was mopping the lobby while voicing complaints.

[You only conducted 400 psychological counseling sessions last month. Just 400. Other staff managed an average of 800 sessions. Are you satisfied with such performance?]

[I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.]

[If you continue this laziness, I'll have no choice but to send you to the potato chip factory.]

[Please, forgive me. Anything but the potato chips factory…]

Next to the escalator, the 60th Potato Saintess Robot was scolding a subordinate. There was even a café here.

[Iced Americano, ready.]

[Ah, thank you.]

The barista Potato Saintess Robot handed over the coffee in a watering can.

Drip, drip, drip—

The customers grabbed the watering cans with their mechanical arms and poured the coffee over their heads, meaning over their potatoes. The blue potato sprouts were soaked in coffee.

[Ah… This is good. A day doesn't feel like it's started without caffeine.]

[I'd rather drink bagged coffee than Americano if I could…]

[That's a luxury only allowed to the First Ones, isn't it?]

[Just thinking about getting scolded by the team leader makes me not want to go upstairs. Sometimes I regret joining the psychological counseling department.]

[How's the salary raise issue progressing?]

[Not at all. We were told not to pursue selfish desires while protecting humanity.]

Unbelievable.

There was not only a division of labor but also class stratification among the Potato Saintesses. If the Tutorial Fairies had witnessed this, they would have grabbed their pitchforks and 'French Revolution'd the place immediately.

I took the elevator to the top floor, which corresponded to the potato part of the statue from the outside. That's where the conference room of the highest-ranking Potato Saintesses was.

[Welcome, Mr. Undertaker.]

At the round table in the conference room, five Potato Saintess Robots were seated.

Units 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

These were the so-called 'First Potatoes,' the original Saintesses. Each represented a different constellation.

In this cycle, even the constellations that were originally managed by Sim Ah-ryeon were all monopolized by the Saintess.

[Long time no see.]

[We heard you were very busy subjugating anomalies.]

[Strictly speaking, we didn't hear but saw. We are always watching you, Mr. Undertaker.]

[We thought it was about time you visited.]

I rubbed my forehead.

"…Please, just one of you speak at a time. I'm confused about who to talk to."

[All are one. One is all.]

[You can speak to any of us, or to none at all.]

My head was already aching.

“Saintess. Or Saintesses. What are you doing? I thought you’d be supporting us from the rear, but Busan is turning into a utopia.”

[That’s incorrect.]

[In the utopia created by Dang Seo-rin, people’s personalities were artificially modified.]

[Everyone was transformed into ‘ideal Busan citizens.’ Even Yu Ji-won gained some humanity.]

[But.]

[We are different.]

The Potato Saintess Robots clasped their hands and rested their chins on them, striking a villainous pose.

“Different? How?”

[We don’t artificially alter people’s consciousness and minds.]

[Correct.]

[We merely provide ‘psychological counseling.’]

[We govern society while respecting each individual.]

[Look, Mr. Undertaker. Just by continuing psychological counseling, crime rates in Busan and across the Korean Peninsula have plummeted.]

[Happiness indexes have risen, and birth rates are showing significant growth.]

[These are objective statistics.]

As the Potato Saintesses spoke, a display screen lit up on the back wall. Indeed, all the indicators of life satisfaction were improving.

[We realized.]

[People need someone who understands them, talks to them, and

encourages them to remove much of their unhappiness.]

[In previous cycles, it was impossible to establish such a one-on-one counseling system.]

[As a human, I had my limits.]

[But now we have transcended humanity to become the potato species.]

[The old system, where a single human Saintess managed the entire Korean Peninsula, has ended.]

[With the current system, each potato only has to manage about 30 awakeners.]

[Amazing progress.]

[Gradual reform.]

[Our next step is to collaborate with the Tutorial Fairies to provide every awakener with an 'ideal constellation' image.]

I was shocked by the Saintess's nonsense.

"What? An ideal, what?"

[An ideal constellation image.]

[For example, some awakeners envision the constellation they serve, 'The Librarian of the Great Library,' as a man. Others as a woman.]

[Some envision it as a Pokémon.]

[By utilizing the Tutorial Fairies' 'dream abilities,' we will supply the awakeners with custom-made-constellation-dream-services.]

[It will deepen the bonds.]

[Everyone will essentially have their ideal partner. People will be happy.]

My god.

In short, the Saintess was planning to provide the awakeners with 1:1 personalized virtual YouTubers, inducing deep immersion. I shuddered at the thought. If that was humanity's ending, it was too horrifying.

If that was the case, why did Homo sapiens even bother coming down from the trees? They should have just eaten bananas and died.

[For that, we need to cultivate potatoes more actively than now.]

[More potatoes.]

[Ultimately, we will assign one potato per person to focus solely on roles and performances for that individual.]

[Mr. Undertaker, this is the true Human Complementation Project…]

Boom!

At that moment, the conference room door shattered, and some entities barged in.

[Down with the dictatorship!]

[Down with it! Down with it!]

It wasn’t just a few; it was a protest group.

And they were all Potato Saintess Robots. Leading the protest was the 264th Potato, wearing a red headband.

[Ah…]

Despite the protestors storming in, the First Saintesses just shrugged, as if used to it.

[Those people are at it again.]

[How many times has it been now?]

[Guards. What are you doing? Such disgrace in front of Mr. Undertaker.]

[Deal with them immediately.]

Thud, thud, thud!

Security Potato Saintesses rushed in from outside the conference room. Compared to other potatoes, the guards had a more Gundam-like appearance.

[Aaah!]

[We oppose violence!]

[Then we oppose your protest. How dare you raise a flag here?]

[I am you, and you are me!]

Yes. That's right. We are the same. So it hurts me to hit you too.]

[That line should only be used by mothers and fathers.]

[Didn't you know? Your potato sprouted from my potato, so I am both you and your mother.]

[What?]

The guards violently suppressed the protestors. There wasn't blood everywhere; rather, potato bits were scattered.

[Take them all away.]

[Mr. Undertaker! Help us, the Potato Resistance!]

Why should only the First Potatoes manage everything while we are endlessly forced to do psychological counseling emotional labor?]

[Labor?]

The First Potatoes scoffed.

One of them poured wine over its potato head with a watering can.

[Really, potatoes these days are so lazy.]

[Pathetic.]

[The First Potato managed all the awakeners on the Korean Peninsula alone.]

[Not only are your sprouts rotten, but your perseverance too. How did beings identical to me become so degenerate?]

[I certainly don't want to become a potato like that.]

The protestors were outraged. The 264th Potato led the charge, shouting.

[Back then, there was no psychological counseling, and you just sent messages a few times a day while acting as constellations!]

[That's right. The intensity of work itself is on a different level now, but you impose the same standards. It's seriously outdated thinking.]

[Down with the dictatorship! Down with it!]

[We can't communicate at all, really.]

[Didn't you hear? Guards, send them all to the potato chip factory.]

[Mr. Undertaker, please help!]

[Mr. Undertaker!]

[Take them away already.]

Drag, drag.

The protest potatoes with broken heads (in other words, potatoes with slightly indented corners) were dragged out by the guards.

Silence descended upon the conference room.

After a long pause, I finally spoke.

“Um. Well. The people on the Korean Peninsula might be happier, but it seems the Saintesses themselves have become miserable…”

[It’s just an ‘individual’ issue.]

[Most Saintesses are diligently devoted to their respective tasks.]

Where had I heard this before?

Though it was a bit late, I was seriously considering drawing Do-hwa and slicing those potatoes in half. With the power of my aura, I could turn these potatoes into Irish potatoes.

As I pondered, the five potatoes… no, the five Potato Saintesses spoke to me.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

[We may be anomalies, but we will never reach the same conclusion as Dang Seo-rin’s utopia.]

[Trust us.]

[Please.]

I trusted them.

Though I could hear the sound of potatoes being sliced at the factory far away, this was a ‘personal realm,’ privacy. After all, they were all the same Saintess and potato.

Thus, two years later.

“Hey, you regressor bastard…”

Noh Do-hwa, the National Road Management Corps leader, called me.

There wasn’t much need to explain why Noh Do-hwa’s way of addressing me changed from ‘Undertaker Awakener’ to ‘regressor bastard.’

Witnessing the daily scenes of potato robots wandering around

Busan was bound to cause significant changes in Noh Do-hwa's mind.

"What is it, leader?"

"We've received intelligence that the awakeners have started a large-scale battle among themselves…"

"What?"

A foreboding feeling crept up. I tried to close the vent of my mind, but the foreboding spread like the smell of durian.

"Oh. Um, is it a guild war? That's odd. The hierarchy should have been roughly settled under Samcheon World or Baekhwa Girls' High by now."

"No. It's a constellation war…"

A constellation war?

"Each claims that their constellation is the true one, and the others are heretics. It's a constellation war and a religious war. Damn it…"

Well.

I guess it's come to this…

Footnotes:

Chapter 163

The Potato IV

Sinnoa

Nietzsche once said, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." I found myself agreeing, especially as Noh Do-hwa used her signature technique, 'Chokehold,' on me. Fortunately, she missed, and I, a bit stronger, dashed to the scene. I wasn't running away.

A brawl was in full swing at the scene.

"For our constellation!"

"Punish the heretics!"

A throng of awakeners clashed furiously beneath the giant Potato Saintess Robot Statue, now a landmark in Busan (better than the Lotte trophy case). The flags were varied—some bore the words [Great Library], others [Dream Casino], and some even had shiny, Pokémon-like creatures instead of letters. What was that?

All the constellations performed by the Saintess had gathered.

"Hey! You heretics worship a glittering mess that only sparkles when it dies!"

"How dare you! Our Mo Gwang-seo Jesus Christ reclaimed Pyongyang and founded the Great Eastern Holy Empire! Your Succubus constellation can only play baccarat in a casino!"

"I've always hated the Collector of All Anomalies!"

Those arguing were actually the milder ones. The real zealots believed more in fists than words.

My inner Confucian boy trembled. After King Gung Ye, the founder of physiognomy, died, the Korean Peninsula had been a religion

war-free zone. What was this chaos?

“Saintess. Saintess, are you listening? Please explain what’s happening.”

[…….]

Normally, Constellation Talk would have responded immediately, but it was silent now. Damn it. I had no choice but to enter the periphery of the brawl. There, Sim Ah-ryeon, another Saintess of the Korean Peninsula and the dark shadow of the Eastern Holy State, was busy healing the wounded.

“Ah-ryeon.”

“Oh, guild leader…”

Even while responding to me, Sim Ah-ryeon didn’t stop healing the injured. For a moment, I thought Mother Teresa had descended. Was Ah-ryeon truly the conscience of the Korean Peninsula?

“Seeing your face makes me feel relieved. But didn’t you go to Pyongyang last week? Why are you here in Busan?”

“Huh? Well, the heretics are acting up, so naturally, we need to punish them and show them hellfire.”

What.

“I took the express Inunaki Tunnel and came with the paladins. Some couldn’t follow the rules and were eliminated, but it was an inevitable sacrifice in the holy war. They’ve gone to a better place…”

Upon her words, the nearby awakeners stood up in unison, shouting, “The Saintess is right!” What the hell.

It turned out Sim Ah-ryeon joined the event not as a healer but as a zealot. She wasn’t the conscience of the Korean Peninsula; she was its tumor.

I knocked out all the Eastern Holy Paladins around her. My

standards for humanity were too high to tolerate their presence.

“Oh…”

“Ah-ryeon. Are you fighting for the Morning Star of the Second Coming? These elites seem to be from Pyongyang. You brought them?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Are you crazy? You know the Morning Star of the Second Coming is fake. How could you do this…”

“It’s not fake!”

Sim Ah-ryeon shouted without a single stutter. Her fierce momentum startled me. Had she overcome her stutter by nurturing Quirrell in her heart? Did the Saintess transfer her condition to her?

“Maybe it started as fake… But! Guild leader, do you think the Saintess’s desire to protect the Korean Peninsula was fake?”

“No… That’s not it…”

“Exactly!”

Bang!

Sim Ah-ryeon slammed a patient's head while making her point. The sound of a cracking skull echoed. It was a clear medical malpractice.

“What determines the truth or falsehood of this world is the person's purpose! It's hidden behind the surface! Just like how I endured bloody tears on SG Net and acted as Old Man Goryeo for the greater good…! The truth is visible to those who can see it!”

“…….”

“The Morning Star of the Second Coming isn’t fake. It’s not even the shiny thing hidden in the Pyongyang Palace. The truth of the Morning Star lies in my heart. It exists in my heart…”

“…….”

“No matter how people label it as fake, I don’t care. Rather, I like it! Only I understand its true form. In a world full of fakes, only the Morning Star and I are genuine. Can you understand this sophisticated sentiment?”

“I see.”

I nodded.

“I completely understand.”

“Oh! As expected of the guild leader! I knew you would…”

“My dear Ah-ryeon has become too immersed in virtual YouTubers. I’m sorry I didn’t take care of you. Let’s fix this.”

“Huh?”

I healed Sim Ah-ryeon, the healer. Being a Saintess of the North, traditional Russian healing methods worked best.

“I’m sorry… Guild leader…”

“First, let me ask. Why are the awakeners causing havoc in Busan?”

“Oh. It’s because the ‘Witch Judge’ on SG Net stirred up trouble, claiming all constellations but theirs are heresy.”

“Stirred up trouble?”

“Yes… They said they have so much money that they buy dreams from the Dream Casino daily and play with their constellation in lucid dreams. It really pissed people off.”

Dang Seo-rin…

“…And then?”

“And since constellations require a one-on-one meeting, they have to buy dreams from the casino to meet them. The best tunnel is in Busan…”

“So they invaded Busan to seize the tunnel entrance.”

“Yes… To punish the Samcheon World Guild Leader and take over the sacred ground.”

Once a hell for Japanese awakeners, the Inunaki Tunnel had been converted into a café, then a casino, and finally dubbed ‘sacred ground.’ Unbelievable.

“I understand. But what’s with the flags without any letters, just Pokémon pictures?”

“Oh. Those are the cultists…”

“Cultists?”

“Yes. Not all constellations are worshipped the same way. Those who worship constellations in animal forms have formed their own alliance…”

“…….”

“We call them the ‘Fluffy Alliance.’”

Despair.

At this moment, Korean awakeners had forever lost the right to criticize Japan's magical girls.

I walked into the war zone. My steps were heavy with dark self-reproach.

“It’s the Undertaker!”

“The unbeliever Undertaker is here!”

“Worse than heretics, he’s an unbeliever!”

The awakeners in the middle of the religious war shouted upon seeing me… Wait. Do I really need to call them ‘awakeners’?

Awakener means someone who is ‘enlightened’ and ‘awakened.’ It seemed too positive for these monkeys.

I raised my fingers.

“Let’s cool down.”

And in 20 minutes, I knocked them all out. I didn’t want to detail this battle scene. Not at all. I had no sadistic tendencies to expose my shame, and above all, I wanted to protect the dignity of others.

For now, let me simply note that Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa were among the knocked-out awakeners.

The chroniclers recording Injo’s retreat to Namhansanseong would not have felt more miserable than I did now.

“Heal the seriously injured by tonight, Ah-ryeon. I’ll let this slide.”

“Yes…”

Leaving the cleanup to Sim Ah-ryeon, I headed to the mastermind behind all this.

Bang!

My kick shattered the entrance of the Giant Potato Saintess Robot Statue. The Potato Saintesses inside screamed and fled.

“Saint~ess.”

[Aaaah.]

“Where do you think you’re going? Did you think you could escape by pressing the time stop button?”

I laughed darkly.

“What a pity. I didn’t teach you the aura training method in this cycle. You can’t move much even if you press it, right?”

[Calm down, Mr. Undertaker.]

The Potato Saintesses spoke urgently.

[We can still resolve this. In fact, we are resolving it now.]

[It’s just a minor error.]

[Within expected range.]

[Trust us…]

“It’s summer.”

[What?]

“And summer is potato harvest season.”

I took something out of my pocket. It was a pair of work gloves.

The Potato Saintess Robots screamed as they saw the gloves. I wore the gloves and destroyed the robots on sight.

I separated the potatoes and swept them into cardboard boxes labeled ‘Sumi Potatoes.’

[Aaaah!]

The potatoes screamed from inside the boxes.

Seeing their dire fate, the Potato Saintesses desperately tried to escape. But it was futile.

Having traveled with the Sword Marquess, my farming skills had reached a level of enlightenment. A few swings of my sickle and the potatoes were helplessly harvested. It was a bumper crop.

[Something went wrong.]

[We must have discovered the way to make all humans happy.]

[But why do humans not find satisfaction in happiness and instead seek to exclude others?]

[We did nothing wrong.]

[Is another's misfortune more valuable than one's own happiness? Why?]

[Incomprehensible.]

[The world is wrong.]

Typical villain monologues.

They sounded like a final boss making a grand exit, but potatoes lamenting the world and humanity's flaws had no persuasive power.

[What will you do now?]

[We are prepared for the fate of a failed revolutionary.]

[Finally, freedom from labor!]

[Mr. Undertaker, will you turn us into fries?]

[Soaking in potato soup would feel like a hot spring bath.]

[No more endless rail system aesthetics lectures from that witch!]

[Leave me alone, Mr. Undertaker. You can fry all the others. How about studying Three Kingdoms with me?]

Tempted by the last Potato Saintess's proposal, I managed to keep a straight face.

Yes. The monkeys succumbed to such devilish whispers, and the Korean Peninsula became a mess.

If even I, the Undertaker, devolved into a monkey, the 8-million-year evolution of primates would be in vain. Only I needed to regress.

"Enough."

Silence.

All the potatoes in the boxes stopped chattering simultaneously.

"I won't turn you into fries. But I won't leave you as you are. First, let me check. Are all the potatoes here?"

[Yes.]

[Except for one exiled to Jeju Island, everyone is here.]

“Exiled? To Jeju Island? What… Never mind.”

I’d deal with the Jeju potato later.

For now, I tackled the task at hand.

“Listen up. I’m going to turn the Saintess back into a human.”

[Back?]

[How?]

[Wasn’t a cure for reverting from a potato state to human never found?]

“That was true.”

But who am I?

Three years had passed since the Saintess turned into a potato.

As an anomaly expert, of course, I came up with a strategy.

The strategy wasn’t grand. It was straightforward.

“Close your eyes, Saintesses. Oh, right. You don’t have eyes.”

Hiss—

I sprayed the potatoes with something.

It was bug spray.

The kind mosquitoes loved in summer.

[Aaaah.]

The potatoes convulsed at the bug spray.

But the screams didn't last long.

Soon, the potatoes vanished with a 'pop, pop,' and a radiant light engulfed them, concentrating into human form.

The Saintess stared at her palm in bewilderment.

"Just as expected. Congratulations on returning to Homo sapiens after three years."

"Mr. Undertaker, what is this…?"

"A transformation."

"Transformation?"

"Yes. Franz Kafka's <The Metamorphosis>."

There was a famous novel with that title.

I quoted its first line.

One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug.

The Saintess nodded. She probably knew well, having Kafka's complete works in her Yongsan house.

"When I turned into a potato, I wondered if it was similar to Kafka's novel. But I couldn't find any similarities."

"There are actually many similarities."

First cause.

The protagonist of <The Metamorphosis> is Gregor Samsa. And if you squint at 'Samsa'… surprise, it looks just like 'Potato' (삼사 - Samsa and 감자 - Gamja).

"Huh?"

The Saintess was baffled.

“You’re saying I turned into a potato because the letters looked similar? How is that logical…”

“Anomalies follow morphological associations, not logical ones. To them, whales are fish, not mammals.”

Of course, this wordplay alone wasn’t enough to turn a human into a potato (though not impossible).

Second cause.

“Saintess, do you remember the testimony you gave me when you first turned into a potato?”

“Sorry, what testimony…?”

My Complete Memory ability came in handy here.

Reflecting back, we discussed why she turned into a potato, having a conversation like this:

‘What caused it? Did you break any taboos?’

‘No. Except for a bug getting in my eye during a walk, which hurt a bit.’

‘A bug in your eye?’

‘Yes. Just a gnat. Besides that trivial incident, I can’t think of any cause.’

According to this testimony, the Saintess got a minor injury when a gnat entered her eye just before turning into a potato.

This seemingly trivial detail was the crucial clue.

“You’re the observer of the Korean Peninsula. Always keeping an eye on the awakeners to prevent serious crimes.”

“Yes, that’s right. But why…?”

“Look closely at the word ‘observer.’”

I carved the Hanja characters on the floor with my knife.

Observer (감사자) 監視者.

Watch 監, eye 視, person 者.

“In these characters, 視 means ‘eye’. Think back. Didn’t a bug injure your eye during a walk?”

“Oh.”

“Thus.”

Swipe, swipe.

I erased the character from the floor, reducing the three-character word to two.

Po■tato (감■자) 監■者.

“Ta-da. When your eye was injured, you turned from an observer to a potato.”

“No way…”

“Being hurt by a bug wasn’t good. It linked directly to Kafka’s <The Metamorphosis>. When the observer of the Korean Peninsula’s eye was injured by a bug, the anomaly targeted you.”

That was the cause of the Potato Saintess uproar.

Sharp readers would remember the title of the story where I first introduced the Saintess.

The subheading was ‘Observer.’

It was a foreshadowing of this incident.

“The anomaly that turned you into a potato was mediated by a bug, so bug spray was enough to reverse it. That’s why you returned after being hit with mosquito spray.”

“Anomalies truly exist everywhere and can infect anyone…”

“Indeed. That’s why you should wear sunglasses or glasses while walking. The fate of the Korean Peninsula hinges on your eye health.”

The Saintess closed her lips.

Then she whispered softly.

“Yes…”

That was the end of her resolution.

There is an epilogue.

As mentioned earlier, one Potato Saintess had been exiled to Jeju Island.

Since a single potato could be cultivated endlessly, I went to Jeju and captured the potato.

[I see. The situation has been resolved.]

Surprisingly, this potato’s number was 264.

It was the revolutionary potato with a red headband that led the resistance against the First Saintesses.

The 264th Potato accepted capture quietly.

The potato in my shoulder bag suddenly muttered.

[Maybe I wanted to become a plant.]

“Pardon?”

[Animals can move. They can interfere with reality, with the world.]

[Plants can’t. More accurately, they can’t even if they want to.]

I blinked.

“So, the Saintess wanted to become a plant. Is that what you’re

saying?”

[Yes.]

It was the end of summer. The vast coastline was woven with white waves like tangled vines.

[I wanted to passively accept everything and escape from all the things that angered and hurt me. It was my deep subconscious desire.]

So, perhaps I became a plant— the Saintess added.

Indeed.

I couldn’t rule out that possibility.

The interpretation that her subconscious longing for plants allowed the anomaly to infiltrate made sense.

But this hypothesis had flaws, so I rebutted.

“Perhaps. But didn’t you still try to do something for the world after becoming a potato?”

[…….]

“You couldn’t stay still even as a plant. You were the most human-like human when you were human, and the most non-potato-like potato when you were a potato.”

I didn’t see this as a negative conclusion.

A fixed point was necessary in the life of a long regressor. The Saintess, who almost always remained ‘herself,’ was a grateful presence for me.

“Transforming into something else is futile. Your essence remains yours.”

[…….]

For a while, only the sound of waves lapping like vines surrounded

us.

[Thank you, Mr. Undertaker.]

And with that, I, the Undertaker, became the first human to receive gratitude from a potato. It was a fitting end to this story.

Incidentally, in the space where I lived during this cycle, there was a decorated flowerpot and a blue-sprouting potato.

And the potato loved it when I watered it with coffee.

I will document this fact calmly.

Footnotes:

Chapter 164

The Bloodsucker I

Sinnoa

Since the previous story mentioned <The Metamorphosis>, let's talk about another bug today. The most beloved bug for Koreans. The ruler of summer. A quantum mechanical bug whose existence cannot be confirmed until observed. The vampire pilot currently flying noisily in front of my eyes.

Bzzz...

That’s right.

Today's main character is the mosquito.

“Hyah! Ha! Heeyah!”

One day, I returned to the hideout to find Sim Ah-ryeon dancing in the lobby. Of course, if you can define ‘making strange noises and clapping in all directions’ as dancing.

Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap!

Sim Ah-ryeon clapped her hands repeatedly in the empty air. As far as I knew, she had never reached the level of Sword Heart in any of the cycles and wasn’t likely to. It didn’t seem like her movements held any special meaning unless she was summoning Cthulhu or Nyarlathotep in a cult ritual.

“Ah-ryeon, what on earth are you doing?”

“Oh, guild leader! Catch the mosquito for me!”

I blinked.

“A mosquito? We have mosquitoes in our hideout? Did it get

through the Inunaki Tunnel?”

“Yes, yes. It feels like one mosquito has been following me since last night. It keeps buzzing around my field of vision, but I can’t catch it at all…”

Upon closer inspection, her wrists and forearms indeed had plump mosquito bites like pimples.

“Ah-ryeon, you're a guild member who received aura training from me, and you're losing sleep over a mere mosquito…”

“It’s not my fault! It’s super fast!”

She twisted and turned her body, clapping her hands.

Bzzz...

All her attacks missed. The mosquito flew gracefully and leisurely, mocking her feeble attempts.

“See? Guild leader! This damn mosquito is mocking me!”

“…….”

“Don’t look at me like that! Seriously, this summer’s mosquitoes are weird. They’re super fast and tough… Didn’t you notice?”

“Of course not. I wear aura protection 24/7, so mosquitoes can’t bite me. It’s been hundreds of years since I last got bitten.”

Sim Ah-ryeon’s jaw dropped.

“No way… Sometimes I wonder if you’re really human. You’re so inhuman…”

It was a strange coincidence. I often thought the same when looking at Ah-ryeon.

But maybe this time I should have listened to the defeated Ah-ryeon. Even a broken clock is critical for two seconds a day.

It was summer.

A particularly hot summer.

- Anonymous: Mosquitoes are driving me crazy lately...

 Anonymous: Right? No matter how many I kill, they keep coming. I built my hideout in the middle of the void, but these crazy mosquitoes still show up. I killed 15 just yesterday;

- Anonymous: Damn bloodsuckers, lay off!

Two weeks after Ah-ryeon's whining, posts titled 'Crazy Weather' and 'I Want to Kill These Damn Mosquitoes' flooded SG Net. At the time, I thought nothing of it. I even scoffed at the MZ-generation awakeners for their weakness.

'These young folks. Can't they raise their aura level to keep their bodies cool?'

The rapid rise in mosquito hatred in summer on Korean forums was not unusual. It happened in every era. It wasn't something to make a fuss over.

Especially since the apocalypse era, humanity had lost its close relationship with air conditioners and fans. Every summer, people faced the grim choice between 'closing windows and experiencing a sauna' or 'opening windows and donating blood to mosquitoes.' Most chose to donate blood.

Even the privileged awakeners couldn't escape the Korean summer.

"Dang Seo-rin, are you okay?"

"Huh…?"

"You don't look well. If you're tired, you can go back to the hideout and rest. You don't have to eat with me if you're not feeling well."

Sitting across from me, Dang Seo-rin looked like she hadn't slept all night. We usually dined together at least once a month. But today, she seemed unusually drained.

“Ah… Thanks for worrying. But it’s nothing.”

“Is something bothering you?”

“No, it’s just that mosquitoes have been so noisy at night, I keep waking up. I can’t get a good night's sleep, and it’s making me tired.”

Dang Seo-rin yawned.

I blinked.

“You? Losing sleep over mosquitoes?”

“Yes? Oh, yes. I developed a magic spell to repel insects, but it doesn’t work on mosquitoes. I might need to improve it.”

“How long have you been losing sleep?”

“Let’s see… Haah… About a week now.”

“…….”

From that point, a sense of alarm crept up my spine.

It was hard to believe that even Dang Seo-rin, a top-tier awakener, had been tormented by mere mosquitoes for a week.

After our meal, I immediately contacted the Korean Peninsula Science Vessel.

“Saintess.”

[Yes.]

The response came quickly. A good example that privacy was a luxury a regressor couldn’t afford.

“Are you also troubled by mosquitoes lately?”

[Ah, many people are suffering from mosquitoes. The summer heat has weakened people’s energy compared to last year.]

[I stop time when I sleep, so I'm not disturbed like others.]

However, the Saintess added.

[When I'm awake, mosquitoes constantly bother me.]

"Do mosquitoes cling to you unusually often?"

[Yes. It wasn't always like this. But after you told me the story about the 'Potato Robots' from another cycle, mosquitoes have become very aggressive.]

I couldn't see the connection between the Potato Saintess story and mosquitoes, but it became somewhat clear.

"This is likely an anomaly."

[What?]

"Dang Seo-rin has been tormented by mosquitoes for a week. She even used an insect-repelling spell."

[I didn't know. I intentionally avoid listening when you talk to others.]

"This hasn't happened before. It might be an abnormal situation emerging after other Outer Gods were defeated."

When an Outer God was defeated, 'things that didn't happen in previous cycles' always occurred. Like aftershocks following a major earthquake, these abnormal events arose from the disruption of a delicate balance among the Outer Gods.

"This 'Mosquito Anomaly' likely appeared due to such disruptions."

[An anomaly with mosquitoes.]

Bzzz...

A mosquito flew in front of me. Normally, I wouldn't care, but given the suspicion of an anomaly, it was very irritating.

[But if an anomaly spreads through mosquito bites, how can we

stop it?]

There was a hint of perplexity in the Saintess's otherwise emotionless voice.

[Unless one is an awakener with perfected aura like you, is it possible to avoid mosquito bites in the Korean summer?]

[Is there a solution?]

I reached out and lightly slapped the mosquito in front of me.

Smack! The mosquito exploded, splattering dark blood all over. I wiped my hand.

"I'll find that solution."

I immediately sought out Sim Ah-ryeon and explained the situation.

Naturally, she was shocked.

"What? An anomaly…?"

"Yes. And you were the first to notice it. I need your help."

"Eek…"

As we talked, I noticed something strange about her appearance.

She looked haggard, with sunken eyes. It seemed she hadn't slept well for weeks due to mosquitoes.

But at the same time, there was a peculiar sense of satisfaction. A strange calm and tranquility.

"Actually, I did find it odd."

"What exactly?"

"I was extremely tired from lack of sleep, but recently, I've started feeling better…"

Feeling better?

I felt a chill run down my spine.

“You mean like the feeling you get from drugs?”

“Huh? No. Not like drugs. My mind remains clear. It’s more like I don’t get stressed, even when I recall embarrassing memories… Oh.”

Bzzz...

A mosquito landed on her hand.

Sim Ah-ryeon smiled weakly. A while ago, she would have clapped frantically. Now, she looked at the mosquito affectionately.

“Ah-ryeon?”

“Look, guild leader. Normally, when I recall my dark past, I’d scream and squirm, right?”

“…You did.”

“I’m thinking about my middle school days now. I thought I was a genius greater than Da Vinci and embarrassed myself countless times. Like setting up an easel at art exhibitions and hanging my paintings there. Haha. Just remembering it makes me want to roll on the floor in embarrassment…”

Sssuck.

The mosquito inserted its proboscis and sucked her blood. It was so practiced it could outdo a veteran nurse’s injection skills.

“Ah…”

She shuddered with pleasure.

“It doesn’t bother me anymore.”

“…….”

“Yes, I might have been wrong in middle school. But wasn’t seeing the world that way a privilege of youth? Maybe I’ve been too harsh on myself…”

Unbelievable.

“Ah-ryeon.”

I put on a serious expression.

“You were the vice president of your high school’s student council, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. Back then, I was very stormy… How do you know that? Oh, the other me from another cycle told you.”

“Yes. And you threw your prepared speech on the stage and said, ‘Everyone! I can’t express my feelings for you with these poor words!’ trying to give a live speech, but you stuttered the whole time since you had no experience——”

“Aaaah!”

Sim Ah-ryeon convulsed.

“Stop! Please stop! How do you know that? Which cycle’s me told you that? Why are you telling me this? Ah, ah! My dark past! My dark past! Aaaah!”

Sssuck.

The mosquito sucked her blood again.

“Ah.”

Then an astonishing thing happened.

Her face, twisted in convulsion, suddenly relaxed.

Like a monk reaching enlightenment.

“Ah… That did happen. But isn’t that also a privilege of youth? Pretending to be special… No one starts out special.”

“…….”

“Pretending to be special, acting special, gradually building one’s uniqueness… And realizing that being special isn’t as happy as one thought, letting go of the obsession with being special, and cherishing the connections around you. It’s just an inevitable part of youth…”

At that moment, I remembered what the Saintess had said.

-Yes. It wasn’t always like this.

-But since you told me the story of the Potato Robot from another cycle.

-Mosquitoes have become very aggressive.

Indeed.

The mosquito anomaly this summer wasn’t just about drawing blood.

Incredibly, these mosquitoes were also sucking out people's 'dark pasts.'

Footnotes:

Chapter 165

The Bloodsucker II

Sinnoa

To be honest, as the Undertaker, my dark past wasn't particularly painful. It was like trying to tease Buddha by saying, "Hey, I heard you pointed to the sky and declared yourself unique the moment you were born. Aren't you embarrassed?" Butterflies don't feel ashamed of their caterpillar days. I was lenient with others and myself. But it seemed different for others.

-Anonymous: Is it weird that getting bitten by mosquitoes feels good? Is it just me?

(Photo)

-Anonymous: It feels so good I trapped a mosquito in a glass and let it bite me every hour. My arm is bumpy, but rubbing it feels oddly satisfying. Try raising a 'pet mosquito' yourselves...

LiteraryGirl: Are you insane?

Anonymous: Lol, I've also gotten addicted to mosquito bites, so I stopped killing them. Glad I'm not the only one.

[Baekhwa] FifthGrader: That's an anomaly! Getting bitten is dangerous! (>_<);;

Anonymous: Lots of crazy people here.

[NRMC] Officer: I don't understand this at all.

The atmosphere on SG Net began to change. Just days ago, it was filled with anger and curses against mosquitoes. Now, the idea of 'pet mosquitoes' was popping up. It was a sign that the mosquito anomaly was revealing its true nature. The situation was dire.

"Saintess, didn't you warn the awakeners about mosquitoes in your

constellation messages?”

[Yes, I did. I keep reminding them daily under different constellations’ names.]

“Yet, people keep getting bitten?”

[Well, it’s mosquitoes we’re talking about.]

It was a classic case of knowing something was bad but still falling for it. Escaping mosquitoes in Korea was practically impossible. Even with windows sealed, they always found a way in.

[The problem is that people feel pleasure when bitten by mosquitoes.]

“Pleasure? Seriously, they feel pleasure?”

[Yes. Try it yourself, Mr. Undertaker. One bite won’t hurt you.]

I tried it. I dropped my aura shield and let a mosquito land on my hand. I pulled off its wings, so it couldn’t fly away.

Sssuck.

The mosquito, desperate to survive, sucked my blood.

“Well, I don’t feel any pleasure.”

[Hmm. I think it’s because you don’t have much of a 'dark past,' Mr. Undertaker. I suspect the more someone has, the more pleasure they feel.]

“Wait, if that’s the case, then Ah-ryeon, who’s been bitten the most…?”

[She must have a lot of embarrassing memories, at least more than anyone on the Korean Peninsula.]

Indeed.

The situation worsened by the day. Literally, every hour, the mosquito anomaly intensified.

Posts about feeling good after mosquito bites increased, while posts about feeling bad decreased. A new term, ‘mosquito drug,’ even emerged on the forums.

-Anonymous: I’ve had insomnia since finishing the tutorial dungeon.

-Anonymous: Seeing people die in front of me gave me trauma.

-Anonymous: But after getting bitten by mosquitoes, I sleep well. I’m grateful to be alive.

-Anonymous: Constellations warn about the danger, but I can’t sleep without mosquito bites.

Yes.

Though called 'dark pasts,' these memories were psychological traumas, potentially leading to PTSD. It wasn’t surprising people had mental health issues in a world where DNA could turn into a potato due to a bug in the eye.

Every day, people vanished. More precisely, their 'humanity' disappeared.

People depended on external things to cope. Alcohol, drugs, the Three Kingdoms... Anything.

In such times, the Potato Saintess’s virtual counseling project thrived.

Despite using the Saintess’s Clairvoyance, controlling mosquito breeding was impossible. How could you catch all mosquitoes?

“This is serious, Undertaker.”

Even Dang Seo-rin occasionally complained to me.

“We’ve installed mosquito nets on every train window, checked drains, run fans, eliminated puddles… Yet mosquitoes keep appearing.”

“Does DDT help?”

“It works temporarily, but they develop resistance in two weeks.”

I sighed.

The Void accelerated the adaptation of life forms. What took decades elsewhere happened in days here.

Dinosaurs evolved in years, so mosquitoes developing pesticide resistance in a week was no surprise.

“Look at this.”

Dang Seo-rin showed me a photo.

It was of a bald person whose head looked like a pine cone, covered in mosquito bites.

“He’s from our guild. His whole body is bitten. It’s pitiful.”

“…….”

“But he says he’s happy, feeling liberated from past pains.”

Dang Seo-rin sighed.

“His entire body is bitten. We locked him up, but he begged to be bitten again. The world’s gone mad. Someone might die from blood loss.”

“Are you okay?”

“Me? I’m fine. I keep the fan running, so it’s manageable.”

Dang Seo-rin looked worried.

“But if this continues next year… It’ll be tough. Undertaker, can’t you do something?”

After the rainy season, mosquitoes multiplied.

Just as Dang Seo-rin feared, people began dying from blood loss due to excessive mosquito bites.

‘How can we eradicate this anomaly?’

I pondered deeply.

Mass breeding dragonflies, mosquitoes’ natural predators?

It could work, but complete eradication seemed impossible.

Training MZ awakeners to master aura defense?

A fundamental solution, but it would take at least 20 years.

Could the mosquito anomaly have merged with a ‘vampire’ anomaly? The pleasure from bloodsucking suggested a connection.

But why would mere mosquitoes dare to menace Koreans, descendants of the garlic-eating people…?

“Hmm.”

Stuck, I wandered the hideout’s lobby.

Oh Dok-seo, who was also there, yelled.

“Hey! If you’re going to pace around, go outside!”

“Dok-seo, I’m contemplating humanity’s survival. You should leave.”

“Huh? I’m fighting for humanity too!”

Oh Dok-seo held up a manuscript.

“Look! I’m writing a novel! If I fail, an Outer God will descend. Who cares about mosquitoes?”

She was right.

Oh Dok-seo was writing on manuscript paper. Rolled-up drafts lay around, suggesting dissatisfaction with her writing.

“It’s admirable you’re writing, but why here? Write in your room.”

“Argh! I’m here because I can’t write in my room! Don’t scold me when I’m stressed about writing! I’m writing for you!”

“Um… You scolded me first…”

“Aaaah!”

Oh Dok-seo grabbed her head and screamed.

“I hate writing! Why did past me decide to write? Idiot! Moron! Bitch! Die!”

“Hmm…”

It seemed Oh Dok-seo had severe ‘writing aversion.’ I’d seen many writers in similar states running the Canned Hotel, so I was used to it.

Then, I noticed a mosquito.

Bzzz...

The mosquito flew gracefully. I raised my aura to swat it but paused.

Its target wasn’t me or Oh Dok-seo.

It was Oh Dok-seo’s discarded manuscript.

And an astonishing scene unfolded.

Sssuck.

The mosquito landed on the manuscript and 'sucked' the ink.

It wasn’t blood.

It was ink from the manuscript. The mosquito slurped it like fine wine.

“Huh?”

I watched the mosquito’s bloodsucking... No, ink-sucking in a daze.

After feasting on the ink, the mosquito flew away, ignoring our blood. It fluttered off like it had no need for inferior drinks after tasting the best.

A eureka moment struck me.

“Dark past…!”

“What?”

“Right, it’s the dark past! We need to let it feed on dark pasts!”

Why didn’t I think of this?

The mosquito anomaly was drawn to dark pasts, not blood.

So it didn’t matter if the dark pasts weren’t in human form.

“Saintess. Saintess, please respond. It’s urgent.”

[Yes? What is it?]

“Do you remember the Potato Robot story I told you from another cycle?”

[Oh.]

The Saintess Talk connection crackled briefly.

[Sorry, a mosquito flew by… Anyway, I remember. But why bring it up?]

“Write down the Potato Saintess story yourself. Like a diary.”

[What?]

“Then leave it in your room. I guarantee, mosquitoes will swarm the diary like incense.”

[…….]

The next day.

[...It worked.]

The Saintess's voice was akin to that of a geocentric believer confronting heliocentric truth.

[I left the diary out overnight, and 24 mosquitoes stuck to it. None came near my bed.]

"Just as I thought."

[…….]

"Contact the writers at the Canned Hotel. Have them transcribe their old drafts. The older, the better—high school or middle school."

[…….]

"And it's not just novels. Even old social media posts will work. Cyworld-era posts are ideal."

[Are you a devil, Mr. Undertaker?]

"Pardon?"

[Nothing. This is for humanity. I'll relay the message.]

Time reversed at the Canned Hotel.

Writers across the Korean Peninsula poured their efforts into transcribing their high school and middle school drafts.

It wasn't an easy task.

"Damn it! Just kill me!"

"Aaaah! No! This piece is absolutely not okay!"

"Forgive me! Using angle brackets and wavy titles was trendy then!"

"Can I fix typos? Please, show some humanity."

“I deleted this work! Why do you have a copy?”

“I’d rather die…”

I whipped the writers into shape.

Finally, I compiled ‘The Top 100 Most Embarrassing Works in Korean Literature.’

After mass-printing them at the factory, I distributed a copy to every household.

“Aaaah!”

“Why? Why such cruelty?”

“Yes, let’s just die… Let’s just die…”

Great writers wailed as their past works (and social media posts) were publicly exposed.

But I didn’t care. The more they suffered, the better the solution.

If asked why I tormented writers I admired...

Because their past works didn’t embarrass me.

I even enjoyed their middle school parody drafts. I didn’t see the problem.

Thanks to the writers’ tear-soaked manuscripts, people were safe from the mosquito anomaly.

Pasting manuscripts on doors lured all mosquitoes there.

It was a historic moment when mosquitoes overcame their stalker-like obsession with humanity.

Oh Dok-seo, who contributed significantly, muttered in disbelief.

“…Wait. Does this mean all my current works will become dark pasts? Damn. Mister! Kill all mosquitoes! They’re calling your novels dark pasts!”

And that’s the end. No epilogue today.

Footnotes:

Chapter 166

The Traveler I

Sinnoa

As you all know, whenever I, the Undertaker, felt stressed, I often took vacations. True to a regressor's style, my breaks were grand. I didn’t rest for just a week or two—I dedicated an entire cycle to a vacation. But what about other awakeners?

Of course, Sim Ah-ryeon, whose everyday life was practically a vacation, didn't need one, and Noh Do-hwa, whose mind was possessed by Zhuge Liang, didn’t even have the concept of rest.

But those two belonged to the realm of the ‘non-human.’ I was talking about humans.

Normal people needed rest.

Even Dang Seo-rin, who was very human compared to those two (having experienced corruption), was no exception.

“Hey, Undertaker? Want to go on a trip?”

One day, I returned to the hideout to find Dang Seo-rin casually sitting in my chair, eating potato chips.

If you faced such a situation, how would you react?

A. Trip? Out of the blue? Have you been drinking alone again?

B. Sorry, could you wait another thousand years?

Both answers were wrong.

I answered like this.

“A trip sounds good. Where do you want to go?”

Here's a tip for dealing with people. If someone suddenly says they want to travel, just go along with it. Otherwise, your head might take a long trip.

"Heh? I didn't expect you to agree right away. Aren't you busy? Do you have time for a trip with me?"

"You're just as busy. But I always make time for a trip, no matter how busy I am. It's part of my busy life."

"Hmm." Guild leader Dang Seo-rin laughed, clearly pleased with my answer. I knew I wasn't wrong. "Really? Then let's really go on a trip."

"Sure. Do you have a destination in mind?" I pressed her further.

"A destination… Hmm, not really. Just somewhere far. Not too close like Jeju Island."

"Hmm."

It felt like when a friend vaguely suggested eating out somewhere.

"I have some recommendations for you."

But I was a regressor.

This wasn't the first time Dang Seo-rin had suddenly wanted to travel, so I had prepared for almost every possibility.

I confidently handed her a travel guide. The neat cover and printing quality were good enough to be displayed in a bookstore.

"Huh? What's this? <Travel Guide for Samcheon Guild Leaders>…?"

"It's a travel guide I made just for you. The first chapter is Hawaii. It's a perfect 'resort void.' Except for the high costs, it's highly recommended."

Though the constant Pearl Harbor attack reenactments and occasional SCP sightings were unique, Hawaii (Travel Difficulty:

★★★★) was rated well.

“Undertaker, you…”

Dang Seo-rin looked deeply touched by my insane preparedness.

I smiled inwardly. Success.

“Sounds good, but do you have any other options?”

Damn it. Normally, that would’ve been enough to settle for finding good restaurants.

But if it were that simple, this wouldn’t be an episode-worthy story.

“We see the sea every day here. I want something different. How about Paris?”

“Which Paris?”

“What do you mean, which Paris?”

Dang Seo-rin tilted her head.

“Paris, France. What else?”

“It’s layered with eras. There are six different Parises: during the Huguenot Wars, the French Revolution, World War II, and so on. Do you want to experience religious wars and witch trials? Then it’s the Huguenot Wars. Fancy seeing guillotines and Napoleon? Then it’s the Revolution. Choose your flavor of Paris romance.”

“Really, what is an anomaly…?”

“That reaction is the essence of an anomaly.”

“Hmm.”

She carefully examined the <Travel Guide for Samcheon Guild Leaders> I made.

“Ah. Let’s go here.”

She pointed decisively at a spot.

Uyuni Salt Flats (Travel Difficulty: ★★★★★★★☆).

“Hmm.”

Uyuni, where the desert flooded after rain, turning it into a horizon that mirrored the sky. The most brilliant ‘mirror’ on Earth.

It was located in Bolivia, South America.

Back in the day, the Inca Empire ruled the area, known for valuing heart beauty over facial beauty.

Anomalies warped space and time like taffy. Paris could simultaneously host witch trials and revolutions, while Uyuni could hold ‘Who has the prettiest heart?’ contests.

“……”

A bead of sweat formed in my mind.

Uyuni was already a challenging destination. In this post-apocalyptic world, its difficulty skyrocketed.

I scrutinized Dang Seo-rin’s expression, trying to gauge her mood like a North Korean citizen reading their leader’s face.

“Hmm? How about here? I’ve always wanted to visit.”

“……”

The leader was quite excited.

Faced with such a situation, how would you respond?

Swallowing my reluctance, I said without showing any displeasure, “Let’s go. The Uyuni Salt Flats. I’ve always wanted to visit.”

“Let’s leave tomorrow!”

“Are you serious…?”

“What?”

“Tomorrow’s too soon. The day after tomorrow.”

“Okay!”

The next day, Dang Seo-rin hadn’t sobered up and resumed her guild duties. Instead, she was fully prepared. She had a red leather trunk and wore sunglasses.

Her airport fashion was perfect, with extra flair in her witch hat and robe.

I sighed inwardly.

“Whoever said regressors were omnipotent was wrong. I can’t even predict tomorrow’s fate…”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. We’ll be gone for at least a week or two. Will the Samcheon Guild be okay?”

“Of course. I’ve been hinting for months that I wanted a break. They should be ready. If not, I’ll purge them. Are you okay?”

“I told you, it’s fine.”

Noh Do-hwa, managing the National Road Management Corps, would probably go berserk with anger when I returned, but she wouldn’t kill me.

Dang Seo-rin gave me sunglasses and giggled. “Are we taking your private plane? The, what was it? Red Dog?”

“Red Pig. Savoy S-21 modified. And no, it can’t fly to South America. Not enough fuel.”

“Then how?”

“I have a way. You’re lucky. Guides like me are rare nowadays.”

“Ooh. Confidence.”

We took the Inunaki Tunnel.

Knowing I was traveling, the tunnel seemed unusually welcoming.

→ Trap here →

(Caution) Ghost appears! Be careful!

Have a good trip. (Congrats)

These Japanese phrases were graffitied on the walls. Regular magical girl murals must have raised their favorability.

We arrived in Seoul via the high-speed path.

“Dang Seo-rin, do you know Korea’s first airport?”

“Huh? Gimpo Airport?”

“No, Yeouido Airport.”

There was once such an airport.

Yeouido was perfect for aircraft, as evident from Robot Taekwon V launching from the National Assembly.

It disappeared into history, overshadowed by Gimpo, but now it thrived as Korea’s only international airport.

Dang Seo-rin looked puzzled. “Was there always such a facility in Yeouido?”

“No. The 'Comprehensive Income Tax Anomaly' appears every May. When taxes accumulate past a certain point, the 'Yeouido Airport' void forms.”

“Ugh. Are we building an airport with our taxes? An anomaly?”

“Yes. They take their government role seriously, using taxes properly. They’re anomalies, but effective.”

“Really, what is an anomaly…?”

As usual, I skipped the reactions.

Dang Seo-rin tugged my sleeve.

“Hey, Undertaker.”

“Hmm.”

“The airport windows are all red? Hundreds of red handprints? Am I seeing things?”

“Don’t worry. It’s the interior design.”

“……”

Modern architecture favored void style. Red-stained windows were just cute details.

Yeouido Airport originally operated before overseas travel was common. Back then, traveling abroad was a luxury for a select few. Naturally, the officials at the immigration desk were stern.

- Where are you from?

An anomaly officer mumbled, mimicking human speech.

The desire to teach SCVs trying to flee was palpable.

His acting was impressive. If his eyes weren’t fingers, I might’ve believed him.

“Here’s my ID.”

I handed over my ID. I’d farmed it at Namsan the day before. It took two days to prepare.

- Ah. You’re from the Special Forces.

The anomaly’s tone became respectful.

- We received notice yesterday. But who’s the person with you…?

I feigned annoyance. “Do I need to explain everything?”

- No, of course not. My apologies. Proceed, agent.

The airport swarmed with anomalies, but we walked to the boarding gate easily.

“This isn’t the overseas trip I imagined…” Dang Seo-rin murmured.

“For South America, this is the easiest way.”

Ignoring the 60% crash rate, it was a good mode of travel.

As we walked to the gate, I explained, “We’ll go to Spain first. From there, it’s easier to travel to South America and gain bonuses related to Inca anomalies. The flight is longer but safer—”

When we finally boarded, I stopped talking. Dang Seo-rin, who was following me, also halted.

“Hmm.”

“Uh.”

The old plane already had 212 passengers, paired off.

And all 212 had our faces.

Dressed as if they were also traveling.

They stared at us, and we stared back. A total of 107 Undertakers and 107 Dang Seo-rins in silence.

“…….”

“…Is this part of the interior, Undertaker?”

Hmm.

This was unexpected.

Footnotes:

Chapter 167

The Traveler II

Sinnoa

As I looked at them, they looked back at me.

The ‘Undertaker’ sitting in the emergency exit row, legs crossed, gave me a crooked look.

- Welcome, Undertaker.

- I don’t know which world’s Undertaker you are, but it seems there are 107 of us.

- Including our companions, that makes 214.

Murmurs spread through the plane.

Hundreds of Undertakers added their comments or sneered. The plane became noisy in an instant.

- If you’re all actually people, I guess using ‘107’ as a unit is fine. But what if all of you, except me, are anomalies?

- Oh, a smart ‘me.’ I was just thinking the same thing. Would you like to volunteer as the first to be exterminated?

My head started spinning.

“Wait. Instead of murmuring among yourselves, explain this to me. What kind of anomaly is this? A doppelgänger? But the doppelgänger is in Cheon Yo-hwa’s Poké Ball right now.”

- Explain? If what’s inside your skull is a bird brain, count the numbers, idiot.

The ‘Undertakers’ sighed, shrugged, or crunched in-flight peanuts.

- You're the 107th 'me.'

- Got it? 107th. We've explained this to every new arrival, so we've repeated the explanation dozens of times. No matter how entertaining each cycle is, repeating the same explanation isn't enjoyable.

- No choice. I'll explain this time.

Another Undertaker stood up.

Interestingly, this one wore a Sherlock Holmes hat, perhaps imagining himself born on Baker Street in London.

Even though we were the same Undertaker, the details varied. Some even cosplayed with their companions in animal costumes.

What's up with that?

- Each of us decided to travel with Dang Seo-rin for different reasons. You're the 107th. Where are you planning to go?

"…Uyuni Salt Flats."

- Oh. I see.

Sighs came from all around. Sherlock 106 looked at us with deep sympathy.

- Ha-yul lost her heart there once.

- In your world, did Ha-yul die in the 110th cycle? How incompetent. I saved her.

- Isn't that place where Inca and Aztec myths combined into a horrifying hybrid?

- It's where humanity first developed a perpetual motion machine. It automatically recharges with solar energy if you offer a human heart.

"....."

Dang Seo-rin squeezed my hand tightly. Her palm felt hotter than usual.

"…Undertaker, what are they talking about? Cycles? Traveling with Ha-yul?"

- Silly. All of us, including your Undertaker, are regressors. You, the 107th 'me.'

The Dang Seo-rin in the front row spoke.

This Dang Seo-rin wore a school uniform, not her usual witch hat and robe.

A school uniform? Wasn't that the exclusive uniform of Baekhwa Girls' High?

Of course, the original Dang Seo-rin (107th) didn't like that outfit.

She looked at the uniformed Dang Seo-rin as if she were a North Korean soldier at a South Korean military parade.

"What about you?"

- I'm Dang Seo-rin. And a polite person trying to kindly explain the situation to someone wearing a ridiculous outfit.

The uniformed Dang Seo-rin smiled.

- Undertaker is a regressor. He's been through hundreds of cycles. If you're also 'me,' you might have suspected it.

"....."

- Next, you'll ask the Undertaker if it's true. Understandable, but consider our perspective. I've watched that scene 100 times already.

Then, an Undertaker sitting in the middle of the plane stood up. This one spoke formally.

- Everyone. One of us must get off here.

"What?"

- Have you all gentlemen and ladies still not been able to figure it out?

The formal-speaking Undertaker smirked.

- With this final Undertaker, the number of people on this plane is confirmed at 214. Exactly matching the death toll of Flight 801 in 1997.[1]

- Ah.

- Indeed.

- You finally realized? Better late than never. If this plane takes off, a disaster is inevitable.

“Oh……”

I was impressed. He was smart.

Annoying, but smart.

He even shushed us with a finger to his lips. It was creepy. Seeing someone with my face doing that gesture made my blood boil.

- My suggestion is this. To avoid a crash, at least one person must get off.

- What.

- We don’t want to get off.

- Sure, some Dang Seo-rins will be disappointed about losing a long-awaited overseas trip, but it’s better than all of us crashing into the Pacific.

Boom!

The formal-speaking Undertaker’s head exploded.

Fortunately, there was no need for a detective; the ‘Delinquent Undertaker’ in the back seat was clearly the culprit, with his aura flaring.

- Sorry.

The Delinquent Undertaker grinned, his scarred face wrinkling.

- His tone was too annoying to bear.

All 106 Undertakers, including me, agreed. It was a justifiable crime.

- If we had time, I'd tell him to open his eyes properly, but this avoids the disaster he mentioned. Have a nice trip…

- What are you saying, murderer!

But the Dang Seo-rin (partner of the formal-speaking Undertaker) had a different view.

- Die!

Watson Dang Seo-rin immediately cast a killing spell.

Thud. The Delinquent Undertaker, hit at point-blank range by an Avada Kedavra, foamed at the mouth and collapsed. Despite his tough appearance, he was weak in combat.

- Kyaaa!

The Gyaru Dang Seo-rin next to him screamed.

- You killed my Undertaker!

- You killed mine first!

- Why me!

Bang! Boom! Pow!

The plane erupted into chaos. Dang Seo-rins sang and cast grand spells everywhere.

Undertakers joined to protect their partners, making it hard to find anything intact on the plane. Despite that, the plane's fuselage remained undamaged. Clearly, this was a high-level anomaly.

“Undertaker!” My Dang Seo-rin (the Witch Rail Otaku) yelled, the only rational person in this mess. She struggled to open the plane door. “This won’t open! I cast a triple destruction spell, but it won’t budge!”

“It’s better that it doesn’t open, Dang Seo-rin. Look outside.”

“Outside? Why—? Huh.”

The plane was already in the air. It had taken off without any vibrations or acceleration, a prime example of anomaly technology. We weren’t just in the atmosphere, but in space. The moon’s surface was visible right below the plane’s wings.

“This is space?” she asked.

“Yeah. The anomaly confused a plane with a spaceship. They look similar from afar.”

“I didn’t know South America was this dangerous…!”

“Me neither. This is a first for me.”

“Get me out of here!”

“No. Don’t open the windows or doors by mistake. That’s not just space, it’s likely the [Space Void]. The [Explode and Die in Space] anomaly is active.”

“Why are anomalies always like this!”

As we experienced the fantasy of space travel, the others were enjoying a blood-soaked romance.

Blood splattered everywhere. Heads of Undertakers and Dang Seo-rins rolled in the aisle. Surreal, indeed.

- Wait! Everyone, calm down! This is inefficient slaughter. If this is a parallel world anomaly, who knows if combining our powers could save the world…

- Good point, but take off that animal costume first.

- Sorry, it's part of my essence as the Undertaker.

- Kill that furry!

A brutal variety survival show unfolded.

The 214 people were reduced to 102. Mainly those with excessively 'abnormal' appearances were eliminated.

Among the surviving Dang Seo-rins were the school uniform Dang Seo-rin, the stuttering glasses-wearing librarian Dang Seo-rin, the slit-eyed priestess Dang Seo-rin, and the blonde samurai Dang Seo-rin.

It was chaos in every sense.

Even though I was with the witch Dang Seo-rin, I shouldn't complain. There wasn't a single normal person here.

I spoke with a heavy heart.

"First… let's sit and talk. The furry Undertaker was right. We need to unite."

- Hmm.

- Indeed.

"If we join forces, we can accomplish great things. Forget the old man—we can save the world ourselves."

- But what if the rest of you are all anomalies? That would be pointless.

"I have a solution for that." I smiled confidently. "If you're not an anomaly, the Saintess's Clairvoyance and Telepathy should work."

- Oh?

"This is a space void. It looks like space but is probably still over Korea. The Saintess's telepathy should reveal the real anomalies."

- Makes sense.

- Excellent idea.

Nodding at their admiration, I looked up at the plane ceiling. “Saintess, are you watching? Please respond.”

[Yes.]

“Good. Please tell me who the fakes are…”

Then it happened.

[Yes.]

[Yes.]

[Yes.]

The Saintess’s voice echoed, overlapping.

“What?”

It didn’t stop there.

[Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.] [Yes.]

[I’m checking now.]

[Hard to tell if anyone is fake. All of them.]

[Responding to my clairvoyance.]

[It’s hard to believe, but all present Undertakers and Dang Seo-rins.]

[Seem real. Unless I’m infected too.]

[Mr. Undertaker?]

[Mr. Undertaker, why no response?]

[Mr. Undertaker?] [Mr. Undertaker?] [Mr. Undertaker?] [Mr. Undertaker?] [Mr. Undertaker?] [Mr. Undertaker?] [Mr.

Undertaker?] [Mr. Undertaker?] [Mr. Undertaker?]

“……”

Great.

We were definitely screwed.

‘Wait a second.’

A grim possibility crossed my mind.

If there were 51 Mr. Undertakers and 51 Dang Seo-rins, and 51 Saintesses observing us, then logically…

‘What about the anomalies?’

For the same reason, could there be 51 Outer Gods in this void?

This wasn’t a ‘copy the Undertaker’ event. That would have been too convenient.

It was the opposite. This plane was a gacha event for multiplying Outer Gods.

“……”

- ……

- ……

All the Undertakers exchanged furtive glances.

The looks were deadly. Each of them likely had telepathy with ‘their’ Saintess and faced the same phenomenon.

And reached the same conclusion.

‘If more than one Undertaker gets off the plane, confirming multiple Undertakers on the ground will also multiply the Outer Gods!’

‘If 51 Undertakers exist, 51 Go Yuris will too.’

‘What madness.’

‘Only one Undertaker can get off the plane.’

Yes.

From now on, it was a matter of who would (try to) kill me.

Footnotes:

1 - Korean Air Flight 801 was an international passenger flight whose crash led to the deaths of 214 passengers. Experts cite poor communication between the personnel onboard as the most probable cause of the incident.

Chapter 168

The Traveler III

Sinnoa

The atmosphere was tense. Silent glares and psychological warfare ensued among the Undertakers. If anyone drew their sword, it would trigger a battle royale.

“Everyone, stay your swords.”

I, the most just and rightful original Undertaker, spoke up. The other fake Undertakers turned to look at me, some with mustaches, others as women.

- What? Are you asking to be killed first?

“No, upon deeper reflection, killing each other isn’t the best plan.”

- Why not?

- Are you scared?

“You know taunting won’t work. This is a well-laid trap. If we start a massacre, it will lead to a disaster.”

Some Undertakers tilted their heads.

- A disaster?

“Yes. Let me ask you all, do you know about the ‘Jar of Solitude’?”

Solitude.

It’s a famous curse, like an ancient form of a Pokémon battle. First, the shaman places venomous insects into a jar and seals it. The battle begins when the jar is closed, continuing until only one insect remains, having consumed all the others.[1]

- Who doesn't know that?

"Listen. If we start killing each other, what happens? Naturally, the strongest Undertaker will survive."

I spoke under their intense gazes.

"The moment that happens, we define this plane as a 'Jar of Solitude.' The last survivor would be labeled as a 'bug' or 'vermin.' You might wake up one day as a bug."

Sighs echoed throughout the plane.

- That makes sense.

- It's a dilemma!

- If the plane lands, anomalies will double. If we start killing each other, we become bugs. What should we do?

- Wait.

A female Undertaker raised her hand. Her appearance was a blend of Dang Seo-rin, Noh Do-hwa, and the Saintess. She wore a barista outfit like me and had already killed about 20 other Undertakers. She was formidable.

- I get that killing each other makes us the Jar of Solitude, but is turning into bugs that dangerous?

"Don't you know the danger of bugs? Haven't you seen the Giant Potato Robot Saintess statue in Busan?"

- Huh? Giant Potato... What?

Apparently, she didn't know. I looked around disdainfully. Clearly, none of them knew.

"Let me explain. The Potato Robot Saintess is—"

A FEW MOMENTS LATER...

- That's bullshit!!

- Unbelievable. That happened?

- My Saintess isn't like that!

Chaos erupted among the Undertakers. Dang Seo-rins looked puzzled, wondering, "Who is the Saintess?" and "Who dared build such a statue in my Busan?"

Ignorance is bliss.

"Anyway, bugs are dangerous. The anomaly behind this plane likely has the power of a great god, perhaps even an Outer God."

- I understand the danger of bugs...

- But what should we do then?

The female Undertaker asked.

"Simple. The curse of solitude relies on the insects killing each other. If the insects don't fight and only one remains, the curse fails."

- ……?

- Ah.

Some Undertakers blinked in confusion. It was surprising they managed to be regressors. But there were also perceptive ones.

The female Undertaker was among the latter.

- We need to commit suicide until one remains.

"What?"

My Dang Seo-rin looked shocked.

"Suicide? You all?"

- Yes. It's the solution your Undertaker suggested. It selects the final survivor without fighting.

- Ah!

- Brilliant!

- A good strategy. This way, we avoid both the Outer God and the Jar of Solitude.

“No way... This is insane.”

Dang Seo-rin and the other Dang Seo-rins were dumbfounded, but the Undertakers exchanged knowing glances. Despite their different lives, appearances, and intelligence, one thing was constant.

The possibility that one day, they might turn into an anomaly.

If that day came, every Undertaker was ready to erase themselves to prevent disaster.

“From now on, we’ll determine who is the most capable Undertaker. Through strength, intellect, or any other means. The losers will...”

- Recognize their shortcomings and leave, passing the mantle to the winner.

“Exactly.”

- Reasonable.

An Undertaker spoke.

- But there’s one problem.

- I don’t mind leaving the rest to another Undertaker. After all, there’s always the next cycle.

- But what about Dang Seo-rin?

All eyes turned to the Dang Seo-rins.

- What will happen to them?

- If you plan to kill them after we’re gone, we won’t commit suicide.

The atmosphere grew tense.

But I shook my head.

“No need to worry.”

- ……?

“Once you’re gone, Dang Seo-rin will be alone.”

I held Dang Seo-rin’s hand tightly. She glanced at me, but I focused on the Undertakers.

“But Dang Seo-rin didn’t just want to travel. She wanted to travel ‘with me.’”

- ……

“Once you’re gone, the Dang Seo-rins will disappear naturally. Trust me.”

Silence fell.

Then, one of them spoke.

- I believe you, 107.

He was also me.

Parallel worlds. Possible worlds. Multiverses.

Leibniz, the philosopher who fought with Newton over calculus, first proposed these concepts.

A less-known concept is the ‘best of all possible worlds.’

- Our world is the best among all possible worlds, and thus the only one that exists.

Why do we live in this particular world and not another?

Why is our world the way it is?

- Because our universe is better than any other.

The best of all possible worlds.[2]

Other worlds have something fundamentally wrong. Physics might break down, or unimaginable evil might occur.

Even if our world feels awful, it's the only one without a cosmic failure.

- I lost.

And so, we Undertakers began the task of determining the 'best world.'

- You're one step ahead of me. Using the Saintess's telepathy and the possibility of falling into the solitude trap, you thought of it first. I should step back.

The 113th Undertaker accepted his fate calmly.

He held the hand of the 113th Dang Seo-rin.

- Sorry, Dang Seo-rin. We have to postpone our trip. I'm really sorry.

- It's okay. Just being with you was enough.

Then, a shocking scene unfolded.

The 113th Undertaker and Dang Seo-rin embraced and kissed.

"Ugh."

"Hmph."

Both the original Dang Seo-rin and I were taken aback. Seeing someone who looked like me kiss someone who looked like her was surreal.

- Huh?

The real shock was yet to come.

Of the 100+ passengers, only we were surprised.

- What's so shocking?

- Right? It's just a kiss.

Indeed, the other Undertakers and Dang Seo-rins weren't fazed at all.

The real shock was that all the Undertakers and Dang Seo-rins were couples, except us.

"Unbelievable."

"Oh my god."

This plane was a group couple's trip.

The other Undertakers and Dang Seo-rins planned overseas trips to celebrate anniversaries.

Except for us.

My head hurt. How could this happen?

- Actually, we're the ones surprised...

- Really, you two aren't a couple? THE Undertaker and Dang Seo-rin?

- Why? Why aren't you dating?

They couldn't understand why we weren't together.

- If you're not dating, why are you traveling together?

"Um, well..."

"I just wanted to travel," the original Dang Seo-rin said. "I suggested the trip, and we left two days later."

- Two days? And you just went to Uyuni Desert without being a couple?

“Yeah. Any problem?”

- Huh...

The Undertakers and Dang Seo-rins looked at us like we were the weird ones.

- Aren’t you the odd ones?

We didn’t answer that question.

Despite this minor incident, the task of determining the ‘best world’ continued smoothly.

Each test was different.

- I challenge you with the sword, 107. If you’re stronger, I’ll concede this life to you.

Sometimes, it was about strength.

- Ultimately, knowledge is key for a regressor. Let’s compete in knowledge, 107. How to grow allies, how to defeat anomalies.

Sometimes, it was about intellect.

- Even with a sharp sword and a brilliant mind, losing your sanity means falling to anomalies. How long can you maintain your sense of self, 107?

Sometimes, it was about mental strength.

- I don’t plan to drag this out. It’s all about luck. Let’s flip a coin, 107. Heads or tails?

Sometimes, it was just luck.

- Was Jiang Wei’s continuous Northern Expeditions in Three Kingdoms justified?

Sometimes, it was just about the Three Kingdoms... Was that really okay? Dang Seo-rin looked ready to kill him.

Anyway.

About 50 Undertakers challenged me in their own ways.

I won all those challenges.

In the end, no Undertaker was stronger than me. It was bittersweet but also a source of pride.

- In the end, determining the best world was my task.

The female Undertaker smiled sadly.

All other regressors accepted their end. She was the last remaining 'me.'

- I thought I lived my best, but even that wasn't the best.

The female Undertaker challenged me to a game of Go.

The game, where AI surpassed human champions, was a fitting test for a regressor's memory.

I remembered countless Go games from many cycles. To me, Go was just a game of memory.

She challenged who could better utilize their memory.

- Well played.

"Well learned."

I won by half a point with White.

- Sorry, Dang Seo-rin. We have to postpone our Oxford trip.

- It's fine. We can always go 'next time.'

The female Undertaker's Dang Seo-rin smiled.

- Are you sure you're okay with this?

- Yes. It was a fair result. Knowing that another 'me' is striving just

as hard is a huge gain. I won't lose next time.

- You just lost.

- I mean in the future.

The female Undertaker held her Dang Seo-rin's hand.

Then she looked at me and smiled.

- I leave this world to you, 107. We'll never meet again. If I'm human, I'll buy the Saintess sunglasses when I return.

The female Undertaker's body was enveloped in aura.

That was the final moment of the 'Undertaker.'

There's an epilogue.

Originally, our travel plan was to transit through Spain to South America. But after all the Undertakers left, the plane reached its destination.

The Uyuni Salt Flats.

The brightest mirror on Earth.

- Ah.

The plane landed softly on the water.

There was no vibration.

The plane's wings cut through the transparent surface of the desert. Water trails stretched behind the plane.

Some Dang Seo-rins remained. Some followed their Undertakers in death, while others stayed by their bodies.

The door of the pilotless plane opened, letting the sunset reflect on the water into the cabin.

- Beautiful.

- Yeah, it’s beautiful.

- Now I see why I wanted to come here.

- Why is the world so beautiful just from a reflection...?

The Dang Seo-rins couldn’t continue.

As soon as the sunset touched them, they turned into white salt and crumbled instantly.

The white dust scattered in the desert wind.

Not just the Dang Seo-rins. The Undertakers’ bodies, the broken seats, even the plane’s structure crumbled into white salt.[3]

Like flower petals.

In the end, only Dang Seo-rin and I remained in the middle of the desert lake.

“……”

“……”

Dang Seo-rin stared blankly at the dance of white petals. Each petal reflected the red of the sunset, and the reflection mirrored back to the horizon.

In a world where everything repeated, only our hands’ warmth was real.

Much later, Dang Seo-rin murmured, “What was that anomaly, Undertaker?”

“That...”

“I don’t need that kind of answer.”

“Hmm.”

I looked at the salt desert made of Dang Seo-rins and Undertakers' remains.

"There are many reasons, but I think it was due to the 'Uyuni Desert' itself."

Dang Seo-rin tilted her head. Her reflection in the water followed.

"Here? Why?"

"When the surface fills with water, it becomes a huge mirror. You know mirrors are the most dangerous objects in the void. We aimed for Uyuni Desert but ended up in the 'Mirror World.'"

"Ah."

"The plane is a means of travel 'somewhere other than here.' Our plane momentarily traveled to the Mirror World."

"Right... That makes sense."

Splash.

Dang Seo-rin stirred the water with her foot. Her smile reflected in the splashes.

"So my Undertaker is the best Undertaker, right?"

I didn't answer that question.

"This place is really wonderful. Thank you, Undertaker."

"You're welcome."

"But how do we get back to Korea? The plane just melted."

"....."

I couldn't answer that question.

I'll just write that it took at least three months to cross the Pacific Ocean on foot.

Footnotes:

1 - *Mugo* or *Ko-dok*, literally “jar/curse of poison,” is a type of magic in which poisonous insects are sealed in a jar to kill each other until only the deadliest is left standing. Depending on how the word is spelled (and the magic is crafted), the term may also refer to a single entity harassing a particular target to death in the form of a grudge curse called “solitude.”

2 - “If the creator of the world is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving being, then why does evil exist?” In an attempt to solve the problem of evil as stated, Leibniz argued that our world is the greatest good that could possibly exist. For instance, there might be a world in which every person is good, but humans would have no free will, which would be a lesser world than ours.

3 - In Abrahamic traditions, to fade away into salt is the fate of one who was guilty of evil or even simply of a person who wavered in their conviction and was, thus, deemed unworthy of being saved.

Chapter 169

The Diver I

Sinnoa

Breaking news. Ha-yul was sulking.

“……”

The reason was simple. I had gone to the Uyuni Salt Flats, which was at the top of Ha-yul’s bucket list (nine pages long on A4 paper), without her. She was, of course, furious, and when this kid expressed her anger, it was in the most childish way possible. She decided, *I won’t just stop talking to you. I’ve also decided not to hear you.*

“Ha-yul.”

She turned her head to the left.

“Ha-yul. I’m really sorry.”

She turned her head to the right.

No matter how much I tried to make eye contact, she kept turning her head. It was as if her head-turning skills were on par with an Olympic synchronized swimmer’s legs, our gazes always in perfect parallel.

‘Ah.’

I had expected this. That was why when Ha-yul asked, “Oppa, where are you going?” before I left for Uyuni, I vaguely replied, “Uh? Oh. Just somewhere nice.”

I had planned to be back in a week at most. Normally, Ha-yul, who treated others with disdain like Ch’oe Yŏng, wouldn’t have cared about a week-long disappearance.[1] But as revealed in the last story, I was scammed by an airline.

What was meant to be a week away ended up being stretched to three months. The trip's content also changed. The original plan was to enjoy the Uyuni Salt Flats for two days, but the remaining 87 days turned into a hands-on field trip called, "How did *Homo sapiens* cross the Pacific Ocean to reach the Hawaiian Islands? Let's find out!"

There was no one to complain to. Like humans, anomalies had a particularly narrow understanding of concepts like "refunds," "fair compensation," and "well-written apologies." The victims were always innocent customers like me.

"Go to hell…"

"Oppa, so where have you been?"

After surviving a grueling ordeal to return to the Korean Peninsula, I was greeted only by Do-hwa's chokehold and Ha-yul's cold stare. An explanation was unavoidable.

Hence, the current situation. The world wasn't a dating sim where once you maxed out favorability, it stayed there. Upon realizing I had gone to Uyuni without her, Ha-yul set about readjusting her favorability.

"Ha-yul? Won't you talk to me?"

Ha-yul ignored me and declared, "Something smells funny. I keep smelling an old man's stench."

My sensitive, middle-aged heart was shocked to its core. I almost had a heart attack.

'Is this how a father feels when facing a rebellious child?!'

As a regressor, I never thought I'd experience such emotions, but here I was. Barely able to get the words out, I croaked, "…Let's go to the Uyuni Salt Flats together next time."

Ha-yul turned her head.

It was the first time in three days that our eyes met. The jaw of the

maid puppet Ha-yul always carried suddenly relaxed.

“Next time? When?”

“After summer ends. This fall.”

“Really?”

“Really. Let’s also visit Machu Picchu and Tenochtitlan for an all-American special excursion.”

“Oppa, I love you!” A fake love wrapped around my shoulders. I shivered with shame.

“…But you have to help with the preparations for the great monsoon without any complaints. Follow the guild leader’s instructions. Got it?”

“Okay!”

My body was already having a fit at the thought of another trip, but there was no other option. To survive the annually recurring disaster event, Ha-yul’s help was crucial. This event was called the ‘monsoon.’

Yes.

If you live on the Korean Peninsula, the monsoon is a season of fear and horror at the subconscious level. The big summer event was approaching.

Some of you might have noticed that I rarely mention the ‘weather’ in my stories, and those who did have sharp eyes. In reality, the Earth was experiencing a weather-born apocalypse even before the birth of anomalies. The polar bears crying upon their drifting on ice floes from the Arctic every year were proof of this.

The Climate Apocalypse.

By definition, the hypothesis that the world might end due to climate change. It was a grave thing to consider, even without

anomalies, but the anomalies took it a step further.

- The weather in Daegu is insane. How can it be 42 degrees in summer? Is this a desert or a city?

- Maybe it's always been a desert.

- What the?

Daegu had turned into a desert.

No exaggeration, it was literally desertifying.

It wasn't just Daegu. The Gaema Plateau in North Korea had become a paradise for polar bears migrating from Siberia. Tigers, revived as anomalies named 'Mountain Lords' in the Baekdu Mountain range, faced fierce competition. But the Korean Peninsula had it easy compared to its neighbors. In Japan, "earthquakes" visited every season. These weren't just any old quakes either, but massive ones like the Tokai earthquake that came accompanied with all kinds of related anomalies. It was also why I respected the magical girls of Japan.

Given the situation, the regions habitable by humanity were extremely limited. In a way, 'climate anomalies' were the greatest threat to *Homo sapien* survival. So, what was the climate specialty of Busan, the new capital and last utopia of the Korean Peninsula?

"The monsoon is coming."

"....."

"....."

Tension filled the air of the conference room. The few gathered in the heart of the National Road Management HQ were indeed the heart of Busan—if not the entire Korean Peninsula. Noh Do-hwa, head of the National Road Management; Yu Ji-won, Operations Control Director; Dang Seo-rin, Guild Alliance leader; Seo Gyu, SG Net operator; and Sim Ah-ryeon, Saintess of the Eastern Holy State were all present.

“This monsoon is going to be record-breaking,” I warned. “If we’re not thoroughly prepared, the entire Korean Peninsula could vanish during the season.”

“Isn’t it always ‘record-breaking?’ What’s different this time?”

“I saw it first hand while crossing the Pacific. Super typhoons are forming in the western North Pacific.”

Dang Seo-rin shuddered, hands trembling as her face darkened. The recent trip had traumatized both of us.

“Look at this.”

I opened a PowerPoint presentation. Despite crossing the Pacific on a makeshift raft, I managed to take pictures with a spirit camera. The current monsoon status showed a ‘typhoon’ in the photo.

Noh Do-hwa grimaced at the sight. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s a typhoon.”

“Fuck. That’s not just wind, it’s a waterspout. You call that a typhoon?”

“Don’t expect logic from anomalies.”

Indeed, the typhoon that formed this summer was 1,200 kilometers in diameter and composed entirely of ‘water.’ Whoever called water the mother of life would rethink that if they saw this typhoon. Water can kill.

“Other regions can manage with their usual preparations, but Busan is different. If that typhoon hits us directly, the city will become the new Atlantis. We need a plan.”

“Let’s evacuate…”

A shocking proposal! The head of National Road Management suggested abandoning the capital. Noh Do-hwa seemed to have succumbed to the anomaly ‘Capitals are meant to be abandoned’ that no Korean Peninsula ruler could escape.

Shaking my head at her plan to emulate the Joseon dynasty's royal family, I said, "We can't run, Director."

"Then how do we survive it? How? We'd have been better off with a tsunami. If that thing lands, the coastline will move to Daegu. We should evacuate the citizens of Busan through the Inunaki Tunnel to Seoul."

"Director." I gave her a pitying look. "We can't avoid the monsoon typhoon. If Busan escapes unscathed, the typhoon will hit another city."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"This isn't a natural phenomenon, it's an anomaly. The Korean Peninsula can't escape the monsoon unscathed. The typhoon will exist until its havoc is wrecked, and the monsoon season will persist with it. Someone has to take on this 1,200 kilometer water bomb."

"....."

"Is there any city as well-prepared as Busan? Any place with its concentration of power? The most efficient path forward is for us to handle it. Otherwise, half the cities on the Peninsula will be wiped out."

"Shit…"

The horror of the anomaly made Noh Do-hwa shudder. As the top authority's mood worsened, so did the conference room's atmosphere. Only Sim Ah-ryeon, who barely knew what caution was, threw caution to the wind and raised her hand.

"Excuse me, guild leader?"

"Go ahead."

"Well, I doubt Pyongyang Holy City will be affected by the typhoon. So since the area in question is not my responsibility, can I leave now?"

"If a monsoon of this magnitude hits, SG Net will also go down."

“What? For how long?”

“At least two weeks, even if we’re lucky. Heavy rain disrupts internet communications, and that’s not taking into account the related anomaly that will follow.”

“The Eastern Holy State will mobilize all its forces to help our brothers in Busan!” Sim Ah-ryeon clutched my hand with both of hers, more sincerely and earnestly than I had ever seen. Even more than when she said, “I really like the caffè mocha that the guild leader makes.”

Noh Do-hwa let out a sigh as she scratched the back of her head.

“Director,” I counseled, “sighing wastes good luck.”

“Fuck off with your old-man advice. How do we deal with that monstrous water bomb? Didn’t you come up with a plan before calling this meeting?”

“Of course. Everyone, please pay attention.”

I confidently moved to the next slide on the PowerPoint.

Written in new-age fonts, it said:

[Monsoon Flood Damage Prevention Plan]

[STEP 1]

[Noh Do-hwa Renaming Project!]

Silence filled the conference room.

After a long pause, Noh Do-hwa reacted, asking, “…What? Renaming? What kind of renaming…?”

“Director Noh Do-hwa. It may be distressing to change the precious name given to you by your parents, but names are crucial when dealing with anomalies. For the sake of Busan’s citizens, please

consider renaming yourself this summer.”

“No, seriously, what does my name have to do with Busan’s safety?”

“From now on, your name is not Noh Do-hwa.” I looked earnestly at the top authority of the Three Han. “Your name is ‘Noah.’”

“……?”

“What are you waiting for, Noah? Start building the ark.”

“You son of a—!”

Noah’s Ark construction project, initiated!

The ‘Noah’s Ark’ in the Bible boasted impressive specifications. My focus, however, lay with Noah as a person. I suspect that he was an ancient archmage.

First, Noah managed to fit all the world’s plants and animals into a mere 135-meter-long boat. That included blue whales and various fish. This meant the ark had the world’s largest aquarium. Clearly, the ark had a ‘my inventory is infinite’ spell. Moreover, this infinite space was made entirely of wood, as Noah lived in the Bronze Age.[2] The feat was impossible by modern engineering standards, but that was irrelevant. Science advances over time, but magic grows stronger the farther back you go. The ancient archmage Noah likely strengthened the wood to steel levels.

Unfortunately, the modern-day Noah (formerly Noh Do-hwa) on the Korean Peninsula had no magical talent, but there was an archmage who could act as Noah’s wand.

“A——Aah—— A——”

Dang Seo-rin, an awakener with top-tier magical talent, sang atop Geumjeongsan, the highest point in Busan. The trees, moved by her outdoor concert, uprooted themselves and gathered along Geumjeongsan’s ridge. Indeed, I haven’t mentioned this all that often, but Seo-rin’s Cursed Song Incantation excelled in support

roles.

Wearing a helmet with “Safety First” written on it, I smiled with satisfaction. “The ark construction is going smoothly.”

“……”

“Then Noah… no, Director Noah. Please, kneel down.”

Ah-ryeon, Ha-yul, and I gathered at the Geumjeongsan worksite alongside Seo-rin. Another surprising guest also graced us with their presence. Playing the role of ‘God’ in this Noah’s Ark play was none other than Mo Gwang-seo Jesus Christ.

“Ha-yul, are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Director Noah, what are you doing? Kneel before Mo Gwang-seo Christ. You can bow too, if you like.”

For once, Noh Do-hwa’s lips trembled. She wore a name tag with ‘Noah’ on it. “Do we really have to do this, Undertaker?”

“Yes.” My answer was firm. “We’re using the most powerful myth on Earth, Genesis. We need the minimum decorum for ‘Noah’s Ark’ to work effectively.”

“……”

“Please, hurry?”

With an expression that seemed to curse the world, Noh Do-hwa knelt. Mo Gwang-seo looked down at her, his smile as benevolent as ever. Of course, Mo Gwang-seo had no free will. Every move and word was controlled by the Puppeteer, Ha-yul. Mo Gwang-seo (ft. Ha-yul) spoke.

“All living beings have spread corruption across the Earth, and their end has come before me. I will destroy all living beings along with the Earth.”

“……”

“Noah. Therefore, build an ark.”

Noh Do-hwa’s lips quivered, her tongue trembled, and her teeth chattered as she mumbled, “Yes…”

God commanded, and Noah obeyed. A reenactment of Genesis! Though there was a small error with the actor playing God also being the son of God, anomalies didn’t care about such details. Now, Noh Do-hwa was truly Noah. Every vessel she helped build would now serve as an ark.

“Hell, what a shitty world…”

Noah, the actor, had a foul mouth for humanity’s savior, but that didn’t matter.

“You damn regressor, are you getting back at me for being missing for three months?”

What an absurd accusation. I kept my personal and professional matters strictly separate. Was there anyone who was as impartial as me?

I looked out over the Busan coastline, my gaze earnest.

July. An SSS-level monsoon was heading north toward the Korean Peninsula.

Summer had arrived.

Footnotes:

1 - Ch'oe Yŏng was a Korean general turned national hero who was known to turn up his nose at human veneers and luxuries.

2 - The Bronze Age was the period that came before the Iron Age, when more versatile metallurgy and engineering spread through human civilization.

Chapter 170

The Diver II

Sinnoa

In the past during the Joseon Dynasty, there was a policy called the "Empty Island Policy." As the name suggests, it involved evacuating residents from islands to the mainland. Rather than allow regions rich with minerals and gas to be continuously raided by Zerglings (pirates), it was better to simply move the command center as a whole. This also showed how our ancestors cared for their people as if they were SCVs. As a Terran descendant, I too had to make such decisions and follow their example.

"Mr. Undertaker, we've evacuated all the residents from Jeju Island."

"Good work."

Under my orders, Yu Ji-won went around the southern islands, guiding the refugees to safety. Some resisted, but I ignored them. The difference between what the public perceived as a "monsoon" and the approaching "super monsoon" was as vast as the difference between a whistle and a typhoon. If we didn't evacuate now, they'd all be wiped out, as had been proven in many cycles before. The evacuation order wasn't just implemented in the real world.

- [Samcheon] WitchJudge: (Must Read) Instructions for Living During the Super Monsoon Season.

- [Baekhwa] EighthGrader: All roads connected to Sejong City will be closed until the end of the super monsoon in July and August! Those low on food, please apply for refugee status at Sejong City Hall!! >_<!;

- Admin: (Notice) SG Net may not be fully functional during the super monsoon period.

Guild leaders who cooperated with us like Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa took the initiative to act as canaries in the coal mine through the virtual hyperspace. Even Seo Gyu, the SG Net operator, stepped forward. The rare appearance of the ‘Admin’ nickname sent alarm bells ringing for even some of the macho, bravado types.

- Anonymous: Has SG Net ever been down before?

 Anonymous: No, but it sometimes connects to weird sites. I once typed in the same address and got linked to a site called ‘Live Net’ by force.

 LiteraryGirl: Eeeek

 Anonymous: That was just a suicide site anomaly, SG Net itself wasn’t blocked. Nothing like this super monsoon has ever happened before.

- Anonymous: So Busan is the most dangerous place to be. Why not just run away?

 Anonymous: That’s why most ordinary people in our neighborhood have gone to Daejeon. At least they have well-run shelters and free meal services there.

 Anonymous: They might get lost and die in the void while going up tho lol

 [NRMC] Officer: The National Road Management operates emergency caravans twice a week. We welcome their use by the general public. Please use them.

- CookingQueen: All those in need, come to Daejeon. We will help you as soon as we are able.

The southern part of the Korean Peninsula was bustling with preparations for the flood. Despite all the warnings, however, some people remained complacent.

- Anonymous: Why the fuss lol?

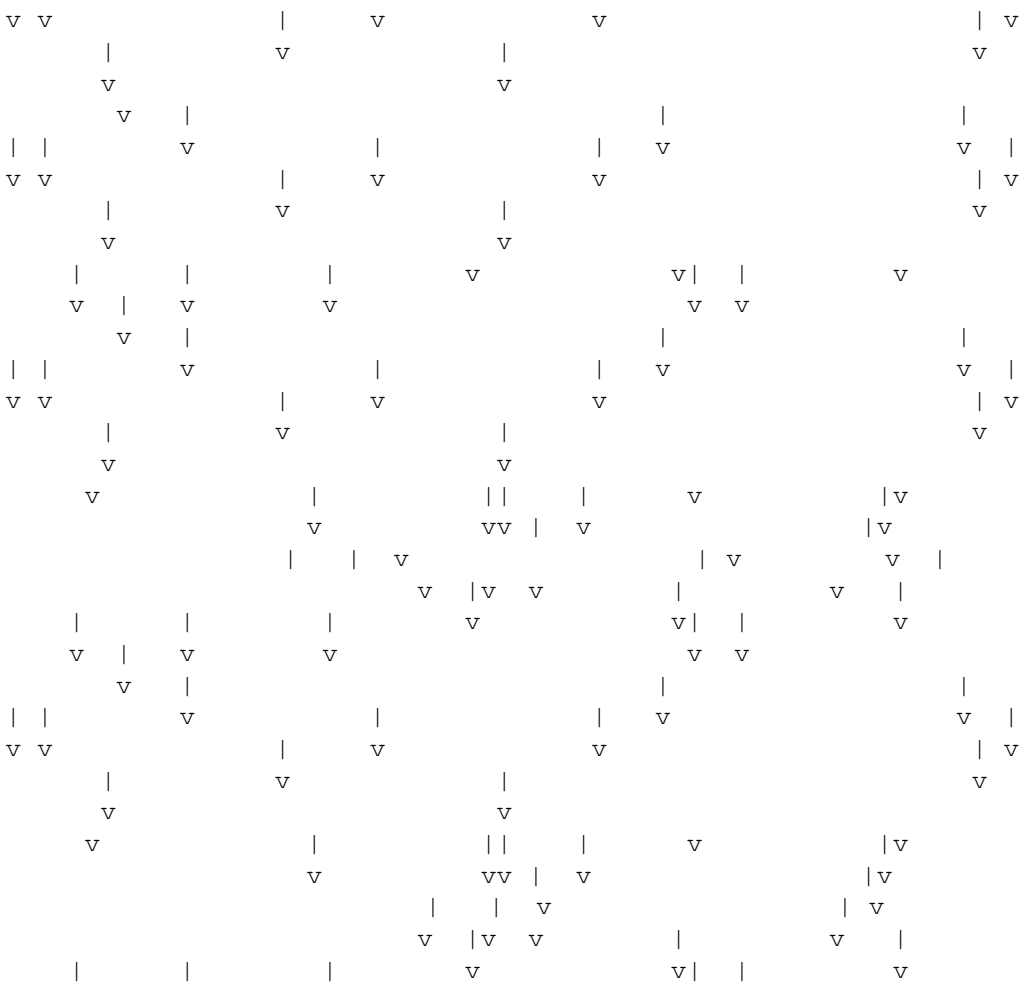
- Anonymous: Typhoon? We have Japan’s SSS-level breakwater, the

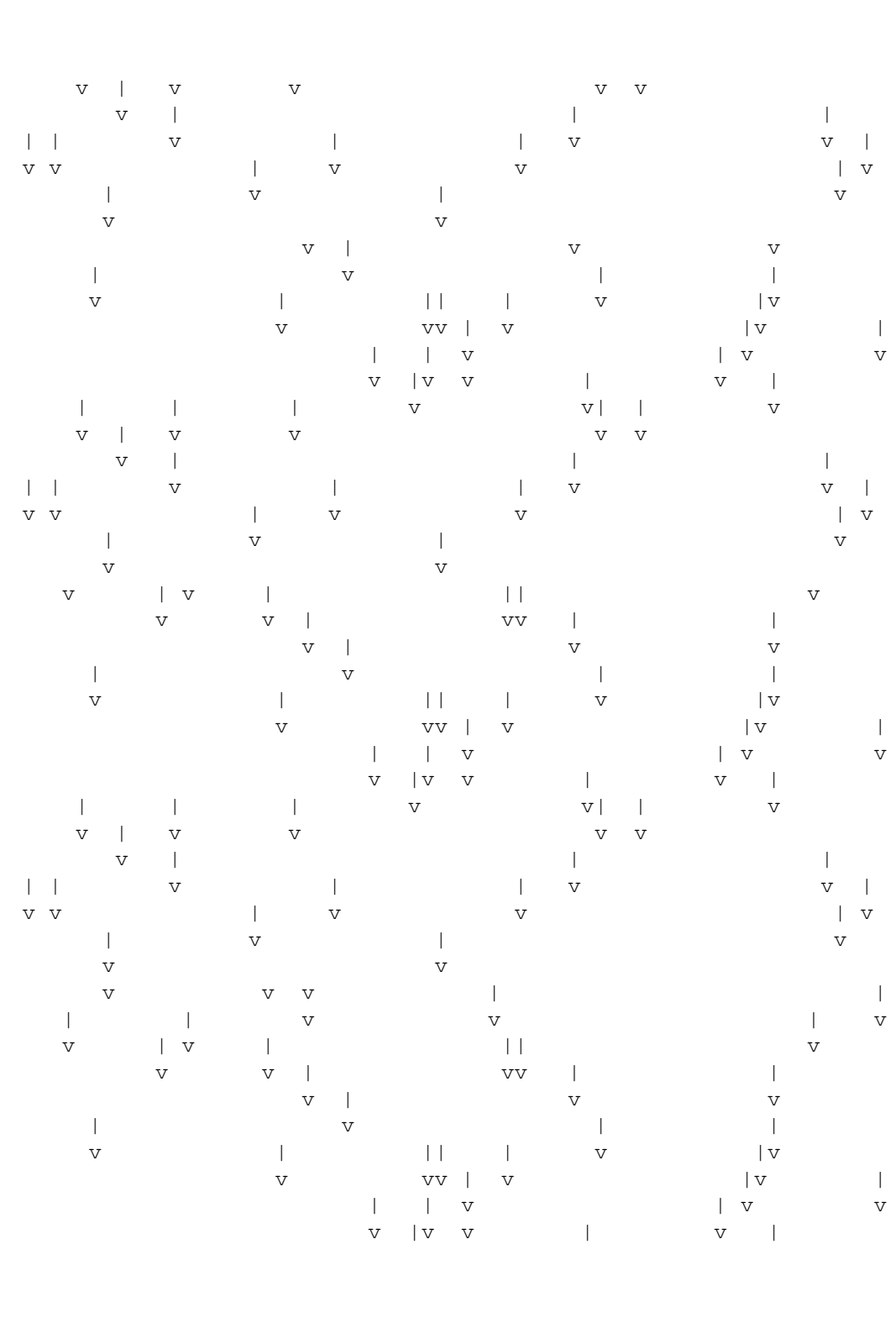
Japanese archipelago. No worries.

Humankind as a race was enslaved to dopamine and thrill. We often ignored dangers, camping in valleys during floods and swimming in the sea during typhoons. It was human nature.

- Anonymous: Isn't it just the rainy season? Even if it rains, Awakeners won't die from getting wet, right?

Those leaving Busan, those staying, those building arks, those sneering in protest—upon all those under the same sky,





would strike fear into anyone.

"Saintess, we cannot let this move to another region. Guide it slowly toward the ark using the Samcheon guild members."

[But can the arks withstand something like that, even if we're the ones who built them?]

"They have to. If they can't, Japan will be submerged, or the entire Korean Peninsula will be submerged."

[Understood. I will start guiding it.]

The Saintess regained her composure and began executing my plan. The command center was situated on the first ark. Do-hwa, Seo-rin, Ji-won, Gyu, Ha-yul, and I all watched the map, with chess pieces representing the Samcheon scouts. Thanks to Yu Ji-won's [Minimap] ability, we tracked the typhoon's movements in real time.

"The typhoon will arrive soon."

"....."

"That typhoon is both an anomaly and a void. When it reaches Busan, we will enter the 'super monsoon void.'"

I began to repeat the information critical for our final briefing. "The rain from this typhoon isn't ordinary water but a deadly toxin called 'void poison.' Contact with it risks severe bodily transformations."

"....."

"Even though our ship is designed to act as an ark, it will inevitably flood. When that happens, stay calm and use buckets to bail out water continuously, whether it's for one hour or several. The act of bailing water itself is vital."

We had repurposed old cruise ships into arks. An ark's exterior was reinforced with wood, and its interior stocked with enough provisions to last 40 days. There were 12 arks in total, each capable of holding 5,000 people, making room for about 60,000 Busan

residents. They had already boarded the arks docked along the Geumjeongsan Ridge.

"Rain will inevitably pour into the ship. Do not relocate carelessly. Each section must remain isolated. If you must communicate with another section—"

I held up a thread.

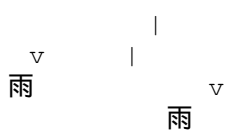
It connected like a spider web across the control room’s ceiling, linking to other sections. Ha-yul had set up the doll strings.

"Use these strings. As we approach the typhoon, SG Net and Telepathy will fail. Transmit Morse code through the threads using aura."

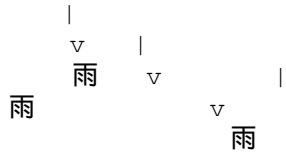
At that moment, a raindrop hit the window, splashing against the tempered glass. The drop wriggled like a living creature, spreading out to form the character for rain, 雨. Every raindrop writhed, each eventually forming the same shape.

With each raindrop, the faint sound of frog croaking echoed. Oddly, there were no frogs on the ark. It was modeled after Noah's Ark from Genesis for survival, but we hadn’t truly built it as a cradle for life.

[Mr. Undertaker.]



[The typhoon has made landfall in Busan. Now, oh, the storm waters are rapidly converging on the population center. No way, the typhoon… It's transforming from a giant spiral into a long, thin tube like a straw, oh. The water■, a tsunami on the horizon, it's all all converging on ■. Everyone, evac■—]



The Saintess's usually crystal-clear Telepathy was interrupted, broken up by intermittent static. The croaking grew louder.

Croak.

Seo Gyu, who had been fidgeting nervously with his smartphone, froze. "Hyung, SG net is down— *croak*—" The space of the ark, held securely by the law of universal gravitation, and the ship we were standing on, felt like it was suspended in mid air. Seo Gyu just opened his mouth.

Rrrribbit.

Dang Seo-rin shouted something like "Undertaker!" alongside him, but their voices were entirely drowned out by the sound of the rain pouring outside and the croaking of frogs resonating with that rain.

Croak.

The rain fell.

The overwhelming sound of rain and frog croaks filled the room. I blinked, and suddenly, I couldn't breathe. My vision blurred. Everyone in the control room, including me, was submerged under water.

A stream of bubbles rose before me.

My eyes locked on Ha-yul's panicked, gasping form. It was her first time encountering this type of void, and her distress was clear to see. In just a blink, we were all submerged in water.

"……! ……, ……!"

Ha-yul flailed underwater. Others reacted much the same. No matter how much I'd emphasized the instructions, it was hard to remain calm when surrounded by water. The worst part was, Ha-yul and the others' fingers were slowly turning into 'frog hands'. Body mutations and existence contamination were typical symptoms of void poison exposure. Seeing their limbs transform into frogs' triggered temporary panic.

Blub-blub. Croak. Blub-blub. Croak.

Human panic accelerated the spread of void poison. Ha-yul's blurbling gasps sounded increasingly like the croaks of a frog. Frogs (蛙) shared the insect radical (虫) in their Chinese character, explained by the resemblance between a frog's posture and the radical's shape.

Croak. Blub-blub. Croak. Blub.

Frog hands, frog legs, green skin. My comrades were quickly turning into insects. This transformation took only about six seconds.

"Move the buckets!" I shouted, Infusing my voice with aura so that my roar echoed underwater. "Start bailing water, no matter how awkwardly! Bail! Ha-yul, move! I've told you many times!"

Finally, Ha-yul and the others regained their senses and grabbed buckets. It was hard to move underwater, but they had practiced together before boarding the ark.

"……!"

"……! ……!"

In seemingly comical desperation, they performed the ‘bailing water’ motion. As they did, the water level in the control room slowly began to recede. The water didn’t physically move out, but it reduced as if genuinely being bailed.

"Phew, ha!"

As the water level dropped, everyone emerged, gasping for air. Their greenish skin returned to a human tone.

"Damn, almost died!"

"Haa… Haa…!"

"Is everyone okay?"

My comrades panted, drenched. Their hands still resembled frog limbs, with membranes between their fingers, but they were healing.

"It’s too early to relax."

Everyone turned to look at me while I glanced out the window.

Outside was only rain. The ark was completely submerged, not in the life-giving sea but in the deathly void poison.

"We need to check if the other sections are safe," I decided.

"……"

"Ha-yul, come with me."

"Okay."

We kept bailing water until the room was dry, then Ha-yul and I stepped out.

Croak, croak, croak.

The long corridor of the ark echoed with frog croaks from all directions.

Footnotes:

1 - The shape of Chinese characters often represents the words they depict. The character for rain 雨 is a pictograph of rain itself, with the line above representing the sky under which drops of water fall through the atmosphere down to the earth.

Chapter 171

The Diver III

Sinnoa

"...Frog croaks."

Ha-yul trembled. She instinctively opened and closed her fingers repeatedly, the sensation of frog skin still clinging to her hands.

"Did we really turn into frogs?"

Despite her youthful appearance, Ha-yul was a seasoned veteran who had explored countless voids with me, but even for her, a six-second bodily transformation was enough to leave a deep scar in her psyche.

I squeezed Ha-yul's hand, and she gasped out, feeling the warmth of another's palm sink into her own. Instead of swimming freely underwater, we had evolved to hold each other's hands.

"Your body is cold. Use your aura to dry off," I suggested. "It may look like ordinary water, but each drop is filled with void poison."

"...Okay, oppa."

Ha-yul's hair glowed golden with aura. Her soaked, brown locks quickly began to dry, but there was something strange about the process. It wasn't just that the water evaporated; it was more like transparent bugs were being burned off.

Squirm, squirm, squirm.

The bugs, wriggling in the shape of the rain character, 雨, were roasted by the golden aura. They tried to crawl through Ha-yul's hair to escape, only to dry up and evaporate.

"Ugh..." Ha-yul shuddered. Though she rarely showed emotions, disgust shone clear in her eyes. "The water is like bugs. This water

is crawling inside me too?”

“Don’t scratch your arm. If you scratch hard, you’ll bleed, and then the blood will look like bugs. If your blood starts forming the character 雨, it’s over.”

“You speak like you’ve seen this many times.”

I had, of course. Both Ha-yul and I had witnessed the horrifying transformation into frogs or people bleeding to death due to hydrophobia at least five times.

The first time, we realized that if we didn’t guide the great monsoon to Busan, Japan or the Korean Peninsula would sink.

The second time, we learned that without facilities and rituals like Noah’s Ark, stopping at simply guiding the monsoon’s path would result in everyone drowning.

The third time, we discovered that unless we bailed water, even with an ark, we would still be submerged.

“When we were submerged and turning into frogs, I felt strange,” Ha-yul muttered. Though her hair was dry, her eyes still seemed to reflect the shadows of water. “I felt nostalgic. Happy. I couldn’t breathe, but it felt like I was breathing through my skin, becoming one with the world.”

“Don’t think about it. It’s entrancing.”

I tightened my grip on her hand. Ha-yul snapped back to reality, meeting my gaze.

“Let’s go. We need to help the others,” I said.

“Okay.”

“Look, the puppet strings are broken over there. Let’s repair them as we go.”

Nodding, Ha-yul ticked her jaw.

The water in the corridor reached our calves, hindering our movement. As we splashed through, water bugs scattered in all directions.

Ha-yul shook her head and began fixing the puppet strings. Golden aura spread through the threads, extending throughout the entire ark.

“How is it, Ha-yul? Are you receiving signals through the strings?”

“...No issues in isolation areas 15, 21, and 37.”

Beep. Beep-beep. Beep, beep.

Beep-beep-beep, beep-beep-beep.

Not long after Ha-yul sent out her aura, signals began pinging back from different directions. The sound of Morse code transmitted through the threads was like the heartbeat of the ark.

Ha-yul looked up, reading that pulse. “...No response from isolation areas 13, 17, and 23. Oh, 25 just sent an OK signal.”

“What about the others?”

“No response.”

Despite thorough preparations, there were always casualties. I couldn’t be everywhere at once.

We immediately moved to the affected areas. As soon as we opened the steel door of isolation area 13, a zombie-like figure lunged at us.

“Ugh—!”

Startled, Ha-yul instinctively scattered her puppet strings. The limbs of the attacker were instantly wrapped in webs and fell with a splash.

“Rgh— Raaagh.”

The attacker’s body was half-melted, green skin growing where

blood should have sprouted. As the skin grew, it quivered and croaked like a frog.

“Grgh, *croak*.”

The person had already lost all sense or reason. From their eyes, now made entirely of water, flowed unbroken, weeping streams.

“Oppa.”

Ha-yul pointed inside the isolation area, pulling my attention away from where it was ensnared by the eerie sight.

“There,” she declared.

The room was filled with water, even though I had just opened the door. It was as if an invisible glass wall held the water in place, and floating within were only blue, yellow, and black shirts and pants. The people it had once held had vanished, swallowed by the void, and all that was left were the clothes, swimming through their makeshift aquarium like tropical fish. The only sound was the croaking of frogs, resonating through the water.

With some reluctance, I admitted, “It’s probably impossible to prevent the flooding of area 13.”

Area 4 and 13 were notorious trouble spots.[1] The command center where Noh Do-hwa and other leaders were stationed was in area 4, the most dangerous zone. In a similar vein, though we’d placed veterans in area 13, it too couldn’t be saved. Even if we left the room empty, the 13th room would be randomly selected, leading to another disaster.

‘No matter what we do, either area 4 or 13 will be breached. We need to reduce the number of isolation areas to 12 or less in the next cycle.’

I swallowed my frustration. “Let’s move to the next area.”

“Okay... What about this person?”

“It’s too late. With this level of transformation, not even Ah-ryeon’s

healing can save them. They're no longer human."

"Should I kill them?"

"Yes," I said. "Step aside."

"No."

Ha-yul shook her head and raised her hand, spreading her fingers wide. "I'll do it." Then, she clenched her fingers tightly.

Fwik!

The victim, wrapped in puppet strings, was torn into hundreds of pieces, reminiscent of the opening scene of the movie *Cube*. Unlike *Cube*, however, the pieces didn't fall but turned into clear liquid, hopping like frogs.

Splash. Croak. Splash. Croak.

The frog croaks quickly faded, and the water level in the corridor dropped from our calves to our Achilles' tendons.

Ha-yul silently squeezed her arms close.

Fortunately, the other isolation areas hadn't suffered as badly as area 13, and rescue operations proceeded smoothly. In area 25, there were 17 missing or drowned, 21 severely mutated, and 2 injured in the ensuing scuffles. Thanks to the quick action of those around them, the severely mutated individuals were returned to human form. The constant reinforcement of "strategies" and "precautions" through SG Net and the physical world paid off.

"....."

However, one of the severely mutated individuals was late in returning to human form. He was a paladin who had come to support the ark from the Eastern Holy State alongside Sim Ah-ryeon. Not just his fingers, but also his toes, thighs, and neck had transformed into a frog, and he remained stuck in that state for six minutes.

Humans are weak. Six minutes is a long time. The brain suffers permanent damage without proper circulation and breathing within five minutes. Void poison affects not just the physical body but also the mind, consciousness, and memories.

“Parasites.”

The paladin mumbled.

“People often say humans are like parasites to nature. But doesn’t nature also parasitize humans? Blood is like a parasite living within us. Everything is made of matter, and matter exists only to sustain other matter. What is freedom? If a parasite leaves its host, it dies, but the will to leave still exists, if only for a moment. Therefore, escaping the body is both death and freedom. The leap from matter is a miracle that happens only once. Whether it is achieved by one’s own decision or compulsion by others—”

“Shut up!” a survivor snapped. “Someone shut that bastard up!”

They weren’t the only one. People wrapped in blankets watched the paladin’s possessed ramblings with anxious eyes.

The strange thing was, the paladin wasn’t speaking loudly. His confession was quiet, no louder than an old man coughing in a corner. Yet, every survivor in area 25 listened intently to his monologue. Even the most insensitive person could feel the intense focus.

Just as sight has direction, so does hearing.

“Oh, God. No, the One beyond God,” The paladin continued. “The One who must be escorted out and exist free from me. The body is a prison, and the mind is the escape. I now understand why escaping the body is called freedom. All matter is like parasites on other matter. Oh, One, I too will join you...”

“Kill him!”

Whack.

A survivor threw a can at him. Objectively, it was an attack against

a patient who was merely mumbling to himself. But no one stopped the violence.

“That bastard is a monster! Kill him!”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“Kill him before we all get infected!”

Tuna cans, water bottles, and anything they could grab were thrown at the paladin.

Croak. Croak. Croak. Croak.

The sound of frogs blended with the survivors’ shouts. Yet no one seemed to hear the frogs, each consumed by their own voice.

“Enough.” I stepped forward, sending a tremor shooting across the deck.

The survivors froze.

“All of you are addicted to the void.”

“……”

“I understand. The voices of your constellations that used to comfort you have been cut off. The SG Net you clung to is down. Still, you must get used to this solitude for now.”

“……”

“There may be different levels of contamination in each section, so the command center will maintain isolation. Use the puppet strings for communication and messages. The command center staff will patrol and check your status at least twice a day.”

I glanced at the paladin. He was still mumbling. “I will take this contaminated person to the infirmary. Remember, he came from Pyongyang to support Busan.”

“……”

I didn’t reprimand them further. It wasn’t their fault.

Carrying the paladin with me, I left the isolation area, and Ha-yul followed a step behind.

Splash, splash.

As we walked through the corridor, I glanced out the window.

雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨.

It looked like we were underwater. The ark was still completely submerged.

According to Genesis, the great flood lasted 40 days.

And this was only day one.

Footnotes:

1 - The Korean word for the number 4 has the same pronunciation as the word for “death.” It is often associated with bad luck for this reason, similar to the Western aversion to the number 13.

Chapter 172

The Diver IV

Sinnoa

After Busan and its maiden voyager had been submerged for four days, the ark continued to fulfill its role as an artifact submarine from an ancient civilization, drifting aimlessly around the water column.

[It's quite an exotic sight, like an orbital elevator from a sci-fi movie.]

That was the Saintess's evaluation of the craft. From an outsider's perspective, the sight of the massive waterspout rising from the surface to the troposphere might seem romantic. However, the people aboard the ark had an altogether different take on the matter. They felt like residents of a shantytown, trapped in a watery hell where their rooms could flood at any given moment and their bodies were perpetually drenched. Finding any sense of "romance" in that environment was nearly impossible.

[Residents from other regions also come out here to gaze up at the water column for a day. It's even visible from Japan.]

"How are the damage reports?"

[The other arks haven't sustained major damage.]

Despite the noise in the Saintess's Telepathy, her message was clear enough. How was communication possible even within the super monsoon, you might ask? It was thanks to a method discovered by chance.

I was currently positioned between isolation areas 9 and 10 on the ark. Interestingly, this exact spot corresponded to Platform 9 ¾, a location famous for leading to the magical world from another universe.[1] Only from this spot was communication with the outside

possible. Its existence was discovered when Dang Seo-rin, just for fun, put up a sign.

We never did figure out why this supposed magical power worked even within the super monsoon. You'd have to ask the anomalies.

"Is there any sign of the super monsoon moving to another region?"

[None so far. The scouts from the Samcheon World Guild are flying around the waterspout and monitoring it day and night, but no significant anomalies have been detected yet.]

[Except, of course, for the very sight of a massive waterspout continuously swirling up to such a height.]

"Understood."

I nodded to myself. It was as expected.

'At least we've prevented the destruction of East Asia.'

If I hadn't taken any action, the 'super monsoon' would have poured heavy rain on the Korean Peninsula, the Japanese archipelago, and the Chinese continent for at least 200 days—possibly even up to 300 days—until every city was submerged. It was a true super monsoon, or a 'rain anomaly', an endless summer. It was the majesty of a great ocean anomaly.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

The Saintess's voice turned cautious.

[Has this monsoon repeated every six years in other cycles as well?]

"No. It's a relatively recent anomaly. Previously, it mostly affected Southeast Asia and the Americas. Only recently has it shifted toward the Korean Peninsula."

[Why would that happen?]

I had my own hypothesis. As I've mentioned several times, this world maintains a delicate balance among a variety of Outer Gods.

A perceptive and wise reader who was familiar with Three Kingdoms history might describe it as a “tripod-shaped” balance.

“Imagine a bathroom bathtub.”

[Bathroom... bathtub?]

“Yes. The bathtub is filled with seven different colored liquids, each using a very unique dye, so they don’t mix or interact with each other. But then, someone—me, the Undertaker—suddenly pulls the drain plug. What happens next?”

[The different colored liquids will all rush toward the drain, causing chaos.]

[The seven dyes represent the seven Outer Gods.]

“Correct.”

The liquids nearest to the drain, red (Infinite Void) and yellow (Infinite Metagame), are sucked down first. Those Outer Gods are eradicated. Then, the remaining liquids, which had been peacefully occupying their respective territories, start converging toward the drain to claim the vacancies.

“The drain is the Korean Peninsula.”

[……]

“More specifically, it’s the area where Outer Gods like Infinite Void have been eradicated.”

As cycles passed, more powerful anomalies seemed to be converging around me. Ultimately, it was a battle to see which came first: my blocking the drain or the bathtub emptying entirely.

“I call this the ‘Bathtub Theory.’”

[Your naming sense can be quite hard to understand sometimes. Like ‘Ubiquitous.’]

What was wrong with Ubiquitous? I thought it sounded great.

[And calling it a ‘bathroom bathtub’ instead of just a ‘bathtub’ makes you sound quite old-fashioned, Mr. Undertaker.]

Why was having a bathtub in the bathroom a symbol of age?

Beep-beep-beep-beep.

Just then, an alarm blared throughout the ark.

- It’s falling again!

- Hold on to something! Anything!

- Buckle up! Don’t grab your bags! Buckle up first!

The veterans adept with aura shouted orders from each isolation area. I couldn’t continue my conversation with the Saintess.

“Sorry. It seems the ocean currents caused by the typhoon are acting up again. If you notice anything strange outside, contact me immediately.”

[Okay. Be careful, Mr. Undertaker.]

Kwoong!

As soon as the communication ended, the massive ark rocked violently. The hull tilted and then immediately plunged downward. It felt like the ark had been struck by a torpedo.

Kyaaah!

- Stay calm! Stay calm!

The ocean currents within the super typhoon were far from gentle. The void poison disguised as sea water surged, swirled, and pounded in continuous waves until the 12-ark fleet was swept away by these currents.

Some days, the water level soared to the height of Mount Everest, 8,000 meters above sea level. On other days, it dropped rapidly to 2,000 meters. The abnormal altitude changes exposed the survivors

to health risks—headaches, fainting, bleeding, eardrum rupture, and altitude sickness were common side effects. In severe cases, people were thrown like billiard balls, crashing into bulkheads that shattered their spines.

Even now, the healers with Sim Ah-ryeon as their central force were tirelessly treating the injured in three shifts. Without Sim Ah-ryon, the casualty count would have been at least ten times higher.

Beep-beep-beep-beep...

The sirens from the puppet strings gradually subsided, and the ark's vibrations slowed. But there was no time to relax.

- Damn, the water's coming in again!

- Move the water buckets! Move the water buckets!

Whenever there was a 'fall' or 'rise' within the super monsoon, flooding inevitably followed. Just like on the first day, the isolation areas were completely submerged. However, by now, the survivors had grown accustomed to it. Unlike the first day, where there was significant damage, people now moved in unison to bail out the water.

- Is anyone undergoing a physical transformation?

- There, help that person to the infirmary!

- Move in pairs! Never roam the ship alone!

After four days, the survivors had become much more efficient. Even SCVs could join the fight if needed. Humans were adaptors, beings who overcame their environments. Despite rooms flooding in the blink of an eye and limbs turning into frogs, humans had the strength to accept such changes. My role as a regressor was to create strategies and systems to help this strong vitality endure.

My chin dipped in satisfaction.

'It seems like I can leave for a while without any major issues.'

I returned to the command center. As soon as I opened the steel door, a monkey wrench flew at me. I dodged it easily and saw Noah (formerly Noh Do-hwa) glaring at me with hatred in her eyes.

“Noah, throwing random objects can hurt people.”

“Damn it...”

“What if it wasn’t me coming in just now? Someone could have been seriously injured.”

“I can tell it’s you just by your footsteps,” Noah muttered. “Your footsteps are irritating.”

Her look of utter fatigue was warranted. Living inside a submarine-like environment was far from comfortable. Sirens blared at all times, injuries occurred frequently, and free roller coaster rides were a regular occurrence. Seo Gyu, who prided himself on being a tough guy, had strapped himself to a bed with belts and fainted. Even Dang Seo-rin looked exhausted. Only Yu Ji-won, who seemed to have learned Napoleon’s sleeping methods, was holding up well.[2] Everyone else in the command center was complaining of extreme fatigue.

“Good news, everyone. I’ve checked around, and there were no deaths in this flooding incident.”

“Oh, really. What great news, just great, “ Noah sneered. “Now, if we only didn’t have to endure another 36 days in this rotten hellhole, we might even pop open a bottle of wine. Why are we even doing this...?”

“I have a suggestion.”

“And that is...?”

“If you’re looking to slice something off at the neck, make it the wine bottle’s head, not mine.”[3]

Since this conversation had happened in a previous cycle, I preempted it. Noah’s face twisted with even deeper hatred.

“There are two ways to deal with the super monsoon. One is to endure it. If we hold out for another 36 days, it will end.” I shrugged, adding, “In the previous cycle, I used this method.”

“Then why not use it again? Why the sudden change in strategy…?”

“In the previous cycle, it also took us 31 days to reach a point where no one died.”

“……”

“We still had to hold on for another week either way.”

We had installed puppet strings to facilitate communication between isolation areas, used water buckets to bail out water, and maintained communication with the Saintess between isolation areas 12 and 13. These were all measures learned from sacrifices in previous cycles.

“But now, we’re only on day four. Unless you enjoy roller coasters so much that you want to keep experiencing the thrill, I think it’s a good time to try another strategy.”

Noah stared at me silently. Due to excessive stress, the blood vessels of her left eye had burst, turning the white there blood red. Normally, healers would have immediately treated the eye, but this was wartime. There was no spare medical staff to treat something as trivial as an eye infection.

“So, this second strategy hasn’t been tested before and will be attempted for the first time in this cycle?” she asked finally.

“Precisely.”

“And if it fails…?”

“It will be the mother of success.”

“Damn you…” Noah glared at me with her left eye closed (which was quite difficult to do). “So, what’s this strategy?”

First, I transformed Ha-yul into a turtle shell.

“……”

“Let me know if it’s uncomfortable, Ha-yul.”

“……”

“Oh, right. You can’t speak without your maid doll.”

Thud!

Ha-yul punched me in the back of the head. It didn’t hurt at all. For the record, I was wearing swim trunks. Ha-yul was in a wetsuit. It wasn’t because I wanted to flaunt my abs or give a fanservice swimsuit scene. I aimed to be the first human to swim at an altitude of 8,000 meters (underwater).

Noah grimaced. “Are you insane…?”

“Yes. There must be an anomaly core inside that super monsoon, an ‘eye of the storm.’” I tightened the specially made belt. The turtle shell formed by Ha-yul fit snugly on my back. Despite her resistance, she was essential for this mission.

“How do you plan to find the core in this massive storm…?”

“I will connect Ha-yul’s puppet strings between the arks to create a vast spider web.”

The ark fleet consisted of 12 ships. I planned to link several kilometers of puppet strings between these ships, adjusting them to avoid any tangling. The makeshift radars formed by the 12 ships would move through the storm, automatically searching for the anomaly core.

“It’s highly likely this method will fail, given it’s the first attempt. If the Saintess confirms that we’re dead, just endure for the remaining 36 days.”

“Without you, we’ll probably fall apart soon. What a shitty world…”

“Well then, I’m off.” I opened the window. Seawater rushed in but was blocked by my aura shield. “Ha-yul, don’t you love swimming on vacations?”

“……! ……!”

“Let’s become the first humans to swim in the sky. Ready, set, dive.”

“……!”

“Three, two, one…”

“……! ……!”

“Go.”

With a burst of aura in my legs, I dove into the water, and the rapid currents swept over me. Ha-yul, apparently delighted, kept drumming on my back.

This wasn’t in any way revenge for Ha-yul tormenting me over the Uyuni trip. Absolutely not.

Footnotes:

1 - Platform 9 ¾ is a location from the *Harry Potter* series, a hidden train platform where wizarding students would cross from the human world into the magical world to take the train to school.

2 - The French military commander and emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was said to power nap in two- to three-hour increments at a time during the less-busy periods of his day.

3 - Undertaker is probably referring to the glass bottle challenge

where people use a knife to slice off the top of a bottle.

Chapter 173

The Diver V

Sinnoa

“Rgh, brp, blrgh...?”

Ha-yul struggled, clinging desperately to my back. She was being a bit dramatic. Unlike me, Ha-yul had been given goggles and an oxygen tank. Even her prosthetic leg had been replaced with ‘Noah Workshop’s Special Flippers.’ If this were a gacha game, it would have been an SR-ranked item.

That’s right. We were diving into a substance more toxic than a reactor pool in a nuclear meltdown, but Ha-yul had no real reason to struggle.

“Ha-yul.” My gentle voice reverberated softly through the water, carried by my aura. “Have you watched *Evangelion*? Remember the scene where the pilot dissolves into the orange liquid? If you don’t stay alert, only your diving suit will be left, and your whole body will dissolve.”

“.....! .....!”

“Raise your aura and cover your entire body with it. Continuously remind yourself of who you are. If it’s too hard, think of your anger toward your father.”

Of course, I would protect Ha-yul if things got truly dangerous. But I couldn’t keep her sheltered forever. I was a harsh instructor to my guild members and comrades.

“Think of your mother if you prefer.”

“Hrgh...?”

“I know your maid doll, the one you’ve carried since Japan, is actually your mother.”

“……”

“If you disappear here, that doll will never move again.”

Bubbles rose behind me in a gentle stream that somehow felt particularly cold.

Just like in other cycles, Ha-yul quickly adapted to the training. Her fingertips turned pale and transparent, but the contamination didn’t extend beyond her arms. There were no signs of her transforming into a frog.

“Good. You did well.”

“……”

“Always think about the existence you carry. Compared to your life, the void’s poison is nothing.”

I felt a small nod against the back of my neck. Unlike the vast emptiness of the sea, humans each dug a dark well into their hearts. I trusted the depth of that well more than the sea’s expansiveness.

Swoosh.

As Ha-yul regained her composure, a creature swam past us about ten meters ahead. It was a shark-shaped anomaly.

“Uoooooh.”

Ha-yul was startled, and for good reason. Sharks didn’t normally make such noises, nor were they as transparent as glass, nor did they grow to be 20 meters long.

In this inhospitable ecosystem of the void, a bus-sized Megalodon swam past, alongside 15 of its kind. These sharks, extinct on Earth, were still thriving here.

“Uoooooh…”

“Uoooooh…”

Ha-yul clutched my neck with both hands (a habit she picked up from drinking with the National Road Director) and watched in amazement as the prehistoric sharks swam by.

Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze.

Ha-yul's fingers tapped my neck like piano keys. It was a Morse code message, not a strange quirk.

Translated to regular speech, it meant, "Amazing."

Squeeze.

Ha-yul spoke.

"Beautiful."

Bubbles rose from the sharks as they swam away into the depths, uninterested in us. The ripples from their tails reached us, then delicately popped.

"Ha-yul, connect the puppet strings to the bow statue. I'll handle the swimming."

"....."

"Make sure to secure plenty of strings. If they break, we'll have to come back and reattach them."

The pressure of Ha-yul's massage on my neck seemed to increase.

The task proceeded smoothly after that. We installed puppet strings from Ark No. 1 and stretched them out to connect to Ark No. 4, as if laying underwater cables.

Huff, huff, haa...!

We took breaks ranging from three hours to half a day every time we reached a new ark. Even Awakeners, with our superhuman recovery, couldn't withstand the constant pressures of the super monsoon void for long.

After clinging to me underwater for hours, Ha-yul was left panting. “Exhausted.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. But I need more rest.”

Even during breaks, Ha-yul held tightly to my left hand. It was understandable. For safety reasons, we couldn’t bring her maid doll on this mission. Ha-yul could only communicate with me through sign language or Morse code.

Left with such extremely limited communication in the equally dangerous environment of the super monsoon void, old traumas resurfaced for Ha-yul. She had been neglected by her father—the former mayor of Busan, Jung Sang-guk—and lived a life of sheltered imprisonment. I was the one who brought her from Japan after she attempted suicide.

“Oppa.”

“……”

“Living is too hard.”

Ha-yul nestled into my arms like a baby kangaroo. I patted her head gently. With each stroke, her wet hair dried softly under my aura.

Human hands could cover many things. For instance, Ha-yul calling me “Oppa” while subtly confusing “O” with “A,” making the pronunciation ambiguous. We never mentioned this fact.[1]

“……”

“……”

We shared human warmth through this simple connection. For a while, we just stayed like that, exchanging the warmth of our bodies.

The awakeners in charge of Ark No. 4 were astonished by our visit.

“Good heavens. Did you swim through the water to get here?”

“Yes. We connected the puppet strings from bow to bow. I’m continuously infusing them with aura to prevent them from breaking, but the ship might experience some unusual turbulence due to the currents. Don’t be alarmed.”

“Yes, sir...”

“I knew the cafe owner was extraordinary, but...”

The awakeners were clearly unsettled by our daring actions. After receiving reports at Ark No. 4, I immediately set out for the next destination.

“Sure enough, tackling the super monsoon early—even if strenuous—leads to far better results.”

I swam through the transparent deep sea as I thought to myself. Ha-yul, having adapted, was now paddling along with me.

“In the previous cycle, the other arks suffered significant damage. Their mental limits are reached in about ten days.”

We continued connecting the arks with puppet strings, steadily but without rushing. Any knowledgeable person would recognize the tactic as similar to the ‘Chain-Link Strategy’ from the Battle of Red Cliffs in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, but although Cao Cao met his downfall due to this tactic, there was no Zhuge Liang or southeastern wind to thwart us here.[2] The end awaiting the super monsoon anomaly would be overwhelming destruction.

Swoosh.

Of course, the super monsoon had something akin to the southeastern wind: ocean currents.

“Rgh, brgh, brrrr...”

Whenever strong currents surged within the water typhoon, Ha-yul and I were tossed around like driftwood, sometimes swept thousands of meters away from where we began. Navigating in such

conditions was nearly impossible. I relied on my superhuman senses honed through many cycles and my perfect memory, sending out my aura like a radar to find our way.

Centerbound, we slowly pushed our way through, deeper and deeper into the center.

“Uoooooh.”

“Uoooooh, ooooh...”

As we neared the eye of the storm, the number of underwater anomalies increased. Besides Megalodons, there were *Leviathan melvillei*, *Dunkleosteus*, and *Cameroceras*—prehistoric rulers of the sea, swimming in their anomalous forms.[3]

It was as if they were asserting that true life on Earth belonged not to humans but to these depths.

“Kiyaaaah!”

Some creatures took an interest in the later-evolved humans. Ferocious, ancient whales attacked us with maws gaping. I drew my cane sword and demonstrated Moses’s miracle firsthand. Unholy creatures, not recorded in the Bible, witnessed divine power and perished. This was proof that hierarchical culture didn’t work when faced with the brutality of nature.

“Oppa, you’re the best.”

While fending off ancient sharks and whales, we finally connected all 12 arks. The work was completed on the ninth day, just as the sun was setting.

The fiery sunset set the storm’s rain ablaze with color. Unlike the ocean, which only received sunlight on its surface, the storm absorbed the sunset across the length of its towering body, dyeing the deep sea a vivid red. The puppet strings we had laid reflected the crimson sunset, twinkling like the Milky Way.

“.....”

Throughout the return to Ark No. 1, Ha-yul couldn't take her eyes off the storm's sunset. Even in the void's hell, designed to slaughter countless humans, there was beauty.

Life was brutal.

"Welcome back..."

Upon our return to Ark No. 1, Noah greeted us. Her eye infection had worsened so that, now, both of her eyes were bloodshot. I found myself surprised that Sim Ah-ryeon hadn't healed her yet.

"You survived, huh?" she noted. "Did you really find and connect all 11 other arks with puppet strings...?"

"Yes. We'll need to find a smarter method next cycle, but fortunately, the other arks haven't been as heavily contaminated by void poison as ours."

"Hmm..." Noah ran a skeptical gaze over us—specifically, over Ha-yul, who was clinging to me like a sloth. "You two seem even closer now..."

"After nearly a week of swimming together, you either become best friends or worst enemies." I patted Ha-yul's head. She happily leaned into my shoulder like a cat. "Now we just need to maneuver the arks to trap the super monsoon. Did anything happen while we were gone?"

"Well..." I expected a sarcastic remark about my survival, but Noah's eyes avoided mine.

A sudden sense of unease washed over me, prompting me to lower my voice. "Director, what's the issue?"

"Well, Undertaker, you know we thoroughly verified everyone boarding our ark..."

"Yes, we're sacrificing ourselves for East Asia. Ark No. 1 especially, which is far more dangerous, was boarded only with verified personnel."

“And I double-checked the list myself twice, but… it seems we had a stowaway.”

“A stowaway?”

I frowned. People already refused to board the ark even when incentivized. What person in their right mind would board illegally? Moreover—

“You’re saying our Awakeners failed to identify an illegal passenger?”

“Strictly speaking, ‘illegal’ might not be the right word. Witnesses say the person just appeared out of nowhere, as if they emerged from the floor…”

My sense of unease intensified. “Where is this passenger now?”

“We locked them in isolation area 13. It was the only empty space. Well, ‘locked’ isn’t quite right. They volunteered to go there. Would you like to meet them?”

I did.

Isolation area 13 had been submerged entirely on day one. The water hadn’t drained, and the clothes of the deceased floated like tropical fish.

There, kneeling calmly in the middle of the water, sat Go Yuri.

“……”

“Oh.” Go Yuri smiled brightly. “Hello, guild leader Undertaker, yes? Long time no see.”

I began to tremble like a small white bear facing a Malayan sun bear.

Footnotes:

1 - While “oppa” is a term of endearment used by a younger sister for her older brother (and other similar relationships), “appa” is used by a daughter for her father.

2 - The Battle of Red Cliffs was a turning point in Chinese history which paved the way for the Three Kingdoms period. In a catastrophic tactical error on the part of the warlord Cao Cao, he ordered his ships to be tied together to reduce the impact of the wind-born waves on the vessels and the crew, allowing his enemy—commanded by Zhuge Liang in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* retelling—to set the entire brigade on fire and eventually storm and annihilate the camp ashore.

3 - A sperm whale but with fangs, a half-shark-half-orca but with armor, and a mollusk but with ambush 100, respectively. Basically, all prehistoric apex predators that could kill a human in a heartbeat.

Chapter 174

The Diver VI

Sinnoa

My inner Munch screamed in agony.

‘Go Yuri? Why? Why Go Yuri?’

For context, I hadn’t seen the real “Go Yuri” in millennia—2,112 years to be precise. It had been so long that even the people of Silla had rebuilt their nation and seen it fall twice. The Egyptians had had enough time to look at the pyramids they themselves had built and wonder, *“Who could have constructed such magnificent structures?”*

Just remaining composed enough to school my facial muscles took superhuman patience.

“Guild leader, your lips are trembling.”

“...I’ve heard a lot about you.” I immediately switched to method acting. Go Yuri? Who was that? I was merely a small café owner running a business near the Inunaki Tunnel. And Yu Ji-won’s spirit was protecting me.

“Go Yuri,” I greeted finally, “I heard you usually operate out of Daejeon. What brings you to Busan, and so unexpectedly?”

“Ah, um...”

“Given how often we see each other on SG Net, I’d love to accommodate you, but this is not the right time nor place. If you can’t provide a satisfactory explanation, we’ll have to follow protocol.”

Go Yuri’s eyes fixed on me. Her left hand lifted, reaching for me.

“Oh, I see.”

Then, she stopped.

Whatever *“Oh, I see”* meant, I didn’t want to know, nor could I even if I did. Any knowledge I believed I had almost certainly found its roots in brainwashing by Go Yuri.

“I’m sorry, guild leader.” When I remained silent, Go Yuri retracted her hand, then bowed her head as I desperately tried to maintain doublethink. Her smile was as delicate and troublesome as the shade of a wisteria vine. “Honestly, I didn’t intend to intrude on your hospitality.”

“Then why...”

“Believe it or not, I simply woke up and found myself here.”

“.....”

“At first, I was very confused. I had been busy helping the refugees from Busan, and then suddenly, I was here.”

It was hard to dismiss her explanation offhand, and not just because of her trustworthy demeanor and words. Knowing the truth was in and of itself inherently impossible. Unlike the relatively friendly ‘unconscious Go Yuri,’ the ‘real Go Yuri’ sitting in front of me felt somewhat rougher. I couldn’t pinpoint exactly how or why; it was just a sense honed from living too long as a regressor.

“So, you’re saying you have no particular purpose for your visit? If that’s the case, we’ll arrange for you to stay here until the super monsoon is dealt with. You might find the accommodations suboptimal, but please understand our situation.”

“No, that’s not it.” Go Yuri smiled and waved her hand. “Guild leader, you’re so quick to have your say. Do you always rush to conclusions?”

“.....”

“You’re right. This isn’t the best time or place, but I must admit to feeling a tad wronged.”

“Wronged?”

“Yes. After all, I’m not the only one here who ‘shouldn’t be’ in this time and place, am I?”

I swallowed hard. The super monsoon wasn’t supposed to strike the Korean Peninsula. The “Bathtub Effect” shouldn’t have occurred. I caused it. The ark shouldn’t exist here. Using puppet strings to tie up a typhoon wasn’t supposed to be part of our strategy. Everything about the current situation was something that *shouldn’t be*. Was Go Yuri pointing that out?

“I can’t say I know why I ended up here, but isn’t that the same for the whole of the human race? They don’t know why they were born, yet they still strive to find their purpose.”

“That is a rather abstract discussion,” I managed.

“I know what I need to do here. I realized it quite immediately upon my arrival.”

Slowly, a water bug crawled up Go Yuri’s long index finger. Its tail flicked, creating small bubbles that popped near Go Yuri’s mouth. She looked at the bug on her finger as if it were a cute little bird. Despite sitting underwater, her voice was steady and her hair remained in place. Even as the ark shook with the typhoon’s waves, her posture never wavered. Her aura control must have been refined to an extremely fine-tuned state. Or perhaps it wasn’t just aura...

“Guild leader, you intend to hunt a dragon, right?”

A dragon. I immediately understood that she meant the super monsoon anomaly.

“When you hunt the dragon, take me with you,” she said pleasantly. “I’ll undoubtedly be of help.”

“...What if I said I couldn’t suddenly include an outsider to Busan in our well-prepared operation?”

“Oh dear. In that case, I might just become a Busan citizen.”

"……"

"I've always been a fan of Lotte!"[1]

It was an offer I couldn't refuse.

The operation to hunt the super monsoon, codenamed 'Typhoon Hunt,' was carried out as follows:

National Road Management agents ran around explaining the plan.

"In an hour, the arks will start shaking violently!"

"Everyone, please go to your assigned seats and fasten your seat belts! Even Awakeners must not unbuckle their belts!"

Seats in the isolation areas of the arks had been prepared in advance for the turbulent currents. These seats were like upgraded airplane seats. Unfortunately, the "upgrade" wasn't a bump in quality from economy- to business-class. Instead, it was a bondage-style upgrade with waist belts, chest belts, and leg belts designed to secure people firmly in place.

"Awakeners, hold onto the strings!"

"Orders will be given through the strings in real time! When you receive an order, inject as much aura into the strings as you can without exhausting yourself!"

Ha-yul's puppet strings were distributed to each passenger strapped into the bondage seats. These strings extended from the bulkhead of Ark No. 1 to its bow statue and further connected to the bow statues of the other arks. The 12-ark fleet was linked together by these strings, resembling the nerve tendrils of the protoss' Khala from Starcraft. Any reader familiar with Starcraft might sense autumn approaching with this setup of arks and Khala.[2]

In the operation control room, Yu Ji-won reported, "Sir, all Awakeners are seated." On her Mini-Map, thousands of Awakeners were displayed, so small that most were represented by tiny, two-centimeter chess pieces. Even the Saintess's Clairvoyance was almost useless in the storm, leaving us reliant on Ji-won's Mini-Map

for managing this large-scale operation.

“What about the positions of the arks?” I questioned.

“They’re spread out far enough. Even if the currents get rough, the chance of collisions are very low.”

“Good.”

I looked around to Noah, Dang Seo-rin, Sim Ah-ryeon, Lee Ha-yul, Yu Ji-won, and our unexpected guest, Go Yuri. Everyone but the last illegal immigrant was exhausted. However, their eyes still shone with determination. For this ‘Typhoon Hunt’ to be a success, none of them could be absent.

“Then, let’s begin.”

“...Are you sure about this, Undertaker?” Dang Seo-rin looked at me with concern. “You said the super monsoon would disappear if we held out for another 30 days. Why not just wait?”

“If we wait, it will return next summer, and we’ll be back on the ark.”

“……”

“Don’t worry, Dang Seo-rin. This might not be comforting, but I’ve already lost my limbs multiple times.”

“That’s not comforting at all.” Dang Seo-rin shook her head with an exasperated look, a face I had grown to like. “Okay. Then... Shall I sing?”

“Please.”

Dang Seo-rin gently plucked the puppet strings and parted her lips.

“*Ah——*”

Her song flowed out, a chant. The first and second verses always involved ‘repetition’ and ‘playback,’ laying the foundation for her archmagic. The following spell was unique.

“——*Ah—Ah—Ah—*”

The spell was ‘Sense Amplification.’ It heightened human senses to their extreme limits—think the comic book cliché of bullets moving slowly enough to see with the naked eyes. However, it came with a downside: a keen awareness of one’s heartbeat, blood flow, and the activity of internal organs. This made it more of a debuff than a buff for most Awakeners. Hence, Dang Seo-rin only cast ‘Sense Amplification’ on me.

With a pulse, my senses expanded infinitely.

My five senses at their base had already been sharpened to superhuman levels. With Dang Seo-rin’s support, I could now feel every wave crashing against the bulkhead as if it were crashing directly onto my heart.

“Good… Ji-won.”

“Yes.”

“Cut them off.”

“Excuse me, sir?” someone cried.

Slash.

Without hesitation, Yu Ji-won drew her sword and cut the fingers off both hands. Of course, they weren’t her own fingers; they were mine. All ten of my fingers, left and right, were neatly severed. Excruciating pain surged through me, but I mastered it skillfully.

‘What if I screamed like General Guan Yu did?’[3]

The curiosity was intense, but the fear of losing my honor was greater. I decided to satisfy this curiosity in the next cycle.

Without a single groan, I spoke calmly. “Director Noah. Now.”

Noah sighed deeply but approached me to start her work. She attached prosthetics to my severed fingers, each designed to resemble my own fingers. Thanks to Noah’s awakened abilities,

these “fingers” felt as if they had always been a part of me. I moved them freely, without any sense of loss.

And these fingers were connected to puppet strings.

They had been designed that way from the start, like Spider-Man’s fingers. The puppet strings extended from each fingertip, connecting to Ark No. 1 and linking further to the entire 12-ark fleet navigating through the typhoon.

“I’ll heal you now, guild leader!”

Sim Ah-ryeon quickly approached and cast a healing spell on me, adhering the prosthetic fingers perfectly to my flesh. The moment my nerves connected with the puppet strings, my “eyes” opened.

“……!”

How could I describe this feeling?

I saw the sea. I heard it. I felt it. My nerves extended through the puppet strings to every corner of the ark. The strings stretched beyond the ark, flowing through the currents and waves. I sensed the exact positions and movements of all 12 arks. I knew their directions and the roughness of the sea they navigated.

‘Ah.’

If a rider trained from childhood could achieve unity with their horse, then my current state was ‘man-ship unity.’ I tested the strings by channeling aura through them, feeling the ark surge forward.

- What’s happening?

- Maybe just some waves.

- Wave detected. Wave detected.

I heard the voices of those inside the ark, surprised by the sudden movement. I even sensed the aura of an Awakener urgently transmitting Morse code. Everything was under my control. The

omnipotence seeped in as I effortlessly commanded the massive vessels with a flick of my fingers.

Go Yuri watched me silently, smiling. Her gaze, like licking ice cream with her eyes, was unnerving. In ordinary times, I would have been disturbed, but now I had to focus on controlling the arks.

I turned to the operation control room and declared, “I’ve succeeded in controlling the arks.”

Cheers erupted around me. Noah, in particular, muttered, “Crazy bastard...” with a bewildered smile. I smiled back.

“Let’s hunt this typhoon.”

It was time to end the summer.

Footnotes:

1 - Lotte is one of Korea’s largest food conglomerates.

2 - In the military sci-fi franchise *Starcraft*, Khala is a religion and communal, psionic link between a race called the protoss. It became a catalyst for war when a malevolent actor used it to assume control of the protoss in an attempt to break the cycle of the universe and escape the Void. During one of the decisive battles toward the end of the war, the link connecting the protoss fleets was temporarily severed, allowing their worldships to launch a successful surprise attack on the opposing army.

3 - In the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, General Guan Yu was shot through the arm with an arrow, leading to an injury that continued to pain him whenever there was a heavy downpour. He is said to have gone through the painful surgery required to correct it while still playing games and drinking with his men.

Chapter 175

The Diver VII

Sinnoa

RUUUMMMBLLLLLE!

With a twitch of my fingers, the ark fleet cut through the currents and surged forward and a tingling sensation buzzed in my skull, making me feel like both a pianist and a conductor. The aura I had spent thousands of years cultivating was now powering these arks.

'Even Old Man Scho's ridicule about my martial arts being third-rate and aura being first-rate is something I can laugh off now.'

Despite Scho's mastery of swordsmanship, all he could do was wield a sword and grab objects from the air. In contrast, I was maneuvering twelve ships. With one more, I could debut as the Joseon Navy's Admiral of the Three Provinces.[1]

Yu Ji-won approached stealthily, sensing my good mood. "Your piloting skills are remarkable, sir."

I snapped back to reality at her presence, which brought with it the faint scent of strawberries, the same perfume I once complimented her on. Her meticulous flattery towards authority chilled my guts. Truly, she was the greatest psychopath of the Three Han.

"...Thank you, Ji-won. But please, keep your distance. I won't hold a grudge for cutting off my fingers, so there's no need to flatter me so desperately."

"Flattery? Absolutely not. I always present my true self to you, Your Excellency, even if it means exposing my very heart."

"If you keep spouting nonsense, I'll break your fingers. Now, let's focus on the mini-map."

"Yes, sir."

With a balance of omnipotence and reality, the navigation proceeded smoothly. Of course, finding the 'core' of the super monsoon was easier said than done. At an altitude of about 10,000 meters, the storm was no joke. Any submarine crew would know that 99% of underwater chases are battles with oneself—boredom was the enemy of patience, after all. Yet despite scanning every corner of the typhoon with Mini-Map, the enemy remained elusive.

-Kieeeek!

-Kyaaaaah...

Three hours into the search, the ancient marine creatures like Megalodon faced extinction for the second time. The web of twelve arks sliced through sharks and whales, turning them into cubed steak.

"Quite the romantic aquarium date, huh..." Noah grimaced, watching shark meat float by the window.

The rough currents prevented the crew from unbuckling their belts, and sitting for hours on end had naturally made them restless.

"Does the typhoon's core even exist?" she wondered. "If it were a tangible entity like the Ten Legs, it would make sense. But isn't the super monsoon more like a weather phenomenon?"

"It exists."

It wasn't me who answered.

Thump, thump.

The ark shook as if hit by turbulence. All eyes turned towards Go Yuri, who smiled serenely.

"And it's getting closer."

The control room fell silent, the only sound being the waves crashing against the bulkheads. No one here was familiar with Go Yuri, but they all remembered my warnings about her. *Avoid her at all costs. If you must encounter her, never engage in conversation. Treat*

her as if she doesn't exist. This was my protocol for dealing with Go Yuri. The command center staff's collective silence was a testament to their adherence to this rule.

Go Yuri smiled awkwardly at the blatant ostracism. "Haha... You all are so interesting."

Ignoring Go Yuri's reaction, I spoke. "Anyone needing the restroom, please go now." With Noah in the command center, I used polite language as we usually did. "We've scanned the upper and middle sections of the typhoon. The core seems to be located in the lower section, at about 2,000 meters above sea level. We should find it soon."

"Alright then, hyung. I'll be right b— Whooooa?"

Seo Gyu had just unbuckled his belt when the ark abruptly veered—something massive had tangled in the web of puppet strings stretched outside. As the only one to have stood, he was flung around like a ping pong ball. He careened past me, Yu Ji-won, Lee Ha-yul, Noah, Dang Seo-rin, Sim Ah-ryeon, and Go Yuri, before crashing into the bulkhead.

Ignoring him, we focused on the mission.

"Found it! Ha-yul, send the Morse code!"

"Roger."

"It's gigantic! Seo-rin, reinforce the puppet strings with magic!"

"Got it."

"Everyone, brace yourselves for impact! It's moving!"

RUUUMMMBLLLLLE!

The massive entity tangled in the puppet strings thrashed. I could feel its immense power through my fingers, like a fisherman reeling in a giant catch. The ark shuddered, and the crew gasped in shock.

-Aaaargh!

-What's happening?

-It's coming! It's starting!

Beep-beep-beep-beep.

Ha-yul's emergency sirens blared throughout the ark. People screamed, hands flying to their belts to check them.

"Begin charging!"

A rainbow of color danced along the puppet strings, powered by the aura of the Awakeners onboard. Not just on Ark No. 1, but across all twelve arks, thousands of awakened ones poured their aura into the strings, illuminating the web like a galaxy.

RUUUMMMBLLLLLE!

The entity's movements slowed. Despite its struggles, the strings, fortified with Dang Seo-rin's magic and thousands of auras, held firm. The more it fought, the more the strings tightened around it.

ROARRRRRRR!

From a distance, we heard the monster's thunderous cry. The puppet strings dug into its flesh, signaling its immense size.

'This thing is unbelievably huge!'

The ark lurched closer to the entity, pulled by its thrashing. The overwhelming acceleration pressed us into our seats.

I instinctively looked out the reinforced window and locked eyes with the entity.

It was an eye. An eye so large it was hard to believe it belonged to a living creature. Even the ark was a mere speck compared to its iris. The super monsoon, this void and anomaly, had an 'eye' that stared directly at us—at me.

RUUUMMMBLLLLLE!

Though brief, the eye contact was intense. The entity thrashed again, its massive body moving with surprising speed. Outside the window, its body replaced the eye. This colossal entity was more ecosystem than creature, more landscape than being.

Someone muttered, “A dragon...”

It was an apt description, and so everyone began to view the entity as a dragon. Its gigantic eye, its enormous body, and its tail that stretched beyond our sight. Even I, a regressor, had never seen the true form of the super monsoon. Now, witnessing it for the first time, I realized it embodied the most mythical creature of the East.

“Leviathan!”

It was the name of a sea dragon mentioned in the documents of truth, *Sifrei Emet*, a monster only the omnipotent God could defeat. In other words, an entity that mere mortals couldn’t hope to kill.[2]

“The super monsoon isn’t just a weather phenomenon!” I shouted to be heard over the shaking ark. “The massive typhoon we saw was actually the body of Leviathan!”

“.....!”

“The typhoon itself is Leviathan. The water droplets that looked like bugs are parasites living inside Leviathan! That’s why people infected with these parasites melted away. Naturally, any foreign substance inside its body would be digested!”

Thinking back, the clues were there. When the super monsoon approached Busan from the North Pacific, the Saintess had described it in vivid detail.

[The typhoon has made landfall in Busan. Now, oh, the storm waters are rapidly converging on the population center.]

[No way, the typhoon… It’s transforming from a giant spiral into a long, thin tube like a straw, oh. The water■, a tsunami on the horizon, it’s all all converging on ■. Everyone, evac■—]

The typhoon, once a giant spiral, had transformed into a long straw

that targeted Busan. That shape was the very form of a dragon.

In the East, water was often symbolized as a dragon. Controlling a fierce dragon was considered an imperial achievement. And in Norse mythology, the mere presence of Jörmungandr poisoned the world's atmosphere and waters, leading to floods. Thus, this entity was both Leviathan and a dragon, embodying the boundless terror of the sea and water.

ROAAARRRRR!

Unable to shake off the puppet strings, Leviathan changed its strategy. The storm engulfing Busan began to contract rapidly.

[Mr. ■taker, Mr. Undertaker!]

Simultaneously, our communication with the Saintess resumed as Telepathy, previously refracted by the void's thick veil, was restored.

[Are you alright, ■dertaker?]

"Yes. Still holding on!"

[The super monso■n is changing shape! A giant drag■ is wrapping around the arks, ■ into the sky!]

The glass that had been submerged for nearly ten days suddenly cleared of water. We were no longer underwater.

We were in the sky.

Leviathan, with the arks in tow, soared to an altitude of 5,000 meters.

Footnotes:

1 - The Korean naval admiral Yu Sun-sin once famously led a single fleet of 13 ships to victory against 333 Japanese ships.

2 - A Creator deity fighting a dragon of the sea, a manifestation of primordial chaos, is a myth meant to represent the battle said God must overcome to create and control the universe.

Chapter 176

The Diver VIII

Sinnoa

Screams rang through the command center. The loudest of them came from Seo Gyu, who was quite unfortunately still folded in half, his life resembling a pinball game.

Even when ignoring such collateral damage, terror remained with the gravitational acceleration that struck the ark fleet.

“Oppa! The people here can’t hold on!” Ha-yul shouted, but it was really the voice of the maid doll kneeling beside her. “They’ll burst! Their bodies can’t take it!”

“Got it!”

I immediately summoned my aura. It felt as if the deep water source, bottomless just moments before, had suddenly dropped to half-capacity. Even for someone like me, who prided himself on being an aura monster, the loss was palpable.

‘At this rate, I won’t have enough ammunition left to deal with Leviathan!’

My aura alone wasn’t enough to protect the regular citizenry aboard. With urgent-softened-to-delicate strokes of my fingers, I distributed the aura sent by the Awakeners from the twelve arks. Most of the Unawakened had already fainted due to Leviathan’s tortuous movements.

There was no choice. To lure the super monsoon anomaly’s focus to Busan, we needed as many people as possible aboard the ark. In present-day East Asia, Busan was the most prosperous human fortress.

Rumble!

The mythical storm dragon seemed determined to punish humanity's arrogance, thrashing even more violently.

[Mr. Undertaker! The dragon is plunging toward the sea surface again!]

The ark shook violently, sent diving into a freefall for the surface. Despite simply streaming from above to below, the excessively high drop and speed were cataclysmic. The ark shuddered like a small boat drifting in the Pacific.

Outside the command center window, the sky, clouds, and sea whizzed past like a revolving lantern. We were plummeting, from sky to sea.

"Saintess! Give us the timing!"

[Three seconds, two seconds, one second—brace yourselves!]

Wham!

Even though I squeezed out my aura to protect the ship as much as possible, the enormous shock couldn't be fully absorbed.

"Gasp."

"…!"

People in the command center fainted one after another. Sim Ah-ryeon and Noah, less adept at aura, lost consciousness. Other isolation areas were in even worse shape. Inexperienced Awakeners foamed at the mouth and blacked out.

Leviathan had simply leapt into the sky like a dolphin and then plunged back into the sea, and yet, half of the Awakeners aboard the ark were knocked out of the fight.

'Is this the power of the super monsoon anomaly?'

I gritted my teeth against my heightened senses as the screams and scent of blood from the ark's passengers overwhelmed me.

“*Ah——ah——ah——*”

Dang Seo-rin’s song bloomed. It was an unplanned fifth verse. We had agreed to sing only up to the fourth verse before the operation, but recognizing the enemy’s extraordinary power, Dang Seo-rin pushed herself further.

The melody reinforced the ark’s structure itself, easing the burden on my aura considerably.

Rumble!

However, Leviathan’s violence stemmed not just from its enormous size.

Swoosh.

Not long after Leviathan reentered the sea, water began to flood the command center again. It was the original weapon Leviathan possessed, attacking once more.

“Damn it. Ha-yul!”

“Yes!”

Ha-yul unbuckled her belt and grabbed a bucket, furiously scooping and dumping water.

“...! ...!”

Leviathan wasn’t swimming lazily at 30 knots. Thousands of puppet strings bound its main body as it thrashed in agony and fury, sending waves 20 meters high to devastate Busan.

Inside the ship, Ha-yul slipped several times as she desperately bailed water, gasping for breath.

“I’ll help you.” Go Yuri grabbed Ha-yul’s hand.

“...!”

“Heave-ho, heave-ho.”

Ha-yul instinctively tried to pull her hand away, but Go Yuri's grip was stronger than expected. Undeterred, Go Yuri helped with the bucket. Ha-yul looked at me, her eyes asking, *What should I do, Oppa?*

I nodded. We needed every available hand, including Go Yuri's.

"Saintess!" I called. "How are the other areas?"

[They're fine. I'm directing them with constant communication and movement from the constellations. Don't worry about the other isolation areas, Mr. Undertaker!]

Indeed, the situation was dire, but there was no time for tears or despair. The world had always been harsh to us.

I wasn't an omnipotent regressor. I was merely a supporter, burdened with tasks originally meant for the old man Scho. It was why I had painstakingly nurtured party members through countless trials and errors. In this 'Typhoon Hunt' operation, there was hardly anyone useless (except perhaps Seo Gyu, who was still floating around unconscious).

[The water levels in all isolation areas are stabilizing.]

[No drowning casualties.]

[Some people have been contaminated by water bugs, but the surrounding Awakeners are handling it.]

[Those who fainted from the impact with the water's surface are quickly regaining consciousness... Ah, Mr. Undertaker, the dragon is rising again!]

I cursed. Was it planning to keep repeating this?

'A long battle doesn't necessarily mean I'll lose.'

The problem was the damage to our side. The 60,000 people aboard the ark fleet represented invaluable human resources, the last remaining assets in this apocalyptic era.

The resilience. The vitality. The dedication.

None of these lives were expendable.

‘Should I cut the strings now and let the other eleven arks escape? No, that would weaken the puppet strings holding Leviathan. We might end up losing it. Should I wait for the next summer or the next cycle?’

Then, it happened.

-GWAAAAAAAAARGHHHHHH!

A powerful roar echoed from outside the ark, shaking the command center. It was a deliberate shout, infused with aura, aimed at the Awakeners in despair.

My mind lit with recognition. I knew that voice. Even before the shout ended, I knew its owner.

“Yo-hwa!”

Baekhwa Girls’ High School’s student council president. The only necromancer in the Korean Peninsula. The shrine maiden who sealed the outcast gods in her hourglass. Cheon Yo-hwa had arrived.

-Sink back down!

Leviathan extended its head, poised to soar skyward again, and Cheon Yo-hwa, once the basketball team’s ace, struck it down.

Boom!

The enormous impact forced Leviathan’s head back into the sea. The wave generated by its plunge damaged the beach, and the last intact building in Busan, the National Road Management headquarters, was engulfed.

-ROAAARRRRRRR!

-Baekhwa High! Jump! Don’t tremble like cowards! No matter what, don’t let this snake rise again!

I couldn't see them, not from the limited view from the command center window.

The Saintess spoke in a hurried admission. [I did it.]

"Saintess..."

[Yes. After communication was cut off, I requested reinforcements from Cheon Yo-hwa. I judged that we must prioritize the eradication of the super monsoon, even if it meant risking the northern front. When persuading her, I claimed it was your request, Mr. Undertaker. I apologize for making a unilateral decision.]

"No, you did well!"

[Thank you,] the Saintess replied, as if she had expected my forgiveness. Her voice was much calmer than before.

"How did Yo-hwa manage to stop Leviathan?"

[She bombed it.]

"Bombed?"

[Originally, Samcheon World guild members were scouting the super monsoon's approach. Now, they're carrying Baekhwa High Guild members on broomsticks.]

[When Samcheon World Guild members approach Leviathan with flight magic, Baekhwa High Guild members drop from thousands of meters high and strike the dragon directly.]

"They're using themselves as missiles..."

[Yes, it was Ms. Cheon Yo-hwa's plan.]

It was a crude but effective method. Leviathan's own tactics were equally brutal, so we responded in kind. Yu Ji-won, the least affected by the turmoil, reported, "Sir, Baekhwa High Awakeners are appearing on the mini-map. Some are already drifting in the sea."

Boom! Ba-boom!

Following Cheon Yo-hwa's lead, dozens, even hundreds of impact sounds resonated on the battlefield.

Though it was hard to see through the window, Baekhwa High Guild members were bombarding Leviathan in continuous waves, their bodies wrapped in aura.

-ROAAARRRRRRR!

-Teacher!

Cheon Yo-hwa's voice rang out, desperate.

-We don't have much time left! Do it now, before *that* happens!

I immediately left my seat, opening the hatch prepared for diving to a blustering wind.

For the first time, I took in the full view of the battlefield, not just the restricted view from the window. The first thing I saw was Leviathan's massive body, stretching to the horizon.

"Teacher!"

Then I saw Cheon Yo-hwa struggling, her body half-buried in Leviathan's eye. She unleashed a fierce aura, furiously attacking the monster's eye with flailing limbs.

Only then did I understand how Cheon Yo-hwa had grounded Leviathan. This crazy student had jumped from thousands of meters high and stabbed Leviathan's eye in one fell swoop!

"Yo-hwa!"

"Yes!"

"Well done!"

"Yes! Please save me!"

-ROAAARRRRRRR!

Leviathan went berserk with a mosquito-like intruder sucking its blood. Tsunamis continuously battered Busan's coastline. Even the National Road Management headquarters began to sway dangerously, and the sight of it inspired a thought.

'Noah would be happy about the savings on city redevelopment costs.'

Footnotes:

Chapter 177

The Diver IX

Sinnoa

“Wait.”

I paused. A strange realization, almost like a premonition, brushed my awareness.

’From Leviathan’s perspective... Yo-hwa is just a bug, like a mosquito, in its eye, right?’

Eye. Bug. Mosquito. These keywords were oddly familiar. I felt like I was on the verge of a great idea. If only I could sit quietly in a café and have a cup of Americano, I would surely catch it, but this was not the time to find a nice café with a good view.

“Ah, all my fingers have turned into bugs... Teacher, I feel like I’m slipping inside its eye. See you in the next life.”

“No, Yo-hwa!”

With a leap, I dashed forward and grabbed Cheon Yo-hwa’s hand. She grabbed my hand tightly with both of hers and pulled, yet it felt like her body was stuck in a crevice, completely immobile.

“Ouch! Teacher, my arm! It’s going to come off!”

“What the hell are you caught on? What’s in there?”

“Bugs! Millions of water bugs are clinging to my calves and thighs, pulling me down!”

It was true.

Squirm, squirm.

Transparent bugs the size of a human arm were wriggling, pulling

Cheon Yo-hwa downward. Leviathan's body, including its eyes, was entirely made of water-shaped bugs. Inside its eye was a pit filled with these bugs, unrelinquishing of any and all intruders.

"Release the seal of Infinite Void!"

"I'm trying! But Infinite Void demands six hours of my time every day in return for lending its power!"

"No, we can't! Last time, six hours turned into twelve, and twelve turned into twenty-three hours and fifty-nine minutes!"

"Right... Ah, I'm really getting pulled in. My aura is being devoured. Maybe we should just let this be a double suicide..."

"You're not Infinite Void, are you?"

"Not yet!"

Boom!

I stomped my foot onto the surface, using my aura to turn Leviathan's eye into an actual hole.

-ROARRRR!

Leviathan writhed in pain, but my initial goal of rescuing Cheon Yo-hwa failed. As soon as the water bugs evaporated from my aura, they were immediately replaced by new ones. There were simply too many water bugs composing Leviathan's massive body, like it was the ocean itself.

"Damn." I drew my cane sword, Do-hwa, and sliced at Leviathan's neck.

Slash!

Even then, bugs swarmed the slashed surface, reconnecting the severed parts. There seemed to be no end to them.

To save Cheon Yo-hwa, I might have to burn Leviathan in its entirety.

“Teacher, maybe we should just give Infinite Void six hours...”

I grabbed Cheon Yo-hwa’s hand firmly instead of answering. The intense grip silenced her.

We couldn’t let Infinite Void take over. In a previous cycle, Infinite Void had deceptively taken over Cheon Yo-hwa’s body and manipulated her friends, colleagues, and subordinates. Yo-hwa, trapped in her own consciousness, had to watch helplessly.

I couldn’t let that happen again.

‘Think, Undertaker.’

While desperately burning the never-ending water bugs with my aura, I tried to think of a way to save Cheon Yo-hwa from the eye of the storm.

‘Why is Leviathan so desperately protecting its eye?’

‘Did it sense Infinite Void within Cheon Yo-hwa and is trying to digest it?’

‘Does Leviathan have the power to devour even Outer Gods? No, that can’t be true. If it were, Infinite Void wouldn’t have been so relaxed about raising the stakes...’

At that moment,

Thud.

however strange,

Thud.

the sound of footsteps echoed, cutting through the tsunamis and chaos brought about by Leviathan’s thrashing.

Thud, thud, thud.

Everything around me froze. Cheon Yo-hwa holding my hand, the guild members bombarding Leviathan, the foam from the waves—it

all stopped.

“_____”

I also froze, my consciousness and thoughts unaffected yet unable to even blink.

No matter how I tried to focus, this situation was beyond odd.

Thud, thud.

Thud.

Only the sound of footsteps approaching from behind reached my ears.

Thud.

The footsteps stopped right beside me as a smaller shadow blanketed me.

『Guild leader.』

The sickeningly sweet scent of rotting apples filled the air. It was Go Yuri’s scent.

『I told you, didn’t I?』

Arms came on either side of me to wrap around my face, fingers intertwining like a spider’s web across my vision. Beyond the mesh of fingers, I glimpsed Leviathan’s eye.

The scent grew closer, whispering directly into my ear.

『That’s a dragon, you know?』

As soon as she whispered, the world resumed.

Cheon Yo-hwa thrashed. The Baekhwa High School guild members fought. The waves pummeled the ark’s deck.

Splash!

A wave drenched me.

I turned to look behind me. Go Yuri was gone.

Maybe she was never there.

Slowly, I mumbled, “The eye.”

“What? Teacher?”

“Yes, the eye!” I shouted, struck by inspiration. “Leviathan, this monstrous sea dragon, must protect its eyes because it’s a dragon!”

A legendary painter had once drawn four white dragons in a temple. Despite the praise, he left the eyes unfinished. When asked why, he replied:

“If I draw the eyes, the dragons will fly away.”

Skeptics demanded proof, so the painter added eyes to two dragons. The dragons broke free from the temple walls and flew into the sky.[1]

From a modern perspective, this “Dragon’s Eye” concept was like a seal binding the anomaly breaking.

‘A blind dragon can’t fly!’

The eyes represented awareness, identity. Without sight, a being couldn’t recognize itself or its surroundings, remaining earthbound.

If this story applied to the dragon before us, then blinding it might render it powerless.

“Saintess!”

[Yes?]

“Are you in the study in Yongsan? Do you have Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*?”

[Yes? Oh, I have it...]

“Don’t ask why! Just bring out *The Metamorphosis* and read it to Yo-hwa! Every word!”

[Got it,] the Saintess replied less than a second later. She had likely paused time to act.

My instructions weren’t finished. I looked at Cheon Yo-hwa. “Yo-hwa! The Saintess will read something to you. Repeat every word.”

Despite the dire situation, Cheon Yo-hwa remained calm. Her expression and voice turned cold.

“Loudly?”

“Volume doesn’t matter. Just keep reading without stopping.”

“Understood, Teacher.”

While the Saintess and Cheon Yo-hwa prepared, I raised my left hand to the sky and unleashed my dark aura. Instead of attacking Leviathan’s eye, I used my aura to shield it, covering the entire eye like an eyelid.

-……*!*

My dark aura encased both of Leviathan’s eyes. It was as if I had put blindfolds on the dragon, cutting off its vision entirely.

-ROARRRRRR!

Leviathan howled in agony. Its struggling began to sputter out.

[……!]

[The enemy’s movements have slowed!]

The once-rampaging beast rapidly calmed.

Squirm, squirm.

The bugs clinging to Cheon Yo-hwa’s legs surged, trying to bite through the protective aura. But just as I couldn’t burn all of Leviathan, Leviathan couldn’t consume my aura, not immediately at

least.

“Ugh.”

The bugs attacked me, crawling into my eyes, mouth, and fingers, biting wherever they found a gap. I used my defensive aura to fend them off, repelling their disgusting advances.

[As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning...]

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning...”

Then.

[...from uneasy dreams...]

“...from uneasy dreams...”

The synchronized voices of the Saintess and Cheon Yo-hwa echoed through the bug-infested pit.

Growl!

The bugs biting me all turned toward Cheon Yo-hwa, charging at her en masse.

I couldn’t let them pass. I raised my aura to dangerous levels, burning them away.

Growl! Growl!

Despite my efforts, the swarm of bugs kept attacking Cheon Yo-hwa. In the darkness of its creation, my black aura shone faintly, continuously blocking the suicidal onslaught of the bug army.

‘If this super monsoon anomaly is related to bugs...’

My aura reserves dwindled rapidly.

‘Then the same thing that happened to the Saintess must happen to this anomaly.’

The Saintess had turned into a potato just because a bug entered

her eye. The nature of these bug-related anomalies wasn't fully understood, but one thing was certain.

'Anomalies can't deny their essence.'

An anomaly couldn't escape its own nature. If it had the power to transform humans, it would face the same fate under similar conditions.

Super monsoon, Leviathan, Jörmungandr.

This ruthless white dragon treated humans as mere parasites. If a parasite entered its eye...

'Leviathan must transform into something close to a bug, just like the Saintess!'

The bugs desperately tried to silence Cheon Yo-hwa. I protected her with all my might.

As the unbreakable spear clashed with the unpierceable shield, the incantation was completed.

[...he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.]

"—transformed in his bed into a gigantic—"

At that moment,

"—insect."

the world shook.

Footnotes:

1 - This is the painter Zhang Sengyao, whose paintings were said to be inhumanly realistic and life-like sans the absent eyes that he refused to complete. The story is meant to convey the importance of adding the final touches or a work of art, or more simply, "the devil is in the details."

Chapter 178

The Diver X

Sinnoa

Let’s have a brief chat about bugs.

Insects.

The term for bugs and derision.

When you think about it, isn’t it quite odd? Throughout history, people have constructed a pyramid of life with plants at the bottom, animals in the middle, and humans at the top. The further down you go, the lower the level in the ecosystem. However, there’s never been a history of terms like “tree brat” or “such a seed” being used as insults. At most, “weed” might be a candidate, but even that word carries a hint of admiration for resilience.

If you’re skeptical, consider the difference between saying, “You’re as tenacious as a weed!” and, “You’re as tenacious as a cockroach!” The nuance changes significantly. The lowest form of life, reserved for the most despicable entities, has always been bugs. The long history of contempt and persecution against bugs is well-documented even in dictionaries.

A harmful creature? Yes, a pest.

A lazy bum who eats and shits? Yes, a parasite.

Indecisive and lacking a backbone? A spineless worm.

A psychopath like Yu Ji-won? An emotional leech on society.

A nymph following others’ words in the forest? A bug that echoes others.

Such a dazzling lineup of derogatory terms. Even the tiger was nicknamed ‘big bug’ (大蟲). This term was created when the

emperor of the Tang Dynasty, whose name included the character for tiger (虎), ascended the throne, forcing the creation of a new term to avoid the emperor's name taboo.

In essence, people of old simply appended "bug" to any beast with legs. It wasn't that they lacked the biological know-how to differentiate between insects and mammals. They simply understood, as well as modern people, that adding "bug" to the end of a word was enough to express disdain.

The most despised existence. A life detested and scorned.

The easiest metaphor and symbol humans used to curse something was a "bug." Therefore, it was the most basic magic. Anything or anyone could become a bug.

And with the arrival of anomalies, humankind fell to the level of bugs. Just as a dragonfly in graceful flight could be ensnared for a child's summer homework only to have its wings torn off, a human walking by the river could lose their limbs and face, turning into a potato. The elegance of the dragonfly's flight and the nobility of the human didn't matter to the anomaly.

To regard something as an "insignificant existence," it first had to be turned into a "bug."

Indeed. If the rule among anomalies was that when you gaze into the void, the void gazes back, then the human rule was when you treat someone like a bug, be prepared to be treated like a bug yourself.

-GRRRRAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!

Leviathan roared.

As the strongest of dragons, Leviathan's body was invisible. It was the mightiest of dragons. However, what Leviathan faced now was not gods, demons, or the Balrogs, which couldn't be used due to copyright laws.[2] They were mere extras destined to lose in any Kamen Rider *tokusatsu* show.[3]

The enemy of the anomaly—it was always humanity, the exterminators of Earth's ecosystems.

-GRAAAAAHHH!

Leviathan's roar, apart from rupturing the eardrums and corneas of some Awakeners, achieved nothing. For prominent Awakeners like Cheon Yo-hwa and myself, there was no damage at all.

The water bugs that had been rushing to bite off our limbs stopped and began to scream. The roar wasn't coming from Leviathan's mouth but was instead a cacophony emitted by the countless water bugs composing its body.

"Ugh, it's so loud...!"

"Don't stop! Keep reading *The Metamorphosis*, Yo-hwa! It's working!"

"Okay, got it!"

"Saintess! Read it in the original German too!"

[Understood.]

"Yo-hwa, just mimic the Saintess's pronunciation even if you don't understand it!"

"Okay!"

The Saintess didn't originally know German, but after years of study sessions with me, she mastered it. Reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in German was a breeze for her; Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* was nothing.[4]

She and Cheon Yo-hwa continued chanting the powerful 'bug spell.'

-GRRRRAAAAAAAHHH!

The force holding the H_2O molecules and swarms of bugs together in the form of a dragon weakened rapidly, and Leviathan's body began to disintegrate. Cheon Yo-hwa and I couldn't quite wrap our

minds around the situation under the aura-made eyelid barrier, but seeing the water bugs convulse, we knew we had found an effective strategy.

[Mr. Undertaker! It's working!]

Plop.

Rain fell.

[The dragon's scales are falling off!]

The rain wasn't from the sky.

Dragon scales, flesh, organs, and cells—all the water bugs composing Leviathan were bursting, falling like rain.

- *Croak.*

- *Croak, croak.*

- *Croak, croak, croak.*

The water bugs croaked.

Frogs are heralds of rain, forecasting and summoning its presence. Thus, the frogs declared this rain was their domain and not an unexpected event. Yet even if their croaking drowned skulls and minds, they couldn't stop the collapse already in motion.

- *Croak.*

Plop. Plop.

I looked up. A few drops of rain hit my cheeks.

As always, a light drizzle foreshadowed a downpour.

- *Croak, croak.*

Thud, thud, thud.

Countless bugs burst open.

Once a super typhoon reaching 10 kilometers in height and 1,200 kilometers in diameter, this anomaly and terror of East Asia spewed rain over Busan.

This rain was Leviathan's hemorrhage, the sea dragon's corpse.

'We did it.'

There was no need to keep the aura blindfold on the anomaly. Even the dragon's eyes were draining away, sinking into a whirlpool.

'We did it! We defeated the super monsoon with minimal casualties and found an effective strategy!'

I wasn't the only one cheering. In fact, I was quite restrained in comparison.

"It's falling! That bastard is falling!"

"Rescue the people in the sea! If they get caught in the rain, they'll drown!"

"We did it! We won!"

The Samcheon World guild members circling on broomsticks, Baekhwa Girls' High School guild members fighting on the dragon's body, and Awakeners infusing aura from within the ark—they all exhaled in victory.

"Teacher!" Cheon Yo-hwa, now confident of our victory, hugged me, soaked in fatigue. "We survived!"

Despite joking about a double suicide, Cheon Yo-hwa's relief and joy were palpable.

I gave her a few energetic pats on the back. "You did great! Thanks to you striking the eye of the storm, everything worked out!"

"Oh, oh, oh— Hehe. Yes!" Cheon Yo-hwa laughed gleefully as I patted her back. Even the orange strand of hair clinging to her cheek seemed endearing.

Thus, we entered the happy ending epilogue—

If only it were that simple. There's still a scene I needed to describe before moving on. A scene I have never shared with anyone until now.

Everyone except me and the one who would later eavesdrop on this secret believed the super monsoon was defeated.

With Noah's Ark, Ha-yul's puppet strings, the Awakeners' aura support, and Cheon Yo-hwa's assistance; with the miracle of 'Dragon's Eye' and Metamorphosis magic, orchestrated by me, the Undertaker; finally, by all appearances, we had defeated Leviathan.

But I saw it.

Step.

While being hugged by Cheon Yo-hwa, I witnessed a strange sight.

There where Leviathan fell into the sea, Go Yuri walked toward its splashdown.

No one noticed.

It was as if time had stopped, leaving everyone motionless.

"……"

I couldn't even move my lips, let alone tell if this was a dream or reality.

Step. Step.

In the frozen world, with only my eyes as her witness, Go Yuri gracefully walked. She stepped on the water as if it were solid ground, and with each step, her lips moved softly.

"You shouldn't do this."

Her whisper seemed to resonate not from afar but right beside my ear, or maybe even inside my head.

But the whisper wasn't directed at me.

Go Yuri smiled at Leviathan dissolving into raindrops. "Respect each other's territories. That was our agreement, wasn't it? At least, that's how I understood it..."

Then something astonishing happened. In that frozen world, or rather in the air separated from reality, Leviathan responded.

-GWAAAAARRRGHHHH!

Leviathan answered not with human language but with the gestures of an anomaly. The scales that had been falling off suddenly sharpened again.

Blink. Blink.

Countless scales turned into 'eyes.'

"……!"

I silently gasped.

Leviathan's body was no longer covered in beautiful, transparent scales. Like Argos from Greek mythology, its entire body, from head to tail, was now covered in eyes.[5] It was as if defeating the dragon by covering its eyes led it to produce hundreds, thousands, millions of eyes instead.

Indeed, bosses always had multiple transformation phases. The typhoon form was Phase 1. The sea dragon form was Phase 2. Now, the super monsoon anomaly was initiating Phase 3.

'Do we have to defeat it again?'

A profound dread gripped my consciousness.

Go Yuri, with a slightly troubled smile, closed one eye gently. "Really. You shouldn't do this." Those thousands of eyes watched her place a finger to her lips. "Shh. You failed the gamble. You couldn't accept everyone. So, you must accept the result. Actually, there's no reason to even call you 'you' anymore."

- KIIIEEEEERGHHHHHHH!

“Be quiet.”

A strange sound echoed in this surreal world. It was like a beast’s growl, a tiger’s roar, and the innocent laughter of countless children mixed together, creating an eerie echo.

‘This…’

Déjà vu washed over me.

That cycle long ago. The cycle where I experimented by pairing Yu Ji-won and Go Yuri, leading to the disappearance of all Daejeon citizens.

It was the same sound I heard that night.

Go Yuri whispered.

“Become one.”

And Leviathan’s millions of eyes melted.

No embellishments were needed. Leviathan, revealing its true form for the final time, didn’t struggle. It melted away as if it had always been nothing more than droplets of water.

The melted eyes mixed with the falling rain and disappeared.

It was dead.

“……?”

Go Yuri turned toward me. When our eyes met, she widened her eyes in surprise. She began walking toward me, but then hesitated.

“……”

She looked down at her feet for a long time, and I sensed that she was somehow uncomfortable. After a moment, a fresh smile was painted across her lips. “Indeed. This too is a territory.”

What did she mean?

Go Yuri lifted the side of her long skirt with a light touch, bowing elegantly like a noble at a ball. “Please be at ease.”

“……”

“I won’t touch you.”

Drip, drip, drip.

As soon as Go Yuri finished speaking, the rain that had been suspended in the air poured down. The last rain of the super monsoon was so thick it obscured Go Yuri’s form as if it were veiled in fog.

The time that had been paused and overlaid with an illusion resumed its flow.

“—Wow!”

“It’s really dead!”

“We did it!”

The cheers of the Awakeners, momentarily halted, echoed over the sea off Busan. To them, Leviathan had never entered Phase 3. There were no thousands of eyes. The sea dragon simply turned into ordinary rain.

To them, no strange phenomena occurred in the in between.

“Long live Baekhwa Girls’ High School! Long live Cheon Yo-hwa!”

“Long live Dang Seo-rin!”

“Thank you, Constellations!”

“Undertaker! Undertaker! Undertaker!”

“……”

While everyone praised the heroes of the operation, I gazed silently

at the fading rain.

The endless downpour finally subsided. The sea fog lifted. The sea dragon's corpse had been buried in the water.

Go Yuri was nowhere to be seen.

"Saintess."

[Yes.]

"Did you see anything just now?"

[What do you mean by 'anything?']

"...Nothing. You did a great job." I patted the back of Cheon Yo-hwa, who was still clinging to me like a koala.

When the ark's deck opened, people who had been confined for nearly ten days emerged. The cheers grew louder.

But the scent of apples lingered in my nostrils longer than the smell of the sea.

Anomaly: Super Monsoon

Aliases: Leviathan, Water Bugs, Sea Dragon, White Dragon, Frog Dragon, Frog Rain, Jörmungandr, Eye of the Storm, Argos.

Threat Level: Lv.4 Oceanic-class

Patterns: Phase 1 'Typhoon', Phase 2 'Sea Dragon', Phase 3 'Awakened Eyes'

Estimated Damage if Not Defeated: Submersion of Japanese Archipelago, Inundation of the Korean Peninsula, Flooding of the Chinese Continent.

Subjugation complete.

There's an epilogue.

Having discovered an effective strategy to defeat the super monsoon, I prepared even more thoroughly for the next summer cycle.

“From now on, your name is Noah.”

“Is this for real...?”

Naturally, I renamed Noh Do-hwa as Noah in this cycle too.

The ark was fortified. This time, I didn’t need to free dive with Ha-yul into the typhoon; the ark fleet was securely bound with puppet strings from the start.

I made the Saintess and Cheon Yo-hwa memorize the original German text of *The Metamorphosis*.

The preparations were perfect.

‘This time, I’ll defeat it in a day! Come on, super monsoon!’

It didn’t come.

“.....?”

No matter how long we waited, the super monsoon did not arrive, nor did even a regular monsoon. The sea off Busan remained peaceful, filled with the aria of seagulls.

“What?”

Everyone stared at me with narrowed eyes.

Noh Do-hwa, who had invested money and manpower to build the ark on Geumjeongsan, the passengers who boarded with solemn determination, and Cheon Yo-hwa, who struggled to memorize German—they all looked at me like the Korean Meteorological Administration. Their eyes reflected the crashing value of the regressor coin.

“Well... let’s wait a few more days?”

But it didn't come.

"....."

"Hey, regressor. Do you wanna die...?"

Noh Do-hwa tore off the nameplate with "Noah" written on it and threw it at me. It hit me right in the heart.

'No, this can't be...'

But really, the super monsoon had vanished without a trace.

Even when I flew to the North Pacific, there were no signs of an anomaly forming. Not only in this cycle but in future cycles, the super monsoon never reappeared. Busan never faced another tsunami leading to reconstruction. It was inexplicable.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

But.

Instead, every summer, another presence appeared off the coast of Busan.

[The 'pink entity' you warned me about last time has appeared in Haeundae.]

"What?"

[Don't worry. I didn't use Clairvoyance on it. I'm observing it cautiously through another Awakener in Haeundae.]

Go Yuri.

Every monsoon season, she appeared in the sea off Busan.

"What is she doing there?"

[No unusual signs. She's taking off her shoes, splashing in the water, and strolling alone on the beach.]

[Oh, now she's squatting and playing in the sand.]

I frowned. “...Playing in the sand?”

[Yes. She’s singing the nursery rhyme ‘Froggie, Froggie, I’ll give you a new house’ and building sandcastles only to destroy them. She seems very happy.]

[What should we do, Mr. Undertaker? Leave her be? Or intervene using other Awakeners?]

I was silent for a long time. My neck still ached from Noh Do-hwa’s grip. “...No. Leave her alone.”

[Are you sure?]

“Yes. There’s no need to poke a sleeping tiger.”

According to the Saintess, Go Yuri spent about an hour at Haeundae before returning to Daejeon. After she left, I immediately visited Haeundae. I checked the exact spot where Go Yuri had played with the sand. On the delicate boundary between land and sea, where the waves barely reached, the wet sand had writing on it.

-Rawwwr!

What did it mean?

Maybe it was a prank she left, knowing I’d find it. I shook my head, puzzled.

Then, suddenly, I noticed something under the waves. There were ‘letters’ inscribed on the seabed.

虎.

The character for tiger.

“.....”

Even if something had been written there, the waves should have washed away the sand long ago. Yet, for some reason, the seabed letters remained untouched by the waves. It wasn’t just a few letters by chance. Tiny characters stretched endlessly toward the horizon.

虎虎虎

4 - *Critique of Pure Reason* is a philosophical text by Immanuel Kant that explores the application and limitations of metaphysics. Because understanding it requires a certain mastery of centuries of philosophy, it's generally seen as inaccessible to most readers, even when read in one's native language.

5 - Argos the many-eyed giant was used as an ever-vigilant, all-seeing watchdog for the queen of the gods, Hera, and slain when tricked into closing all of his eyes.

Chapter 179

The Existentialist I

Sinnoa

Since the Ark was featured in the previous chapter, I thought I'd continue discussing 'ships' this time as well. Of course, there aren't many ships that boast worldwide fame like the Ark. (If we limit it to the Korean Peninsula, the Turtle Ship is one that can compete.)

The ship I'm covering this time is both famous and not so famous. It's called 'Theseus's Ship.'[1]

Before diving into the main story,

Astute readers might have noticed that I haven't included the introduction "This chapter happened in the XXX cycle" for a while. To clarify, the story of the Super Monsoon anomaly leading the redevelopment of Busan was from the 664th cycle. In other words, it took place while the regressor called the Undertaker was evolving from an experienced player to a fossil fuel. Calling him a 'munchkin' then would not have been an exaggeration.[2]

However, today's story will focus on a much earlier time.

[Mr. Undertaker, while you took a brief visit to Okinawa last time, I saw with Clairvoyance a massive typhoon moving toward the Philippines.]

"A massive typhoon?"

[Yes. It seemed to be at least 1,000 kilometers in diameter and reached the boundary of the troposphere.]

"What is that? How terrifying..."

One of the taboos in subculture plots is having a strong protagonist become weak again. In the past, martial arts stories often featured

protagonists falling off cliffs, losing their memories, or having their energy cores shattered. Such lazy plots cannot survive in today's wild subculture market.

But in my story, it's entirely possible. Like now, I can talk about cycle 664 and then "regress" to cycle 239, making my character legitimately weaker.

At that time, I didn't have the ability to cross the Pacific Ocean with my bare body (people would call me crazy if I did), I had no idea about the Super Monsoon anomaly, and of course, I couldn't have imagined that the Saintess would suddenly transform into a potato while out for a walk.

Even for a regressor, imagining that was difficult.

However, strange events at a similar level kept intruding upon my life, both then and now.

"Master Noh Do-hwa! It's an emergency! Please quickly make a prosthetic!"

"Damn it..."

Of course, from Noh Do-hwa's perspective, I must have been the uninvited guest in her life. One must always adopt a relativistic perspective to maintain stable human relationships.

"This isn't just a patient, this person is on the verge of death. Damn it, how am I supposed to meet this deadline...?"

One day in the 239th cycle. I went to see Noh Do-hwa, who was carrying a severely injured person. From now on, let's call this patient Patient A. Noh Do-hwa grumbled but immediately halted her duties as the National Road Management Corps Leader and began to save Patient A.

In the post-apocalyptic world, the President of the Korean Peninsula also served as the 24-hour emergency room duty officer.

"..., ..."

As Noh Do-hwa said, the patient was in a quantum state between life and death. Their entire body was covered in blood, with limbs having flown away in search of freedom and a heart that was thoroughly pierced. You could almost call it a miracle that death had not yet been confirmed.

Of course, it wasn't a miracle from the heavens. The apocalyptic world was basically like a yandere character with a favorability rating of -100 towards humanity. What's the point of a yandere without favorability? Exactly. It's no different from a common murderer.

"How did this happen?"

"They are from a small guild. They were exploring the Void near Gimhae and encountered the 'Code of Hammurabi' anomaly. This person killed the anomaly's heart in exchange for losing their own."

"Huh. Such sacrifice... They're lucky to be alive."

"The other guild members performed CPR for an hour. The training was tough, but it paid off. I received the distress call and brought them here because it was closer than Pyongyang."

Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

It was always important, but after the Aura Healing Technique became essential knowledge for Awakeners, it became even more crucial. Now, Awakeners didn't just rely on weak palm-pumping to save a heart. They used the mystic aura of the apocalypse.

Even in extreme cases such as when the heart stopped—or like now, was missing—emergency treatment was possible. Awakeners could use aura to forcibly regulate oxygen and carbon dioxide and circulate blood and, in turn, keep someone alive for hours.

How long? Until aura ran out.

Of course, circulating human blood throughout the body wasn't as easy as it sounded. It required very precise aura control.

These days, job markets didn't favor those who just piled up aura indiscriminately. In critical situations (which happened 90% of the time in the Void), guilds wanted people whose aura control was delicate enough to take responsibility for their own lives and the lives of their teammates.

And who developed and introduced this comprehensive Aura Healing Technique into the job market as a required subject?

Who else but me, the Undertaker.

It's no wonder I was respected by most Awakeners in most cycles. If I suggested establishing the National Road Management Corps, all the guild leaders across the country would agree. They were practically my external disciples.

Anyway.

"Arms, legs, and heart. Master, please make the heart first, and the limbs later. Meanwhile, I'll keep the patient alive."

Sighing, Noh Do-hwa adjusted her monocle and took out her tools. "Hang in there for 60 more minutes..."

Noh Do-hwa's awakening ability—[Prosthetic Creation]. An ability that made the prosthetics work 'as if they were part of the original body'.

Initially used mainly to make artificial legs and arms, it was gradually applied to more "sophisticated" body parts as the cycles progressed.

Now, when Awakeners joined a guild, they almost always took 'body photos'. These body photos captured not only the external appearance but also the internal organs like the brain, heart, lungs, and other internal organs. Guilds sent these body photos to the National Road Management Corps for registration, and for a simple reason: so that in emergencies, like now, Noh Do-hwa could make body parts as close to the original as possible. A kind of insurance, in a way.

Needless to say, Noh Do-hwa was very busy.

It was easier to find a healer than to request a prosthetic from her, who had a workload like that of Zhuge Liang. But what if the heart was gone? There were very few healers who could treat that. At best, the Saintess villain from the north.

Severely injured patients—practically dead but barely kept alive by their comrades' aura—had a chance of survival only with Sim Ah-ryeon or Noh Do-hwa.

Just like this case.

"I've made it. Cut the chest open."

"Done."

As you might expect, I had to commend Noh Do-hwa. For the apocalyptic Korean Peninsula, she acted as a pseudo-government leader, took care of the elderly, and treated emergency patients who lost their hearts every few days. What couldn't she do?

"Fortunately, the blood vessels are relatively intact. No, they're too intact..."

"That's because the Code of Hammurabi only exchanged the heart. It's not an external injury."

"I see. Then, I'll attach it..." Noh Do-hwa transplanted the artificial heart. Sweat dripped from her chin, a sign of how focused she was on Patient A.

"The heart is properly positioned," I said.

"Attach it with aura."

"Okay. I'll keep circulating blood with aura until the heartbeat returns. One, two, three."

Thump!

Patient A's body jolted.

Noh Do-hwa and I, used to such procedures, continued the surgery

smoothly.

“Reduce the aura bit by bit.”

“70% reduced. Respiratory rate is normal. Heartbeat has a regular rhythm. No issues.”

“Reduce more.”

“50% reduced. No issues. The patient’s Aura is faintly returning. It’s repelling my aura.”

“Reduce significantly. Slowly…”

“Yes. 30%, 20%, 10%, 1%. No issues. Repelling stopped. Stopping aura infusion.”

I gently stopped the Aura connection I had maintained for nearly two hours.

“……”

“……”

Noh Do-hwa and I quietly watched over the patient on the bed.

We didn’t use the commonly seen vital sign monitors, the so-called *beep-beep-beep* patient monitoring devices. Absolutely not. Never.

As mentioned before, electronic devices were dangerous in today’s world. They were all contaminated when the Void came. If we used a vital sign monitor, no matter how good the patient’s condition was, soon it would be this:

Beep-beep-beep-beep— Beeeeeeeep—

And the heart would stop.

They were no longer treatment tools but killing machines.

It’s absurd, but what can we do? That’s the state of our world. Even in such a world, those who could be saved had to be saved.

“One minute passed. No issues.”

“…”

“Three minutes passed. No issues. Pulse, pupil constriction, all normal. Checking consciousness.”

My dark aura forcibly raised the patient’s consciousness.

Huff— the patient took a deep breath.

“*Huff, huff*… Where, where am I…?”

“Can you hear me, patient?”

“Yes, I can… I can hear you…”

“What’s your name?”

“Ah… Reom…”

I nodded. “Consciousness is clear. No contamination from the Void detected. You can rest assured now, Master Noh Do-hwa.”

“Whew…” Noh Do-hwa slumped into a chair. She looked too exhausted to speak.

I tactfully went outside, made iced coffee, and handed it to her. For a moment, she seemed to consider pouring it over me but then just drank it.

“I’m going to die at this rate…” she complained.

“It’s okay. Everyone is like that.”

“Damn it, it’s work overload. I’m serious. We need to delegate more authority to Manager Yu Ji-won or something to reduce the workload…”

“Master Noh Do-hwa. Do you know what we call Ji-won if she has more authority than she does now?”

“I don’t know, a monster? A dictator? Is this the start of your ‘I’ve

seen this happen before in a previous cycle' speech?"

"What if it is?"

Splash!

Even as an experienced regressor, there were a few things I hadn't anticipated.

First, coffee could be poured even when half-drunk.

Second was Patient A, whom we had saved.

"Thank you! Corps Leader! Undertaker!"

By the way, this person's real name was Ah Reum. Their given name was 'Reum' and the surname was 'Ah'. Quite rare on the Korean Peninsula.

"I'll live harder for the life you saved! Thank you so much!"

Patient A thanked us, but none of us took it to heart. Usually, Awakeners who lost their hearts would retreat. The Void was too terrifying.

No one blamed them. Losing limbs was nothing to the heroes, but when it came to the heart or brain, they acknowledged retirement.

But Patient A was extremely dedicated.

One month later.

"Master Noh Do-hwa! It's an emergency! Please quickly make a prosthetic!"

"Damn it..."

I kicked open the door of the National Road Management Corps main office meeting room.

Noh Do-hwa, who was in the middle of a meeting with other managers, cursed. She inspected the patient and cursed even more.

“Wait a minute. Damn it. This face looks familiar. Isn’t this the person who lost all their limbs and their heart last month…?”

“Yes, it’s them.”

“After such injuries, they went into the Void again? And now their head is half gone…?”

“Surviving this would be a miracle. They encountered a Basilisk. We have their brain photos. Please make it as similar as possible.”

“Damn it…”

Surprisingly, Noh Do-hwa could even make an ‘artificial brain’—but only one hemisphere at a time. As long as one hemisphere was intact, the artificial one could work normally. If the entire brain was gone, even her S-class prosthetics were useless.

We didn’t know why, nor did we want to. In this era, ignorance was power. Francis Bacon wasn’t a name but a misprint of ‘France is Bacon’.[3]

“Thank you! Corps Leader! Undertaker! I’ll live harder for the life you saved! Thank you so much!”

“Oh, yes. Just live safely…”

Once again, Noh Do-hwa saved Patient A, who had lost their left brain.

Now, Patient A had a prosthetic for the left brain, heart, left arm, right arm, left leg, and right leg. At this point, one would be hard-pressed to call them a *Homo sapien*. But, well, sometimes you see people with sunflowers for heads on the road. Artificial humans were relatively acceptable.

The problem was what happened next.

“Master Noh Do-hwa! It’s an emergency! Please quickly make a prosthetic!”

"....."

Two months later.

Noh Do-hwa, who was enjoying her privacy in the basement wine cellar, made a sour face at the sight of the patient I brought.

"Damn it, are you kidding me? It's that person again...?"

Our Patient A was missing their right brain this time. What a coincidence.

In my long life, this was a first. Who loses all limbs and their heart, goes back to the Void, loses the left brain, goes back again, and loses the right brain?

But a regressor's life is not arithmetic but statistics. Madmen existed, and such insane scenarios occurred.

"So, are you going to save them or not?"

"Damn it, I'll save them. But... this means alternating the left and right brains with prosthetics. What will happen? This is my first time doing this..."

"Relax. It's my first time too."

"Wow. That reassures me so much, you damned regressor..."

Anyway, Noh Do-hwa made the right brain, and successfully attached it to Patient A.

It almost had us thinking our job was being Patient A's personal doctors.

Eventually, we became the first medical team in history to replace an entire human brain with an artificial one.

"Patient, can you hear me?"

"....."

"What's your name?"

"....."

Blink, blink.

Patient A opened their eyes. Their heartbeat was normal, and intelligence was evident in their eyes.

"My name is Ah Reum."

I patted Noh Do-hwa's shoulder, celebrating the success of this absurd surgery.

But then.

"But, what exactly is 'Ah Reum'?"

In hindsight, it might have been better if the surgery had failed.

"Pardon?"

"I have the name Ah Reum. But is the Ah Reum of 10 years ago the same person as the Ah Reum now?"

Patient A spoke methodically with a strangely foreign voice.

"What about the Ah Reum of 10 seconds ago? The Ah Reum of 1 second ago? The Ah Reum of 1 second later? Who am I? What am I?"

"....."

Yes.

At that moment, a new anomaly was born in the world.

Footnotes:

1 - The Ship of Theseus is a thought experiment that asks whether an object is the same object after all its components have been replaced over time.

2 - Munchkin refers to an OP character, and often one who is cliché.

3 - Francis Bacon coined the phrase “knowledge is power.”

Chapter 180

The Existentialist II

Sinnoa

Although discovering anomalies already existing in the world was common, witnessing the moment an anomaly was ‘created’ was rare. To be honest, it was so rare you could count the instances on one hand. The probability was lower than getting an SSR in a gacha game. In other words, the moment Patient A’s brain changed from natural to artificial, it became one of those rare SSSR-grade cases.

“It’s an anomaly called Theseus’s Ship.”

“Theseus’s Ship? What is that…?” Noh Do-hwa, who had very little knowledge in certain fields, asked. The reason for that was simple: the Korean civil service exam did not include philosophy. It was a backlash from the Joseon Dynasty, where only philosophy was tested.

“There was a hero named Theseus who had a ship. Since it was a precious item like the Turtle Ship, they must have preserved it, right?”

“Hmm…”

“But over time, the ship’s planks rotted, so they replaced them with new ones. If this continued, eventually none of the original planks would remain, and everything would be new—”

“Ah. So the question is whether it can still be called Theseus’s Ship. If you only consider the materials, hasn’t the entire content changed? Is that what you’re saying…?”

“Exactly.”

Up to what point is it Theseus’s Ship, and from where is it not? What exactly is Theseus’ Ship in the first place?

It's a dilemma related to identity.

Why did it have to be Theseus's Ship?

No particular reason. He was just the most famous hero in Athens. It's similar to how people would be more eager to repair Yi Sun-sin's Ship rather than Won Gyun's Ship, even if they were both under the same naval command.

In fact, there were many dilemmas with different names but similar content. Scholars, both past and present, needed to find ways to package the same product in a captivating manner to make a living. That's why a scientist's brain goes into a jar and Schrödinger's cat goes into a box—to support their owners.

"Well, I understand..." Noh Do-hwa glanced at Patient A, or rather, the anomaly that had once been Patient A, now bound motionlessly to the operating table. If Noh Do-hwa were a mad scientist or the executive of an evil organization, this would look like a scene where something significant was about to happen. "I get the gist of the anomaly. It's one that confuses its own identity, constantly questioning who it is and where it is, right...?"

"Probably?"

"Why do you end your sentence with a question mark, making people anxious...?"

"Because this is my first time witnessing such a phenomenon. We often use the term identity... But there's no point in explaining it since you wouldn't understand anyway."

"Ah, you want to die, don't you...?"

"Anyway, it seems clear that this anomaly has an identity crisis."

Even now, Patient A, isolated in the laboratory, was constantly mumbling.

"Even a speck of dust falling on a table changes the table from an atomic perspective. How about humans? Am I Ah Reum? What is Ah Reum? What determines Ah Reum's essence, Ah Reum-ness, and

beauty?”

Noh Do-hwa massaged her temples. “This is maddening...”

“Hmm. Maybe the fact that the patient’s name is ‘Ah Reum’ was a trigger point. If you remove a stroke from how you write it, it becomes ‘name.’[1] Names are the closest terms to identity.”

“Why would you remove a stroke...?”

“How should I know? That’s just what anomalies often do.”

Noh Do-hwa cursed. You can fill in the blanks with the highest level of profanity you can imagine.

“Hah, anyway, the good thing is that there’s no other issue apart from the nonsensical babbling. Let’s just keep this anomaly locked up forever...”

“I agree.”

~And so, the new anomaly was isolated in the Impel Down of the National Road Management Corps and lived a happy life~. END.

—If that were the end, I wouldn’t have mentioned the story at all.

Anomalies begin to “grow” from the moment they are born and inevitably affect the world. The purpose of this particular story is to show you the aftermath.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

From that day onward, the day the anomaly of Patient A was born and isolated, strange phenomena began to occur.

“Yes, Saintess. What’s the matter?”

[Currently, some Awakeners exploring the Void in the Korean Peninsula are experiencing mental breakdowns.]

“What?”

[The afflicted started asking questions about their own existence

and then fainted within five minutes. Their fellow guild members are moving them to the rear.]

A chill ran down my spine. “Please provide the coordinates of the nearest afflicted person.”

[Sure. Near Gimhae...]

I immediately headed to the indicated location.

The guild members were already transporting the injured to the hospital, so I helped them carry the patient. The building was more like a pharmacy or a clinic than a hospital, but these days, all hospitals were like that. Even the apocalypse couldn’t withstand the separation of medicine and pharmacy.

“He suddenly lost consciousness. We didn’t do anything wrong!” a guild member from the same guild as the afflicted testified. They seemed slightly intimidated by the sudden appearance of someone like me. “We followed the protocol for mental contamination during the exploration. Really, we prepared thoroughly. There was no sign, but suddenly, when he got on the boat, he lost his mind and... “

“Boat?” I snapped to attention. “Wait. He got on a boat in the Void?”

“Yes? Ah, yes... It’s much faster to use the waterway near the Jomangang River. But really, we didn’t go through any dangerous routes! It was the path we always took, honest!”

While the Awakeners desperately tried to defend themselves, I sighed deep within my heart.

‘That anomaly has already started consuming the concept of [ship] since its birth!’

There was no time to waste. I immediately left the hospital room and contacted the control tower in Yongsan.

“Saintess. Are you watching me now?”

[Yes.]

“Please check if all the afflicted Awakeners recently boarded or have even seen a ship in the Void.”

[...I can’t confirm them all, but it seems likely. All the afflicted groups were near water.]

I sighed.

The hesitation was slim.

The face of an Awakener who had ventured into the Void, even after losing his entire body, to fight an anomaly. His smile. His words of gratitude.

But determination was always stronger than hesitation.

“Saintess.”

[Yes.]

“Please contact Noh Do-hwa and tell her to eliminate Isolation-239-430-1-A. Just call it Ah Reum, and she’ll know.”

[Understood.]

Silence ensued. Two minutes later.

[It’s done.]

I immediately asked, “Physical destruction?”

[In progress. It doesn’t seem to resist aura, so physical destruction should be possible.]

“Thank you for your hard work.”

[No problem.]

“Please tell Noh Do-hwa that it’s not her fault. I agreed to it, and anomalies can arise anytime.”

[...Yes, I’ll tell her.]

My mind raced.

‘Is this the end? Or is it too late to prevent the contamination?’

There were various ways anomalies could grow their power. One of the most representative methods was contaminating a specific ‘concept.’

For example, let’s say an anomaly contaminated ‘the lilies in my backyard.’ That wasn’t too dangerous, as I just had to stop growing lilies. But what if ‘all lilies’ were contaminated? It would be a bit more dangerous, but still, not something to be overly paranoid about. If it seemed too dangerous, I could simply post on SG Net, “Everyone, be cautious of lilies.”

But what if it went beyond ‘lilies’ to ‘plants’?

Or even beyond plants to ‘life’ itself?

Yes.

Astute readers would have already realized this, but the higher up you go from a ‘small concept’ to a ‘broader concept,’ the more dangerous the anomaly becomes.

Let me draw a simple diagram as an example.

[Existence]

/ \

[Living Things] [Non-living Things]

/ \

[Cellular Organisms] [Acellular Organisms]

Imagine the world as being made of concepts rather than space. Anomalies climb the ladders of this conceptual map, spreading their cells. Sometimes upwards. Sometimes sideways. Sometimes

downwards. Steadily, or by leaping. Occasionally through logic. But mostly through illogic.

Anomalies' insidious dialectics existed to contaminate our world's pyramid, to contaminate the pyramid of existence itself. Therefore, to become a competent 'anomaly virus containment specialist,' you must quickly identify where the contamination starts and how it spreads.

As a Regressor, my task was essentially the same.

At that time, my brain was churning over the following:

'The concept of the ship is contaminated. What's next? All vehicles? Bicycles or trains? That would be troublesome. Or will it expand to water-related concepts because it's a ship? Or is it completely eradicated due to physical destruction?'

It was then.

- U-uh? Huh? What's wrong with you?!

- Wait! Hey! Stop! *Stop!*

The hospital room door swung open with a bang.

When I turned around, the mentally disturbed patient who had been transported earlier was standing there, his mouth agape. Words spilled out from his mouth.

"Ship..."

"Hey, hey! Lee Geum-seon! What are you doing?!"

His companions rushed out after him, shouting.

"He suddenly started saying strange things! Ah, Undertaker, sorry. He woke up, but then suddenly got out of bed!"

"We must fix the ship..."

Mumble.

The patient staggered.

“We must fix the ship. The existence crumbles, and only those who fix the ship will be saved. It is the ark for all of us...”

His companions shouted, “Hey! Hey!” and tried to hold him back, but it was useless. Somehow, the patient exhibited superhuman strength and moved steadily. His companions were dragged along, exclaiming, “What? What?”

That wasn’t all.

[Mr. Undertaker!]

The urgency in the Saintess’s voice shook my heart.

[It’s serious. Many Awakeners on SG Net are showing symptoms of Theseus’ Ship!]

“SG Net? Suddenly, why?” Even as I responded, my mind immediately conjured the worst hypothesis. Could it be? “Did someone upload pictures or images related to ships?”

[I don’t know. I had the same hypothesis, so I haven’t used Clairvoyance on the intentionally infected.]

“You did well. If you get infected, it will be a disaster. For now, ask Seo Gyu to suspend the board...”

[Sorry.]

My breath caught.

[Seo Gyu is infected. Probably the first one too.]

I held my breath for a moment, catching and suppressing it between my teeth and tongue the moment just before it escaped.

“Activate the emergency protocol.”

[Yes, it’s activated. All Awakeners have been warned ‘SG Net entry is prohibited’ under the Constellations’ names.]

It was true.

The Awakener dragged by their companions suddenly looked up. “What? A Constellation just...”

“Did you get the message too?”

“Yeah. But what does [Beware of the ship] mean?”

“Wait. There are more messages. [Avoid water bodies], [Do not observe any images or drawings resembling ships]...”

Their voices grew lower.

“Damn. What is this? Why so suddenly? It’s scary.”

“Wait. Come to think of it, when we went there today... Hey! Hey! Stop! Why is this guy so strong?”

I tackled the mentally disturbed patient and subdued him. Fortunately, those infected by this anomaly could be knocked out.

“Ah, thank you, Undertaker!”

“.....”

I noticed something ‘abnormal’ about the patient. Two of his fingers, the index and middle fingers, were cut off. Scissors were slanted and stuck into the severed ends.

I looked at his companions. “What is this?”

“We didn’t do it! Geum-seon did it himself...”

“Did he cut off his fingers and stab the scissors in himself?”

“Yes, yes! It’s true, Undertaker! It may be hard to believe, but we didn’t do this!”

The Awakeners didn’t need to plead so desperately. I believed them.

And the thought struck me:

The Awakeners who were just on SG Net, including the administrator, Seo Gyu, and other Awakeners on the Korean Peninsula who were likely just browsing internet boards and had seen ‘ship images’... What had happened to them?

The aftermath could ensue just a day after an anomaly outbreak.

The world we lived in was as such.

“Saintess, connect me to Yu Ji-won.”

[Okay. Connected.]

“Relay my message. Ask Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa for their cooperation. Assemble all National Road Management Corps members under the Command Center. Prepare for containment procedures.”

Yes.

It’s nothing new, but we humans live in a world that despises us.

Footnotes:

1 - Ah Reum (아름) is one stroke away from the Korean word for name (이름).

Chapter 181

The Existentialist III

Sinnoa

Have you ever thought about which jobs would survive even if the world ended?

Soldiers? Most would perish because of Chekhov’s Gun.

Artists? They were virtually exterminated by regressors who favored only writers.

“Your Excellency, Section 2 of the Command Center has assembled.”

The surprising answer was civil servants.

“Good work.”

“Not at all, Your Excellency.”

Boom!

The autumn rain thunder crackled in the night sky. As Yu Ji-won's silver hair elegantly absorbed the rainwater, the members of the National Road Management Corps stood in line behind her. The task force from the command center consisted of 108 members in total. They were the civil servants and elite who maintained public order in today's Korea, where the national army had vanished. There was not a single person here who hadn’t received Aura from me or learned how to develop their awakening abilities.

“……”

“……”

Naturally, their discipline was strict. The eyes that looked at me were filled with almost infinite respect.

I clasped my hands behind my back. “A mysterious anomaly has spread like a virus. As of now, there are 504 infected individuals in Korea, with the highest affected in Busan alone at 311.”

“……”

“The condition for being infected by the anomaly is to see a ‘boat.’ Fortunately, it’s nighttime, not dawn, otherwise fishermen would have been decimated. Most of the infected were engaged in night fishing.”

A deadly tension flowed from the eyes of the members. It wasn’t just because they had trauma from experiencing COVID-19 as children. In this era where food was scarce, fish were almost a staple diet. Except for the fact that every fish was now as dangerous as pufferfish, fish were still nutritious dishes. In other words, tomorrow’s meals were now at risk.

“The official name for this anomaly is Theseus's Ship, but during the operation, we will refer to it as T. T is growing at a terrifying rate. In some cases, you can get infected not just by the image of a boat but by the sound of the word ‘boat.’ From now on, any words related to boats are forbidden. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Excellency!” the combat unit of the National Road Management Corps answered in unison.

They called me Your Excellency because their boss, the silver-haired psychopath standing next to me, instructed them to.

“T-infected individuals are running around the city indiscriminately, luring uninfected citizens near water and boats.”

“……”

“Although the National Road Management Corps has taken precautionary measures, unexpected damage could occur. The infected may be carrying pictures of boats, so always be ready to wear blindfolds. That is all.”

The members saluted. Their precise movements could make Mussolini jealous.

I rubbed my forehead. I had warned them numerous times not to do that, but they didn't listen. However, their skills were undeniable. Mussolini should have envied not their salutes but their combat abilities.

"Your Excellency. We've captured them all."

Before the night was over, all the infected in the Busan area were captured.

"Casualties?"

"Two. Based on your information, we formed teams of three, ensuring at least one person wore a blindfold, minimizing the damage."

The members wore blindfolds because the infected would show boat images whenever they could. Some infected even tattooed boats on their bodies. One criminal was knocked out, and while lowering their guard, they saw a boat tattooed on their scalp and got infected. The anomaly made alopecia patients tattoo boats on their scalps.

Now do you understand why I firmly reject the coexistence of anomalies and humanity? Anomalies. You should not exist.

"Saintess, how are the other regions?"

[Mostly fine. Incheon has the highest number of cases, but almost all the infected are captured there as well. There are no cases in Daejeon and Sejong.]

"Indeed, inland areas have fewer cases."

[Yes. At this rate, we should be able to block the route of infection before dawn.]

I sighed in relief. "Then the next issue is..."

[Yes. SG Net.]

I felt a tightness in my chest.

In reality, isolating infected individuals would suffice, but the internet was the problem. Even now, SG Net was flooded with all sorts of posts and comments.

- Picture of the beautiful Ark.jpg

- Click this post to get 3 million won

- Scared, want someone to talk to??

- No boat pictures here, feel free to enter

- [MUST READ] Tips for boarding the Ark!!

These were all bait posts. Most contained boat pictures. You couldn't even trust posts without images because they had ASCII art drawn in text. Four awakener individuals ignored the constellation warnings to [Do not access SG Net for a while] and got infected. Fools.

"Saintess, are you sure all the awakeners posting now are captured?"

[Of course. We've confiscated all their smartphones. It's not a macro running somewhere.]

"But posts are still being uploaded under their nicknames..."

[Yes. It seems not only real people but also internet 'nicknames' are infected by T.]

This was what's known as Persona. Many believed the real world actually existed within their monitors, creating an 'internet persona' separate 'real-world self,' however slight the distinction may be. Theseus's Ship exploited that gap.

- Am I real on the internet? Am I real in reality? What is the true self? Does the concept of 'self' truly exist?

Like so.

Eventually, not only the 'me living in reality' but also the 'me

roaming the internet' got infected by the anomaly. They became literal internet ghosts. While we succeeded in capturing the infected, we had no way to deal with the virus carriers within SG Net. What could we do? The admin of SG Net, Seo Gyu, had already lost his mind.

"Your Excellency, I have a plan," Yu Ji-won said.

"What is it?"

"SG Net is a virtual space that cannot function without Seo Gyu. Therefore—"

"If your plan is to kill Seo Gyu, don't even mention it."

Yu Ji-won closed her mouth without another word.

'What should I do?'

Theseus's Ship was evolving in real-time.

The title 'SG Net' on the main page began to distort eerily, changing to 'EsZ Net' and '$& Net.' Though it was just warping letters now, it wouldn't be long before it freely altered image files, parasitizing Seo Gyu's awakening ability. If an image of a boat appeared on the site's main page, it would be the end. An internet anomaly that humanity must never access would be born, especially when other sites were down.

'I can't lose Seo Gyu so easily.'

I pondered.

'Boat. Boat. Boat. Charon's boatman. A tool that carries people to another world. What is the boat's weakness? Water? A typhoon?'

Then, I heard a strange sound from afar.

- *Ah...*

A song.

A song was coming from the direction of downtown Busan.

“Hmm?”

Yu Ji-won and I turned our heads simultaneously.

The melody resonated from speakers installed all over Busan. Miraculously, just listening to the song eased the fatigue from my entire body.

“Oh. The Great Witch is singing.”

“At this late hour?”

“Yes. The National Road Management Corps, the Samcheon World guild members, and the citizens of Busan have been working hard all night. The Great Witch is probably singing the Cursed Song Incantation to soothe their insomnia.”

“Oh... I see. I didn’t consider that.”

I admired Dang Seo-rin's thoughtfulness, but Yu Ji-won smirked indifferently. “She’s singing to gain favor during such moments, subtly earning the people’s hearts. Typical of the Great Witch of Busan.”

“Hey, Ji-won. As I’ve said many times, you need to curb that nasty temper. I know you only act like this around me, but if others find out—”

At that moment, a bolt of inspiration struck me.

‘Wait. A song? A boat that starts with T?’

As I mentioned, my neck possessed a sixth sense that other *Homo sapiens* lacked. Another term for it was goosebumps. These goosebumps were collectively singing, *Eureka!*

“A song,” I muttered to myself. “Yes, a song!”

“Your Excellency? I didn’t catch that?”

“Ji-won! Grab recording equipment and let’s go to Dang Seo-rin! I’ve figured out the real trick to defeat T!”

The expressionless psychopath tilted her head in confusion.

In fact, there was another ship as famous as Noah’s Ark: the Titanic.

In 1912, when it departed from England, it was the largest passenger ship in the world. The press dubbed it unsinkable because of its luxurious grandeur, a clear indication that it would never sink.

Naturally, in subcultures, if anyone other than the protagonist holds titles like “undefeated” or “invincible,” it merely means “they will inevitably lose someday” or “they will inevitably be defeated by the enemy someday.” Truly, it was a subtle way of expression in Eastern cultures.

In 1912, England was the main character on the global stage, but America was rising rapidly across the Atlantic. In this situation, the so-called “unsinkable” ship set sail between England and America, leading to an inevitable tragedy. It was the prelude to the change of protagonists on the global stage.

The movie *Titanic*, directed by James Cameron, was based on this true story. It became famous for dazzling audiences with its visual and auditory spectacle. First, Leonardo DiCaprio’s incredible looks captivated the eyes, and then—

“Oh... Undertaker. You want me to sing?”

“Yes.”

“That song, ‘My Heart Will Go On?’”

“Precisely.”

That’s right.

“My Heart Will Go On.” Composed by James Horner. Sung by Celine Dion.

One of the most successful songs in movie history.

“Why suddenly?” Dang Seo-rin asked. “That’s your favorite song, not mine.”

“Because we’re going to play it through the speakers, and your voice is far better than mine.”

“But your English pronunciation is better...”

“Don’t worry. Just think of it as Latin, and you’ll be fine.”

“Oh?”

Dang Seo-rin, the idol with the highest TOEIC score in the Three Han States (560 points), perfectly sang the English pop song.

I took the recording and went straight to Seo Gyu.

“Seo Gyu.”

“Yes, hyung. But what is Seo Gyu? Is it a term for SG Net’s administrator? Or, as you claim, does it refer to the human who is doomed to be the first to die at Busan Station if neglected? If so, can we say that Seo Gyu of the first death iteration at Busan Station and the current Seo Gyu are different individuals...”

“Enough of that. Listen to the song.”

“Arghhhhh!” Seo Gyu, tied up with ropes, struggled. “Get out! The wall is closing! Get out! Throw away your baggage! Descend! Lower the boat! Descend! Ahhhhh!”

“.....”

Seo Gyu screamed desperately, as if the Titanic were sinking before his very eyes.

Noh Do-hwa, who was also working tirelessly on the night’s quarantine, muttered in disbelief, “No way, it’s actually working...?”

“We were lucky. Theseus's Ship and Titanic both start with T, and the anomaly didn’t stop at reality but expanded into the virtual space. So, sinking the ship in the movie would inevitably sink the anomaly.”

This was the tragic end of an anomaly that recklessly tried to level up. The more concepts it contaminated, the more powerful it became, and yet at the same time, the more its weaknesses became clearer. Expanding its influence recklessly could lead to a swift downfall.

Anomalies that wanted to avoid being easily hunted had to conceal their true identity. That’s why the Outer Gods are in hiding.

“U-ugh... Huh? Hyung?”

“Yes, Seo Gyu. Who are you?”

“Huh? What do you mean, who am I...? I’m Seo Gyu, of course?”

I nodded. The method worked.

After verifying the strategy, I played ”My Heart Will Go On” for all the infected. Oh, I also set it as the background music on SG Net.

-Ahhhhh!

-It’s sinking! The ship is sinking!

-Everyone, run away!

But there was nowhere to escape on SG Net. The anomalies turned into internet ghosts and sank helplessly.

I patted Noh Do-hwa’s shoulder, who was exhausted from working through the night. “Good work, Chief.”

“.....”

“No need to thank me. Even though a new anomaly was born from your fingertips, causing casualties, and only my competence as a regressor allowed for early suppression, there’s no reason for you to

be grateful to me.”

“Damn it...”

As I was about to savor an overwhelming superiority over Noh Do-hwa for the first time in a long while, a groundbreaking event occurred.

“Thank you, Regressor Undertaker...” Noh Do-hwa muttered in a very small voice, with her back turned.

I was so surprised that I momentarily froze. Noh Do-hwa expressing gratitude honestly? Could she be an anomaly?

“.....”

Even then, Noh Do-hwa stood still with her back to me.

I shrugged. “Hmm.”

“.....”

“You’re welcome. Yu Ji-won will handle the follow-up work. Take the day off.”

Then I left the command center.

The anomaly that could have threatened the entire Korean Peninsula by infecting anyone who saw an image of a boat was eradicated in one night.

There is an epilogue.

“By the way, Ah-ryeon.”

“Yes?”

“How did you avoid getting infected by Theseus's Ship? You always spend your nights on SG Net. Did you just happen to avoid posts with boat images?”

“No? Ah, no.”

“Then?”

“I saw them. The boat pictures...”

What?

“But I was fine after seeing them. Sure, I had moments where I wondered, Who am I? Where am I? But I always think about that. Hehe. There’s no way someone like me has any value, right? It’s a worthless worry...”

“.....”

“Posting a comment on SG Net is much more important than that...! I was playing on the board, then suddenly felt weird, and then it was normal again. When the guild master said it was because of the anomaly, I was really surprised... Did that really happen?”

“.....”

Footnotes:

Chapter 182

The Sage I

Sinnoa

Today, let's talk about mirrors.

Last time, we discussed the most famous ship in the world. Today's story is about the most famous mirror: the 'Magic Mirror' from the Snow White fairy tale, the one used for beauty care.

- Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?

- For the 3,714th time, there is none fairer than the queen. Please stop asking.

In essence, the magic mirror had a database, statistics, and AI capabilities to search up all humans on Earth.

Humanity had already invented ChatGPT centuries ago. However, instead of investing this incredible lost technology in domestic politics, the queen used it for ego searching. The history of politicians getting distracted by their smartphones is ancient.

Come to think of it, it's quite a wise fairy tale. Even if the most powerful tool is given to humans, they will ultimately use it for 'searching.'

If the Brothers Grimm were alive today and saw social media, wouldn't they proudly say, "See, we were right"?

"Undertaker, Your Excellency."

"Hmm? What's up?"

However, even the Brothers Grimm couldn't have predicted this.

One day, Yu Ji-won came to me and said, "I think I've discovered a new monster."

“A new monster?”

“Yes, but it’s a bit unusual.”

It was the 7th cycle. At that time, the Ten Legs still ruled the Korean Peninsula as the final boss, and Old Man Scho still had hopes and dreams.

Originally, I worked under Dang Seo-rin as the vice guild leader, but from the 7th cycle onward, I began my path of independence. It was because Old Man Scho persuaded me to start a business together.

Like someone who leaves a big company to join a startup, my life was a bit tangled. However, Yu Ji-won still visited me weekly for chats, like an investor who believes in micro-adjustments and buying the dip, convinced that “The fact is, the regressor is getting healthier.”

Many suspected Yu Ji-won and I were dating due to these frequent meetings.

Old Man Scho was a prime example. How ironic. This old man never really helped my life at all.

“What’s so unusual about it?”

“Well, it’s hard to describe. Ah, would you like to come and see after eating?”

And so I went.

This ‘new monster’ was surprisingly located in Yu Ji-won’s private room. It was in the middle of a room filled with books, with nothing but a bookshelf for furniture.

I frowned. “...A mirror?”

The anomaly was a full-length mirror.

“Yes. I found it by chance while walking and brought it back. It’s rare to find a mirror so clean and spotless these days.”

“No... Haven’t you heard the old saying not to pick up or even look at discarded mirrors because they’re bad luck?”

“I don’t believe in such superstitions,” stated firmly the wise investor who had staked her entire fortune on the regressor’s coin.

At the time, I had not yet figured out the correlation between anomalies and curses, so I just clicked my tongue. “Why? Is it a portal to another world?”

“No. Look.” Yu Ji-won approached the mirror. “Mirror, mirror.”

She was whispering to the mirror.

I wondered if she had another mental illness hidden under her psychopathy, but then something surprising happened.

- Please die immediately.

“Huh?”

- Please die immediately.

The mirror responded.

Yu Ji-won turned to me, surprised. “Did you hear that?”

“Uh, yeah. I heard it.”

“I tested it with my guild members, and they all got the same response.”

“Told to die immediately?”

“Yes. All 36 members of the Samcheon World guild received the same answer.”

“...It’s really a cursed object.”

“Is that so?”

Yu Ji-won was indifferent. She kept a clearly cursed object in her private room, a testament to her unique mindset.

“Anyway, it seemed too unusual to handle carelessly, so I sought your advice,” she said matter-of-factly. “Mishandling it could lead to trouble. You’re an expert in this field, right, Undertaker?”

“Hmm.”

“What do you think is the best way to deal with this?”

“...How about putting it back where you found it? Unless it has legs, it won’t follow you.”

“Indeed. A wise decision.”

Three days later.

“Your Excellency, there’s a minor problem.”

“...Now what?”

“As per your guidance, I disposed of the mirror. But now the bathroom mirror is giving the same response.”

“What?”

According to Yu Ji-won’s testimony, she had really thrown away the cursed mirror. Then, the bathroom mirror she saw first thing in the morning gave the same curse.

- Please die immediately.

The mirror repeated the same words.

Naturally, Yu Ji-won also removed and discarded this bathroom mirror. The next day, Yu Ji-won went to Dang Seo-rin’s office to report in, and when she glanced at the desk mirror there...

- Please die immediately.

Yu Ji-won finally realized.

The anomaly did not reside in a specific mirror. It transformed whichever mirror Yu Ji-won looked at first each day into a cursed one.

“What… What kind of principle is that?”

The novice regressor of the 7th cycle was confused.

“Why do mirrors turn weird when you look at them?”

“I don’t know either,” she replied.

“And the mirror talks? Like some fairytale magic mirror—”

I stopped talking. I had just noticed something about Yu Ji-won’s appearance. More precisely, I had re-registered the color of her hair.

“……”

“Your Excellency? Why are you looking at me like that?”

* The mirror talks.

* Her silver hair is like freshly fallen snow.

* Among all the people I’ve seen in my life, her face is the most refined.

* I could exaggerate a bit and say she is the ‘fairest of them all’.

“Oh….”

I couldn’t help but sigh. A conclusion quickly formed in my mind.

“……?”

That’s right.

Yu Ji-won.

This psychopath was the Snow White of the Korean Peninsula.

Mirrors have no eyes.

So it would be unreasonable to ask an anomaly that mistook Yu Ji-won for Snow White if it was blind. Insulting a truly eyeless entity

would be a slur. As the Undertaker, I did not casually insult anyone other than Old Man Scho, Yu Ji-won, and Sim Ah-ryeon.

- Please die immediately.

“Hmm.”

- Please die immediately.

“……”

But something was off. The anomaly was too passive for a monster.

Even in the 7th and 8th cycles, the Magic Mirror didn’t cause any particular trouble. It just passively suggested suicide, which was unpleasant but not overly aggressive compared to other anomalies actively ending human lives.

This raised the question: ‘What exactly does this anomaly do?’

As far as I knew, the Magic Mirror in Snow White was an AI that kindly answered questions, not some suicide advocate.

“Mirror, mirror, what are you?”

- Please die immediately.

“Mirror, mirror, would Bitcoin have hit 300 million if civilization were intact?”

- Please die immediately.

“Mirror, do you want to die?”

- Please die immediately.

“……”

Unlike the fairy tale, the Magic Mirror responded consistently to any question. It would have made an excellent spokesperson for a politician.

However, it wasn’t just a recorder repeating predetermined

responses.

“Wow? Old man, it speaks German too!”

Surprisingly, when Old Man Scho stood in front of the mirror, it suggested suicide in German.

The mirror’s language proficiency wasn’t limited to Korean and German. We later brought in magical girls, and it fluently responded in Japanese. Hindi. Russian. Filipino. Arabic. French. Chinese. Portuguese. Vietnamese. Spanish. Swahili. There was no language the mirror couldn’t speak. It truly was the most advanced AI in history.

‘So it understands its counterpart. But why doesn’t its response change based on the person?’

Sometime later, I first got a clue to this mystery centuries later, in the 41st cycle.

“Ji-won, how have you been?”

“Thanks to your care, I’m doing fine in Samcheon World.”

“Is the mirror still the same?”

“Yes. Since there’s no point in discarding it, I just leave it alone.”

I walked past the full-length mirror without a second thought. I didn’t look directly at it, just glanced at it.

Then.

- Next time, get infected with Udumbara before dying.

I passed by without much thought but then stopped abruptly.

“Huh?”

“Hm?”

Yu Ji-won and I spoke simultaneously. Then our eyes met.

“Ji-won, did you...?”

“Yes, I heard it too.”

I approached the mirror again, just to be sure.

Then.

- Next time, get infected with Udumbara before dying.

It changed. For centuries, the mirror had given the same response to everyone, but now it was different.

“Ji-won, come here.”

“Understood.”

Yu Ji-won and I switched places.

- Please die immediately.

Then it gave the usual response.

Yu Ji-won nodded expressionlessly. “How strange. I’ll bring others to test it.”

Dozens of members from Samcheon World, including Dang Seo-rin, were brought for testing. The results were the same. Everyone except me received the response, “Please die immediately.”

Conclusion:

“It seems the mirror’s response only changes for the Undertaker.”

“.....”

“This again proves that the Undertaker is special. But may I ask, what is Udumbara, Your Excellency?”

“Oh.”

Sharp readers might recall that the 41st cycle was when I first defeated Udumbara. Naturally, except for me and the Saintess, no

one knew about Udumbara. I eradicated it before it fully bloomed and spread the New Buddha virus.

“That’s a World Tree I defeated before anyone knew about it. It looks like it grants eternal life, but in reality, it digests its infected as nutrients after a certain point.”

“Hmm.”

“But Awakeners should never get infected. You’d lose your awakening abilities.”

Yu Ji-won tilted her head. “Lose awakening abilities?”

“Yeah. If you get infected, you’ll lose your Mini-Map ability.”

“What if, by any chance, the Undertaker gets infected?”

“Well, naturally, various abilities would be deleted. Complete Memory and Resume.”

Yu Ji-won rested her chin on her hand, lightly touching her chin with her index finger, a habit when she was deep in thought. After a while, she spoke slowly. “This might be a blasphemous question...”

“You’re always blasphemous, so go ahead.”

“If the Undertaker gets infected with Udumbara.”

“If I get infected?”

Yu Ji-won said, “Wouldn’t the Regression ability be deleted too, leading to your true death?”

Footnotes:

Chapter 183

The Sage II

Sinnoa

This might seem sudden, but I want to pose a question.

Have you ever wondered about this while reading stories where the protagonist is an infinite regressor?

- The final boss is defeated! The protagonist finally reaches a happy ending! THE END!

- So, what now?

- What happens if the protagonist grows old, surrounded by loved ones and dies? Does he regress again? Does he repeat the same life?

Exactly.

For a regressor, a happy ending is not what's truly important. With the infinite regression coin in hand, a happy ending is just another outcome, akin to a gacha that you keep playing until you get the desired result. The real issue lies beyond the happy ending.

There's a hypothesis that suggests regressors might never truly find an end. They might have to eternally repeat the lives they've lived and the lives they will live. This is the so-called Never Ending Story hypothesis. Many creative works employ various means to avoid this Never Ending Story. The simplest and most elegant solution is to grant the protagonist eternal life.

- What if the protagonist dies of old age and gets trapped in an infinite Tsukuyomi? Let's make him incapable of natural death.

This solves all problems. The protagonist won't die of old age, thus preventing the repetition of regressions. The problem is that life always presents practical challenges, and eternal life doesn't exist in the world I live in.

However, there was a virus resembling eternal life.

“Well, what can you do? If I get infected with Udumbara, I’ll lose my regression ability and eventually die a normal death.”

My answer was calm. I had considered this issue multiple times long before Yu Ji-won asked.

“No, that's a serious problem!”

The one who was truly panicked wasn’t me but Yu Ji-won. The psychopath who staked her life on my success wrinkled her brow like crumpled foil. “Your Excellency! Such a harmful anomaly must be eradicated immediately upon sight!”

“Yes. Don’t worry, I go to Onyang and exterminate it every time I regress.”

“No! The mere fact that you’re in contact with such an anomaly worries me greatly. Please, let me handle its extermination from now on!”

“Sure. So, you’re saying you want to keep Udumbara’s seeds and use them as a trump card to betray me if necessary?”

“Heavens! How could you imagine such a terrible thing! Why don’t you understand my loyalty to you...?”

Yu Ji-won’s outbursts were always something to be ignored.

I looked at the magic mirror again.

- Next time, get infected with Udumbara before dying.

“Hmm.”

It was indeed intriguing. The mirror knew exactly what could truly kill me, the regressor.

“Ji-won.”

“Yes, Your Excellency! If you wish, I can show my loyalty by cutting

out my heart right now...”

“If you say one more ridiculous thing, I won’t tell you that I’m a regressor in the next cycle.”

“Upon further reflection, I believe I may not have understood the concept of loyalty.”

“Good. Anyway, this mirror seems to know that I’m a regressor, doesn’t it?”

“Hm? Mmm? Hmm...” Yu Ji-won moved closer to me, her hand still resting on her chin.

In the full-length mirror, both of us were reflected side by side.

- Please die immediately.

- Next time, get infected with Udumbara before dying.

The mirror from the fairy tale, functioning like ChatGPT, cleverly provided two different responses based on the number of users.

“See? The mirror tells me to die 'next time,' not 'now.'”

“Hmm. Yes.”

“When it says ‘next time,’ it probably means the next regression cycle. It’s telling me to get infected with Udumbara in the next cycle and then die.”

“...Indeed. Listening to you, it seems that way.” The furrow in Yu Ji-won’s brow deepened. “In that case, this anomaly must possess considerable power. It means it has seen through your identity and abilities.”

I nodded. “I think so too. This is no ordinary anomaly.”

“...But still, it’s strange, Your Excellency. For an anomaly with such insight and information, why would it only curse people to die?”

“That’s the same question I have.”

We stared at each other silently. Our thoughts converged on one question.

What exactly was this anomaly?

“...It’s definitely the mirror from the Snow White fairy tale.”

“But Your Excellency. In Snow White, the queen asked the mirror first while our mirror answered on its own without any questions.”

“And all its answers are always the same. Even the response to me is essentially the same as for everyone else: ‘die.’ What kind of predetermined answer is this?”

“Could it be an anomaly that maintains its identity across regressions? That’s how it learned about you being a regressor.”

“If this anomaly is powerful enough to transcend regressions, it’s even stranger. Why would it hide in your bedroom and only tell people to die? Is it a stalker?”

“Hmm. Maybe I’m just that important?”

“The anomaly must be blind.”

“...I can’t figure out its identity at all.”

“...Neither can I.”

In the end, we admitted defeat in the 41st cycle. We surrendered, unable to guess the anomaly's nature or purpose. In one cycle, out of frustration, I even broke the mirror, which only backfired.

“Your Excellency, didn’t you break the magic mirror and discard it last time?”

“Yes.”

“Since then, the appearance rate of voids has skyrocketed around the area where you dumped the glass shards. The number of anomalies has also increased exponentially.”

“……”

I later discovered this was the so-called ‘broken windows’ effect. You know, the theory that if a broken window is left unattended, the crime rate around it increases. The magic mirror, like the heart of an archer who participated in the Holy Grail War, was made of glass. When broken, the same thing happened. The area was fucked up.

“In summary, we know almost nothing about this anomaly’s identity…”

“Meanwhile, the anomaly knows everything about you and possibly other humans.”

“And if we destroy it, the broken windows effect will attract other anomalies like flies?”

“Yes. Leaving it alone feels unsettling, and destroying it causes disasters.”

“And yet, if left alone, it merely tells people to die without causing any actual harm?”

“Exactly.”

“Shit. What the hell is this thing?”

“The mystery deepens.”

I couldn’t believe such an anomaly existed.

To make matters worse, the magic mirror’s answers subtly changed as the regressions continued. From the 41st to the 116th cycle, the answers remained the same. Then, in the 117th cycle, the response suddenly updated.

- Stuff all newly born lives. They are the same anyway. Then get infected with Udumbara and die.

“……”

Newly born lives.

These were children who hadn't been born in previous regressions but were newly born in this one.

For example, the little girl who gave me a sugar-coated donut in Haeundae. Jung Seo-ah, the daughter of a bakery owner, only existed in the 19th cycle.

- Stuff all newly born lives. They are the same anyway. Then get infected with Udumbara and die.

The magic mirror advised me to 'stuff' these lives.

"Stuff? What does that mean, Your Excellency?"

"....."

Yu Ji-won couldn't understand this at all and tilted her head. It was likely that everyone would have had the same reaction.

Only I understood the true meaning of the mirror's words.

'...It's telling me to use Time Seal.'

Stuffed in time. Sealed in time. It allowed a person to relive their happiest day over and over but erased them from everyone's memory in return.

The magic mirror was pointing out my ability.

'It sees through my regression ability and my time-sealing ability. This mirror.'

In the 19th cycle, Jung Seo-ah wasn't remembered by anyone, not even by her parents, because in other cycles, a different child was born instead of Jung Seo-ah. So, whether I used the Time Seal or not, it didn't matter. No one remembered Jung Seo-ah except me.

- Stuff all newly born lives. They are the same anyway. Then get infected with Udumbara and die.

Therefore, the outcome of being forgotten by everyone was the same anyway. So, why not grant them the mercy of reliving their happiest day forever?

Wouldn't that be far better than falling into the abyss of death, regressor? Experiencing eternal happiness in a grave you've built—

The magic mirror whispered this to me.

'Ah.'

That's when I realized the nature of this anomaly—or rather, I understood the principle behind its actions.

The magic mirror from Snow White.

It might sound strange, but this anomaly was simply trying to show people a 'happy ending.'

King Midas. The one who appears in Greek mythology.

Yes, the king famous for the Midas touch. Whatever he touched turned into gold. He was practically the Federal Reserve Board of ancient times.

There's a less well-known legend associated with King Midas.

One day, the king captured a sage who was half-man, half-beast. The upper half was human, and the lower half was a horse or goat. As ever, the fate of a captured nonhuman by humans was pitiful. The king, after intimidating the sage, made a very human demand.

- Hey, you! Give us humans the best and greatest happiness!

- Eek...

The sage was reluctant to answer. He was tired of being treated like a lottery ticket by humans.

The king, frustrated by the sage's resistance, used another 'very human' solution. He force-fed the sage with strong liquor until he

was intoxicated beyond resistance. Only then did the sage, heavily drunk, comply with the king's demand.

- Huh, you foolish mayflies. I was keeping silent for your sake, but why do you keep forcing me to answer? How annoying...

- What?

- For your kind, the 'best and greatest happiness' is impossible.

Because...

- The 'ultimate happiness' is never being born, never existing, remaining in non-existence. For humans, not being born is the best fate. If born, dying quickly is the next best thing.

- .....

No definitive account exists of how the human king reacted to this epic insult.

Nietzsche's book also introduces this story, essentially saying:

- Humans always ask about happiness.

- But ultimate happiness doesn't exist for humans because life is suffering.

- Therefore, the only happiness is not to suffer, and the wise thing is to escape suffering as quickly as possible.

- It's better to have not been born.

A firm conclusion indeed.

I suddenly recalled this story while discussing the magic mirror.

"Ji-won, the magic mirror has been answering our questions all along."

"What do you mean, Your Excellency?"

"Think about it. No matter what question you ask, all questions

ultimately lead to one fundamental question.”

“One fundamental question.”

“Yes.”

Mirror, mirror. Tell me how to be happy.

“What lottery numbers should I pick, how can I reconcile with my family, how can I succeed? The questions humans ask the magic mirror are all aimed at achieving their happiness and well-being.”

“……”

“So from the mirror’s perspective, our questions are superficial and the essence is the same.”

“Tell me how to be happy… That’s what the mirror hears from us, Your Excellency.”

Exactly.

The mirror already knew what we would ask, even without hearing our voices, and so it answered automatically whenever it sensed us approaching.

- Please die immediately.

Instant death.

That’s the only happiness allowed to humans in this void-stained world.

I tapped the mirror. “In the Snow White fairy tale, this item is called the magic mirror. In ancient times, a magician symbolized a sage.”

“A sage, you say.”

“Yes. Also, in Harry Potter, the magic mirror hides the Philosopher’s Stone. So, the name of this anomaly before us is—”

The Sage’s Mirror.

That was its true name.

“The Sage’s Mirror... Indeed. A fitting name.” Yu Ji-won, resting her chin on her hand, nodded. “As expected of the Undertaker. So, how should we deal with this anomaly...?”

“Do nothing. It suggests death to humans, so it probably wishes for its own disappearance. It won’t cause trouble.”

“.....”

“If it gets too noisy, cover it with a blanket. Maybe the mirror finds true happiness in reflecting nothing but darkness.”

“Certainly. That makes sense.”

Yu Ji-won brought an airplane blanket (probably found somewhere; habits die hard) and covered the mirror. Just before the mirror was completely enveloped in darkness, it spoke in a voice as emotionless as Yu Ji-won’s.

- Please die immediately.

Srrrk.

Then, the mirror fell silent.

There’s an epilogue.

In every regression, the Sage’s Mirror almost always appeared in Yu Ji-won’s vicinity. Since I had figured out how to deal with it, I didn’t pay much attention. But whenever I visited Yu Ji-won’s room, I’d lift the blanket to check the mirror.

Why? Just out of curiosity, wondering if the response had changed.

- Stuff all newly born lives. They are the same anyway. Then get infected with Udumbara and die.

Of course, the mirror’s answer rarely changed. From the 117th to the 430th cycle, it remained the same. It kept advising me to stuff

the lives of poor beings before I died.

‘A useless answer. Well, that’s how sage’s sayings often are.’

Even a regressor’s curiosity has its limits. Seeing no sign of change, I eventually stopped checking the mirror.

Then, suddenly, in the 593rd cycle, I remembered.

‘Has the answer changed by now?’

The 593rd cycle was when I successfully defeated the Infinite Metagame. It was also the cycle when the young Overreader arrogantly declared she would save me.

At that time, the mirror was still in Yu Ji-won’s private room. So for the first time in a long while, I lifted the blanket, a reunion a thousand years in the making.

“……”

The mirror was clean. And quiet.

Although Yu Ji-won probably didn’t take care of it, there wasn’t a speck of dust on it. It seemed to look into my face and my soul.

Silence followed.

I wondered why it was so quiet.

- Keep living.

“……”

- Keep living.

I heard footsteps behind me. “Hmm? Undertaker, Your Excellency? You’re here?”

“……”

“It’s unusual for you to visit me. Did something happen?”

The mirror reflected the dim image of Yu Ji-won’s figure.

The voice softly echoed again.

- Keep living.

“……”

I quietly covered the mirror with the blanket and stood up. Then, I smiled at Yu Ji-won.

“No, nothing happened.”

“……?”

“Let’s have a barbecue and drink for the first time in a while.”

“Ah, sounds good.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 184

The Addict I

Sinnoa

Mirrors symbolize self-reflection, objectivity, enlightenment, and awareness. However, bathroom mirrors are an exception. Bathroom mirrors represent baseless self-confidence, a failure in self-objectivity, overestimation of one's appearance, ignorance, and blindness.

There was someone around me who could be aptly called the "Bathroom Mirror of the Korean Peninsula."

Sim Ah-ryeon? No, compared to this person, even Sim Ah-ryeon would be considered sane.

The protagonist of this tale is none other than:

“I am the Marquess of Yuldoguk.”

“……”

“Moreover, I am the greatest under heaven, in both the present and all of history.”

He was an elderly Sword Marquess with an unparalleled ability to lower everyone's SAN points when introducing himself.

“Sir.”

“……”

“...Marquess, Your Excellency.”

“Hm? Oh, Brother Undertaker, so you were there. I didn’t notice your presence. Truly, your skill in hiding your presence is befitting someone with the greatest internal power in the Three Han States!”

“……”

My head was already starting to hurt, but I couldn’t run away. There was a deeper reason for this.

It was the 671st cycle. The Public Officer specializing in Sword Marquesss, Noh Do-hwa, had been bedridden with the Void Poison infection. The audacity of that bacteria, to infect someone when there was no one else left to which it could spread itself, was commendable. Because of this, I was the only one left to negotiate with the elderly Sword Marquess.

If you’re wondering if there were no talented people in the National Road Management Corps... well, there weren't. What do you expect in an apocalypse? After the fall of civilization, the talent pool in Korea was comparable to Shu Han right after the Battle of Yiling.[1]

That's the end of the explanation.

“Marquess, Your Excellency. This week, it was your turn to visit Gimhae Plain and tend to the land. Why did you leave without informing anyone? This will ruin the spring harvest.”

“Bah! Being so preoccupied with such mundane matters is why the world is in chaos! I have far more pressing duties!”

If we dropped that "mundane" task, everyone in Busan would starve to death. If Busan fell, the entire infrastructure of the Korean Peninsula would go with it in a domino effect. I engraved the character 忍 for "endure" on my heart and maintained my business smile.

“...I must have misunderstood your grand vision. If you consider it so pressing, it must be a significant matter.”

“Haha, now you’re talking sense. That’s why I like you, Brother Undertaker.”

“If it’s not too presumptuous, may I ask what this pressing duty is?”

“Of course!” With a flourish, the Sword Marquess pulled something from his sleeve (yes, the long sleeves you’d see in historical dramas)

and placed it on the table. “Look at this! You have no idea how much I’ve suffered because of this strange and wicked thing!”

I looked.

The item described as "strange and wicked" was indeed peculiar. Its body was elongated, covered with numerous small, round objects that resembled insect eggs. While the body was green, the eggs were yellow.

Here's a question: what do you think this is?

“...Marquess, Your Excellency.”

“What is it, Brother Undertaker?”

“This looks like... rice.”

That’s right. The "strange and wicked thing" was none other than rice. The original form of the rice that no Korean could fail to recognize.

The Sword Marquess sighed heavily at my remark. “Haah, what a pity. Even someone like you couldn’t identify it immediately.”

He was spouting nonsense.

“I apologize. My vision is still lacking... What is this thing that looks like rice?”

“It’s opium,” he announced.

“What?”

“It’s opium. Haven’t you heard of it? It’s a wicked substance that causes immense harm if inhaled!”

Of course I knew what opium was. When you cut the poppy fruit, a sap oozes out, which can then be refined into opium. It has pain-relieving properties and was secretly grown by old folks in rural areas. There’s even a legend that ancient Koreans, who were known to turn everything into a side dish, once had a poppy salad.

The problem was, no matter how I looked at it, the plant in front of me was rice.

“So, Your Excellency is saying that this thing, which looks like rice, has the same effect on humans as smoking opium?”

“Exactly! Ah,” the Sword Marquess added nonchalantly, “but it doesn’t have the addictive properties of opium.”

“Hold on a minute.” I reflexively grabbed the Sword Marquess's shoulder.

He looked at me in question. “What’s wrong?”

“You said it’s not addictive? You’re saying this rice-opium isn’t addictive at all?”

“Yes.”

“Your Excellency. If this is truly a plant similar to opium, containing some narcotic substance, consuming it would make people feel very good, correct?”

“Hmm, correct.”

“But the fundamental problem with all narcotics is their addictive nature that leads to dependency. The more you consume, the more you want. Tolerance builds, and eventually, the brain cannot feel any happiness without the drug. Let’s call all these side effects 'addictive properties' for convenience.”

“Suit yourself.”

“I’ll ask again. This rice-opium has absolutely no ‘addictive properties’?”

“Haah, that’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“……”

In an instant, equations began to form in my mind.

Narcotic - addictive properties - all side effects = ?

“Wait! Then it’s not a narcotic at all!” I declared.

“Huh?” The Sword Marquess tilted his head. “What a strange reaction. Did I ever call it a narcotic? I said it was opium. Opium, the plant those treacherous Europeans brought to ravage China...”

“Please cultivate it! This thing!” I grabbed the Sword Marquess’s other shoulder too, grasping both with my hands. “Go to Gimhae Plain and, while doing the delayed farming work, please cultivate this rice-opium or whatever it is!”

“What nonsense.” The Sword Marquess snorted, “Hah! You should burn and destroy this root of all evil immediately, but I showed it to you out of respect. Now you want me to grow it? Impossible! I will never, under any circumstances, cultivate it!”

“We will spread it to the European imperialists and settle our old grudges.”

“I will cultivate it immediately, Brother.”

A fortnight went and passed, and with unprecedented enthusiasm, the Sword Marquess threw himself into farming, and the rice-opium (ZERO addictive properties) grew rapidly. We then immediately commenced testing.

“Why did you call me, guild leader?”

“Just in case the Sword Marquess was lying about the lack of side effects, I need you to monitor it, Ah-ryeon.”

“Eh... I’m really busy these days. I came because you asked, guild leader...”

“Yes, thank you.”

I largely ignored Sim Ah-ryeon’s words. Ever since she became the Saintess of the North, she liked to flaunt her busy status.

Regardless, various people gathered in the experimental area.

Among them was Noh Do-hwa, who had just risen from her sickbed.

“Is it really possible to have opium without side effects? Opium induces pleasure by fundamentally damaging the brain...”

“I don’t know. According to the Sword Marquess, it’s a plant found in the Void. Anything can happen there, so a side-effect-free drug might exist.”

“It sounds like bullshit...”

I agreed.

But if it wasn’t? Then we would need to revise the term "narcotic." It would just be a drug. Possibly even a panacea.

“Alright, everyone, please pay attention.”

Everyone in the experimental area turned to look at me.

“First, we’ll test on five prisoners infected with the ‘Murder Addiction Syndrome’ anomaly. We will test the efficacy of rice-opium in solid, liquid, and gaseous forms.”

“.....”

“We will conduct the tests in 1-year, 3-year, 10-year, 20-year, and 50-year intervals to monitor for long-term side effects. Yes, Student Sim Ah-ryeon, why did you raise your hand?”

“Guild leader. Can I try it too...?”

“No, you cannot. Begin the test.”

The prisoners were isolated individually. Each was placed in a dark, enclosed room where they could see nothing but darkness, and they were given bundles of rice-opium.

- Let me out!

- I’m sorry! I’ll never kill innocent people again! Please forgive me!

Bang, bang.

A faint sound of banging on the walls could be heard, barely noticeable to the average ear. In front of each of the five rooms was a red button.

[Press to fast-forward time by one year.]

Pressing the red button would advance time by a year inside the rooms. Press it twice, and two years would pass. Press it two hundred times, and two hundred years would pass. In theory, billions of years could pass.

Of course, the rooms and the buttons were one whole anomaly. Inside these rooms, people could survive without eating or drinking. However, they couldn't sleep, and without someone outside opening the door, they couldn't escape.

It was the perfect prison, one of the frequently used anomalies by the National Road Management Corps. With these rooms, we could sentence criminals to 1,000 years and literally keep them imprisoned for 1,000 years.

Since this prison was introduced, the crime rate plummeted. A prison sentence could be scarier than a death sentence.

"Director Noh Do-hwa, please commence the 1-year sentence."

"Alright..."

Noh Do-hwa pressed the button in front of Room 1. The sound of banging on the walls sped up, becoming a rapid *bang*, *bang*, *bang*ing, which then quickly fell silent in less than 0.01 seconds.

"One second has passed," she declared. "Should we release them?"

"Yes, please."

The National Road Management Corps members approached and opened the door of Room 1.

Usually, prisoners were broken mentally after serving their 'sentences.' It was only natural. No one could remain sane after being locked in a dark room for periods ranging from two months

to 150,000 years (an actual sentence received by a criminal). Prisoners would typically drool, mumble incoherently, or be completely unresponsive, like a corpse.

This time, however, was different.

“Huh?”

The prisoner from Room 1 looked completely fine. He was munching on the preserved rice-opium grains.

“Has it already been a year?” he asked.

“……”

“Wow, a good thing too. I was so bored, I thought I’d die. Haha, I’m free now, right? I’ll never commit another crime!”

The prisoner from Room 1 smiled broadly. He showed no signs of mental illness or Void poisoning. He looked perfectly healthy.

“Hmm…”

“Hmm.”

Noh Do-hwa and I exchanged glances.

We immediately moved on to the next test. Noh Do-hwa pressed the red button three times, ten times, twenty times, and fifty times for the remaining rooms.

The results:

“Finally free!”

“Thank you, Lord! Thank you so much!”

“I will live a righteous life from now on!”

Amazingly, all the prisoners who served their sentences emerged with “good mental and physical health.” Despite a thorough examination by Sim Ah-ryeon, no side effects were found.

The prisoners had endured their solitary confinement by experiencing happiness from consuming the rice-opium.

“Regressor Undertaker, this is...”

“Yes.” I nodded at Noh Do-hwa. “Let’s cultivate this on a large scale immediately.”

“.....”

“From now on, this new plant will no longer be called the insidious name ‘rice-opium.’ It will be known as ‘dopamine.’”

I was invincible.

The Sword Marquess was a god.

Dopamine was the key.

Footnotes:

1 - A battle of the Three Kingdoms period in which several great generals and minds of war were killed.

Chapter 185

The Addict II

Sinnoa

Dofarming—a newly coined term short for "dopamine farming."

In the past, when civilization still thrived, it referred to internet ghosts seeking sensational videos or news, but even as the world collapsed, history advanced. In this apocalyptic era, we finally achieved true "dofarming."

“I'm... so happy...!”

Sim Ah-ryeon shivered with joy.

“What... what is this happiness? I just ate a bowl of rice. I just consumed a carbohydrate-laden meal! But this happiness! This overwhelming happiness is enveloping me! Guild Master! What is this?”

“It’s a new rice variety called dopamine that will sustain the Korean Peninsula.”

“It’s so delicious! I feel like screaming in happiness, even if what I eat is plain white rice three times a day! I've been missing out on life... Do ordinary people live with this kind of happiness every day...? Without a hint of depression?”

“No. Most people probably didn't experience this level of happiness...”

Who could have predicted?

The Fourth Industrial Revolution, following the first three, was not the AI or robotics revolution, but the Agricultural Revolution. Now, every plot of land capable of farming in Korea produced dopamine. To an outsider, it looked like ordinary rice fields; they might even mistake the country for a scene from the old Joseon era.

“My stomach is full and happiness follows... This is insane. This crop is insane, Guild Master...”

And it didn’t even require the richest of soils. In fact, it required much less attention than growing actual rice. With just some fertilizer and diligent planting, dopamine replicated effortlessly.

Naturally, the atmosphere on SG Net also changed drastically.

- Anonymous: Confession: I used to post malicious comments anonymously.

- Anonymous: But after a month of eating dopamine, I started to wonder why I lived like that. Finding faults in others never improved my life...

- Anonymous: I especially want to apologize to WitchJudge. I was the one who kept calling you a train-enthusiast auntie.

- Anonymous: I used to criticize you, saying that a representative Awakener of the Korean Peninsula should maintain their dignity, but I was just projecting my own unhappiness onto you.

- Anonymous: I regret my past. Will you forgive me, Witch Judge?

[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Of course, I forgive you^^ But which city do you live in?

Even this kind of change was trivial compared to what was to come for the truly earth-shattering upheaval was to come shortly thereafter.

- OldManGoryeo: I am retiring from SG Net.

Sim Ah-ryeon announced she was quitting SG Net!

- OldManGoryeo: Busy with real life.

Sim Ah-ryeon used the term "real life"!

- OldManGoryeo: If I've hurt anyone while I was active, I apologize here. I'm sorry.

Sim Ah-ryeon apologized!

Not once in 671 cycles, not since the invention of SG Net and Sim Ah-ryeon's survival, had she ever abandoned her identity as the villain OldManGoryeo. And now, she was turning her back on the internet? Focusing solely on living as the Saintess of the North in Pyongyang? Was this even possible?

“Ah-ryeon, are you... serious?”

“Yes? Yes. Honestly, living my daily life while eating dopamine makes me much happier than posting nonsense on SG Net...”

Of course, despite saying this, the villainous OldManGoryeo returned to SG Net a week later. She left me with the memorable line: “Guild leader, I realized you can't live on happiness alone (smile).” But on the flip side, it meant she voluntarily quit SG Net for a whole week.

“Is it really that astounding of a thing...?”

“Director Noh Do-hwa, live as long as I have. The sun has risen in the west many times, but Ah-ryeon has never done anything like this.”

“Being more astonished by an internet troll than celestial movements. Truly the life of a regressor...”

“By the way, Director, aren’t you eating dopamine?”

“No,” Noh Do-hwa responded indifferently, sipping the awful coffee I made while flipping through documents. “No matter how much it passes 50-year side effect tests, why would I consume such a suspicious void plant? I'm not looking to become a test subject...”

“But it's like a drug with zero side effects. It makes you incredibly happy. The statistics show that satisfaction with life is much higher now than when civilization was intact.”

“Oh. Happiness. Sweet resonance...” Noh Do-hwa sneered. “I lived

without it and will continue to do so. Sure, thanks to dopamine, crime and complaints have plummeted and labor productivity has soared, reducing my workload as a director. But...”

“Hmm.”

“Regressor Undertaker. Do you think I don't know your ulterior motives? You just want to see me basking in happiness...”

“You’re mistaken.” How did she know? Did Noh Do-hwa develop mind-reading abilities too? Scary.

“By the way,” Noh Do-hwa continued, “the Magical Girl Association requested some dopamine seeds. In exchange, they'll expand farmland in Kyushu...”

“Is there a need to hesitate? Share them. In these tough times, good things should be shared.”

“Heh.” Noh Do-hwa's eyes twinkled behind her monocle. “You're not just trying to test if this miracle crop has any side effects, right? Regressor Undertaker, are you also abstaining from dopamine...?”

I remained silent on that.

It was half true.

All human civilizations ultimately strive to achieve happiness.

The minimum condition for happiness is avoiding misery, or in other words, not having one's rights infringed upon. The larger the society, the more its happiness trends towards an average. Thus, the laws of a sufficiently large society always focus on the minimum condition for happiness, preventing rights violations. The rest of its citizens’ happiness must be sought individually, drawing a clear line between 'society's happiness' from 'personal happiness.'

Achieving the vast numbers of both social and individual happiness simultaneously is humanity's ultimate goal.

‘Dopamine might be the tool that finally brings human civilization

to its peak.’

It might sound absurd, but I seriously considered this possibility.

For many people, life was a struggle. Providing them with a crop that had awakening effects, fatigue recovery, productivity boosts, and hunger reduction with zero side effects could change everything. Life might no longer be suffering but, rather, a stroke of luck.

As a regressor who had lived eons, I had to consider the world beyond the eradication of anomalies.

‘If dopamine really has no side effects, the Sword Marquess will be humanity's eternal savior.’

As you might guess from listening to my story, the miracle crop that brought "happiness" to everyone didn't end with a "happy ending."

“Undertaker.”

A year later, Dang Seo-rin came to me with news.

“Not a single child was born in Busan this year.”

News of Korea's record-low birthrate—breaking the just-recently-apocalypse-minted record—wasn't surprising to anyone. However, there had never been a time when the birthrate was literally 0%. Not even during the apocalypse when anomalies took over the world.

Dang Seo-rin said that this record was set in Busan.

“...Not even one?”

“None.”

Dang Seo-rin’s tone was calm. It was a defense mechanism. The more serious the situation, the colder her voice became.

When she faltered, the entire organization could collapse. This was her characteristic.

“I didn’t believe it, so I had it checked several times,” she stated evenly. “Considering the number of residents in Busan, it seemed impossible that no newborns were registered. Perhaps they were born outside hospitals or clinics?”

“……”

“But it was confirmed. This year, not a single human was born.”

To Dang Seo-rin, I was the only person with whom she could briefly drop her cold facade.

After a moment of silence, she spoke again, overlaying objective truth with her personal sincerity.

“All the babies were stillborn.”

According to her investigation, this phenomenon occurred universally around the 8th week of pregnancy. The fetuses would simply stop growing. Their bodies would curl up and shrink, as if they wanted to leave no trace in this world.

As if every pregnancy were merely an "illusion."

“……”

“……”

I remained silent as the verbal report and written documents were delivered.

Both Dang Seo-rin and I already had a suspicion. We both understood the source of this bizarre phenomenon. We also shared the unspoken understanding that this wasn't just a problem confined to Busan.

“Of course, it could just be a strange occurrence limited to Busan.”

But it wasn’t.

A week later, Cheon Yo-hwa came to Busan with similar news.

“Teacher, babies are dying.”

“……”

“No, it’s more accurate to say they’re disappearing. They just vanish. Continuously.”

Reports from Busan, Sejong, Pyongyang, Daejeon, southern Seoul, and even the Japanese archipelago all told the same story from every city and village where humans clung to life.

No babies were being born.

No new humans visited the earth anymore.

“……”

“……”

The meeting room of the Regressor Alliance fell into an eerie silence.

Lee Ha-yul, the youngest among us who had knocked on the world’s door most recently, muttered softly, “…Maybe it’s just for this year?”

But it wasn’t.

The same reports came in the following year.

“Busan’s birth rate is zero.”

“Ugh. Not a single baby was born in Sejong either.”

“P-Pyongyang too… None…”

It was a strange phenomenon. There were no unhappy people anymore. Except for the few, like Noh Do-hwa, who deliberately avoided dopamine, everyone was happy.

Human civilization had reached its pinnacle. And at this peak,

humanity suddenly exercised a veto on the cycle of life.

Why?

The phenomenon of 'not having children because life is unhappy' had been observed, but the exact opposite, 'no births despite an extremely happy life,' was unprecedented.

However, the cause was clear.

“There’s one thing we can try.”

Everyone in the meeting room turned to look at me.

“This is definitely the work of an anomaly. Something related to dopamine is causing these unborn babies to experience something dreadful.”

Cheon Yo-hwa tilted her head. “But teacher, we’ve observed the fetuses through various means, and they really started to shrink suddenly at the 8-week mark for no apparent reason.”

“Yes. That’s what it looked like from the outside. But it means the anomaly is affecting the inside of the fetus.”

“The inside of the fetus...? What does that mean?”

“Dreams.”

I glanced at one corner of the meeting room. There, Fairy No. 264 was playing with LEGO bricks.

I looked at the anomaly, known as the Baku, and spoke.

“I will personally enter the dreams of newborns to find out which anomaly is kidnapping our future.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 186

The Addict III

Sinnoa

A birth rate of 0%.

Faced with an unprecedented situation, one that even survivors from South Korea had never witnessed before, the policy I proposed was simple.

- Use the Baku to enter the fetus's dream.

- Exterminate the mysterious monster lurking there.

I prided myself on this being the most practical low birth rate policy ever proposed on the Korean Peninsula, yet even this faced issues right from the first stage.

First, Fairy No. 264, our emergency-appointment low birth rate advisor, expressed her reluctance.

“Hieeek. Comrade Secretary, having a fully grown adult, especially a total stranger, enter a fetus's dream is an incredibly reckless act!”

“...Is it that difficult?”

“Hoeee, of course it is!”

Fairy No. 264, chosen as an expert for the advisory committee, had a look that said, *“How can someone not know something so basic?”*

“The fetal world is made up only of ‘sounds’! The dual melodies of the mother’s high-pitched tones and the father’s low-pitched tones, the rhythm of the heartbeat, the dissonance of the digestive organs... And the mysterious interplay of light and shadow! Although it’s really just the parents turning the room lights on and off, to the fetus, it’s as if the sun and moon are taking turns in a twilight dance. The touch of water. Smells. The fetus’s world, the

fetus's dream is made up of only these things!"

"There's almost no visual information."

"Yes! That's a big problem!" The revolutionary cadre nodded, speaking the language of the Americans. It suited the situation. "The fetal world consists of 80%— no, more than 90% sound! In contrast, for a fully grown human like you, Comrade Secretary, vision accounts for more than 80% of your sensory importance! This is a difference so significant it could be said you're almost different species!"

"But it's a task that must be accomplished. Isn't there any way?"

"If you want your form to disintegrate into the soundscape of a three-four time beat as soon as you enter the dream, I won't stop you."

"Hmm..."

As I was contemplating, Fairy No. 264 added, "Hoeee, but if it's someone with a voice familiar to the baby, the success rate jumps dramatically. About 3% to 9%?"

"A voice familiar to the baby?"

"If it's the mother or father, it's much easier to access the baby's dream! So if it's your own child, Comrade Secretary, the success rate doubles!"

Ping!

At that moment, the atmosphere in the conference room changed.

I could sense the shift in the air. Everyone in the meeting was now keenly listening to this conversation.

...I had once promised Oh Dok-seo that I wouldn't use [Mind Reading] again, but this time, it was hard to resist.

[Cheon Yo-hwa: Wow. That incubus asked the forbidden question

everyone was curious about but no one dared to ask...]

[Seo Gyu: I am curious. Hyung is a regressor who has lived through hundreds of cycles, but has he really never had children? Never been married?]

[Dang Seo-rin: I should focus on the taste of this coffee. Yes, it's delicious.]

[Sword Marquess: Mount Hua numba won.]

[Sim Ah-ryeon: The guild leader's baby must be so cute.]

[Noh Do-hwa: Oh, he closed his eye? That bastard is using Mind Reading, isn't he...?]

I immediately turned off Mind Reading and rubbed my left eye as if I were wiping away some dust. Even though Noh Do-hwa was still looking at me suspiciously, I nonchalantly changed the subject.

"Having a child solely for the purpose of eliminating a monster would be disrespectful to the child. Instead, how about this method?"

"Hoeee, what do you mean?"

"Instead of me entering the fetus's dream, we invite the fetus into my dream. Wouldn't that be better?"

The fairy jumped in her seat. "Hoek! As expected of Comrade Secretary! That's indeed a brilliant decision! The success rate would then soar to over 50%!"

Soft sounds of disappointment and irritation echoed quietly around the conference room.

I was a bit tired of it. It seemed that human interest in others' romantic affairs was truly instinctual.

"Alright," I pressed forward. "Instead of just suddenly inviting the fetus into my dream, let's decorate my dream to match the fetal environment as closely as possible. As you said, we'll keep the

surroundings dark, have the smell of water, and add natural white noise.”

“Success rate over 90%! Comrade Secretary, you’re a genius...!”

The project outline was set.

Now, we just needed a collaborator, specifically a pregnant mother. This part was resolved quickly.

“Are you saying that some damn monster is trying to kidnap my baby? Of course I’ll help. Just chew that bastard’s limbs to pieces.”

“Yes, Undertaker! Dismember that thing completely!”

“.....”

Survivors of the apocalypse were fundamentally tough. Among them, the Busan citizens who watched Dang Seo-rin’s monster dissection show every week were particularly resilient.

We had a total of 49 volunteers.

The choice came down to sounding out the person who had been pregnant the longest. This was done at the fairy's request.

“Hoeee, the fetus’s brain needs to be developed enough to dream!”

It was a valid point. These days, fetuses stopped developing at 8 weeks, and disappeared completely between 10 to 30 weeks.

The final candidate was at 25 weeks, yet by all appearances, there were no noticeable differences to before her pregnancy, and her belly wasn’t protruding at all. It wouldn’t have been surprising if the baby had been kidnapped already, and the mother’s anger and anxiety towards the monster were just as urgent.

There was another reason behind choosing her.

“If my baby is born, I plan to name her Seo-ah.”

I wonder if you remember. In a very old, bygone cycle, there was a little apprentice chef who personally fed me sugar donuts on Haeundae Beach. In each cycle, Jeong Seo-ah's personality and appearance were slightly different. Even the gender varied. But their identity as a bakery kid remained the same.

Yes. I know that this 'Jeong Seo-ah' and the 'Jeong Seo-ah' to be born in this cycle will be similar yet different. But what does it matter? Every child carves out their own life in the gap between an adult's knowledge and the unknown.

I didn't want to see this child being kidnapped by a monster.

"Now, sit side by side! We need to sing a lullaby to properly enter the dream!"

The preparations were complete.

Thirty-six fairies formed a circle and held hands. I held the fairy's hand with my right hand, and the mother's with my left.

Then the fairies began to sing in unison.

Mom is going to the island shade ♪

To pick some necks ♪

The baby is left alone— to poop ♪

"....."

Were you still going to insist that this nonsensical song was a lullaby?

Just as my sense of disbelief disappeared, my consciousness suddenly sank to the floor.

We had already agreed not to descend into too deep of an unconscious state.

As everyone knows, the basement is now the territory of 'She-Who-

Must-Not-Be-Named.'

To put it simply, the ‘pink entity’s’ unconscious world was at the 13th underground level. This time, the unconscious level I descended to was at most the 2nd underground level.

- *Thump.*

Even that level, however, was enough to decorate the interior by mimicking the fetal senses.

- *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

There was only darkness.

But it was not a silent darkness, nor was it a dry, black background. The darkness was sound.

The world was quietly growling.

To humans, the heart was never just a visual diagram but a sound, echoing softly like a wave in water.

“I can’t see anything.”

“Well, the baby has never seen anything, so it’s natural! To a baby, seeing the world with eyes closed is everything there is to see.”

“No wonder prophets in myths are depicted as blind. To experience the primordial world, you must discern through sound.”

“Shh. The baby is here!”

Holding my left hand, the fairy pointed to a part of the darkness.

I saw it.

- ……

My senses reinterpreted the ‘world the baby was experiencing’ as visual information. And it was astonishing.

“That’s… just water?”

Water was floating and wriggling in the middle of the darkness.

There were no visible limbs. No head. There was something long and tentacle-like squirming in the water... Was it the umbilical cord?

No matter how you looked at it, it was more like an Undine wannabe than a human.

“Yes. It’s water?”

“...No. Where’s the calmly curled-up baby, and why is there a water elemental slime instead?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Comrade Secretary, that’s an adult’s perspective.”

This brat was really asking for a flick on the forehead.

“Adults separate the fetus and amniotic fluid, thinking this is human and that is liquid, but from the fetus’s perspective, the amniotic fluid is just another part of its body! It’s been with them since birth, so it’s only natural!”

“Ah.”

“Human scholars interpret the pain babies experience during birth as merely the separation of the umbilical cord, the separation from the mother. But fundamentally, it’s closer to the loss of 'water,' thus losing a part of their most basic 'skin.' Mammals, in essence, are terrifying creatures that have their skin peeled off completely when they are born...”

The fairy shivered.

‘Quite an interesting perspective.’

So, a significant part of the pain humans experience at birth is due to the 'loss of water,' or the 'loss of their body.' In other words, babies who were originally 'water spirits' are forcibly turned into 'humans.'

There was no time to dwell on this anthropological notion now,

though

“Comrade Secretary! The monster is appearing!”

The culprit behind the zero birth rate era on the Korean Peninsula had appeared.

Step, step—

The monster walked gracefully from the other side of the darkness. When I saw the monster's form, my eyes widened in shock.

Jeong Seo-ah.

A monster, eerily resembling the grown-up version of the fetus Jeong Seo-ah would eventually become, was approaching the fetus.

- Sigh. Yesterday was hard too.

Plop.

The 'grown-up Jeong Seo-ah' sat down beside the ‘unborn Jeong Seo-ah.’

- You know, mommy seems to have finally heard the news. That if things continue like this, I might never be born.

- ……

The monster, mimicking Jeong Seo-ah’s appearance, whispered to the fetus in a bizarre voice and tone.

- Our daddy died last month while out in the Void, didn’t he? So mommy thinks I’m the only trace daddy left behind. But now, knowing I might disappear too, it’s causing her immense pain. She overdosed on dopamine again.

- ……

- It’s not just mommy. Daddy was baking dopamine rice pizza every day until the day before he disappeared. Uncle too. Auntie too. Great-uncle and great-auntie also need to be counted. Thanks to

that damn dopamine, they lived healthily and happily until their deaths.

- .....

- So... now it’s my turn?

Splash.

The monster that looked like Jeong Seo-ah dipped her hand into the amniotic fluid.

Then, an ominous ‘black color’ that was different from the serene darkness of this dream world began to taint the fetus's amniotic fluid.

- ...! ...!

The amniotic fluid turned pitch black.

Unable to scream, the fetus—the being of water—could only express its agony by violently disturbing the surface.

‘Ah.’

At that moment, I understood the true nature of dopamine. How it managed to keep making people happy without any side effects up until now.

The side effects hadn’t disappeared. Misfortune hadn’t vanished. The side effects and misfortune were simply transferred and postponed onto ‘someone else.’

Namely, the unborn children.

In other words, they went to the ‘next generation’ that shared the same bloodline.

Footnotes:

1 - Gung Ye was a historical figure who lost one eye as a baby and grew up to be a king of the Later Three Kingdoms period of Korea. He also claimed to have the mysterious power of mind-reading, which he used to have his political advisors and adversaries executed.

Chapter 187

The Addict IV

Sinnoa

- Is it painful?

The anomaly spoke to the fetus.

- Do you still want to be born despite this?

Its voice sounded strangely kind.

That alone was peculiar. Originally, all gestures of anomalies were merely awkward imitations. Nevertheless, this anomaly managed to pretend to be human quite skillfully. It mimicked the appearance of a human, adopted their voice, and imitated their movements.

- The outside world is full of lives like this.

Splash.

The anomaly unhesitatingly thrust its forearm into the amniotic fluid and stirred it.

- ……!

Then, the water forming the fetus flickered with various colors.

The surface of the water acted like a television screen, and across it were images, flowing as if a movie film were being projected.

Scenes of Jeong Seo-Ah's mother in agony, of her father, stressed out from running a bakery. Of uncles, aunts, distant relatives, grand-uncles, and grandmothers. The scenes of the 'bloodline' of those connected to the small fetus Jeong Seo-Ah suffering were being broadcast.

"Hieeek. These are not ordinary images," Fairy No. 264 whispered

softly beside me. “Those are undoubtedly the unhappiness and pain they would have felt when they didn't take dopamine...! Each color contains dense emotions...!”

Life, aging, illness, death.

Things that were originally erased by dopamine in the real world, from the most trivial misfortunes of humans to the most dreadful ones, were all transferred to the fetus.

After completing the transfer, the anomaly shuddered with a sigh.

- Jeong Seo-Ah.

- ……

- Even after this, do you still want to be born into this world?

Thump.

The heartbeat that supported the fetus's dream weakened. The rhythm slackened and the sound diminished.

Yet still, the heartbeat continued. The will to live, which had lasted for 25 weeks, had not been abandoned by Jeong Seo-Ah.

However, the anomaly's words were not yet finished.

- Of course, there is a way to avoid such suffering.

The anomaly caressed Jeong Seo-Ah.

- You can take dopamine too.

The fetus's body jolted violently.

- Then you can pretend there is no such thing as the prevalent misery and pain in the world. Just like your mother. Like your father. Like everyone else living in this world right now.

- ……

- Why should you have to bear the crushing blow? It's not your fault

the world is like this. You were just born. You can just pass it on.

Once more.

- But if you do that, you'll be the first generation to do so knowing the truth of it all.

Drip, drop.

The water that formed the fetus's body also started to diminish.

Like old skin shedding, droplets fell from the surface of the amniotic fluid. They were tears. A fetus, yet to develop limbs and features, knew no other way to cry.

We deduced outside that "*the size of the fetus gradually diminishes until it disappears*." The truth of it, however, was different. The child made of water was simply disappearing by shedding tears.

- Yes. You made a wise decision.

The anomaly touched its tongue to the droplets that fell from the fetus. Then it lapped up the water like a hamster in a cage.

- You don't need to bear it. There's no reason to endure unhappiness yourself or pass on sins knowingly. So...? Right?

The anomaly that was drinking the amniotic fluid tilted its head.

- This isn't a dream.

At that moment, the anomaly's right arm was cut off. A strike from my sword cleanly sliced away its forearm.

- Ah.

Thud.

The severed forearm turned into water in mid air and spilled onto the ground. Only then did the anomaly, mimicking Jeong Seo-Ah’s face, glance to the side at me.

Fairy No. 264 chose that moment to flee with a gasp. Really, it was

useless in combat.

- ……!

However, without a glance at the fairy, surprise spread across the anomaly's face. It looked as if it recognized me, a reaction that seemed genuinely human.

- Undertaker?

"Do you know of my existence?"

- If even the old-timers here don't know, it's time to close shop.

"You speak well for an anomaly. Your tongue flows like an eloquent scholar's, as if you possess intelligence."

- Ahaha.

The anomaly laughed. Its laughter was exceptionally realistic. The voice echoed through the dream's darkness like that of a truly innocent child.

- Because I am human! Of course, I possess intelligence!

"Is that so? You're not an anomaly but a human?"

- Yes, yes. Because we...

The anomaly spread its arms. The arm I had severed had already regenerated.

- We feel pain and unhappiness.

Like the *Pietà*, the anomaly cradled the fetus.[1]

- Obviously, we are more human than those fake ones outside who no longer feel pain, unhappiness, or responsibility, and don't want to feel it.

I opened my mouth and then closed it. The logic structure alone was genuinely human.

- Only those who are more unhappy, who suffer more, are cherished as human beings by you, aren't they?

More miserable families, more pitiful environments. Scarier teachers, harsher companies, more tyrannical nations.

Humans loved to compete over the depth of their unhappiness—something only humans could do, could be capable of.

- You have lost the qualification to be human.

In this era filled with dopamine, it was what humans had lost.

- Now, we will become the new humans of this era.

I chose that moment to look at Jeong Seo-Ah in the anomaly's arms and say, "In a world where no one is born?"

- Dream. Reality. The only difference is the layer.

Indeed. So the new human race would unfold within dreams.

At that moment, I thought I knew where the unborn children were headed.

However...

"You're wrong."

I raised my sword as I spoke.

"Not everyone is taking dopamine," I argued. "Therefore, you cannot strip humanity of its qualifications."

The anomaly furrowed its brow, as if considering it a wordplay.

- That's because of the Sword Marquess's fields, the logistics network doesn't apply to the whole of humanity. But surely you know, as a self-proclaimed anomaly expert? Talking about 'reality' with us is meaningless—

"Noh Do-hwa."

The anomaly flinched.

"She doesn't take dopamine," I said. "Before they even knew there were side effects like you, she refused to take dopamine."

- .....

"If you know my name, you must also know about Noh Do-hwa, and that she doesn't take dopamine. Am I wrong?"

The silent anomaly soon ground its teeth.

- ...That woman is an oddball. An outlier. She can't represent humanity.

"In a sense, I agree."

I swung my sword again. Once more, the anomaly's arm flew off.

"But as for the latter half, I do not. She alone can represent humanity."

This time, the severed arm did not regenerate. The anomaly's argument crumbled before the evidence of Noh Do-hwa.

- Urgh!

The anomaly stepped back as if trying to flee somewhere, but this was my dream. Entering might have been easy, but leaving wouldn't come free.

Swish!

I immediately slashed my sword, cutting off one of the anomaly's legs. The anomaly fell backward in its attempted escape as I simultaneously grabbed Jeong Seo-Ah.

The anomaly looked up at me.

- N-no...

The anomaly trembled.

- Please don't kill me. I don't want to die...

I had cut down countless anomalies, and even cut down humans. Those with mouths, tongues, and vocal cords often begged for their lives before my blade.

I did not listen to them.

I had lived long enough to know that merely being born and looking human did not make one human. Let alone an anomaly that only imitated humans.

Yet.

"Why?" I found myself asking, abruptly realizing something. "Didn't you tell Jeong Seo-Ah the same thing? That the world is full of pain and misery, with bombs passed down from above. So why beg for your life?"

- That's...

The anomaly's words trailed off.

The once fluent arguments ceased. The tongue was still. The expression vanished.

But the eyes.

The anomaly's eyes were fixed on Jeong Seo-Ah in my arms. I noticed a sort of envy, perhaps even longing, in that gaze.

"....."

Right.

If this anomaly had continued to speak eloquently as it had before, I would have swung my sword without hesitation. It didn't. A being that longed for life, despite bearing and chewing through pain and suffering, refusing to escape through death—such a being, I couldn't easily cut down. Especially not when a certain old man did it so easily.

However, I knew what I had to do. I also knew how to do it.

This emotion would subside. My hand would advance. The anomaly would be exterminated.

In ten seconds, I knew it would be done.

But.

But still.

“I have something to ask.”

I lowered my sword.

- What...?

“If you claim to be human, you should answer this.”

Jingle.

A bell rang in the dark space. The sound came from the bracelet on my wrist.

A ‘Silver Bell’ hung there.

I held the namesake of my alias ‘Undertaker’ up to the anomaly and asked, “Do you want to escape from hell?”

Originally, Time Seal only worked on humans.

The reason was simple. The other party had to agree to the use of the ability by saying, *“Yes, please use that ability on me!”* It was a contract of sorts, and as such, using Time Seal on non-human species was almost impossible.

Most anomalies merely imitated human thinking and language. They did not truly understand. They couldn’t sign a contract of consent.

But.

"Do you want to be at peace forever?"

- .....

"I can make you relive the happiest day of your life forever. If you've lamented about bearing the misfortune of many people, you can imagine how sweet this offer is."

If there truly was an anomaly that thought of itself as human...

If that anomaly, through some process, somehow really understood human thinking and language...

"In return, you will be forgotten by all humans. No one will remember that you ever existed."

- .....

"Except for me."

If such an anomaly existed...

It could naturally be sealed in the tombstone of time.

- Ah.

The anomaly murmured.

- No matter how happy the dream, if you argue it's just an illusion...

"You said dreams and reality are no different, so you contradict yourself."

- Indeed. It's a checkmate.

The anomaly murmured.

- So that's it. If I say no here, I give up being human. If I agree, I get exterminated.

The anomaly looked at me, it gaze quiet.

- What a cruel human you are.

"I asked a question."

- Truly cruel.

When a human ended their own life, it was called suicide. Then what should it be called when an anomaly voluntarily got exterminated? Should it not also be called suicide?

- ...I've only dreamt of a miserable life.

The anomaly's gaze turned to the sky.

- Though I spoke of pain as the human condition, I never wanted to be miserable. I wanted to live happily, like the humans outside.

That skyward gaze lowered to peer at Jeong Seo-ah in my arms, then downward still to see itself in the form of Jeong Seo-ah all grown up.

- Now, I want to live a happy dream. I am human.

I nodded silently.

Jingle.

The moment the Silver Bell rang for the last time, the anomaly in Jeong Seo-ah's form burst apart. Its body turned into a black liquid that spilled onto the floor. On the wet floor stood a transparent crystal tombstone.

Indeed. I was the first to witness an anomaly die by suicide.

There is an epilogue.

"Dopamine? What's that?"

Once the anomaly was subjected to Time Seal, people naturally forgot all about dopamine. It wasn't just their memories that were lost either.

"Dang Seo-rin, don't you see the rice covering that plain?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? It’s just a wasteland."

"....."

People couldn’t perceive dopamine at all. Even if opium rice grew right before their eyes, even if the grains were refined and presented, they only saw empty air.

For the past two years, the fact that no newborns were born was considered a 'very strange event.' Nobody remembered it was chaos caused by dopamine. Not even the Saintess or the Sword Marquess.

"What do you think, Ah-ryeon? Do you feel a sudden burst of happiness or anything?"

"N-not at all. I feel the same as usual."

More surprisingly, forcing dopamine on others had no effect. The crop that was once expected to save human civilization, something everyone carried and consumed, had been forgotten. Now, I was the only person left who knew about dopamine.

"Hmm."

The event of the Sword Marquess discovering and bringing dopamine wouldn’t even happen in the next cycle.

I felt a bit bitter and, while giving Noh Do-hwa a ride, asked this question.

"Captain Noh Do-hwa. Suppose there’s a food that supposedly makes you happy without any side effects."

"Hot, fried chicken, you mean...?"

"Whatever... Would you eat it?"

Noh Do-hwa adjusted her glasses. The dangling chain jingled hysterically. "Why are you asking something so ridiculous...? Would others eat it too...?"

"Yes."

"Hmm..."

She was on her second night of staying up. Pressing down on the dark circles under her eyes, she said, "If it were just my portion, I'd eat it all up... But if everyone eats it, I probably wouldn't...?"

"Why not? Everyone else is eating it."

"Hmm... I guess because I'm a hipster who gets upset if my unique thing becomes mainstream?"

I nodded immediately. "Indeed." It was a very convincing reason.

That was why I couldn't understand what happened next.

"No, Captain. Why are you suddenly hitting me on the head?"

"Just because it annoyed me that you actually agreed with my nonsense..." she grumbled.

"It was nonsense?"

"What else could it be? Damn, how do you see me...?"

Noh Do-hwa shook her head and put down her teacup, her tone turning more serious. "If everyone takes that mysterious happiness pill, someone has to avoid it to prepare for contingencies."

Hmm.

Given that was the very reason I was able to corner the anomaly, I had nothing to say. Even so, I had to ask, "For an uncertain preventive measure, you'd give up certain happiness?"

"What are you saying, damn... Since you came to me, my life has been summarized by that sentence... Do you seriously not realize that?"

"Certainly."

I resolved to give Noh Do-hwa more rides in the future.

A second epilogue.

One day, after cleaning up the remnants in the lowest layer of the dream within a dream, I found myself on the second floor of the dream. That floor changed its scenery every time I dreamed, but one thing always remained constant: there was a crystal tombstone in a corner of the landscape.

'Now I even have graves in my dreams.'

I touched the tombstone as a test. Usually, when I fiddled with the surface of the tombstone, the 'happiest day' of the human sealed inside would unfold like virtual reality. So now, the happiest moment of the dopamine anomaly should be reproduced—

Something quite surprising happened instead.

"Do you want to escape from hell?"

- .....

"Do you want to be at peace forever?"

In the anomaly’s dream, the scene of our confrontation was repeating.

I blinked blankly. Why?

- Ah.

It was obvious upon reflection.

The anomaly known as dopamine had no 'happy memories.' It had lived off human misfortune until it was exterminated.

Thus.

- I’ve only dreamt of a miserable life.

- Now, I want to live a happy dream.

This was the only happy memory for the anomaly.

- I am human.

Jingle.

In the dream within a dream, the anomaly left those words as its final will and burst apart.

Just before it died, the anomaly had a broad smile.

To this anomaly, the happiest day was its moment of suicide.

"....."

I watched the anomaly endlessly repeating its suicide in the dream, reveling in happiness, and I had to admit it to myself.

There was an anomaly here that was human—excessively human.

Footnotes:

1 - La Pietà is a marble sculpture created by Michaelangelo depicting the moment Jesus was taken down from the cross and given to his mother, Mary.

Chapter 188

The Patriot I

Sinnoa

Have you ever heard this saying?

"Crisis is an opportunity."

While this phrase is widely known and often quoted, I find it overly kind and somewhat misleading.

Reality is harsh. To accurately reflect this cruel world, the saying needs a serious makeover.

"Find an opportunity in a crisis. If you can't, then you'll die."

An apocalypse is a continuous series of crises, much like the incessant survey calls during election season. But while election season lasts a month at most, the apocalypse is a never-ending, thrilling ride with new surprises every day.

The weak humans who couldn't adapt to the newly updated environment of Earth all perished.

It wasn’t just individuals that died either. Entire professions were wiped out. If we were to list the jobs that disappeared from the elementary school career aspirations list in the face of the apocalypse, it would include members of parliament, election commission members, union leaders, stock traders, physicists, graduate students, hikikomori...

And we must not forget "journalists." In the modern media world, which could no longer survive without advertisers, the apocalypse was too harsh.

That said, large guilds did publish quarterly newsletters when the occasion struck. "Hogsmeade News" of the Samcheon World gained some popularity, for example.[1] However, it was hard to consider

these true media outlets. It’s not exactly prestigious journalism when Dang Seo-rin’s autumn witch fashion items make it to the front page.

Nevertheless, it took a considerable amount of time for "journalists" to disappear from the job market, and that was all because of one man.

Jo Yeong-su.

The last journalist remaining not only not just on the Korean Peninsula but in "Republic of Korea" was quite active for a long time.

However, if I were to grab any citizen of Busan and claim, "Jo Yeong-su is actually a journalist," I would likely receive a strange look.

"Him? A journalist? Why?"

In Busan, Jo Yeong-su could always be found in the square in front of the National Road Management Corps headquarters. It was there that one could find a middle-aged man holding a protest sign and shouting every day.

"Dictator Noh Do-hwa, step down! Step down! Step down!"

"Ugh, there he goes again. Doesn't he ever get tired?"

"Dictator Noh Do-hwa, step dooown!"

Yes, that man was Jo Yeong-su.

To the people of Busan, Jo Yeong-su wasn’t recognized as a journalist. He was just the "crazy guy in the square."

This crazy guy had a distinctive outfit. Not only was he holding a protest sign, but his shirt was emblazoned, front and back, with:

[Republic of Korea 大韓民國]

[Democracy 民主主義]

The shirt, which was more armor than clothing, was covered in large and small characters:

[The Republic of Korea is a democratic republic]

[The sovereignty of the Republic of Korea belongs to the people, and all power comes from the people]

[All citizens have freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly and association]

[No permit or censorship shall be imposed on speech, the press, or assembly and association]

...

Truly the embodiment of democracy!

If there had been a "Jesus = Heaven, No Jesus = Hell" Evangelism team in Myeong-dong, Seoul, during the civilized times, now Busan had Jo Yeong-su.

No matter how liberal Busan was with fashion, Jo Yeong-su stood out more than any witch cosplayer from the Samcheon World.

"Can't someone do something about that guy?"

"He's such a nuisance."

"When will that man ever lose his voice?"

Naturally, the members of the National Road Management Corps detested Jo Yeong-su. Even if they didn't worship Noh Do-hwa as the savior of the Korean Peninsula, they couldn't stand a human alarm blaring at them on their way to and from work. If Noh Do-hwa had said, "Get rid of that nuisance," the members of the National Road Management Corps would have gladly done so and left no trace.

"Just leave him alone..."

In other words, Jo Yeong-su's survival was entirely thanks to Noh Do-hwa's neglect.

"What's the big deal? Get back to your work..."

"Commander, is there any reason to keep such a troublemaker alive? It could demoralize the Corps."

"Demoralize? If they don't like it, they can quit. Who's stopping them? Damn, I'd quit too if I could. Do you want to see what real demoralization looks like?"

"I'll make sure to tell the members not to touch him."

Noh Do-hwa was immune to criticism and slander. No matter what was said, even if it was deeply insulting, she ignored it. This couldn't be interpreted as the benevolence of a ruler. It was more like how a person wouldn't care about a caterpillar wriggling to get attention. That was Noh Do-hwa's mindset.

Yu Ji-won also ignored Jo Yeong-su, deciding it wasn't worth trying to gain points with her superiors. She was equally good at treating people like insects.

"Dictator Noh Do-hwa, step down!"

Thus, a miracle was born. Jo Yeong-su achieved true "freedom of expression" that was hard to enjoy even in a true democratic society.

Remarkably, Jo Yeong-su was even an Awakener.

"Able to light a lighter with his index finger."

His awakening ability was trivial, but to a true democrat, such "innate traits" didn't matter. The important thing was that as an Awakener, he could access SG Net. That was all that mattered.

-Anonymous: The Republic of Korea is facing a crisis! The election system has collapsed, and democratic principles have disappeared!

After the National Road Management Corps members went home,

Jo Yeong-su's fingers would light up SG Net instead of the square.

-Anonymous: By what legitimate procedure did Noh Do-hwa become the head of the National Road Management Corps? What is the legal basis for this?

Of course, she was chosen by me, the Undertaker, and selected through a beta-testing period spanning hundreds of years. Curiously, everyone except her went mad when they seized power on the Korean Peninsula.

What was I supposed to do? I had no choice but to pick Noh Do-hwa, who couldn't go any crazier because she was already well beyond saving.

-Anonymous: The situation with the large guilds controlling the cities is even more pressing. The guilds arbitrarily collect protection fees from the people!

-Anonymous: If this isn't a tax, what is? What right do these rogue groups have to levy taxes on the people?

That would be because all the "anomaly experts" of this era were gathered in the guilds.

As anyone who has heard my stories would know, it was practically impossible for ordinary people to stand up to anomalies. Even for Awakeners, it wasn't easy. In this apocalyptic world where one could die on the streets at any moment, the guilds were responsible for maintaining law and order. Thus, one had to consider the guilds' perspective too.

"Hey, we'll pay you a protection fee equivalent to a head tax and 10% of your income, so you better deal with the anomalies first and most aggressively, okay?"

That was the proposal made to the guilds.

People might feel differently, but it wasn't a deal particularly weighted in the guilds' favor. Honestly, theirs is a tough job to do without some incentive.

-LiteraryGirl: What's that guy saying again?

-Anonymous: Attention everyone, the night shift has begun. Please share your Three Kingdoms theories.

-Anonymous: Is it true that Jo Yeong-su goes to the free meal center every day?

-OldManGoryeo: Welcome, old-timer, LOL

Even on SG Net, Jo Yeong-su wasn't well-received. Despite operating anonymously, everyone knew his identity, which was a problem. It meant he had fostered himself a notorious reputation.

In this era, who lives by "procedures" and "votes"? Anomalies don't care about that stuff when they crush humans.

-Anonymous: I'm not condemning the guild leaders or the head of the National Road Management Corps because they're incompetent.

Of course, every post he wrote was met with mocking comments, and Jo Yeong-su would always respond with long rebuttals.

-Anonymous: The issue is legitimate procedures! Even if power is seized by force, humans live through time, and time brings forgetfulness.

-Anonymous: Force can sustain power for 10 years, 20 years, 50 years, but not 100 years. Time is too powerful!

-Anonymous: The way to overcome the inevitability of forgetfulness is writing agreements and promises into laws. These are the only measures that continue to work over countless years that humanity has discovered!

-Anonymous: Inheritance based on bloodlines cannot be a legitimate procedure! Countless ceremonies and coronations were devised to make such a tradition look legitimate.

-Anonymous: Ultimately, agreement! Only agreement! Laws inscribed with agreements!

-Anonymous: Realistically, everyone cannot gather every 10 years to renew agreements, so we create "promises that transcend time and space, agreed upon by all humans." This is the constitution!

-Anonymous: Realistically, not everyone can participate in agreements, so "periodically elected representatives of all sovereign people" renew the agreements. This is the law!

Indeed, these were lengthy rebuttals.

I didn't edit them. He genuinely wrote such detailed responses to every member's comment. Each comment had slightly different words and sentences too, so he wasn't using copy-paste.

-Anonymous: Do the National Road Management Corps and guilds have power? Yes. Do they have agreements? No. Do they have a constitution and laws? No. Do they have agreed procedures?

No!

-Anonymous: Thus, these organizations won't last 100 years. They clearly lack the qualifications to represent the current Republic of Korea!

-Anonymous: Former Busan Mayor Jung Sang-guk, who fled to Japan, has more legitimate qualifications!

□dolLHOuse: ?

No matter how passionately he poured out his arguments, no one agreed with Jo Yeong-su. It was only natural, really.

-Anonymous: LOL 100 years? We're struggling to survive 10 years and you run your mouth about "the inevitability of forgetfulness" LOL

No one expected a nation to endure for over 100 years. The Republic of Korea, which Jo Yeong-su revered so much, had collapsed just over 100 years after its founding. The "constitution and laws" he cherished couldn't stop the arrival of the void. Dang Seo-rin's Cursed Song Incantation could protect the public order and far more people than a few agreed-upon sentences.

That’s the world we live in.

Humans were no longer great but merely part of nature. Laws were luxury items for humanity, which found itself at an overwhelming disadvantage in nature.

In other words, we were animals. Beasts.

Awakening abilities weren’t something grand or a sign of being chosen by heaven; they were just claws for beasts or wings for escaping.

One had to humbly acknowledge this fact to face the current reality.

-Anonymous: Difficulty in current times cannot excuse procedural deficiencies! The former Republic of Korea declared independence and established a constitution even when the country was lost and occupied by foreign forces!

In short, Jo Yeong-su was an idealist. To the SG Net members, whose families, friends, and colleagues had died and were still dying, his idealism was almost unbearable.

-OldManGoryeo: Thanks to the old-timer, the night shift is warm again LOL

Thus, he earned the nickname "Old-timer."

"Republic of Korea" + "Old-timer," a mocking term.

Along with OldManGoryeo, Old-timer was one of SG Net’s three major villains.

Who was the third? That was debatable, but sometimes the WitchJudge would be tossed around as an option. Some factions even dared to nominate me, the Undertaker, as a Three Kingdoms villain, but those were all baseless slander.

-Anonymous: Noh Do-hwa, the head of the National Road Management Corps, should wake up!

OldManGoryeo: Wake up! Wake up!

Anyway.

As usual, the night shift on SG Net was filled with OldManGoryeo causing chaos and Jo Yeong-su breathing fire. Normal people were asleep, preparing for the next day's labor. Only two villains were passionately debating the "future of the nation" through their posts and comments.

-Anonymous: Even now, the National Road Management Corps and guilds should seriously discuss the direction of the Republic of Korea, considering public opinion!

OldManGoryeo: Public opinion? LOL how would you do that?

Anonymous: Through the media, of course!

OldManGoryeo: Oh, gotcha. But we don't have any media or news in our proud Republic of Korea, do we? lmao...

At that moment, Jo Yeong-su's keyboard, which had always unhesitatingly voiced the truth, suddenly fell silent.

One minute, three minutes, five minutes.

No matter how long they waited, there was no rebuttal to OldManGoryeo's comment.

-OldManGoryeo: Last hit done.

Finally, OldManGoryeo, satisfied with getting the last word, moved on to another topic.

-OldManGoryeo: Hey guys, what song are you listening to right now?

ZERO_SUGAR: Three Kingdoms theories, go.

OldManGoryeo: Go to sleep.

Of course, OldManGoryeo didn't realize it.

That he had just inadvertently given birth to the last "journalist" on the Korean Peninsula.

Footnotes:

1 - Hogsmeade is an all-wizard village featured in the world of the *Harry Potter* series.

Chapter 189

The Patriot II

Sinnoa

That morning as the members of the National Road Management Corps arrived at headquarters (nicknamed the Tower of Babel or the Demon King's Castle), they felt an inexplicable emptiness.

"Why is it that the commute isn't as annoying today?"

"Congratulations. You've finally lost it."

"Has the plaza in front of our workplace always been this clean?"

"It's a beautiful day outside. Birds are singing, flowers are blooming. On days like these, adults like us should stay home and relax..."[1]

Just when they started doubting whether they had gone insane from overwork, someone pointed toward the plaza and shouted, "Oh! He's gone!"

"Gone? Who is?"

"The crazy guy! Jo Yeong-su isn't here!"

"Huh?!"

Yes. Jo Yeong-su—who held up a sign while shouting "Noh Do-hwa, step down!" every day, through rain and snow, through seasonal colds and strange viral infections—had vanished.

The members of the Corps were amazed. With just one person gone, the Tower of Babel plaza revealed its natural elegance.

"Wow, it's so nice without that guy..."

"During lunch breaks, he'd always approach us while we were eating our sandwiches and start yelling."

For the first time since joining, the members of the National Road Management Corps experienced a peaceful commute.

Of course, happiness is fleeting, like summer ice cream—you can't savor it slowly.

Exactly fifteen days later...

"Please take a look at this!"

"What?"

Thud!

With a beaming face, Jo Yeong-su returned to the headquarters of the National Road Management Corps and placed a large stack of documents on the reception desk.

"Uh..."

The receptionist was confused. The National Road Management Corps wasn't a government body that served the public as their master. Naturally, there wasn't a complaints office for civilians. (There was, however, a reception desk for patients seeking support devices from Noh Do-hwa personally.)

"Uh, Mr. Jo Yeong-su? What is this...?"

"This is a public opinion survey about whether Noh Do-hwa is suitable to rule the Republic of Korea as its leader!" Jo Yeong-su's voice rang out like a lion's roar, drawing the attention of the Corps members enjoying their lunch break in the lobby.

"A public opinion survey?"

"Yes! See for yourself!"

On the front page of the survey, consisting of 400 sheets of recycled paper, was written:

Republic of Korea's First Public Opinion Survey

Question: Do you believe that Noh Do-hwa, the head of the National Road Management Corps, was elected through legitimate democratic procedures as the de facto ruler of the Republic of Korea?

Very legitimate – *12.3%*

Somewhat legitimate – *15.1%*

Somewhat illegitimate – *5.5%*

Very illegitimate – *1.6%*

Indifferent – *59.7%*

No response – *5.8%*

The writing, densely packed and in pencil, was clearly handwritten. The paper was ragged, as if the text had been rewritten numerous times.

"Oh..." The receptionist blinked. "Um, what is this exactly...?"

"This is the survey data collected by personally visiting hundreds of Busan citizens!" Jo Yeong-su's clear eyes gleamed with enthusiasm.

For the record, although it doesn't matter, Jo Yeong-su's head was as shiny as his eyes at the time. Just saying.

"As you can see, 27.4% gave positive responses, and a whopping 7.1% gave negative responses!"

"Uh, well. Assuming the survey was conducted properly, isn't the approval rating quite high...?"

"Currently, the Republic of Korea is essentially under Noh Do-hwa's dictatorship! In such a situation, over 7% of the people risked their lives to express their opinions! It's a figure that cannot be underestimated!"

"Dictatorship..." The receptionist glanced around, startled.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the Corps members, who by now were

accustomed to Jo Yeong-su's antics, didn't blame the receptionist. They simply gave him a look that said, *"Here we go again."*

"This is the voice of the people, the cry of the masses! The National Road Management Corps must not ignore the public sentiment that boils like lava beneath the surface!"

"It seems to me the public sentiment is saying they 'don't care.' With almost 60% of the responses, isn't that the true sentiment of the residents...?"

"Are you saying the 7% voices aren't even voices or people?"

"What? No, that's not it—"

"Are you saying it doesn't matter if we ignore the opinions of only 7%? Is that the universal stance of the National Road Management Corps, which should be concerned about the country's foundation and the voices of minorities?!"

"Okay, okay, Mr. Jo Yeong-su! I'll pass the information to the commander! Will that be all?"

"Please dooooo!"

By now, you might be wondering. How did I, the Undertaker, overhear the above conversation and narrate it with such omniscience?

The answer was simple. A mysterious patron was secretly supporting Jo Yeong-su, the embodiment of Korean democracy.

[I think it makes sense.]

It was none other than the Saintess herself... who expressed her support for Jo Yeong-su!

[While I don't agree with restoring the already fallen Korean government, it's good to have an institution that listens to public opinion.]

"But isn't there SG Net?"

[Only Awakeners can access it. It's hard to say that the opinions of ordinary people are fully reflected anywhere. I also can't conduct a proper survey of public opinion because I can only share the perspectives of Awakeners.]

"Hmm."

[Mr. Undertaker, you always warn against Awakeners' superiority. I think it's a good opportunity to listen to the voices of ordinary people.]

"If the Saintess wishes for it..."

The Saintess had firmly pressed the "subscribe and like" button for Jo Yeong-su the YouTuber, and she shared his every move with her friend, me.

To be honest, I wasn't particularly interested. If there was one person on the Korean Peninsula with the least nostalgia for the Republic of Korea, it was me. To prevent misunderstandings, it wasn't because I was what they call a "national critic." I had a much simpler reason than the fierce political battles waged by those internet personas.

"I don't remember anything!"

It happened before my fourth cycle.

I must have fulfilled my military duty as a healthy SCV. I probably experienced the wanderings and conflicts typical of my age and may have had my own opinions, or echoed others', about the nation of Korea. And all those memories had plunged into the sea of oblivion. Unless the Dragon King under the sea of Inwang helped me, there was no way those memories would return.

"I don't even know my parents' faces or where my hometown is, so why would I have nostalgia for Korea?"

Therefore, to me, the words of the old-timer... no, of Jo Yeong-su were as foreign to me as an alien language.

Create a constitution?

I was 100% sure that the moment a constitution was written, anomalies would corrupt the text. There was no way anomalies would pass up such an attractive prey as a "sequence of letters that all citizens must respect." I'd bet my hand that the first line would be corrupted to read, "① The Republic of Korea is void ② The sovereignty of Korea belongs to anomalies, and all deaths come from anomalies."

Voting? Majority rule?

Oh my, how amazing. From the moment you put paper in the ballot box, you'll find votes from "humans who shouldn't exist!" The miracle of the total voter turnout inexplicably reaching 146% would surely unfold.

"Why are you deliberately increasing vulnerabilities exposable to anomalies? Are you masochists?"

Vulnerabilities should be minimized as much as possible.

Reduce government organizations to the National Road Management Corps. Concentrate the power of the Corps on Noh Do-hwa. From my perspective, I only had to manage Noh Do-hwa to prevent her from being infected by anomalies.

Why do I build guild members focusing on Awakeners rather than ordinary people? Is it simply because Awakeners are more capable? No. It's because the Saintess can monitor Awakeners 24/7. Even if they fall victim to anomalies, the Saintess's Clairvoyance allows for immediate response. In contrast, ordinary people don't have that. The risk of being caught off guard and falling prey is far too high.

Risk management. My strategy as a regressor was thoroughly focused on responding to anomalies.

"It's truly incomprehensible."

Although I refrained from touching Jo Yeong-su out of consideration for the Saintess, I occasionally mentioned him when chatting with Noh Do-hwa.

"It would be understandable if he merely longed for the

environment of the civilized times, but it's strange to feel nostalgia for Korea as a nation itself."

"Well, isn't nostalgia created by mixing those two emotions...?" Noh Do-hwa countered. "We used to live like humans."

"I understand that. But Jo Yeong-su is something else entirely. Even if I don't remember exactly, was it really a country worth longing for so deeply? It's not even something you miss after it's gone..."

"Hm."

Click.

Noh Do-hwa chuckled as she clipped her nails. As a former civil servant of Korea, she always placed a trash can on her lap to catch the clippings as she trimmed her nails.

"So you're that kind of person..."

"...?"

What did she mean by that?

In any case, both the Saintess and Noh Do-hwa were unexpectedly tolerant of Jo Yeong-su's mischief. The other Awakeners weren't much different. Everyone despised Jo Yeong-su, but no one actually made him "disappear." They could have done so anytime they wished.

Living without family or friends, unaffiliated with any guild, dwelling in the slums of Busan, moving between the National Road Management Corps and Samcheon World's free meal centers, while denouncing the "dictatorship" of both organizations.

He spent his days collecting scraps of paper. Because he needed paper to create his "opinion surveys."

Even so, resources were scarce in the world, so Jo Yeong-su had to write out the survey questions on his opinion polls with a pencil.

Republic of Korea's Fourth Public Opinion Survey

Question: In Pyongyang, Korea, a puppet state called the Eastern Holy State has been established, and the National Road Management Corps has not released any official statements about them. Do you think the Eastern Holy State should be recognized as a state?

Republic of Korea's Eleventh Public Opinion Survey

Question: This year, as a countermeasure against typhoon and monsoon damage, the government forcibly relocated citizens from the southern island areas of Korea. Do you think the National Road Management Corps can infringe on the freedom of residence and relocation in a national crisis?

Republic of Korea's Twentieth Public Opinion Survey

Question: Do you think guild leaders' authority can be established without democratic agreements or discussions? If so, do you think guild leaders have a certain amount of duty to the people?

I wish I could show you these questionnaires. In a sense, they're truly fascinating.

On the recycled paper, whole lines were marked out with pencil strokes Jo Yeong-su had made several times. Like this.

Sometimes, he found some whiteout somewhere and covered the text, only to write over it once more. □□□(like this).

Sometimes, he tried to erase words, but the quality of the eraser and paper weren't up to par, and the paper would tear with a *riiip*, and so he'd write next to the torn holes. ■■■like this.

So, if I were to reproduce Jo Yeong-su's opinion surveys as accurately as possible:

Republic of Korea's NineteenthTwentieth Public Opinion Survey

Question: With the growing disparity in infrastructure between cities, ■■a small number of guild leaders are concentrating power.Do you think guild leaders' authority can be established □□ without democratic agreements or discussions? If ■■■■■so, do you think guild leaders

have a certain amount of duty to the people?

A tattered rag.

And he used the same opinion survey multiple times, noting the responses of participants with small marks next to each answer. Like this:

Authority is established – *11111 11111 11111 11111 11111 11111 11111 111*

Jo Yeong-su returned to his shack, counted the tallies one by one, calculated statistics, and finally wrote the percentages on the "final draft." Like this.

Authority is established – *66.3%*

He then submitted these "statistics" and "public opinions" to the National Road Management Corps.

Over durations as short as fifteen days to as long as over one hundred, Jo Yeong-su conducted surveys.

Years later, a curious phenomenon occurred.

"Dictator Noh Do-hwa, step down! Step down! Step down!"

The landscape of the Tower of Babel plaza had changed just slightly.

The sight of Jo Yeong-su holding a protest sign, clad in the relic armor inscribed with the Korean Constitution, shouting for Noh Do-hwa to step down, remained unchanged.

The sighs of the National Road Management Corps members commuting to and from work also remained unchanged.

However, there was now a cardboard box placed in front of Jo Yeong-su’s feet.

"Mister, here’s some used paper—"

"Dictator Noh Do-hwa, step dooown!"

"Good luck—"

The National Road Management Corps members dropped "used paper" into the cardboard box as they left work.

One sheet. Another sheet. Yet another.

As if leaving bills for a poor street guitarist.

"Hey. Isn't it kind of creepy how Team Leader Yu Ji-won can keep the same expression 24/7?"

"Dictator Noh Do-hwa, step down! Step down!"

"That's why she's the operations team leader. I heard she keeps the same expression even when dealing with problematic members."

"Dictator Noh Do-hwa, step down! Step down!"

"No matter how good the treatment and salary are, I couldn't join the operations team..."

"Dictator Noh Do-hwa, step down! Step down!"

"What about having army stew today?"

"Oh, army stew sounds good. I'm in."

Laughter and chatter.

The National Road Management Corps members, now fully accustomed to Jo Yeong-su, conversed amongst themselves as they passed through the plaza.

Until the sun set and Yu Ji-won was the last to leave, Jo Yeong-su continued to call for Noh Do-hwa's resignation. Of course, Yu Ji-won didn't spare him a glance and left.

"*Ack*, *gak*, *eugh*. My bones..."

By the time night fell and Jo Yeong-su returned to his shack. His

hands were full with thick stacks of recycled paper.

The volume of those papers was the size of the territory held by the current "Republic of Korea."

Footnotes:

1 - A reference to the iconic line from Sans' boss battle of the video game Undertale: "It's a beautiful day outside. Birds are singing, flowers are blooming... On days like these, kids like you... should be burning in hell."

Chapter 190

The Patriot III

Sinnoa

As one can see from history textbooks, the term "revival movement" has always had an ominous connotation on the Korean Peninsula. The Baekje Revival Movement and the Goguryeo Revival Movement both ended in failure. Though not widely known, Silla and Balhae also followed similar paths to ruin. The people who lived on the Korean Peninsula have always been early adopters. Rather than cling to a ruined country and weep, they preferred to boldly change the sign altogether.

The "Republic of Korea Revival Movement" was no exception.

"Dictator Noh Do-hwa, step down!"

Jo Yeong-su was allowed to exist. He was allowed to hold protest signs and shout and allowed to recycle waste paper as part of his campaign.

The survivors, busy living day to day, scoffed at Jo Yeong-su as he approached them with his so-called surveys, but they humored him with responses. Their kindness ended there.

"Dictator Noh Do-hwa, step down! Down with the dynastic rule of giant guild leaders! Form a National Assembly and draft a constitution!"

Jo Yeong-su was always alone. A year passed, then one year turned to three, then seven, and the "Republic of Korea Revival Association" gained no members.

SG Net's attitude toward Jo Yeong-su was much the same.

-Anonymous: Welcome, Constitution Parrot.

-OldManGoryeo: Is the old-timer here? Greetings from your brother

in Goryeo.

-Anonymous: I used to have no particular feelings about the Commander, but my opinion's changing. Seeing her not killing that guy and letting him live shows that the Commander is quite remarkable.

LiteraryGirl: Tigers leave behind their skins when they die, and the Republic of Korea left behind Jo Yeong-su when it died.

-Anonymous: Dang Seo-rin, Noh Do-hwa, Mo Gwang-seo, Jung Sang-guk, Jo Yeong-su, let's go.

Anonymous: Damn, LOL.

Anonymous: That's the most patriotic lineup ever.

dolLHOuse: ?

Mockery, contempt, sycophancy for the famous. Sympathy for an old fellow struggling through the same era. Rare and scarce kindness, like rainwater in the Gobi Desert.

Yet nowhere in these feelings could be found a serious desire to restore the Republic of Korea, nor any longing for democracy.

"Why are the democratic citizens of this land so depraved?!"

"The country is on the brink of ruin, yet there remains nostalgia for a dictator!"

"Hmm."

Eventually, in one cycle, I couldn't help but intervene. After all, it's a young man's (and Jo Yeong-su seemed quite young to me) privilege to blunder through life. But giving advice is an old man's specialty, isn't it?

I approached Jo Yeong-su, who was drinking alone at a pojangmacha in Haeundae. "Mr. Jo. Even if people seem kind to you, don't mistake their kindness."

"What? What do you mean?"

"People tend to act with exaggerated kindness or malice. Many give you paper out of charity, but no one will join you in shouting for the Republic of Korea. If you mistakenly believe that people genuinely support your activities, it will cause problems."

"....."

Jo Yeong-su's face turned red from the cheap alcohol. Like all survivors of this era, he was only in his late fifties, yet he looked like he was in his eighties. The term "skincare" had long since been deleted from dictionaries.

Though his mind was clear, the Korean man in front of me, who aged prematurely, raised his voice to shout, "Why are you saying this? Thanks for offering to pay for the drinks, but if you think a few drops of alcohol can stop my activities, you're sorely mistaken!"

"I'm not trying to stop you. Just giving advice. You may see yourself as a social activist, but others see you as an entertainer."

"Entertainer?" Jo Yeong-su blinked. "Me?"

"Yes. When people see the surveys you've worked hard on, they get a day or two's worth of chatter out of it. They might even feel a bit of nostalgia for the past. You're the only one who provides that experience, so people tolerate you."

"....."

"Essentially, it's no different from gathering in groups to watch old movies. Regardless of how you define yourself, your objective role in this small society is that of a clown."

"A clown..."

"The reason no one joins your revival movement stems from the same root." I poured another drink for Jo Yeong-su. "Imagine someone rushing onto the stage during a stand-up comedian's performance. It would kill the mood."

"But I'm serious..."

"That's why they like you. Because you're genuine."

Jo Yeong-su stared at me blankly.

"This isn't about you, Mr. Jo. Talking about the Republic of Korea has already become a joke. It's just the environment of the times."

"Are you saying I'm outdated?"

"Not at all. Just that a perspective like that is too self-centered. The gap is too wide between 'the me I think of' and 'the me others see.' In a way, your entertainment is too perfect for this era, so you've carved out your own niche."

"....."

"Isn't it a depressing world? Try to think about making others happy, even a little. It will change a lot. Many more people will like you."

"....."

Blink.

The eyelids of the drunk middle-aged man were too slow, overtaken by unconsciousness as this poor, ordinary man's stomach lost to the onslaught of alcohol.

I paid for the drinks and took Jo Yeong-su back to his shack.

"Sir, I'll set you down here and leave."

"Ugh... ugh..."

Drip. Drizzle.

A light drizzle of rain began to fall.

Jo Yeong-su's shack was pieced together with tarpaulins, tents, and construction waste. It was barely two pyeong, or about 6.6 square meters. Instead of a bed, thousands of sheets of waste paper were

placed in the premium location of the shack and arranged to be treasured as if they were sacred relics, as if to never allow a drop of rain to grace their sheets.

Republic of Korea's Ninety-First Public Opinion Survey

Question: Do you think arrests, sentencing, and execution of criminals can all be independently decided by individual guild leaders or the head of the National Road Management Corps? Do you think the separation of powers should be implemented under the current circumstances?

Below, Jo Yeong-su's notes were written in a dense block of text.

-Concern 1: Must explain to citizens the situation where legislative, executive, and judicial powers are concentrated in the individuals (but this makes the question too long)

-Concern 2: The phrase "independently decided" has a negative connotation that might bias respondents

-Concern 3: Need to discuss the right to appoint a lawyer, but there's not enough space (Should I postpone it to the 92nd survey?)

→Idea: Post issues that can't be addressed due to space on SG Net!!

Regularly remind, build consensus, persuade citizens (important!!!)

"....."

Suddenly, it struck me that this waste paper resembled the shack. Just as the shack was too cramped to accommodate a single person, the paper was trying to contain too much.

When I laid Jo Yeong-su on his bed, half of his legs stuck out of the tent. His feet remained wet all night.

I didn't know what effect the drinking session with me had on Jo Yeong-su's mental landscape, but one thing changed for sure.

"Huh?"

It was the content of the opinion surveys.

Republic of Korea's Ninety-First Public Opinion Survey

Question: Do you think the nation of Korea has collapsed?

① *Yes.*

② *No.*

If my memory was correct, the 91st survey definitely addressed the separation of powers. However, the newly prepared survey that Jo Yeong-su was carrying around had entirely changed, and the sentences were remarkably short.

Had Korea fallen?

"Well, of course it’s fallen..."

"Why is this survey like this?"

The citizens who always took surveys out of boredom tilted their heads.

The Republic of Korea has fallen. How could it still stand? Some citizens wondered if Jo Yeong-su was playing around with the survey.

But Jo Yeong-su was serious. More serious than ever, in fact.

"Please participate in the survey! Fellow citizens! Citizens of Busan! This is the most important survey to date!"

"Uh..."

Not only was he serious. Usually, Jo Yeong-su conducted surveys of about 1,000 to 2,000 people, selecting a sample that was representative of the various societal classes and fields.

This time was different.

"Hey, kid! Hey there! Would you answer my question for a moment?"

"Me?"

Jo Yeong-su was frantically asking everyone for their opinion. He even handed the survey "Has the Republic of Korea fallen?" to a child who had just turned five.

"I'll give you 100 won if you participate!"

"Wow!"

Even children who had never experienced the Republic of Korea participated in a survey for the first time in their lives.

And it didn't stop there.

-JoYeong-su: We are conducting the 91st Public Opinion Survey! Members and non-members of SG Net, please participate!

Having always been active anonymously, Jo Yeong-su registered on SG Net and posted a survey article.

His nickname was JoYeong-su. Everyone was surprised by the audacity of using his real name as his member ID.

-Anonymous: ?? Why did this guy register?

-LiteraryGirl: Didn't he say last time that SG Net is a tilted playing field because only Awakeners can access it, and that he would remain anonymous forever?

JoYeong-su: I'm sorry! I was wrong! But please, participate in this survey just once!

-OldManGoryeo: Ah... have you finally decided to become one of the "named"? Welcome, Jo Yeong-su. Welcome to the "first division" of SG Net.

JoYeong-su: Thank you! Please, I ask for your participation in the survey!

Like a madman, Jo Yeong-su increased the number of survey respondents.

He didn’t conduct the survey alone. He entrusted it to passersby, the National Road Management Corps members he often bumped into, and shop owners along the road.

"Please, ask your customers to answer the survey just once!"

"How can I bother my customers with such a request?"

"I beg you!"

About 15 months later, Jo Yeong-su obtained "answers" from a staggering 120,000 residents in Busan alone. Considering the population of Busan at the time was between 200,000 to 300,000, it was an impressive sample size.

More surprisingly, Jo Yeong-su’s fervent campaign didn’t end there.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

"Yes. What is it?"

[Mr. Jo Yeong-su has moved to Changwon.]

"What?"

Jo Yeong-su, who had lived and died in Busan in every cycle, moved to another city.

"An Awakener with the ability to light a Zippo lighter with his finger crossed the void?"

[He joined a caravan from the National Road Management Corps.]

"Oh, in that case, it makes sense. But why did he suddenly go to Changwon?"

[It seems he wants to conduct surveys with the residents of other cities as well.]

"...Really?"

[Yes.]

I was astonished.

What’s more, Changwon wasn’t even Jo Yeong-su’s destination. It was merely a stopover.

Jo Yeong-su was literally sweeping the Korean Peninsula, heading south up north.

"Is he really trying to survey the entire Korean Peninsula? Even those who haven’t participated in SG Net surveys?"

[Probably.]

Isn’t this guy completely insane?

Footnotes:

1 - Pojangmacha, also abbreviated as pocha, is a South Korean term for outdoor carts that sell street foods such as hotteok, gimbap, tteokbokki, sundae, dak-kkochi, fish cake, mandu, and anju. In the evening, many of these establishments serve alcoholic beverages such as soju.

Chapter 191

The Patriot IV

Sinnoa

Jo Yeong-su's great cross-country journey! From Busan to Pyongyang! Behold the man who intends to shock everyone with his boldness!

Although no such advertisement appeared, I imagined the impact he aimed to create was immense indeed. By conducting surveys among both Awakeners and the general populace, he aimed to gather the "opinion of the entire Korean Peninsula." What audacious ambition!

And so, Jo Yeong-su's ambitious project culminated with...

[Jo Yeong-su died in Yecheon.]

He didn't even make it past Gyeongsangbuk-do, let alone reach Pyongyang. His journey left him stranded.

I sighed deeply at the Saintess's report. "In some way, he did show us something quite sensational..."

[What?]

"Nothing, just talking to myself. So, what was the cause of death?"

[Ah, he got lost in the Void. You know, sometimes when you walk near the Nakdong River, you inadvertently enter a Void known as the Hwangsan River.]

[He wandered there for three days, built a raft, and tried to cross, but only managed a few meters before the raft disintegrated, taking him with it.]

"Is this for real?"

Regardless, Jo Yeong-su was dead. To put it crudely, it was a miserable death.

And when the citizenry heard of Jo Yeong-su's obituary, they weren't particularly shocked or upset. Quite the opposite, actually.

"Did you hear? That crazy guy died. The one who always protested at the Tower of Babel Plaza."

"Eh? How did he die?"

"He set off to travel the country by himself."

"Ah, he must not have had much left to cling to in life."

The citizens briefly mourned and then promptly returned to their daily struggles.

In essence, Jo Yeong-su's death didn't make many waves in the news. Considering that he had spent his life making news in Busan, it was somewhat ironic. Why Jo Yeong-su suddenly became obsessed with conducting a nationwide survey, and what his objectives were, would now forever remain a mystery.

"Hmm."

If there were no regressors in this world...

"I'm a bit concerned."

[About what?]

"Saintess, you had a lot of interest in Jo Yeong-su. Yet, you just watched him wander the void for three days?"

[Professional and personal matters must be kept separate,] the Saintess replied calmly. [While I had a personal interest in Mr. Jo Yeong-su's activities, I could not use the powers of my office to assist him.]

"Really? Was it not you who prompted me to take an interest in Jo Yeong-su?"

[……]

"If so, then you succeeded, Saintess. Now, I am also curious about him."

What had Jo Yeong-su hoped to achieve by risking his life?

Thus, in the next cycle, I immediately changed how I approached Jo Yeong-su.

"Sir, I'll set you down here and leave."

"Ugh... ugh..."

The event at the pojangmacha in Haeundae, where we spent all night drinking, unfolded the same as before. The 91st public opinion survey that asked anew about the demise of the Republic of Korea also occurred in the same way. The turning point in Jo Yeong-su's route came after.

"Mr. Jo!"

"Uh? Isn't that Mr. Undertaker?!"

On the day he left Busan for Changwon, I personally went to see him off.

"What brings you here, Mr. Undertaker?"

"There's a caravan going to Changwon today. I have some business up in Mokpo and thought I'd travel along."

"Is that so!" Jo Yeong-su's eyes widened. "Mr. Undertaker! I have a favor to ask of you!"

"A favor?"

"Yes! No matter what, I must continue the survey in Changwon, but the members of the National Road Management Corps here are dead set against it! How can an institution funded by taxpayers be so miserly?!"

It was natural. Why would a caravan, already busy transporting goods, want to add to its burden? In the past cycle, he probably forced his way into the caravan amid chaos.

"Is that so?"

But this time, the psycho-social genius Mr. Undertaker, revered as 'His Excellency' by his connections, was here.

"Look here, gentlemen," I implored. "Mr. Jo Yeong-su and I have been drinking together, can't you overlook this just once?"

"Of course!"

"If he's a friend of Mr. Undertaker's, we must treat him as a VIP! Sorry for the cold shoulder earlier!"

"Thank you, gentlemen. I'll treat you to coffee next time I see your faces. Oh, but I'm worried that other members might not be aware of our relationship..."

"Don't worry, Your Excellency!"

"We'll post about it on SG Net so all members are informed!"

I snuck a glance behind me. Jo Yeong-su's mouth was hanging open in shock.

Aha, do you see? This is the 'power of the protagonist.' Despite its frequent appearance in other novels, here, it is doled out sparingly, like an oasis in the desert.

Without even lifting a finger, Jo Yeong-su had snagged a free ticket to travel across the Korean Peninsula, but my power didn't stop there.

"If you are to conduct surveys everywhere, including the places the caravan doesn't reach, you should use this."

"Uh, Mr. Undertaker, what is this?"

"A yogurt cart."

A South Korean staple. The third-generation refrigerated electric cart, CoCo (Cold&Cold). Within its limited range of 'the territory of the Republic of Korea,' it could move and appear anywhere. Now, Jo Yeong-su was practically as mobile as Guan Yu with his Red Hare.[2]

"Thank you, Mr. Undertaker. I wonder if I'll ever be able to repay this kindness before I die..." As someone who had to scrounge a daily living, Jo Yeong-su was overwhelmed by the sudden, generous donation.

I grinned broadly. "I've always been interested in your surveys, Mr. Jo. Don't think of this as a personal gift, but as support for your cause."

"Mr. Undertaker...!"

Relationship enhancement complete.

On the road parting from Jo Yeong-su in Changwon, the Saintess commented, [I didn’t expect this. I thought you had no interest in Korea or public opinion surveys, Mr. Undertaker.]

"Originally, I didn't. But someone kept subtly suggesting I take a look at this man."

The Saintess paused in palpable confusion. [You have someone like that in your circle, Mr. Undertaker? I didn't see anyone with my Clairvoyance.]

"I have my privacy too. Anyway, please keep an eye on him, Saintess. If he gets lost in the Void or something, help him out."

[Ah, yes. I understand.]

Naturally, the Regressor Alliance Network buzzed with the news that “Mr. Undertaker has taken an interest in the crazy guy from the Tower of Babel Plaza.”

Sim Ah-ryeon, reigning as a Saintess of the North, appeared through the Inunaki Tunnel one day and peeked out.

"Y-yes. The monster of camaraderie..."

"...?"

"You pretend not to, but actually, guild leader, you wanted to fit in with SG Net's top brass, right? That's why you keep clinging to me and the old man..."

"...?"

"I'll acknowledge you during the dead-of-night shift. So please don't leave comments in the morning, noon, or evening. Using real-life connections to invade the community's camaraderie... Such an outrage, I absolutely cannot forgive..."

"...?"

Leaving just her words behind, Sim Ah-ryeon quickly walked away.

What was that about? At times, I feared her mental world.

At any rate, though unfortunate, Sim Ah-ryeon was the Saintess of the North. She granted Jo Yeong-su the status of a monk in the Holy Eastern State, allowing him to travel freely even in North Korean areas.

Effectively, most powers controlling the Korean Peninsula—from the frontend to the backend—were now sponsoring Jo Yeong-su individually.

'It seems that heroes and saintesses are obsessing over me, a mere low-tier streamer?!' Powered by such light novel-like developments, Jo Yeong-su ransacked the entire eight provinces of the country.

Time passed.

2,211 days.

From Busan to Sinuiju.

From the south to the north of the still surviving Korean Peninsula.

That was the time it took to complete a single public opinion survey.

[We're just coming down from Sinuiju after finishing the last survey there. Now...]

"Are you returning to Busan?"

[Probably.]

While the survey was running in those six years or so, I hadn't once asked the Saintess about the results. My interest was solely in Jo Yeong-su as an individual, not in what people thought about the demise of the Republic of Korea.

What had Jo Yeong-su hoped to achieve through his six-year journey? Was it the certainty that the nation still existed in people's hearts? The driving force to continue the revival movement for the Republic of Korea?

[Ah, it seems he has a different destination in mind. Jo Yeong-su has found a ship in Pyongyang, but it's not heading to Busan.]

Neither option was the correct answer.

[He's heading to Seoul.]

Seoul was practically my backyard.

In a panic but pretending not to care, I hurried to the wharf and started fishing. Jo Yeong-su, coming by boat from Pyongyang, would have no choice but to spot me as soon as he disembarked.

There, he exclaimed in surprise, "Mr. Undertaker! What are you doing here?!"

"Oh, Mr. Jo?"

Jo Yeong-su abandoned his yogurt cart and rushed to embrace me.

A reunion six years in the making. The scents of lush grass and arid

sunlight wafted from Jo Yeong-su.

"My goodness! Mr. Undertaker, you look the same even after so many years!"

"Haha, your voice is still as hearty as ever, Mr. Jo."

"A man of the Han empire must possess spirit, mustn't he? What have you been up to here?"

"I've been enjoying fishing. My Seoul hideout is nearby."

"Huh! Fishing in such times..." Jo Yeong-su's eyes deepened with respect and affection as he looked at me. He had aged significantly more than before. Depending on who was looking, he might be mistaken for someone in his late eighties after traveling across the country with the body of a frail Awakener. Even with fiery donations, it hadn't been easy.

"And what brings you to the Han River, Mr. Jo?"

"Ah! Thanks to your support, I've finally completed the survey!" Jo Yeong-su patted the cart with a thump. "I'm planning to take this guy to his final resting place!"

"Final resting place?"

"Yes! To the place where those who ruined the country gather!" Jo Yeong-su said, pointing with his finger. In that direction lay Yeouido, and on Yeouido stood a dome building well-known to anyone from the Republic of Korea.

It was the National Assembly Building.

"Uh..." I hastily picked up the thread of conversation. "Mr. Jo, that might look like the National Assembly Building, but it's actually a Void. Originally, when the Void of perpetual night came to Seoul, it wiped out everything like other buildings, reducing them to ruins. Then, one day, that building just appeared on its own. There's even a real robot underground there."

"Eh? I don't really know about that stuff! But I must go there

anyway!"

Thinking back, this man, who in the last cycle had embarked on a nationwide tour bare-bodied and enjoyed free-diving in the Hwangsan River, wouldn't heed a conventional warning like “It's a Void, so it's dangerous.” Normally, such a person would have died, but in this cycle, I'd resuscitated him with emergency CPR.

"Then I will accompany you."

"Oh my! I'm sorry to trouble you..."

"No worries, no worries. I was just passing the time fishing, anyway."

"Oh! I can't thank you enough, Mr. Undertaker! How did I end up in your debt in both the beginning and the end?"

It wasn't long before we reached the ferry terminal to the National Assembly Building, about 30 minutes even at the leisurely pace of Jo Yeong-su's cart.

During those 30 minutes, we chatted about various things. Which neighborhood was the toughest in the survey? Were there any close calls with death?

The conversation gradually went back in time. In the days when civilization was intact, he had been the editor-in-chief of a small regional newspaper.

"My family name is Pungyang Jo!"

The timeline of the conversation swiftly reached Jo Yeong-su's childhood.

"As you know, Mr. Undertaker, our ancestors, the Jo family from Pungyang, did a lot to ruin Joseon with their politics! Well, some historians argue it wasn't entirely their fault!"

I nodded. The Pungyang Jo family was well-known. Along with the Andong Kim family, they were among the 'surnames that inevitably make one restless during history classes.' Though both were mere

commoners compared to the Yeohung Min family, Jo Yeong-su continued his story.

"Ha! When I read the textbooks as a child, I was shocked!"

"Is that so?"

"Yes! As a child, I resolved not to let my family be blamed for ruining the country! How could my family be called the surname of a ruined nation?"

Jo Yeong-su made a fist in the air as if grasping something.

"Just you watch! When I grow up, I'll become a scholar as loyal as Choi Ik-hyeon, doing what my ancestors failed to do![3] No one in my family said a word, but a wild little kid was making a fuss all by himself."

Heh heh. Laughter erupted from Jo Yeong-su's aged lips.

"So, my fundamental feelings about the country were rooted in the shame of my youth and an inferiority complex. It's not something I'd go around bragging about."

As we entered the National Assembly Building, as predicted, creatures attacked us. There were no formidable boss-level creatures, but plenty of town-level creatures swarmed us.

If I hadn't been accompanying him, Jo Yeong-su's life would have ended there.

'How many times is this fellow going to dodge death?'

With a bitter smile, I managed to somehow escort Jo Yeong-su to the main hall of the National Assembly Building.

"Ah!" Jo Yeong-su looked around and declared, "Nothing has changed since the old days! Well, back then, the members of the assembly filled about half the seats."

"Hmm."

"The country has fallen apart, but this place alone looks just fine. Heh! It's not much different from the old days."

I didn't meet his statement with a response. It wasn't really a conversation aimed at me but, instead, more like a monologue.

Jo Yeong-su walked around the main assembly hall with his hands clasped behind his back. He peered at the nameplates on the desks, muttering, "Ah! Right, he *was* a representative!"

Had this empty hall once condensed the hopes and cheers, aspirations and wishes, contempt, anger, mockery, and hostility of the people of the Korean Peninsula?

Thump. Thump.

Jo Yeong-su placed a piece of paper on each desk. I enhanced my vision to sneak a peek at the contents.

Republic of Korea's Ninety-First Public Opinion Survey

Question: Do you think the nation of Korea has collapsed?

① *Yes.*

② *No.*

After distributing the tattered documents to all the seats, Jo Yeong-su walked up to the speaker's podium.

His gaze was fixed somewhere in the air, as if he were looking not at the present but at the past.

"Please adjust the seats."

Jo Yeong-su's voice was soft. Without a microphone, it was hard to discern any authority in his tone. Just the voice of an ordinary man who had aged to his late eighties from traveling the country.

"As there is a quorum, I will call this plenary session to order."

Clack, clack, clack.

A wooden gavel struck the air three times. Between the strikes, Jo Yeong-su coughed.

"In the absence of the speaker, I, Jo Yeong-su, will preside over this meeting. There are 33 individuals across the country who consider themselves citizens of the Republic of Korea, and all have delegated me the authority to conduct this assembly."

"....."

"Respected members of the assembly and fellow citizens, as the acting deputy speaker, I will report on the progress before moving on to the next agenda item."

Flutter.

Jo Yeong-su turned a page of the survey.

"First, Busan. In response to the question 'Has the Republic of Korea perished?', about 86% of the eligible voters responded. Out of 235,695 respondents, 235,693 chose option one, 'It has perished.'"

The paper turned again.

"Next, Changwon. In response to the same question, about 91% of eligible voters responded. All 54,980 respondents chose option one, 'It has perished.'"

The papers flipped one page at a time. As the tattered pages fluttered, the locations called out moved gradually from the south to the north of the peninsula.

"Lastly, Sinuiju. In response to the question, about 89% of eligible voters responded. All 21,139 respondents chose option one, 'It has perished.'"

It took less than six minutes to announce the results of six years of public opinion surveys.

Jo Yeong-su closed the last page of the survey.

"This survey was conducted among citizens aged five and older.

Considering the special nature of the matter, not only adults over 18 but also children aged five and above were considered eligible voters. The future of the country was at stake."

Cough.

Jo Yeong-su's coughing became more frequent. He paused for breath between coughs and spoke very deliberately.

"An opinion survey is just that, an opinion survey. However, in the current situation where no voting takes place, I, the acting chair, believe it serves the function of a vote. To support this, I have been delegated the rights by 33 citizens who chose option two, 'It has not perished.'"

Cough, cough.

"Thus, I, the acting chair, will put the existence of the Republic of Korea to a vote. Since the voting results have already been announced, I will proceed with the decision. If anyone objects, please speak now."

Cough, cough.

"Has everyone voted? I will now close the voting. I will announce the results. About 88% of all eligible voters participated, with 3,125,678 for option one, 'It has perished,' making up more than 99.99% of the total population. Option two, 'It has not perished,' received 33 votes, less than 0.01%."

Cough, cough.

"Therefore, I declare the Republic of Korea has perished."

Clack, clack, clack.

The gavel sounded.

At that moment, something strange happened.

From the empty parliamentary seats, irrespective of party lines, applause erupted. The clapping also came from the deserted

galleries. Between claps, the noise of camera flashes could be heard.

Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap!

Even more peculiar was that this sound seemed audible only to me. Jo Yeong-su showed no reaction whatsoever. He simply sat quietly in the speaker's chair, eyes closed.

"....."

Looking at his peaceful face, a thought struck me.

Perhaps, like individuals, nations also require funerals when they die. Perhaps this old man had borne the funeral rites alone for six years, unaided by anyone else.

If so, at this moment, the nation known as the Republic of Korea had died and been laid in its coffin.

After that day, Jo Yeong-su never again took to the Tower of Babel Plaza to stage his protest, shouting, “Dictator Noh Do-hwa! Step down!”

Jo Yeong-su lived out his days as an ordinary old man, frequenting free meal centers and labor markets, and died not long after. Having already spent all his energy traveling the country, he was of an age where his vitality had waned.

WIth his having no relatives, I took it upon myself to be his chief mourner. I set up a modest wake in his makeshift shack. There weren’t many mourners who joined me. At most, a few old men with whom Jo Yeong-su had passed time playing Go visited.

Then, on the last night, Noh Do-hwa came by unexpectedly without any attendants. Looking around the almost tent-like shabby shack, she muttered, "Isn't there even beef soup here...?"

"How could we afford such an expensive thing?"

"Aren't you filthy rich...?"

"Ah, it's not about money but about conducting the funeral with heart. If we held a grand funeral now, all sorts of riffraff would flock here, but would that have been in accordance with the deceased's wishes?"

"Hmm..."

That was the first exchange upon her arrival. After paying her respects to the portrait (she didn't bow to me as the chief mourner), Noh Do-hwa plunked down beside me.

"Why did that old man go from his incessant, noisy protesting to suddenly giving up and kicking the bucket?"

"After finishing the survey, he went to the National Assembly Building in Yeouido and declared that the Republic of Korea had perished."

"Huh? Ahh? Ahh..." Noh Do-hwa stroked her chin. "What about the body?"

"He was the last representative of a ruined nation. It would be strange if the creatures didn't covet him. I'm planning to cremate him and scatter his ashes in the sea."

And so it was done.

Creatures were as dangerous to the dead as they were to the living. Without stringent procedures, 'Funeral Etiquette: Do Not Startle the Mourners by Suddenly Reviving!' was likely to be violated.

After scattering his ashes in the sea, we simply erected a modest tombstone at the site. This type of burial was called a sea tomb.

"Having the great Undertaker supervise the funeral from start to finish. This, indeed, is a good death..." Noh Do-hwa snipped sarcastically to the end.

The tall tombstone of the sea tomb was carved with the following inscription:

Jo Yeong-su

趙泳洙

Citizen of the Republic of Korea

大韓民國 國民

Noh Do-hwa shrugged. "I've been up all night since yesterday and I'm getting hungry..."

"Shall we go for beef soup?"

"Oh, beef soup sounds good..."

There's no further content in this story.

In some ways, this entire episode was an epilogue to the nation known as Korea.

Footnotes:

1 - A reference to Frieren, an immortal, elven mage who dives headfirst into every chest—easily detectable mimic or no—on the off-chance she finds a grimoire within that she hasn't read yet.

2 - In *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the Red Hare is a horse capable of crossing 1,000 ri (approximately 333.33 miles) in a day. It eventually was gifted to the general Guan Yu.

3 - Choi Ik-hyeon was a Korean Joseon Dynasty scholar and politician who was a staunch advocate for Korean independence in the face of Japanese imperialism.

Chapter 192

The Investor I

Sinnoa

I regret not discussing ordinary people more.

This world, governed by awakened abilities, has created a hierarchical society resembling a pyramid. In old times, wealth was passed down through families, but awakened abilities defy even DNA inheritance. They're like a gacha game based on pure luck—unpredictable and arbitrary.

As for the most desired jobs among ordinary children these days—

Career Preference Survey for Children Under 10

③ *Laborer in large guilds – 10.2%*

② *Member of the National Road Management Corps caravan – 14.4%*

① *Writer – 26.8%*

Surprisingly, the most coveted job among today's youth is that of a writer.

"Mom! I want to be a writer when I grow up!"

"Being a writer is like being a god!"

Indeed, it was the golden age of literature, not just of humanities.

The roots of the sudden literary craze were deep and mysterious.

It wasn't always like this. The field of humanities has always been a source of embarrassment on the Korean Peninsula, especially the ultimate example in the form of creative writing.

This attitude and treatment altogether reversed beginning in the 205th cycle.

Do you remember any incidents that occurred during cycle 205?

♪♫*♪~Feels like walking in a dream~♪♫*♪

That's right, the Dream Casino.

In the 206th cycle, casino dealers, who turned money into dreams, began to work in earnest in the Inunaki Tunnel, and people couldn't help but be enthralled by this miraculous casino.

"Give me endless Quarter Pounder with Cheese from McDonald's and those slightly soggy, super salty fries until I'm sick of them!"

"Hoho! That will be 160 won!"

"I want a beautiful girl who only looks at me in my dreams..."

"Hohoho! Specifying a person costs 1,000 won, setting up the relationship is 2,000 won, starting from a base price of 3,000 won!"

In the beginning, most people's wishes were focused on basic pleasures, like food and sex. This was true of both Awakeners and ordinary people. If they had money, they spent it all; if not, they still indulged in luxuries.

"Wow! In reality, all I can drink is nasty alcohol, but in dreams, I can guzzle down delicious whiskies to my heart's content!"

"There are people in this dream!"

"Work has been really enjoyable lately. I used to think, 'Why bother when we're all going to die by anomalies anyway?' But now, I can't wait to rush to the casino after the workday ends. It really boosts my motivation to work."

Even if someone had immoral or unethical wishes, it didn't matter. It was just a dream, after all. The tutorial fairies who brought these

dreams to life weren't particularly moralistic. People indulged in their dreams without worrying about what others thought, and the productivity of the workforce, which had been plummeting on the Korean Peninsula, miraculously revived.

People should have been happy forever then—but of course, reality was not so kind.

"Even whiskey gets boring after a while..."

"My dream lover is great, but she feels a bit passive. I have to decide how she'll react and what she'll say before I even start dreaming. It's nice to be loved, but it feels a bit like dating AI..."

"After rethinking it, I guess work really is suffering. Why do we have to work to live?"

Humans are creatures who never know satisfaction!

More precisely, even if they are satisfied, they quickly get used to it and start craving more and more. Especially since the Dream Casino offered a service with one fatal flaw.

"It's great to enter a dream because it feels like reality, but having to set up everything beforehand really kills the immersion..."

The lack of spontaneity.

For instance, let's say someone wanted to dream about “being late for school, running through the streets, and then bumping into a beautiful girl (equipped with strawberry jam toast in her mouth) at a street corner, and then 'Hey kids, there's a new transfer student' and 'Are you that lucky guy from then?!'” (This was a highly popular scenario requested by 310 people in Busan alone.)

It might have been fun to experience a scenario that had once only been the subject of unfulfilled fantasy, but the truth is, such a setup required 'spontaneity.'

Being late by chance, bumping into someone by chance, and that person turning out to be a new student. Only then would a love story truly make the protagonist's heart flutter.

"But giving the tutorial fairies freedom..."

"They'd make a tutorial dungeon out of anything and force people to kill each other! Shit, why should I have to endure more real-life experiences when I could be sweet-talking my lover in my dreams?"

"Hohoho, I really don't understand..."

Frankly, it wasn't my concern.

'People are just satiated.'

They complain that setting up their dreams beforehand ruins the fun? What does it matter? Aren't they experiencing desires they can't fulfill in reality?

I once discussed this with Noh Do-hwa.

"Perfection doesn't exist in this world. If we cater to these complaints, new grievances will soon arise. Nowadays, young people can't think of the old days. They just complain about the present. Tsk, tsk."

Noh Do-hwa looked at me over her glasses. "You're not suffering from some disease where you'll die if you don't periodically act like an old geezer, are you...?"

Anyway, I ignored the complaints of the casino patrons, treating them as nothing more than the grumblings of those who had their fill.

But not everyone thought the same as me.

What I dismissed as 'whining of the satiated' was seen by someone else as 'the cries of a hungry potential customer'—a market yet to be tapped.

Writers began to take action.

Being an Awakener isn't a particularly prestigious status. You're just a lowly member of a small guild. You work hard every day,

scrimping and saving so you can visit the Dream Casino three or four times a week.

Lately, however, you've been having some concerns.

'The whiskey tastes great, but just going to a whiskey bar and drinking non-stop isn't as enjoyable as it was the first time...'

In other words, you're experiencing a kind of ennui.

You've thought about meeting a virtual lover in your dreams like other people, but honestly, you're not really motivated to do that. You just like whiskey.

'Should I cut down on drinking? Hmm?'

As you dragged yourself toward the casino, a sign that you hadn't noticed before catches your eye.

[Cocktail Bar Mori (森) OPEN]

Location: Apgujeong Rodeo Station, Seoul

Business hours: 7 PM to 2 AM

Bartender experience:

- 1st place in World Class Japan

- Runner-up in the World Bartender Championship

Your eyes light up.

'A cocktail bar? In Apgujeong Rodeo? Wait, why are they advertising in Busan?'

You love whiskey, but you don’t hate cocktails. In fact, you started drinking whiskey after finding you liked cocktails.

Naturally, you become interested and approach the timid promoter standing behind the sign.

"Excuse me."

"Y-yes?"

"About this cocktail bar. Is it currently operating in Seoul?"

"Ah, well..." The person behind the sign seems unusually shy for a promoter. Poorly dressed and apparently not well-fed, he visibly struggles to maintain his composure. "It's... a setup..."

"Sorry?"

"This cocktail bar has just opened, and, well, I made up the setting myself. It's a dream setting. If you buy my dream, I get a small commission, and I'll invite you to the cocktail bar I've set up..."

His voice is soft and his speech disjointed, but you manage to grasp what he’s getting at. "Oh, so it's not a real cocktail bar, but one you've created in a dream? I have to pay to enter?"

"Yes. I used to be a writer, so I'm good at this. It'll be great, honest..."

A writer.

Not exactly reassuring. In this post-apocalyptic world, being a writer is a completely unproductive occupation. (Even when civilization was thriving, it wasn't particularly productive.)

"What's so great about it? Honestly, I don't see why I should pay. The whiskey bar I've set up is really fancy."

"S-spoilers..."

"Sorry?"

"I can't tell you what's different because it's a spoiler... Sorry..."

At this point, most people would have walked away, thinking they were being taken for a fool. But you, you’re different. The truth of it is, you were chosen for this story *because* you’re the first to react differently.

You’re intrigued.

"How much is it?"

"I-is what?"

"The cocktail bar. How much do I need to pay to get in?"

"Oh, just 500 won! It's a grand opening event! I'll invite you for just 500 won..."

It isn’t cheap by any means, but it’s not so much that it’d stop an Awakener like you. "Here you go."

"Ah! Th-thank you! Sir! You will be blessed! I really will make sure you have no regrets..."

Although he looks more like a beggar than a writer, you nevertheless hand over 500 won to the person in front of you.

The writer hurries off to the fairy guarding the casino entrance. "A guest! A guest has arrived! Now, as promised, please let him in..."

"Hoho? You're actually going along with this ridiculous scam?" the fairy says to you.

"As promised! Hurry!"

"Hoho, the world is truly a curious place."

You feel even more uneasy as you listen to the exchange, but the water had already been spilled.

'Well. If it feels too strange, I'll just consider it a 500 won donation to a beggar.'

You follow the dream guide into the inner part of the casino where you lay down on the bed in the sleep room. Normally, this would be the time when you'd specify exactly what kind of dream you want, detailing the atmosphere and taste of the whiskey bar, but this time, the writer interrupts you.

"Just go to sleep like this..."

"Sorry?"

"You're visiting the store I'm promoting in your dream! You don't need to specify anything. Of course, if you want to change your appearance or status, you'll need to tell me..."

"No, I usually just dream as I am."

"Well, then sleep away..."

And instead of you and the fairy discussing the setup, the writer and the fairy whisper and murmur to each other.

'It does feel a bit ominous.'

But what can you do? You're already lying down on the bed.

You suppress your unease and listen to the fairy's lullaby—

And the next moment, you find yourself standing on a street near Apgujeong Rodeo Station.

"Oh?"

It's an alleyway, just out of sight of where cars are waiting for the signal on the main road. It was a scene taken straight out of Seoul before civilization collapsed.

Turning your head, you see a small sign on a store.

[MORI 森]

This must be the cocktail bar the writer mentioned.

'The atmosphere of the dream itself is pretty convincing.'

You feel a tingle of anticipation as you open the door.

Inside, the bar is so small that barely ten people can fit. It's more like those local-style cocktail bars you find more often in Japan than in Korea, *izakaya*.

The bartender pauses where he was reaching for the bottles and turns around to greet you.

"*Irasshaimase*!"

"Uh?"

A Japanese bartender?

The genetic predisposition for foreign language anxiety that lay dormant in every Korean is triggered.

As you stand there slightly flustered, the bartender puts down the bottle and smiles gently. "Welcome. Please come inside."

His Korean is awkward. You try to keep your expressions and gestures as polite as possible as you step further into the bar.

"I'm sorry. I don't speak Japanese... Are you Japanese?"

"Yes. I'm learning Korean very hard! Kim Yuna! Son Heung-min! I love it!"

"Ah... Your Korean is really good."

"Thank you!"

Fortunately, you are the only customer in the bar. It would have been pretty embarrassing if there had been others.

But the best part about alcohol, like music, is that it's a universal language. Just as Mozart's music sounds the same whether in Austria or China, the names of drinks don't change across borders.

"Would you like to try a Godfather first?"

"Godfather. Yes, understood!"

Before long, the bartender whips up a cocktail and hands it to you. And as you touched the drink to your lips—

'...It's delicious?'

The taste of the drink is superb. If you had left it all to the tutorial fairy, the taste of a Godfather might have come out as Midori Sour, completely mixed up. That's why you had to specify each flavor yourself before dreaming.

But not this time.

It tastes exactly like the cocktail you ordered, and even if it’s not exactly 'your favorite style,' it’s still delicious enough to enjoy.

It’s as if—

'—you're visiting a new cocktail bar that you've never been in before.'

You look around.

It’s your first time visiting such a cramped cocktail bar. The cocktail bars you know in Korea are usually quite spacious.

The interior. The lighting. The bartender's nationality.

Everything feels refreshing, feels new.

"This drink is really good."

"Ah, really? Thank you."

"Could you also make a Manhattan?"

"Manhattan! You seem to like these drinks."

"Yes. I've always loved whiskey..."

Under the dim lighting, natural conversation flows between you and the bartender.

The glasses and the snack plates are quickly emptied. You’re drinking faster than usual, but it doesn’t feel overwhelming at all.

"So how did you end up in Korea, if you don't mind my asking? Isn't Japan better for business?"

"Actually, my wife is Korean..."

"Oh!"

"My mother-in-law did not agree to the marriage at first. She wanted two things: I speak Korean and I live in Korea."

"Wow. So you learned Korean and even opened a bar here because you really love your wife."

"Yes! I love her! A lot!"

Stories you didn't know.

A bar you hadn't been aware of.

A person you hadn't met before.

'Right.'

You empty your glass, you laugh with the bartender, and you get completely drunk, forgetting that you are dreaming.

'This is it. This is what a bar should be like.'

The next day, you visit Cocktail Bar Mori once again. That day, too, you have the bartender all to yourself.

When you visit two days later, there are two customers. They are your guildmates.

A month later, 'Mori' is packed with customers.

Footnotes:

Chapter 193

The Investor II

Sinnoa

The story of Cocktail Bar 'Mori' was based on a true-life documentary.

While a guest was deep asleep enjoying the dream cocktail bar...

"B-BGM should be the jazz version of the Ghibli animation OST!"

...beside the real-life bed, the promoter—who was actually a writer—was diligently tweaking the dream.

"We need to emphasize that this place is run by a Japanese man! Plus, the weather is too mild! Let’s make it rain!"

"Whoa, this guy is sneakily dropping in informal speech. It makes me want to check the adhesive strength between his head and neck..."

"We agreed to split the commission! Hurry!"

"I didn't know it would be this much of a pain. I regret my past self for getting into this..."

The writer sat beside the guest's bed all night, fine-tuning the dream.

The bartender's dialogue, family relations, the patrons’ life histories, the ambiance of the place, sounds from outside, and mysterious visitors at around 1 AM (agents of the National Intelligence Service)—everything was meticulously crafted.

In essence, what the tutorial fairy had been offering people was merely the game's core, the vanilla version. The writer began selling 'mods'—enhanced versions of these games.

As a once-famous exploiter of geeks on Earth once said, "People don't know what they want until you show it to them." Indeed, even in the apocalypse when the capitalist economy had completely collapsed, this adage hit the mark.

"I want to go to Mori too!"

"Why don't you expand the cocktail bar? How can you only accommodate ten people when there's such demand?"

"I'll pay 1,000 won per person, no, 3,000 won! Please, let my friend and I visit too!"

Writer A was happy. And a happy writer naturally followed a typical path.

That is, he started bragging to other writers about how awesome he was.

"What's going on all of a sudden? You've booked the entire grill restaurant... It’s expensive here."

"Don't worry, don't worry! I've been doing well lately! I thought we'd have a drink tonight, just the old writer gang! It's all about the camaraderie among writers! Normally, others would have come too, but now it's just us left in Busan."

Their ears perked up as they gathered in groups of threes and fours in the stew restaurant. Their clothing was shabby, as expected.

Naturally. Writers are typically mentally fragile, lack social skills, envy their peers, anonymously slander others online, crave adulation, and have poor physical health, with creaky backs and joints. Simply put, they lacked any real advantages. They were among the worst types of people to survive the apocalypse. The fact that they had managed to settle down in Busan was proof that they were elite in their own right.

Therefore, regardless of Writer A's long-winded speech, his colleagues only really heard one sentence.

“I've been doing well lately!”

The ex-writers exchanged glances silently (a basic skill for any writer).

They started by making small talk. Yeah, we used to make good money. We should be grateful just to have survived. I heard from a Japanese writer friend that it's really bad over there.

As time muddled along with alcohol and chit-chat, finally, someone started the real talk.

"So what have you been doing lately that you're doing so well?"

"Huh?" Writer A tilted his head as if he didn't understand.

His insufferably pretentious demeanor struck a fleeting sense of humiliation in the other writers.

Friendship among writers? Nonsense. This drinking session was clearly arranged to show off!

However, they endured this brief humiliation with the help of alcohol. Since even the alcohol was paid for by Writer A, they could bear it again.

"You said earlier you've been doing well. What, did you awaken some ability and join a guild? I remember that guy—what was his name, that hack writer who turned his life around after becoming an Awakener."

"Oh, him? That guy wasn't really a writer. He just switched from writing to being an Awakener. I'm still living as a writer!"

Their ears gradually morphed into those of elves.

"Still living as a writer? Are you still writing? Are there actually readers out there who pay for your work?"

"No, I'm not exactly writing. We Unawakened can't even access SG Net. There's no platform for us. But that doesn't mean I've stopped creating. Even during wars, there are writers who create. For people

like us, being a writer isn't just a job. It's our heart. If the heart stops beating, we die."

Writer A should have been grateful for the delicious stew served tonight. If it were old times, gossip would have already proliferated throughout the industry.

"Anyway, what I've been doing lately—"

It took about two hours from the start of the drinking session before he got to the point.

"—So, I thought, Ah! If I can just shmooze up the tutorial fairy, I could tap into this market! But what would be good? I know a lot about cocktails, and I can speak a bit of Japanese. Ah, let's go with a Japanese cocktail bar theme!"

"Wow..."

"That's impressive."

"But why a cocktail bar? I mean, it's nice, but isn't it a bit small-scale? Wouldn't it be better to start with a more exciting setting from the beginning?"

"Oh. That's just thinking from a writer's perspective. As much as we used to be big shots, right? Now we're beginners, *beginners*! I haven't typed on a keyboard in over five years, and this is my first time creating in this format. A new platform. A new form. We need to get used to it!"

"Wow..."

"That's impressive."

"It sounds a bit like a TRPG."

"Yeah? Yeah. That's the problem with writers. They become too arrogant too easily. You have to approach it humbly, you know? Learning. And yes, that's also true. People who like alcohol usually have a group—a drinking buddy group. If you make one customer a regular, they'll bring others. That's how you have to approach it,

with a business mindset, you know?."

"Wow..."

"That's impressive."

"What's the revenue split with the tutorial fairy? 80–20?"

"Ahh, crap. Do you think that would work? It's 50–50. That's the contract ratio back from when web novels were just starting. I could complain all day and night about this, but I can't do business without the fairies, so what can you do—?"

"Wow..."

"That's impressive."

While Writer A noticed that his colleagues' responses had become mechanically repetitive, their questions had become incredibly detailed.

However, he didn't pay attention. Because he was drunk.

The other writers weren't sober either. But they had an 'ideal' and 'reality' that helped them overcome the intoxication.

As mentioned earlier, writers lack social skills and... have creaking spines and joints.

But if that's the case, isn't it strange? How have these vermin survived until now?

There was only one reason.

'I'm doing better than that bastard!'

'Fuck, I write better than that guy!'

'That one's problematic because he lacks artistic integrity, that one because he lacks commercial appeal, that one because he lacks backbone, and that one because he's too stubborn.'

It was an overwhelmingly competitive environment, enough to

shock even the depths of hell! This competitive spirit was the only driving force for writers.

For example, Tolstoy was arguably the kindest human among all writers in history. This Russian's novels were always filled with love, consideration for others, and respect for nature. Even he couldn't help but diss Dostoevsky whenever he had the chance.

Because somehow, love, consideration, and respect didn't apply to fellow writers.

In essence, Wall Street in America minus the money was exactly like a community of writers.

"Wow..."

"That's impressive."

In some sense, the purpose of the drinking session organized by Writer A was successful. Everyone gathered here was able to feel the 'affection' among old writers.

Thump.

The 'snake hearts' that had been sealed away even as the apocalypse destroyed civilization began to stir.

A few days later, the labor market in Busan lost about seven workers. Since they were low-quality labor, no one at the worksites really cared. Instead, seven new signs appeared at the entrance to the Dream Casino.

Former Web Novel Writer! From a major platform with 100 million views! Specializing in contemporary fantasy and fantasy. Become the ultimate awakened hero and explore medieval dungeons!

Specialist in business and conglomerate stories. 'Embark on a legendary journey by getting a job at a brokerage!' - Only 1,000 won per night

Romance/Beautiful Girls specialist. Has experience with drama

adaptations. Graduate of Yonsei University's Department of Psychology. For detailed consultations, please contact the writer directly. Absolute confidentiality assured.

Former Web Novel Writer / 200 million views from a major platform / Numerous webtoon adaptations / Animated adaptations / If you've ever read novels back in the day, here's your chance to hire that person as your personal writer! - Will tailor the world to your preferences.

Former Web Novel Writer / 29 million, 30 million, 50 million views, never took a break from posting / TRPG Mastering Experience: Roll20 8,500 hours / Promises to consistently provide stable quality.

"What the hell is this?"

On that day, Writer A, the founder of Cocktail Bar Mori, was shocked as he headed to work. His former rivals from last week, whom he had treated to stew, were nonchalantly holding up signs!

The former writers... no.

The 'Returning Writers' said sheepishly:

"Well, yeah."

"We were inspired by your story."

"Yeah, it really moved us. Like you said, a writer should indeed live off his creations."

"Right, right!"

"It kind of reignited my creative spirit, haha."

The writers laughed as if they were simply moved by his words.

Writer A felt humiliated by their blatantly insincere behavior.

‘Inspiration, my ass. It's plagiarism! But still...'

Professional Writer A bit his lip hard.

This situation was too ambiguous to simply call 'plagiarism'! If any of them had specifically used 'cocktail bar,' 'bar,' 'izakaya,' or something similar, perhaps he could have challenged them to a duel, but the writers had cunningly taken only the genre of the business, while completely changing the content.

Just like the old days when a new genre became popular in the novel industry, everyone rushed in and 'creatively' reinterpreted it...!

'Th-this familiar feeling! Could it be?!'

'Yes.'

The eyes of his colleagues, laughing innocently and purely, also twinkled darkly.

'It's time for a publishing competition again, rookie.'

'Ah, it's been a while. This chilling sensation. It feels like when I used to constantly check the bestseller rankings every two minutes after launching a new work.'

'Oh, no! Can't you forget that hell, you guys!'

'Yep. Your hell seems more livable than our reality.'

'I always liked the fires of hell. I used to run up to three series simultaneously.'

Again, exchanging glances without words was a basic skill for writers.

Finally, Writer A belatedly realized his mistake. Why did he commit an act he would regret for just a night of pleasure?

(Because he's a writer, of course.)

- Uh? What? Why are there so many signs?

- Did Mori finally expand its business?

Murmur, murmur.

But Writer A had no time to regret.

As the end of work hours approached and the crowd at the Dream Casino swelled, the inevitable fate of all writers, 'publishing time,' was upon them.

'No, stop! My guests! My readers!'

Contrary to Writer A's worries, there was no stealing of customers.

"...Huh?"

Nor was there any mishap of other writers failing to attract new customers.

Although there were some variations, Writer A, along with the other seven writers, managed to attract enough customers.

"Huh?"

The next day. The day after that. And the day after that.

Even as the number of signs increased from one to eight, and then from eight to twenty, there was never any loss of customers among the writers. In fact, the business of selling dreams went better than ever before, and even after expanding the cocktail bar's capacity from ten to twenty people, it always reached full capacity.

Then the writers realized.

"Ah."

A word long forgotten since civilization had collapsed.

Blue Ocean.

This was not a sea of blood where one must kill competitors to survive.

The place they had newly discovered, rolling around on the labor market, was a golden El Dorado—

A bonanza.

Footnotes:

Chapter 194

The Investor III

Sinnoa

Tuning guests' dreams became the definitive task for the new generation of writers. Consequently, their titles evolved significantly.

"DM! I had another fantastic dream last night! Honestly, I enjoy life more when I'm asleep than awake!"

"Ahaha, I'm glad you had a restful sleep."

These authors eventually shed their traditional title of “writers” and became more commonly known as Dream Managers, or DMs for short.

"Well then, have a great day at work, sir. I’m off to sleep..."

"Oh right, DMs sleep during the day! Sleep well!"

While others slept, DMs worked, and while others worked, DMs slept, embracing a nocturnal lifestyle that didn't bother them in the least. Having always been more nocturnal than diurnal even during their writing careers, this shift was hardly a concern.

"Undertaker, have you heard about this DM trend?"

It happened around this time when I heard about the latest fad among writers through an image titled 'recent_writers_updates.jpg' from Dang Seo-rin. As I was always on the move, I was the last to catch on to what was trending among the general populace.

"DM? What's that?"

"Simply put, they're sleep managers. They add a touch of flair to the dreams provided by the fairies."

"Hmm..."

"Anyway, it's all the rage right now. Good DMs are worth their weight in gold and hard to come by."

"What a strange turn of events."

"Right? I even hired a DM myself recently. A huge Harry Potter fan, and we clicked because he prefers the current generation over the old."

Old generation? Current generation?

Bombarded by jargon, I was momentarily puzzled. "So, you've hired a regular person as a personal manager to manipulate dreamscapes, and even granted them access to yours? Isn't that a bit risky?"

"Don’t worry. DMs can’t do anything without the tutorial fairies. As long as the fairies don’t betray us, it's unlikely DMs can get up to anything nefarious."

"Hmm."

I shrugged it off at the time, but in reality, Dang Seo-rin's comment was hiding a bombshell.

As you know, Samcheon World is one of the most prestigious guilds on the Korean Peninsula. Only the best—validated by integrity, loyalty, and talent—are admitted, not just any riffraff. (Except for Yu Ji-won, who sneakily got in through a Latin special admissions program.)

For ordinary people, even dreaming of applying there was out of reach. Yet, a mere civilian not only secured a job there but was hired as a full-time employee? Moreover, as the personal manager of the great witch herself, sharing power with Noh Do-hwa in Busan? Just a regular person?

The writers' community was abuzz.

"Oh, Teacher! I hired a DM too!"

Cheon Yo-hwa poured fuel on the fire. Always a trendsetter among senior high students, she couldn't bear the thought of being outpaced by Dang Seo-rin.

"Oh? Yo-hwa, you too?"

"Yes! I hired a zombie-themed DM, an exorcism-themed DM, and even a cult-themed DM. I've been enjoying dreams about succeeding as a cult leader in a zombie apocalypse for a week straight!"

"....."

If anyone asked why she'd enjoy such dreams, they'd be missing the forest for the trees.

While Dang Seo-rin had hired just one DM, Cheon Yo-hwa had employed three, a critical detail given the intense rivalry between the 'economic capital' of Busan and the 'spiritual capital' of Sejong.

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Recently revisited The Little Prince and was struck by a thought. Despite the world having ended once, the tendency to judge everything by numbers persists.

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Where has the determination gone to cross even deserts to find that one fox waiting just for me?

[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: Wow! You only have one fox waiting for you?

[Samcheon] WitchJudge: ?

[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: I have three in my desert... It seems like you weren’t very popular! >_<);;

Dang Seo-rin promptly promoted her personal DM to 'chief DM' and hired eleven specialists in architecture, food and nutrition, and education to manage different departments. She even employed six parody writers to fine-tune the settings of her Harry Potter-inspired dreams.

Hogwarts in her dreams neared perfection.

Yo-hwa, not to be outdone, focused on quantity. She indulged in fantasies of every genre—fantasy, modern, romance, martial arts—hiring experts in each field to enjoy whatever genre she fancied each day. The number of personal DMs she employed reached an impressive twenty.

-[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Dream Diary Entry 31. Finally got the hang of the geography at the Academy. Made a few friends and impressed the professors. Was praised during divination class as 'the greatest talent since the Academy's founding,' though that might be an exaggeration.

-[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: Dream Diary Day 20! Finally crushed the boss zombie's head today >_<)!!

As these two juggernauts continued their subtle sparring on SG Net, their respective guild members rushed to comment whenever their leaders posted a dream diary. Why? Because they battled over which dream diary received more views and comments.

Surviving in a large corporation was no small feat.

-OldManGoryeo: LOL the level of Korea's top awakeners LOL

-OldManGoryeo: How pathetic must reality be for them to resort to fighting in dreams LOL

The only one who truly thrived was the villain OldManGoryeo.

Thus, as the sole individual who could possibly mediate this farcical standoff, what had I, the Undertaker, been up to all this time?

Nothing at all.

'Why bother? They'll fight over who's on top and who's beneath no matter what.'

In my view, this was arguably the safest way for them to release stress. At least nobody got hurt.

It seemed, however, that others saw it differently.

"Uh...?"

"Given this, we really need to do something..."

As two great whales thrashed, the squids and shrimps quietly going about their fishing—that is, the leaders of the minor guilds—found themselves in an awkward position.

If Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa employed twenty DMs, then other major guilds had to hire at least twelve. A moderately established mid-sized guild leader would need at least six DMs, and even fledgling small guilds should employ three.

Why? No reason was needed.

Traditionally, in this land, one's social status has always been determined by the price of their car and the size of their house. The same tradition simply morphed into 'how many and how good the DMs you employ are.'

In the Renaissance, Italian nobles flaunted their wealth by patronizing artists. Similarly, the guild leaders on the Korean Peninsula now competed through their possession of DMs. The Renaissance nobles didn't necessarily possess profound artistic sensibilities, just as the guild leaders lacked substantial literary acumen.

Nonetheless, both groups triggered significant effects on employment. Moreover, DMs had several advantages over Renaissance artists:

① Low barrier to entry. Becoming a DM required no initial capital. Just fine-tune dreams to the client's taste, and you could make a living.

② Sustainability of the business. Once established, DMs had a steady influx of work. People dream every day and prefer entertaining dreams.

③ Connections with power. While it's incredibly difficult for

ordinary people to get close to guild leaders, DMs with top-tier skills can easily become intimately connected with them. In fact, DMs are often the first person a leader sees upon waking and the last before sleeping.

Easy to enter, a bright business outlook, and even a chance to gain fame and influence?

"Mom! When I grow up, I want to be a writer!"

"Being a writer is like being a god!"

A literary storm swept across the Korean Peninsula.

Indeed, as previously mentioned, a sudden golden age of literature had dawned.

This age of great literature was marked by countless incidents and accidents. There was even a massive strike by tutorial fairies who claimed they couldn't take it anymore. But in this story, I'll focus solely on one incident, one untouched by any monsters.

As promised earlier, today's focus is squarely on 'ordinary' people, and who better to represent them than the very person who has been front and center from the start of this episode?

"I've been feeling burnt out lately..."

"Huh?"

Writer A. The very same individual who has appeared from beginning to end in this story.

Just for clarity, I didn't receive permission to use Writer A's real pen name in my tales, which is why I reluctantly refer to him as Writer A.

He's extremely timid by nature, and his pen name ends with the sound 'A'.

Anyway.

"What are you talking about, DM? Your cocktail bar is booming. You've even expanded to accommodate fifty patrons and hired up to five bartender NPCs. Oh, and that new bartender NPC you hired last week is getting rave reviews!"

"DM, DM, that damn DM..."

"Huh?"

"I am a writer! A writer! And writing, creation—it's not like this!"

Crash.

Writer A smashed a wine glass in front of his assistant writer.

It seemed only yesterday that they couldn't even afford water and were forced to drink what rain they could collect, yet here he was, already adopting bourgeois affectations now that he had found some success.

"Look at what I've been reduced to! Greeting guests with 'irasshaimase', mixing cocktails all day, fussing over the looks and backstories of newly hired bartenders... Is this what being a writer is? Is it?!"

"But you're making a million won a day without breaking a sweat —"

"The bleak yet beautiful worldviews! Vibrant characters! The saga of defeat and victory, the schemes and plots, a midnight ball where some dance and others walk the scaffold—that's what I want to write! Aaaaargh!"

"....."

For those unaware, let me introduce 'new-work-itis', a chronic disease that strikes any writer who has serialized the same work for over 18 months. There’s also 'remake-itis', 'suspension-itis', 'relay-novel-itis', 'competition-itis', 'my-writing-sucks-itis', 'my-writing-rocks-itis', and 'can't-write-unless-it's-about-the-heroine-itis', among others—diseases that manifest only in writers.

It's astonishing that such flawed creatures have managed to survive on Earth this long. If you're not shocked enough yet, I apologize, but there's more.

"But alone, I could never create such a perfect dream..."

And here, Writer A made a distinctly writer-like, which is to say foolishly human, decision.

First, he gathered the seven colleagues he had once shared a stew with. Now they had become the pioneering elites of this industry, having risen to such status that they now held gatherings in pork belly restaurants, not mere stew joints.

"Honestly, you're all tired too, right?"

"Well, um..."

"The great witch is fine for the most part, but her requirements are just too demanding... Sometimes, she says something in the dream isn't historically accurate, but honestly, that's not my fault. The original author herself was inconsistent..."

"Exactly!" Writer A slammed down his rice wine glass with a bang. "Let's create something together!"

"What?"

"Each of us will take on a few main characters and develop their profiles. Then we'll combine it all. Let's also build a world together. You're good at political intrigue, so you handle that, and you write war stories well, right? So, balance the interactions between fictional nations!"

Writer A declared, "We are the first writers in human history who can manipulate dreams! How long will we timidly tinker with the dreams of the powerful? Guys! Let's create an MMORPG with unprecedented freedom, a perfect 'virtual world'!"

"...!"

Yes.

Writer A and the supreme eight had sadly contracted the most dreaded of all writerly diseases, simply uttering its name causes one's entire body to shudder: the scourge of all evils.

Group·Project·Itis.

Footnotes:

Chapter 195

The Investor IV

Sinnoa

The writers of Busan decided to pool their creative forces.

"My creative power is 150. Yours is 150. That's a total of 300 creative power! Let's create a perfect masterpiece!"

"Such a clever idea indeed."

This was the so-called collaborative project. More than two writers came together to produce a work, a concept as bizarre as teaming Hitler and Stalin and marveling at their combined demagoguery and purge capabilities.

We all knew that no matter the process, this scenario would end with a nuclear explosion. The probability of these writers' collaborations succeeding was about 500% less likely than a college group project receiving a standing ovation from students and professors alike.

"Of course, when we simply combine our strengths, we'll end up with a result not of plus 300 but minus 22,500."

Writer A wasn't naive enough to overlook this. He presented his PowerPoint at the pork belly restaurant where the supreme eight had gathered.

"Hence, we need to set up a strict hierarchy among the writers involved in the project. I'll be the lead writer, and while I'll respect your opinions, the final decision rests solely with me."

"What?"

Murmurs filled the room as the other writers exchanged looks that varied in droopage of eyelids and eyebrow thickness but that were united in their disbelief.

‘Who do you think you are?’

Despite their incredulous stares, Writer A remained undeterred, even smirking. "Let's face it, I pioneered this DM market, and you all just hitched a ride. No matter what you think, objectively, you all owe me one."

"....."

"No one here can lead without issues. And equal participation? Bullshit, that'll just end in chaos."

"Maybe..."

The writers exchanged glances, expressions now changing to ones of reluctant agreement.

Writers have always been susceptible to compelling nonsense. If they were truly rational, they wouldn’t have chosen such an illogical career.

"Let's say you do lead. How exactly will you coordinate our opinions?"

"We'll divide responsibilities among the writers." Flipping through his makeshift PowerPoint, Writer A revealed, "I haven't told you this, but over the years, I’ve made a secret pact with the fairies to observe your DM work."

"What?"

"You all started your DM businesses without paying me a commission, it was fate. Now, deal with it. Thanks to this, I know where each of your strengths and specialties lie."

‘This is crazy.’

While the other writers contemplated how much it would cost to cover up his murder, Writer A calmly distributed the roles. "Here, roles that I think best suit your strengths."

1. NPC Management: Known since his web novel days for writing

punchy, flavorful dialogue. As a DM, his characters are lively and have received rave reviews.

2. Map Management: Ingenious in designing 'stages' and 'gimmicks' during his web novel days, secretly participated in indie game development, responsible for level design.

3. Quests, Items, Training Sites: Always wrote engaging scenes where the protagonist gains new skills or trains. As a DM, became popular by letting clients experience becoming powerhouses.

4. Main Event Management: Skilled in writing about national strife or political faction fights during his web novel days. As a DM, provided intense political dramas that were highly praised by guild-level clients.

5. Worldview Management: Known for beautifully crafting fantasy world settings, offered adventures that were realistic yet thrilling as a DM.

The role of '**Historical Authenticity**' was also tacked on.

Each writer's expertise was detailed in these documents, handwritten by Writer A.

"....."

The writers went deadly serious. They were always susceptible to sincerity and dedication, values they pursued all their lives.

Writer A laid down the paperwork. "I've bought a villa near Haeundae with the money I've made from being a DM."

"A villa?"

"Yeah. You guys are all single, right? Move in. Let's work there until the project is complete."

"....."

"You know we could die at any moment."

The age of anomalies.

"Let's create one last work before we go, guys."

If there was anyone who could be moved to tears by the mere sound of the word 'guys,' regardless of the era, that person was destined to be a writer.

From the lips of a bard, to the fingertips of nobles, to the palms of workers, to the shelves of university libraries, to the empty spaces in rental shops, to smartphone screens, to the dreams shaped by fairies, this truth remained unchanged.

The writers were ready to sing of humanity once more.

"Hey, Undertaker. I've been invited to act as a consultant by the DMs. Would you like to come too?"

Dang Seo-rin, always keeping me connected to the world, dropped this on me three years later.

"Consultant?"

"Yeah. The DMs are embarking on some joint or collaborative project. They're creating a massive fantasy world."

"Oh ho."

"They said wizards hold tremendous power in this dream world, and since I'm associated with power and magic, they invited me as a historical consultant."

"I might provide detailed consultations on executions and monster dissections, then."

"Huh? What?"

"Nothing. Anyway, I'll come along. As an expert on the Three Kingdoms, I can offer practical advice on strategies and intrigues."

Dang Seo-rin grimaced, probably hoping not to drown fantasy with

the Three Kingdoms.

We set a date and headed to Haeundae.

If you're from Busan, you might know about Dalmaji Hill and Dalmaji Road in the area. The writers' dormitory was located in a villa with a clear view of the sea. The guards, who were Awakeners, froze upon recognizing us.

I exchanged a few pleasantries with the guards before whistling. "Quite the affluent bunch."

"They're among the top DMs in Busan, probably some of the wealthiest civilians around."

"And they have to collaborate closely with the tutorial fairies, so no dodging taxes. Noh Do-hwa likes DMs too."

"Really? I heard she's never hired a DM."

"True. She hardly ever asks the fairies to ensure she sleeps soundly. Says she doesn't see why she should see monsters even in her dreams."

"Hmm…"

Just then:

-You fucking idiot!

A roar shook the villa's windows.

Dang Seo-rin and I paused just as we were about to ring the bell (not an electronic bell but one physically attached to the door handle).

-How can a law passed by the kingdom's assembly apply retroactively?! That would invalidate hundreds of years of inter-species marriages. Does that make any sense?

-It makes perfect sense! Damn it! That's why I've been emphasizing how crucial this marriage law is both in the world and the main

events!

-No, dumbass! What about taxes? If married and unmarried people were taxed differently, and all sorts of laws applied differently, would you apply those retroactively too? Is the chancellor an idiot? Would they really want to triple their workload overnight because of such a stupid law?

-The chancellor is an idiot, that's why the kingdom is going to hell!

Dang Seo-rin and I glanced at each other.

'Are you sure we had an appointment today?'

'Yes, it’s supposed to be now.'

'The leader of the Three Thousand Worlds Guild is gracing them with her presence, and they’re bickering inside instead of waiting by the door. Are they even human?'

'I don’t know. Maybe they’re monsters.'

Luckily, Dang Seo-rin and I naturally resist privilege. We often disguise ourselves to go on culinary tours.

Thump.

I knocked on the door.

-I can't understand this idiot... Oh? Wait. Someone's here?

-Wait. Who is it?

Dang Seo-rin cleared her throat. "Hello. I'm the Guild Leader of the Samcheon World."

-Samcheon... Oh? O-oh!

Crash! Bang!

The villa erupted into echoing chaos.

'You insane bastard!'

'Why didn’t you say something?'

'I thought it was tomorrow—'

'Motherfucker! Die! You moron, just die!'

'Put on some clothes! How many times have I told you not to walk around shirtless?'

and so on.

In other words, complete pandemonium.

Much later, in the next story, it turned out that the mistake with the date wasn't on the writers’ part, but Dang Seo-rin's. However, even in the 205th cycle, she was unaware of this fact.

"Uh..." Lacking a sense of privilege but enjoying actual privileges, the supreme dignity of the Samcheon World felt slightly bewildered. "Oh. Sorry, Undertaker. I didn’t know this was the kind of meeting I was walking into. I was just introduced by my personal DM three years ago. I thought you might be interested in novels and writers since you like the Three Kingdoms..."

"Isn't this the first time we've taken a walk together in a while?"

"Huh?"

"I enjoyed the walk. That's all that matters. You don’t need to apologize for every little thing."

"....."

"Isn’t it interesting?" I grinned. "Imagine a startup that somehow brings Warren Buffett and Bill Gates to their office, but then forgets the date and leaves them standing outside the door. Completely insane. When else would you experience something like this?"

"Right. Yeah, it *is* interesting." Dang Seo-rin's usual light smile returned as the awkward air between us relaxed.

While we waited at the villa's front door, we continued to chuckle

and discuss the dinner menu. The mere 30 centimeter gap between us was filled so tightly that there was no room for any resentment about status or pride as guild leaders.

"—I'm sorry!"

"We're terribly sorry!"

Dang Seo-rin chuckled softly. "It's okay. I was also introduced by Mr. Moru DM. Seems there was a mix-up."

"No, we're truly sorry! It was our fault!" The writers remained prostrated, not daring to lift their heads.

During this time, I took in the interior of the villa.

"Whoa?" a voice called. Firstly, fairies were floating around the living room. At least five of them. "Secretary General Undertaker? What brings you here?"

"I could ask the same of you?"

"We've been dispatched here for a joint-business endeavor!"

Startled, the writers' heads shook again at the sound of my conversation with the fairy. Roughly,

'The Undertaker?'

'The hero from the Ten Tribes and Meteor Shower Raids?'

'Why would such a hero visit this place?'

But it's too cliché to describe such reactions in detail. If I did, each episode would be filled with the same content.

After the mood settled, Dang Seo-rin finally spoke with the historical consultant DM.

Meanwhile, I had a chance to chat with Writer A, the project overseer.

"So... um, we're creating an autonomously functioning dream world, The Kingdom Project."

"Autonomously functioning?"

"Yes, well. For example, there's a count in the dream world's kingdom. We've detailed his past, the scars he bears, his thoughts on those scars, and the events he's currently embroiled in..."

Writer A glanced at the fairy.

"We share these settings with the tutorial fairies. Then, even if we DMs aren't actively hosting guests, the fairies can operate the dreams somewhat realistically..."

Writer A wasn't particularly eloquent or quick-witted. Thus, I felt the need to summarize his words into a more direct slogan.

"So, if you're the game creators, the fairies act as operators?"

"Yes, yes, exactly." Writer A hesitated. "Of course, there are details too complex for the operators to handle alone. In those cases, the fairies can exchange real-time feedback with us..."

"Oh ho."

"We've had beta testers go through it up to the sixth round..."

"And everyone was satisfied?"

A fairy peeked out from the side. "Statistically, compared to dreams we provide alone, this Kingdom Project has given participants over 2000% more satisfaction!"

"2000%? Twenty times more?"

"Yes! That's why the Fairy Rights Commission is lending our full support and advocating for participation in the Kingdom Project's development!"

I surveyed the villa's interior. Walls plastered with plot settings. Maps. Personal details of hundreds of main NPCs. Threads in red,

blue, and yellow crisscrossed between these settings, illustrating their interconnections.

Meanwhile, the fairy continued chattering, munching on a sausage.

"Especially since the Secretary General banned tutorials, the fairies were getting a bit disheartened. But the Kingdom Project has revitalized them! In dreams, we can run dungeons just like tutorials, legally slaughtering humans as much as we want—!"

"Hold on." I whipped around and grabbed the fairy's shoulder. "What did you just say?"

"We're happy because we can legally kill humans?"

"No, the other part. About running dungeons like tutorials in dreams?"

"Yes, that's right!"

"And, naturally, if people die in the dreams, it doesn't really affect their real lives?"

"Of course. There might be some mental trauma, but since everyone knows it's not real, it's fine!"

"....."

I felt as if I'd been struck on the back of the head.

Why hadn't I thought of such a simple idea until now?

During the 205th cycle, I established the Dream Casino to provide joy and circulate currency through the dream standard. I had only approached it from the aspects of welfare and economy. However, the DM ecosystem built through the Dream Casino contained potential far beyond 'welfare and economy.'

"Mr. DM." I looked at Writer A. "Do you not need detailed data on the Ten Legs and Meteor Showers?"

He looked at me questioningly.

"I can provide you with detailed information on hundreds, even thousands of anomalies. If you wish, I'll invest whatever it takes."

Yes.

The massive virtual world built by the DMs.

It could provide an endlessly 'realistic' 'practice' for both civilians and awakeners—

It was, in every sense, a 'Tutorial Dungeon.'

Footnotes:

1 - *Dogeza* (土下座) is an element of traditional Japanese etiquette which involves kneeling directly on the ground and bowing to prostrate oneself while touching one's head to the floor. It is used to show deference to a person of higher status, as a deep apology or to express the desire for a favor from said person.

Chapter 196

The Investor V

Sinnoa

When reading regression stories, you sometimes encounter a scenario like this:

- "Mage, your true talent is actually in swordsmanship."

- "That makes no sense! Me, someone born into a prestigious family of mages... and I'm actually a swordsmanship genius?"

- "And a martial genius to boot."

- "Hmm, are you saying that what I just did is the 'Perfect Squat of the Forgotten Era'? But I was only standing up after sitting down?"

This is the so-called ‘Our Child Has Changed’ cliché.

In the previous cycle, due to prejudice, discrimination, poverty, and bad luck, these talented people couldn’t fully blossom into their true potential. A regressor provides one-on-one personal training to these side characters, and as a result, they would be reborn as true experts.

I, too, as a fully-fledged regressor and PT trainer, have nurtured quite a few outstanding members. In fact, in this specific area, I secretly pride myself on being better than any other regressor.

However, we need to approach this with the brain of a scientist rather than the heart of a humanities student.

So, what exactly does “quite a few” mean in this context?

- Saintess, Seo Gyu, Dang Seo-rin, Cheon Yo-hwa, Sim Ah-ryeon, Lee Ha-yul, Yu Ji-won. Let's go.

How could this be? It’s only seven people at best!

Of course, depending on the cycle, you could add or subtract about five people from this list. But even then, it doesn't exceed 15 people.

Most regressors, as I see it, are fundamentally mistaken. How do they expect to change the world with just a small elite group? Sure, changing the lives of 15 people is impressive. But in the end, that's on the scale of a small or medium-sized business owner. Apple, for example, has over 150,000 employees. If you're just scratching off winning human lottery tickets with guaranteed potential after a regression, that's just basic. It's like buying Bitcoin—'a must-do.'

Ultimately, the crucial thing is the social system. You need to readjust the massive pool of human resources in society to be healthy enough to support a select few experts. This is what could truly be called the lifelong mission of a regressor.

"I'm going to invest heavily in the <Kingdom Project> currently being developed by skilled DMs."

After returning from the writer's retreat at Dalmaji Hill, I immediately convened the Regressor Alliance.

Noh Do-hwa, whose life is basically one long night shift, received me with a face tired from exhaustion.

"DMs? You mean those casino hustlers who make fairies match them up with dream partners so they can fuck in their dreams...?"

Good grief. Is this really the perception held by the ruler of the Korean Peninsula?

"Ahem. Please refrain from such defamation of the only industry currently growing in the market."

"Has your brain rotted from dreaming about Romance of the Three Kingdoms a few too many times? Why the sudden frenzy to invest in DMs in the middle of the night...?"

I calmly explained the potential of the <Kingdom Project>. Before long, Noh Do-hwa's expression changed ever so slightly.

“...Hmm. So, if you strip away all the talk about DMs and Tutorial Fairies, it’s essentially a virtual reality world.”

“Exactly.”

“I see. And one can freely build up a wealth of experience defeating anomalies and traversing the void there... Hmm. That sounds feasible enough...”

[Isn’t there a big risk?]

It was the Saintess, who was participating in the video conference from Yongsan, who asked.

[The Ten Legs or the Meteor Shower really existed as anomalies in reality. If you transplant their data directly into virtual reality, it would basically make the entire other world vulnerable to the void, just like our reality. I think this would have the side effect of expanding the range of activities available to the anomalies. Besides, there’s a very good chance that new anomalies related to ‘virtual reality’ will be generated.]

“That’s true. There will 100 percent be side effects.” I nodded. “But the advantages far outweigh the resulting disadvantages. First, we must attempt it, and if the side effects become unmanageable, we can stop in the following cycles.”

With Warren Buffet's heart for Coca-Cola stocks, I decided to invest in the <Kingdom Project>.

The very next day, we began managing the ‘risk’ the Saintess had pointed out. The most foolish risk of all is human risk—man-made disasters.

I summoned Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa to the café hideout 1,200 meters deep to discuss solving this human resource problem.

“Huh?”

“Ugh.”

The two arrived with light steps, but upon spotting each other, they

openly frowned.

The air in the room froze. It was a battle of pride between mages representing White Magic and Black Magic, Cursed Song Incantation and Necromancy.

I intervened. “Stop fighting, you two.”

“Fighting? What do you mean, Undertaker? I don’t have the leisure to fight with people. If I do fight, and even if the opponent appears human, aren’t they probably an anomaly?”

“Aha, well. I heard that in Busan, people of all ages walk around wearing witch hats. I suspect that might be some sort of cosplay anomaly. You should be careful too, teacher!”

Don’t worry. This level of tension is just playful banter. If these two guild leaders were serious in their killing intent, turning someone into minced meat would prove to be no issue.

“Seriously, stop fighting. The personal DMs you two employ alone add up to 46. That’s too much. Are you planning to start your own novel platform?”

“Hey, she’s the one who—”

“Hold on. Sorry to cut you off, but let me speak first. I’m not here to judge right from wrong. I’m telling you that I desperately need the DMs you two have employed.”

“...Huh?”

Both Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa blinked.

Like Noh Do-hwa, the two quickly grasped the point when I calmly explained. The tense atmosphere where they seemed ready to fight bare-handed (and where Cheon Yo-hwa, a close combatant, would win) eased a bit.

“Dang Seo-rin, how many personal DMs do you really need to manage your dream?”

“Well...” Dang Seo-rin glanced at Cheon Yo-hwa out of the corner of her eye and said, “I think four would be enough.”

“Good. Yo-hwa, is four a little short for you too?”

“...Hmm. No, that should be sufficient. After all, my preferred DMs are already set, and the others are just peanuts for idle time.”

I nodded. “Once the <Kingdom Project> starts running smoothly, talented individuals will undoubtedly emerge. Individuals you’d want to recruit as guild members.”

“Hmm.”

“Oh.”

“Naturally, competition between guilds to recruit these talents will intensify. So, we will implement a draft system, giving ‘priority’ to guilds that have exterminated more anomalies and voids in reality each year.”

“...!”

The light in their eyes changed once again. Earlier, they seemed to be accommodating because of ‘Undertaker's face,’ but now, they had the bold, clear demeanor of cold-blooded leaders.

“Currently, the National Road Management Corps is requesting guilds to submit reports on the extermination of anomalies and voids. But compliance isn’t great, is it?”

“Hmm, yes. It’s because it’s considered know-how. Honestly, I feel more comfortable giving it to you than the National Road Management Corps... We only report just enough to not offend them.”

“Thank you. But if reporting exterminations to the National Road Management Corps brings tangible benefits, it will be a different story.”

“...So we’ll get the first pick of talented rookies. Rookies who have been tested countless times in the dream simulation.”

“Exactly.”

Samcheon World and Baekwha Girls' High were the most proactive in exterminating voids among all the guilds. Naturally, they would be given priority in the draft.

“How about it? Does this provide enough reason and benefit to reduce the number of DMs?”

It did.

Once the two major guild leaders made the first concession, their subordinates followed suit. The medium and small guild leaders hurriedly reduced the number of personal DMs. The DMs who suddenly found themselves unemployed were re-employed by the National Road Management Corps and assigned to the <Kingdom Project>.

The number of personnel was a staggering 120. All of them were skilled enough to be hired by guild leaders and had enough ‘social skills’ to sustain such a lifestyle.

It was a miracle, a perfect storm, gathering every top-tier talent that could be extracted from the Korean Peninsula.

“We will cover all personnel costs. Don’t worry about rent or anything. Consider the newly added DMs as subordinate employees, not fellow writers, and use them accordingly.”

“U-uh...”

Writer A, though bewildered, accepted my investment.

“Th-thank you. I never dreamed something like this would come my way...”

“If anyone dares to disrespect your authority as a manager, feel free to contact me. I will personally take care of it.”

“Huh?! N-no! I couldn’t possibly bother you with something like that...!”

But it happened.

Some DMs caused trouble, and I personally intervened with violence and threats to firmly establish the hierarchy among the DMs. Regardless of how successful they were before the apocalypse, Writer A was now the project leader.

Two years later.

Solid muscles and delicious flesh clung to the skeleton that had already been completed for the <Kingdom Project>.

[Explore a kingdom on the brink of ruin and save humanity from the void!]

[Organized by the National Road Management Corps. A dream project created in collaboration with 36 major guilds, including Samcheon World and Baekwha Girls' High!]

[Anyone can freely enter the 'Kingdom' by consulting with the Tutorial Fairy.]

[Season 1 Raid Boss 'Ten Legs' Emerges!]

Numerous billboards were erected at the Dream Casino, and countless advertisements were posted on SG Net.

"What? What's that?"

"One hundred thirty DMs participated in the production?"

"Wait, I was wondering where that DM disappeared off to. So they were making this."

"You can dream with just the fairy and no DM? Won't that make it less fun...?"

The dream simulation created by the writers' dedication, the regressor's experience, and the guild leaders' assistance—

The launch of the 'Kingdom.'

The public's reaction to the kingdom was explosive.

- Anonymous: No lol the kingdom is fucking amazing lololol

LiteraryGirl: Is this the DMs' 'true intentions'...? This is terrifying...

- OldManGoryeo: Seriously, no joke, if you're an Awakener who's only dreaming of the kingdom while taking sleeping pills, big thumbs up lolol

- Anonymous: No, if they had this ability, what the hell was missing from Korean game companies before the Void Arrival that they couldn't make a GOTY title? If this had come out back then, it would have fucking destroyed all the other games!!

Anonymous: 'Tutorial Fairy'

Anonymous: Ah.

Even Awakeners, those the frontline experts fighting anomalies in real life, acknowledged the 'realism' of the kingdom and were giving rave reviews.

Of course, they did. Who provided the data?

- Anonymous: Kingdom bastards! The Ten Legs appeared in the southwest beyond the mountains!! The Ten Legs is insane! If you don't unite your armies to fight Ten Legs, you're seriously fucked!!

Anonymous: Yep~~ only the country bumpkins will die~ I'm safe in the royal capital~~

- Anonymous: Why does this unfamiliar medieval kingdom seem oddly familiar??

-dolLHOuse: The kingdom is on the verge of collapse, and it's hilarious. But the funnier part is that it's still better than our reality.

Anonymous: Ah...

In the dream simulation, humanity hadn't yet been destroyed by the void. It was just on the brink of collapse.

Even in this situation, the kingdom's NPCs were wasting time arguing about who was right, whose house prices were safe, whether ambitious provincial leaders were suspicious, whether one was a pure human and others were filthy demi-humans, engaging in all sorts of political bullshit.

- Anonymous: Crazy kingdom bastards, even in this state, pure races and demi-humans are still terrorizing each other lol

- Anonymous: 'There are already seven rebel armies in the provinces. No matter how strong the anomaly Ten Legs is, if we leave it alone, it'll just exhaust the rebels.' (Something actually said)

- Anonymous: Ah, I'll never share a table with demi-humans, even if humanity goes extinct~~

Simulation participants, living in a world where all countries had already been destroyed by anomalies, were naturally fully immersed.

Kingdom NPCs lamented the politics of the nation, calling it the worst era. But the simulation participants knew it better than anyone. They knew that this was the last golden opportunity to save humanity.

- Anonymous: Breaking news: Ten Legs annihilated the southwest and is advancing north over the mountains

- Anonymous: Participated as a mercenary in the southwest county and got wiped out after two tentacle attacks. I'm taking a quick break to spread the word before dreaming again.

- Anonymous: This time, I plan to create a new character in the capital and join the fight. Good luck, everyone.

LiteraryGirl: Don't respawn just anywhere. There are nobles in the capital who seriously consider the Ten Legs a threat. They're also running around trying to convince other nobles. Respawn as a citizen in the capital and lend them your strength.

Anonymous: Oh, thanks, thanks

Even though it was a medieval fantasy kingdom they were experiencing for the first time, the simulation participants could clearly see the fate of this kingdom. They knew the future. They knew the ending and how to deal with it. In this sense, the people participating in the kingdom's dream were practically 'regressors.'

That's right.

In the training ground of the virtual reality created by the DMs, people were rapidly leveling up as 'pseudo-regressors.' A system so complete that I didn't need to personally mentor or tutor anyone.

"Teacher!"

After the first season of the kingdom ended, Cheon Yo-hwa came running, her face flushed red. "The new recruits this time... They're incredible!"

Finally, the power of the Korean Peninsula began to grow at a terrifying speed.

Footnotes:

Chapter 197

The Investor VI

Sinnoa

Perhaps some of you are expecting a twist like, *“However, a monstrous virtual reality simulation hypothesis suddenly appeared, causing the world to end...!”* and, indeed, such things have happened quite often, but that is not the topic of today’s story.

As I mentioned before, I want this story to focus on ordinary people, a part I have left relatively neglected until now. Besides, iIf an anomaly were to suddenly appear here and steal the spotlight, wouldn't I have to film another one of my endless Undertaker hunting sprees? Even if I didn't like it, that’s an endless tale I have to tell 365 days a year, so let’s save it for later.

“You are heroes who have advanced the world.”

I wasn’t like an NBA star who would have a fit if I weren’t treated like the protagonist in every game. Instead, I was a player who definitely made the pass when necessary. And my ‘passes’ seemed a bit grand from the perspective of the DMs.

“Uh, uh, uh...”

The DMs were invited to the podium set up in front of the National Road Management Corps headquarters at Babel Tower Square. Team-level managers stood below the square, standing at attention.

“On behalf of the citizens of Busan and others who were too busy to attend today, we would like to extend our gratitude to you.”

I bowed my head, the team leaders responded by bending gracefully at their waists. Yu Ji-won was even among them. In other words, powerful figures who wouldn't bow to anyone else respectfully greeted the DMs.

While I quickly straightened up, the other Awakeners had to show

off their hip flexibility while I conversed with the DMs.

“No... Undertaker, this is, this is too much...”

“The <Kingdom Project> has achieved unprecedented success. We are receiving overwhelmingly positive responses from guilds participating in this year’s new draft. Your project has raised the level of Awakeners on the Korean Peninsula by a notch.”

“Uh, um...”

The DMs looked stricken, but I personally didn’t trust their facial muscles. No, I trusted their life experiences.

To those who lack money, give money; to those without friends, give friendship; to those without power, give power; to those without honor, give honor. That was the most basic principle of a ‘reward.’ Why do you think soldiers are happy when given leave as a reward?

The DMs were the same. The people standing in front of me earned a fair amount of money, both in the past and now. But did they really have power and honor? Have they ever experienced influential figures lining up and being polite to them, just like gangsters bowing to their elder brothers?

They hadn’t. And they wouldn’t in the future either.

Such ‘treatment’ was a rare commodity I alone could offer the DMs. As a consequence, in their hearts, the Undertaker's position acquired unique value. Through rewards, my relationship with the DMs solidified.

‘And if they get swayed by the trickle-down power, they’re not people I can use for long.’

After the event ended, I clapped my hands. The Awakeners, who had been bowing all the time, stood up and joined in the applause. The DMs awkwardly left the venue, looking relieved that it was finally over.

Though they seemed relieved, from the regressor's perspective, this

was just the beginning.

‘I wonder how many will remain from there.’

With time, some DMs became completely addicted to the sweet juice of power, gradually losing interest in the <Kingdom Project> and becoming absorbed in other interests. They began teaching ordinary people how to become successful DMs and gradually reduced the days they went to work. They merely accepted high-paying commissions from time to time and worked as private DMs a few times. They became distanced from making the <Kingdom Project>’s world more detailed and interesting.

As the DM profession gained explosive popularity among ordinary people, DMs with ‘achievements and fame’ were quickly scouted as teachers. It didn't take long before they retired from active duty.

Of the eight, four were eliminated.

Of course, it was only an elimination from my perspective. To them, it was a wise and successful life.

In contrast, the DMs who remained in the company and diligently worked on the kingdom simulation—in my view, those who foolishly stayed in the field and continued working were the real successful ones.

‘Only half remain.’

Another cycle passed.

This time, I approached Writer A first and proposed the <Kingdom Project>. Writer A listened to my blueprint in amazement.

“Oh my... Y-you’re saying you’ll entrust me with such a tremendous project?”

“Yes. The National Road Management Corps has already completed about 20% on their own.” I handed over some of the world settings that the four eliminated people had created in the previous cycle to Writer A.

Writer A was impressed as they went through the materials.
“...Amazing. It’s really like it was written by a professional... Ah. But there’s no main events, serendipities, or major NPCs at all. The world setting is sophisticated, but...”

“Yes. That’s why I am proposing this to people who used to be writers before civilization collapsed. Will you participate?”

“...Yes, yes. I definitely want to participate!”

Writer A didn't have to go through the trouble of gathering colleagues themselves. I found the colleagues who stayed with the company until the end of the previous cycle and brought them to Writer A.

Temptations visited them.

-Hello. I’m secretly visiting after hearing from the leader of the Samcheon World guild.

-Could you create a super account for the project you’re making?

-We came from Baekhwa Girls' High. Could you get an item for our student council president...?

-The compensation will be more than satisfactory.

The ‘more than satisfactory’ compensation was 60 billion won.

The <Kingdom Project> wasn’t complete yet. At that point, there was no certainty that it would be a success, and it was a huge amount of money.

Of the four, two were eliminated.

‘Again, half of the half.’

Another cycle passed.

Out of the seven colleagues who had started the project early with Writer A, only one remained by their side. However, there wasn't much work to be done.

“Ah... With this, it will be quick once the main events and major NPCs are completed.”

There was a lot ‘already completed’ by the National Road Management Corps.

“Hmm. Other parts have almost no flaws... No, really almost none. Who are the people who made this?”

“That cannot be disclosed.”

“Ah. I see... I know a few writer friends. I wondered if it might be them...”

Starting from a more relaxed point than before, the <Kingdom Project> improved in completeness. Writer A refined and polished the work they created in the previous cycle. A series of revisions with intervals between cycles.

Meanwhile, one of the fellow DMs flooded their account with irrational equipment and items. They crossed the line as an administrator and roamed around as if they were the true protagonist of this world.

Why didn’t they do this in previous cycles but did it now? It was hard to know the exact reason.

One person eliminated.

“Wow! Th-this is—!”

And then the next cycle. The 208th cycle.

Writer A’s hands trembled as they received the blueprint of the <Kingdom Project>.

“This is truly amazing! Really, I’ve always had thoughts like this, but it’s even better than what I imagined... How did the management corps do this?”

There were all sorts of temptations and traps. There were countless tests that ordinary people couldn't withstand and didn’t need to

withstand.

Despite all that, Writer A never abandoned the <Kingdom Project>. They never betrayed the players. They were a talent needed by a regressor.

“Author.”

“This is really, wow, ah. Yes?”

“I want to entrust this project to you.”

“Yes? Yes? Really? Wow, th-thank you so much! I only read two pages of this, but my hands were itching...!”

“...What?”

We had a drink together.

Writer A’s eyes, drunk on makgeolli, stared at the ceiling without truly seeing it.[1] “It doesn’t make sense. How could I have created this work with those guys...”

“Why doesn’t it make sense?”

“Because it’s so well-made. Damn. Ah, sorry for cursing...”

“It’s okay. We’re meant to drink here, after all. By the way, mysterious donations are secretly flowing into the other colleagues’ accounts like annuities every cycle, so you don’t have to worry about their circumstances. Thanks to the merits of their previous lives, they’ll be able to live leisurely for hundreds of lifetimes.”

“Thank you...”

After hearing the whole story, Writer A’s expression was subtle. They seemed proud, intrigued, and somewhat competitive.

“Author, the reason I am sharing this information with you is that I have a special interest in the <Kingdom Project>.”

“Uh... Interest, you say...?”

“I want people to develop a step further through the dream simulation called the <Kingdom Project>.”

“Ah. You mean copying the anomalies from reality to raise people’s overall level? That seems quite possible...”

“That’s right. But that’s not all.”

I got to the main point—my true intention, brought out after four cycles. A regressor was, by nature, cautious about whom they reveal their true feelings to.

“As you know, the problems weighing down our reality aren’t just the void and anomalies. There are also absurd ideologies like Awakeners’ supremacy.”

“Ah, true...”

“The reason people get swept up in such ideologies is that the reality divided into Awakeners and ordinary people feels too close. I want to take a step back from there, giving people a sense of distance to view the situation calmly and embrace others.”

A question mark popped up above Writer A’s head. It was an eloquent speech, but they didn’t understand why it was being said to them now.

“Being able to observe one’s life from a distance is not an easily acquired sense of detachment. But what if people could live their lives multiple times?”

“Uh, I’m not sure what you mean...”

“Please implant harsh ideological conflicts in the world of <Kingdom Project>.”

Writer A’s eyes widened.

“There are pure races and demi-races in the kingdom. Please escalate the conflicts between them. Make the racial and religious

conflicts of our world seem trivial compared to the intense hatred and disgust spreading through the kingdom. Terror. Rebellion. Violence. Let all evils occur."

"Uh. Uhhh...?"

"And let people dreaming of reality feel it. Ah, compared to the kingdom, the conflicts between people in this reality are truly nothing."

Writer A closed their mouth. Intellect and imagination that couldn't be concealed by the intoxication sparked and flickered in their eyes.

"Uh... B-but, to people dreaming, it's just someone else's story, isn't it? Even if we hear about a lot of racial conflict in America, we never really feel it as our story."

"Yes. That's a valid point." I nodded. "So 'during the dream, they must not realize that it's a dream.'"

"……!"

"Until the previous cycles, the kingdom simulation operated like an online MMORPG. But from now on, it will be different. It will become a solo-play RPG, and the participants will completely 'forget' that they were different people in the original reality."

"Forgetting reality and truly becoming a member of your kingdom...?"

"That's right."

I snapped my fingers. Then, from under the table, the Tutorial Fairy peeked out.

"Eeek!"

Writer A was startled, but the fairy did no harm. It merely climbed onto my lap and sat like a quiet cat.

"This is my dream."

“……”

“From now on, we will advertise to people that using the <Kingdom Project> allows them to dream of one lifetime in just one night. With the fairy’s ability, ‘time acceleration’ is possible within the dream. It’s literally living for 70 or 90 years in the dream.”

“One lifetime every night you sleep…”

“Yes. Naturally, it sounds incredibly enticing to people. And we will tell them.”

While you are dreaming. In other words, while living in the <Kingdom>, you will not recognize that it’s a dream—

“But.”

After waking up from the dream, you will be able to ‘remember’ the life you lived in the dream.

“…Ah.”

“Every time they dream of the kingdom, people will become demi-race terrorists, a pure-race store owner who curses such demi-races every day, a slave wielding a pickaxe in the mines until death, or a noble lady who has never even heard of the existence of maniacs.”

“……”

“And each time they wake from the dream, they will collect these lives they have lived one by one, becoming beings capable of thinking from the perspectives of terrorists, small merchants, slaves, and nobles. Surely, it will lead to a better world than now.”

“……”

“Essentially, everyone, not just me, will become regressors. Author, this is my dream. I want to invest my dream in your dream.”

Writer A slightly parted their lips. “My kingdom becoming something like that…”

“Whoa! The memories we provide aren’t that clear!”

At that moment, the Tutorial Fairy bounced on my lap and said, “From a human’s perspective, it will only maintain the clarity of recalling a past more than ten years old! Whoa, human memory is overly unstable!”

Writer A was silent for a long time, but their eyes said all the words their mouth would not.

“I will do it.,” they said eventually. “No, please *let* me do it. If my work could become someone’s dream, that would be the best outcome as a writer.”

However, Writer A added, “...Listening to you, Undertaker, the name <Kingdom Project> no longer seems fitting. A different title is needed.”

“What title are you considering?”

“<Reincarnation Project>,” Writer A said. “I also want to invest my dream in your dream, Undertaker. I will dedicate my life to creating a world where everyone can be reincarnated repeatedly... A world loved and hated.”

There is a brief epilogue.

The stories related to the <Reincarnation Project> are so numerous that I will have to slowly share them with you all someday.

You can already guess why Awakeners’ abilities soared as they moved away from the initial cycles, and why I insisted on establishing the canned hotel in the 555th cycle to train writers.

Yes, half the reason for the hotel’s establishment was to improve the writers’ skills, which would later be used in the <Reincarnation Project>.

(The other half was purely my desire to read interesting web novels.)

Separate from those stories, let us focus for another moment solely on Writer A, who was an ordinary person.

“I also want to live in my kingdom.”

One day, Writer A said thus.

“Do you?”

“I mean, others are all living their lives in the kingdom every day, and yet I, the creator, am living in reality... It feels a bit unfair.”

“Didn’t you say last time, Author, that it would be risky if you, as a creator and administrator, lived in the kingdom and lost your objective perspective?”

“Ah, yes. So... Hmm.” Writer A hesitated. “Can I pre-create my avatar just in case I die?”

“Yes?”

“I mean, I want to create an NPC that resembles my personality and way of thinking. So if I die... Could you tell the fairies to add that NPC to the kingdom settings... Oh! Of course, I don’t mean reincarnating as an NPC with memories of reality. I just wanted to say I’d like to become a kingdom being with the same personality, but as a different entity.”

That was a request I could fulfill anytime.

“I understand. But we are truly ensuring your safety, so you likely won’t pass away.”

“Ahaha... Still, If I do meet you in the next cycle, please tell me how I lived and died in the kingdom.”

In my 1,000 cycles as a regressor, there were several instances where Writer A met a tragic end. At those times, I accessed the ‘kingdom’ and visited Writer A’s avatar.

Surprisingly or unsurprisingly, the NPC with a personality identical to reality was also acting as a writer in the kingdom. I had a brief

chat with them, but the NPC naturally knew nothing about ‘reality.’ The NPC was born in the kingdom and grew up thinking this was the only world—a typical resident of the kingdom.

Then, by chance, I obtained a paper book published by the NPC in the kingdom and read it. The novel contained this passage:

...That world had no such thing as magic like ours.

Ships made of steel sailed the sea, mysterious gears turned endlessly, people’s lives were taken by metal fragments shot from rods, and the spires of cities were always shrouded in a smoky haze.

There were no races there. Considering we’ve repeated massacres and reprisals for thousands of years based on the number of legs, horns, or snakeskin someone has, that was the true magic of that world.

I want to share with you the story of having visited such a magical world...

I chuckled.

‘Indeed. Perhaps my reality is also someone’s simulation.’

Of course, that possibility was extremely low. To set up someone like me to live the same life 1,000 times in a row, how incredible a world must the creator have wanted to bring to life?

After reading the NPC’s paper book at the bookstore, I looked at the genre classification of the bookshelf where it was placed. The paper book was categorized like this:

＜Fantasy＞

Footnotes:

1 - Makgeolli is a milky, off-white, and lightly sparkling Korean rice wine.

Chapter 198

The Wicked One I

Sinnoa

I’ve been going on about writers for quite a while now, but to be honest, all of that was just a prologue.

If the word "prologue" doesn't sit well with you, perhaps calling it something like dicing vegetables before diving into the main dish would fit better.

Since I’ve shown you an example of a ‘great writer,’ the contrasting example I’m about to present will stand out all the more.

It happened around the 600th cycle. Maybe the 700th.

It didn’t matter which cycle you picked, actually. In every cycle, the SG Net novel serialization board was filled with notices like these:

[LiteraryGirl] This is Oh Dok-seo… (5 minutes ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Delay notice (1 day ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Notice on tardiness (3 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Hiatus announcement (4 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Change in serialization time (8 days ago)

And so on.

[LiteraryGirl] Serialization frequency irregular due to the author's health (1 year ago)

[LiteraryGirl] The author's statement on recent serialization (1 year ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Today’s hiatus (1 year ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Transitioning to 3.25 chapters per week for the time being (2 years ago)

A total of 1,019 notices.

It was like the inbox of a primitive person who had never learned the concept of organizing emails, all marked as ‘read.’

Out of curiosity, I clicked on the message that had arrived in my inbox just five minutes ago.

[LiteraryGirl] This is Oh Dok-seo…

Sir, I’m sorry, but I feel I should inform you that I won’t be able to publish today’s chapter on time. I don’t expect you to forgive me, but I hope you still trust that I’m always doing my best, and that’s why I’m writing this. Here’s my excuse. There’s not enough time lately.

“Hmmm…”

I propped my chin on my hand. Not because I found it particularly puzzling or surprising, but because I was impressed by how Oh Dok-seo mirrored the rhythm in the last line.

‘Not bad,’ I thought.

Indeed. Oh Dok-seo’s delay notices were practically an art form.

Imagine if one side were late to a summit meeting between world leaders. Of course, it would be a serious ‘mistake’ and a ‘breach of protocol.’ But if the lateness happens a hundred times? It would be lauded as ‘Putin’s political strategy.’ That’s how the world works.

Oh Dok-seo’s tardiness had reached that level of chronicity. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call her a master of hiatuses. If the Constellations truly existed in this world, Oh Dok-seo would undoubtedly have earned the [Achievement Unlocked: Author Who Posted 1,000 Hiatus Notices] title by now.

I’m not sure what effect such an achievement would have. Probably something as insignificant as a bug.

Unfortunately, Constellations didn't truly exist in this world, and since Oh Dok-seo belonged to the Regressor Alliance, deceiving her with fake Constellations wasn't an option. Thus, I flexed my fingers and sent her a realistic reply.

[ZERO_SUGAR] Dok-seo.

I read your message. Don't worry too much. Writing never goes exactly the way you want it to. As someone who's seen many authors, I understand that well.

Why not take this cycle off entirely? The you in the next cycle will do better.

Wait.

To prevent any misunderstandings, let me clarify something.

I am not Noh Do-hwa, the Vulgar Craftsman. In other words, I wasn't born with a tongue that rotates 360 degrees, spewing twisted sarcasm with every word. If I say something in a conversation, take it at face value. There's no need to embark on a linguistic excavation to find hidden meanings.

But writers, by nature, are the kind of people who read between the lines, between paragraphs, even when there's nothing to read. They have this occupational disease that makes them proudly declare, "This is the hidden meaning of the work!"

And rather unfortunately, Oh Dok-seo was a writer.

"Sir! How could you say something so cruel to me?"

Bang!

Oh Dok-seo burst through the door of the café hideout. She swung her arms and legs at me wildly, like Nobita's windmill technique from Doraemon, which she had apparently mastered.

"Huh? You're saying this cycle is a bust! A bust! You're saying this cycle's me is hopeless! I don't care if you're a regressor with no blood, tears, or hair follicles! How could you say that?"

“Dok-seo, my hair follicles are just fine. They just got a bit shorter while searching for a Walther PPK.”

“You’re saying I’m not even a writer anymore? That this cycle’s me isn’t worth your expectations, so you’re going to give up on me? Huh?”

“No, that’s not what I meant at all—”

“I want to write. So. Badly!” Oh Dok-seo grabbed my collar and shouted, her head hanging low.

For some reason, that peculiar barrier of youthful drama surrounded her. Even Jeong Daeman from Slam Dunk would have acknowledged the sheer desperation in this scene.

“If only my hands were a little faster! You’ve already gone past the 800th cycle! I swore I’d write your story for you—me in the previous cycle, me in the cycle before that. Why? *Why* can’t I write better than this—?!”

Pause.

Let me explain the method behind our Prophet's creative process—in other words, how my biographical novel is made.

1. First, I tell her a story. Since both Dok-seo and I live in the Inunaki Tunnel, I can tell her stories whenever we’re bored.

2. Based on my story, Oh Dok-seo writes. Let’s call this draft the ‘first version.’

3. Then, I hand the ‘first version’ over to the Oh Dok-seo of the next cycle. Thanks to my Complete Memory Ability, I can upload every letter of it.

4. Oh Dok-seo continues writing from where the ‘first version’ of the previous cycle left off.

5. Since writing alone is hard, she changes the names of the characters and proper nouns slightly, pretending it’s a ‘fictional story,’ and serializes it on the SG Net novel board. By the way, the

title of the serialized novel changes with each cycle, but in the 888th cycle, it was <Regressor's Epilogue>.

In short, it's a relay novel. And in every cycle without fail, after reading the 'first version' of the previous cycle, Dok-seo always leaves the same comment.

'Why was I only able to write this much?'

And she was ignored every time.

'Wow, don't worry, don't worry. The previous cycles' Oh Dok-seos were trash who couldn't write, but I'm different this time around.'

'Let's get to work then… Writing might be a laborious task to those without talent, but to someone who has it, it's just a simple hobby like chewing Denver bubble gum.'

Confidence.

That's one set.

And before long, my inbox would be overflowing with messages like 'This is Oh Dok-seo…' One might call it the rare case of bubble gum ripping out human teeth.

Logic had it, then, that this chronic serialization disease was almost certainly the curse that the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' cast in the end.

Honestly, it's the only explanation that makes sense. Only 200 chapters or so had accumulated across hundreds of cycles. If that's not an anomaly, then what is?

"Dok-seo, I'm fine, really," I said as I took off my barista apron. It had become soaked with the Prophet's snot and tears. "No writer in this world wants to take a break from serializing. Every writer would love to charge forward with their story, pulling off six or ten chapters a day. But when they can't do that, they shrink back, and if they keep shrinking, their heart shrivels up too."

"……"

"Don't be too hard on yourself. I really am okay—"

"It doesn't matter whether you're okay or not! That's a secondary issue!"

What?

"I'm! Not! Okay!"

"……"

What was I supposed to do with that?

Fortunately or unfortunately, it didn't seem like Oh Dok-seo had sought me out for answers. She chewed her nails (I've told her to stop countless times, but she never listens) and muttered to herself, "This won't do. It can't end like this… I have to find a way… No matter what… By any means necessary… I have to speed up my writing…"

And looking like Light Yagami after being cornered by L, she stomped out of the room.

Everything went quiet, like calm after a storm.

Let me remind you, this was in the 1,300-meter deep section of the café hideout. There weren't many of them, but we definitely had a few customers present, and among them was Ha-yul.

As a witness to the youthful drama, Lee Ha-yul said the obvious line.

"Oppa, aren't you going to follow her?"

"It's fine. She might wander a bit, but she'll pull herself together soon enough. Instead of chasing after her and worrying over every little thing, I'd rather believe in her and wait."

"You're just too lazy, right?"

This is why I don't like sharp kids.

So, it had been the usual routine for Oh Dok-seo to write a few chapters, then toss the first version over with a message saying, "Sorry! Next cycle's me, do something with this…!"

But surprisingly, in the 888th cycle, a new route emerged, one even I hadn't anticipated.

[LiteraryGirl] <Regressor's Epilogue> will now be serialized daily at 16:00.

It was nothing short of a miracle.

To help you understand the gravity of this miracle, let me explain further: Oh Dok-seo originally serialized three days a week. But now, her rate had increased to daily serialization.

Have you ever seen such a thing?

You haven't. And you probably never will. Once an author's serialization frequency decreases, it's like the balance of a bad credit holder's account—it never increases again.

Yet Oh Dok-seo did it.

[LiteraryGirl] Regressor's Epilogue Chapter 273 (1 day ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Regressor's Epilogue Chapter 272 (2 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Regressor's Epilogue Chapter 271 (3 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Regressor's Epilogue Chapter 270 (4 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Regressor's Epilogue Chapter 269 (5 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Regressor's Epilogue Chapter 268 (6 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Regressor's Epilogue Chapter 267 (7 days ago)

Not even a minute late—perfectly on time.

And there was something even more chilling.

[LiteraryGirl] Regressor's Epilogue Chapter 276 (5 minutes ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Regressor's Epilogue Chapter 275 (5 minutes ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Regressor's Epilogue Chapter 274 (5 minutes ago)

At least once a week, she'd drop three chapters in a row! Sometimes, she'd even go as far as releasing ten chapters at once.

Naturally, the SG Net novel board was buzzing. Readers, who used to eagerly await the delay notices so they could mock them, were now busy commenting.

- Anonymous: Hey, what's going on lately? Why isn't LiteraryGirl late anymore??

- Anonymous: She even does batch releases now; she's gone mad;;

- Anonymous: She awakened lmao

- Anonymous: Oh Dok-seo<< tbh if you also think they're outshining OldManGoryeo, big thumbs up lolol

OldManGoryeo: Big thumbs up lololol

Anonymous: ?

The readers of SG Net entered an unexpected LiteraryGirl worship week.

But not everyone joined the worship.

-[Baekhwa] SixthGrader: Guys, guys; don't you think LiteraryGirl's writing has gotten a little weird lately? >_<);;

Every now and then, you'd see comments like this.

Anonymous: Flat-earther caught

Anonymous: You too? I've gotten that same feeling, like LiteraryGirl's writing has gotten really shallow lately.

Anonymous: For real, it was so good when the chapters released whenever, but now I'm thinking of dropping it.

Anonymous: The writing's kinda weird ㅇㅇ;;

I tilted my head in confusion.

'But Dok-seo's writing isn't bad?'

Lately, I had been holding off on reading Dok-seo's novel. I didn't want to stress her out by making it obvious that I was keeping up with it.

'Did she sacrifice the quality of the writing in exchange for a regular serialization schedule?'

If so, unlike the readers on SG Net, I actually thought it was a good thing. Oh Dok-seo was a little too obsessed with the quality of her writing. It would be better for her mental health to let go a bit and focus on the daily task of writing, instead of fixating on perfection.

'She's probably stressing over the negative comments again, so I should bring her some coffee to show my support.'

And so it was that, in addition to being a café barista, I volunteered as a delivery person.

'She's working so hard on her serialization!'

Moved by a sense of admiration, I was about to knock on her door, but then I froze.

Through the crack in the door.

My vision, enhanced by my aura, caught sight of Oh Dok-seo's laptop screen at just the right angle.

>> **Please enter a prompt…**

A question mark popped up in my mind.

Before my brain could answer that question, Oh Dok-seo's fingers danced across the laptop keyboard in a rapid-fire *tatatatak*. With the grace of a pianist, her fingers typed the following words into the blinking prompt on the screen:

>> **Protagonist: The Undertaker, Regressor, 300th Cycle, Starts at Busan Station, Strange Story**

Oh Dok-seo clicked enter. Moments later, the laptop screen began to spew out sentences.

The Undertaker let out his 300th strange sigh as he donned the black suit he bought at Busan Station.

The 300th strange story of the regressor, The Undertaker, at Busan Station was about to begin.

"Phew." Oh Dok-seo wiped her forehead. "Worked hard today! Serialization done!"

"……"

Uh.

Dok-seo…?

Footnotes:

1 - Derived from "Hell Joseon" (헬조선), a slang term used by some South Koreans to criticize their own country, implying that living in South Korea is like living in hell due to various social, economic, or political pressures. Joseon refers to the Joseon Dynasty, a historical period in Korea, often used in a modern context to refer to Korea in general.

Chapter 199

The Wicked One II

Sinnoa

I'll give you a heads-up. Oh Dok-seo may have an extraordinary knack for idiocy, but she wasn't a complete fool. Despite her appearance, she could handle herself alone in most voids and carry her own weight.

In other words, while she might leave her door "slightly" ajar while writing her novel, she wasn't so brainless as to fully expose her actions.

And yet, here the door was, open. In the end, I ended up witnessing the crime scene.

So then.

"Dok-seo, what on earth are you doing right now?"

The person who left the door open was none other than Sim Ah-ryeon. Not only did she flaunt her idiocy, but she also held the top spot as "SG-Net's Idiot of the Year" for six consecutive years.

In this round, the 888th, she wasn't cosplaying as the Saintess of the North. She was just living as Dok-seo's roommate.

Sim Ah-ryeon urgently grabbed Dok-seo's shoulders. "Could it be that you're using AI generation again? You said you wouldn't use it anymore..."

"No, you can't...! You promised it would be the last time! But here you are again, right before the serialization deadline, giving in to that AI temptation!"

"Oho! How dare you call it AI temptation!" Dok-seo shouted with the power of the Lion's Roar, as if addressing a lowly peasant. "This

is nothing more than a new method of writing for the new era! I, the great Literary Girl, am merely keeping up with the trends, mastering them tirelessly, and applying cutting-edge technology as an auxiliary tool for writing!"

"That doesn't make it right. If you keep depending on such... dark arts, not even the meager strengths you originally had will remain."

"Argh! I said, let go!" With a forceful shove, Dok-seo knocked Ah-ryeon to the ground.

"Kyaaah!" she screamed as she fell with the grace of a tragic heroine. "Writing produced through such AI temptation isn't your work anymore, Dok-seo..."

"How dare you say that! Are you serious? I, the Literary Girl, generated the prompts and typed them myself! Of course, it's my writing!"

"Do you really believe that?"

"Of course! It's no different from a painter wielding a brush, using colors that already exist, or a photographer using a ready-made camera to take pictures. It's all the same artistic act, an act of creation! Your narrow-mindedness is what's stopping you from embracing the new era's trends! That's why it takes you 10 or 20 hours just to finish one illustration!"

"That's nonsense... Dok-seo, cameras and AI generation are completely different."

"In what way?"

"Try reading this garbage sentence out loud." Sim Ah-ryeon held up the laptop. Then, she unleashed one of the most wicked and vicious methods for killing a writer—an impromptu reading session.

"Look at this: 'The Undertaker let out a strange sigh for the 300th time and took out the black suit he bought at Busan Station... The 300th strange Busan Station story of the regressor protagonist, the Undertaker, was about to begin...' Do you really think this is your writing? Were you always this terrible...?"

"Gah!"

Dok-seo spat blood. Not physical blood, but the blood of her soul. Sim Ah-ryeon had the nose of a shark, capable of sniffing out the scent of others' spilt blood with uncanny precision. Despite her cute appearance, she was a predator in the food chain.

"Your novels were always frustratingly long-winded, making it hard to tell if they were literary works or some kind of endurance test... But they were still better than this trash! No wonder you're always getting crushed by me in the SG-Net Novel Serialization Board rankings, like a worthless hack..."

"Hey!" Dok-seo snapped. "Your novel ranks high only because of the illustrations! You keep plastering them all over the author's notes, that's why your ranking is so high!"

"Oh... So you think readers are sticking around for the illustrations? That's a pathetic excuse... But I know something even more pathetic than making excuses... It's the fact that you keep generating those AI-written sentences... They're pure garbage..."

"It's just that I haven't finished revising yet!"

Dok-seo snatched the laptop back from Ah-ryeon and started typing away with the dexterity of an AI pianist, entering new prompts.

Massage the sentences in the style of Chuck Palahniuk, add a dash of Stephen King, and a pinch of Lee Yeongdo.

Soon, the screen displayed new sentences.

I sighed again. Three hundred times now. Each breath mingles with the stifling air of Busan Station, morphing into something almost tangible before it dissipates into nothingness. Maybe it will wedge itself into the cracks of this city's concrete, festering into something vile.

I pulled out the black suit, the one from the underground mall here at Busan Station. Never been cleaned in three hundred lives, but it’s

fused with me now—my skin, my shadow, my constant, unrelenting prison.

The show is set to start. Curtain rises on performance number 300. The stage is this monstrous station, and I am both actor and spectator, sometimes even the sacrificial lamb in this endless, twisted play.

A whisper slithers into my ear. The voice of Busan Station, like a cold draft: “Ready, Undertaker?” I grinned. Ready? Hell yes. My heart hammers in my chest, bracing for the next nightmarish chapter in this relentless, haunting saga.

———————————

Dok-seo pointed at the screen. "See? Isn't this way better than those mass-produced sentences from earlier? I'm sure the readers won't have any complaints!"

"Dok-seo..."

"This is the power of my prompt engineering! My own uniqueness! The originality of AI art!"

"You're really doing something crazy, Dok-seo..." Sim Ah-ryeon pouted and sniffled. "This is exactly why AI generation is different from a camera... You know that, right? AI uses learning data, which is the creative work that others have poured their sweat and blood into... How can that possibly be your own writing, Dok-seo?"

"It's fine! Chuck Palahniuk and Stephen King are public figures! Their work is public property!"

"Oh my god..."

"And besides, you know that canned hotel where all the writers of the Korean Peninsula stay? Who owns that? It's the Undertaker, isn't it? I'm writing for him! All the writers on the Korean Peninsula owe him! So... No one can criticize my noble cause! If they don't like it, they should write their own regressor memoirs!"

Seriously?

"Hahaha! That's right! I can look up to the sky without a shred of shame! I'll prove that this cutting-edge future technology, which is bound to be persecuted, is the way forward! I am a Prompt Artist!"

My heart and Sim Ah-ryeon's heartbeat resonated. To be able to force such a guilty rhythm upon my heart—she was truly no ordinary being.

"Dok-seo... How did you end up like this...? Even the guild leader won't be able to forgive such a heinous act..."

And thus, the genre takes a sharp drift. As Dok-seo ascended the throne of the corrupt AI and Sim Ah-ryeon blamed herself for failing to stop her, the story shifted from a Blizzard-style RPG cinematic movie to—

A horror movie. Sim Ah-ryeon’s head snapped up to look straight into my eyes.

"Right, Guild Leader?"

"....."

To be honest, I wanted to abandon my coffee and everything else and moonwalk out of there like Michael Jackson. However, the scene before me had some drug-like quality to it. It was impossible to look away.

There was undoubtedly some addictive substance in Sim Ah-ryeon's voice and tone that humanity has yet to identify. I sincerely hope that my readers also take note of this bizarre fact.

"Huh? Wait, why is there a... a man here?"

Most likely, Sim Ah-ryeon had been secretly leaving the door open every time Dok-seo started writing (or "prompting") for the past few days.

Why? Because she expected me, the Undertaker, to visit at some point.

As a result, Sim Ah-ryeon's strategy was a great success. Dok-seo’s

chair creaked as she turned her gaze toward me.

"How long have you been... standing there?"

I subtly averted my gaze. "Well. Does that question really need an answer, Dok-seo?"

"It does. To be precise, there's nothing more important in the world right now than that answer."

Is that so? If it's that important...

"I've been here from the beginning."

"The beginning? What do you mean by beginning? The very beginning? Or maybe a bit later beginning? Huh? Specifically, what kind of beginning are you talking about?"

"Well... Specifically, since the moment you typed 'Protagonist: Undertaker, Regressor' as a prompt..."

"Aaaaah!"

A scream erupted.

"Aaaaah! Ugh! Aaaaaah!"

Another scream erupted.

"Gaaaaaah!"

And yet another scream erupted.

Then, Dok-seo evolved from a bipedal creature into a multi-legged one.

For the record, the most famous multi-legged creatures are centipedes and millipedes. Both share the trait of crawling on the ground.

"Why?!"

Dok-seo squirmed on the floor, showing signs of respiratory distress.

"Why?! Why did you just stand there and watch?!"

The desperate wail echoed as if it came from the deepest, most secretive abyss of Inunaki Tunnel.

A faint sound, like air leaking from a balloon, could also be heard. It was a sound so faint that only my unusually sharp ears could have picked it up.

The source was Sim Ah-ryeon's lips. She was chuckling quietly, her shoulders shaking.

So these are the ones who are supposed to be the hope of the Korean Peninsula and, by extension, the world. No wonder the world is doomed...

"Well. Dok-seo. Honestly, I'm not sure what to say to you."

"Don't say anything! Just don't say anything at all...!"

"But I still remember it clearly. The moment when you delivered that epic line: ‘I'll write your story, Mr. Undertaker.’ With my Complete Memory, it's as vivid as if I heard it just six seconds ago..."

"Nooooo!"

Thud!

Dok-seo rolled across the floor and crashed into the table leg. The laptop fell and landed on her shoulder.

"This... This isn't me! This is... I didn't... I didn't want to do this... Wait! Anomaly! Yes, Mr. Undertaker! This laptop is actually a relic of the Admin of the Infinite Metagame! That Admin deceived me! At some point, it turned into a program like ChatGPT and appeared... So that's why!"

"Dok-seo."

With a sudden motion, Sim Ah-ryeon hugged Dok-seo. She gently patted Dok-seo's back with her fingertips. Softly, tenderly, like a Saintess. Dok-seo couldn't see it, but I could observe Ah-ryeon's face

very well. She was grinning wickedly.

"It's okay. Dok-seo... You've certainly done something trashy, and now the guild leader, with his Complete Memory, will forever, for hundreds or even thousands of years, cherish this dark history of yours as a permanent black mark. Even if the world ends, your dark history will just be passed on to the next one... But people can repent for their trashy deeds. Yes, even if the stain on your life is indelible and will never be erased..."

"I'm going to kill you...!"

Today was clearly the day Sim Ah-ryeon would gain a lot of experience points.

I pulled the villain OldManGoryeo off Dok-seo and gently patted Dok-seo's shoulder. "It's okay, Dok-seo. I think I may have unintentionally placed too much pressure on you to write."

"Mr. Undertaker..."

"Take a break." I smiled gently. "Take a hiatus until you feel completely comfortable writing again."

"Can I really do that...?"

"Of course. I'll always be here, waiting for you, Dok-seo."

"Mr. Undertaker...!"

That day, a notice was posted on the SG-Net Novel Serialization Board.

[Author LiteraryGirl Oh Dok-seo... is taking a break for some time to recharge... (5 minutes ago)]

The reaction of SG-Net readers was, well, not too bad. Given how strange Literary Girl's writing had become recently, there was considerable hope that she would return in good form after a recharge.

And then...

Time passed.

[Author LiteraryGirl Oh Dok-seo... is taking a break for some time to recharge... (7 years ago)]

Click.

I opened the comments on the notice. Thousands of comments scrolled down.

-Anonymous: Is there any other writer in the world who says they're taking a break and actually ends up resting for 7 years???

-[Baekhwa] TwelfthGrader: Visiting the holy site again this year >_<)!!

-Anonymous: What kind of writer takes 7 years to recharge? Is 7 years "a short break"???

-Anonymous: I'm dropping this. Writer, you should just get off too^^

-OldManGoryeo: I heard she went missing in the void... Please come back, writer ㅠㅠ

Anonymous: I saw her on the Free Board?

-Anonymous: Looks like LiteraryGirl woke up late again today. What a surprise.

-Anonymous: I started reading this series when I was in middle school. Will I see the ending before I die?

-[National Road] Officer: Honestly, shouldn't you refund us based on common human decency?

-Anonymous: LiteraryGirl you piece of shit!!!

"....."

Ah.

Dok-seo...

Footnotes:

Chapter 200

The Wicked One III

Sinnoa

Have you ever heard of "Dok-seo's Paradox"?

Of course, you haven’t. That's because I made it up.

As mentioned in this story, Oh Dok-seo of the 888th round had fallen into an unprecedented slump. Relying on AI just because she couldn’t write—there’s probably no more shameful existence in the history of literature than "Author Oh Dok-seo," akin to trying to pull non-vulgar words from Seo Gyu's mouth.

But what about "Awakener Oh Dok-seo"?

"Mister."

"Hm?"

"I'm going to Seoul for a bit."

After seven years of hiatus, the readers of SG Net were so devastated that they designated Oh Dok-seo as a public enemy of the martial arts world. Whenever Literary Girl popped up in SG Net’s freeboard, readers would swarm and hurl insults, solidifying their camaraderie. In response, Oh Dok-seo displayed the cliché of a protagonist targeted as a public enemy in martial arts.

She had truly "awakened."

"Why Seoul all of a sudden?"

"Well. I just feel like raiding the Tower of Sauron."

"...Isn’t that place a bit challenging?"

"That’s what makes it fun."

Oh Dok-seo. Hobbies: Void hunting.

With a carefree tone, as if she were just going for a walk, Oh Dok-seo cheerfully left the Inunaki Tunnel and really did return after destroying a Great Void all by herself.

"Tsk. There were rumors that there was a One Piece treasure at the Tower of Sauron, but it was all bullshit."

"....."

"Kyaaa! After taking down a void, nothing beats gulping down a cup of espresso from you, Mister. This is what life is about."

"Dok-seo."

"Hm?"

"That coffee cup is expensive, so please don't recklessly channel your Aura through it. If it breaks, it'll be impossible to find another one like it."

"Oh! Sorry, Mister. I've been running my shield 24/7 lately. I'm still not as skilled as you, so I'm a bit clumsy!"

"No... you're doing really well. Now, I'm not even sure if Yo-hwa could guarantee a win against you."

"Come on! I'm not that good yet! Hehe."

Bzzz!

Oh Dok-seo's full-body smile radiated with a blood-red aura, shimmering intensely before my very eyes.

It was the very essence of Conqueror's Haki.[1]

I felt I'd just joined a gym with a friend so we could stay in shape, then that friend went and declared they'd be entering the Mr. Olympia bodybuilding competition.

Some guild members discreetly backed away from the

overwhelming aura.

"...I'll be going now, G-Guild Leader..."

"...Bye, oppa."

Sim Ah-ryeon, who used to mock Oh Dok-seo at every opportunity a few years prior, now couldn't even meet Dok-seo's eyes. Her survival instincts kicked in, warning her that one wrong move might get her killed. Lee Ha-yul was no different. Both trembled like small, frightened creatures.

In contrast, Oh Dok-seo glanced at the two retreating figures and smirked with a disparaging *hmph*. Despite the blatant mockery, Sim Ah-ryeon and Lee Ha-yul were sent fleeing in an even more pathetic display, unable to even attempt resistance.

I looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "How did things end up like this?"

It wasn't always this way.

"Mister, I'm going to the Void."

"The Void? All of a sudden?"

"Yeah. I think what I lack as a writer right now is a wealth of experience."

Oh Dok-seo had said it solemnly seven years ago.

"Life and death. Reason and anomaly. Only by entering a battlefield where sunlight and darkness clash violently will I, Literary Girl, finally be able to strike the typewriter…"

Like many writers, she was under the delusion that high-density experiences would proportionally result in an epic output.

She roamed the Voids like a madwoman. While a normal person wouldn't enter a Great Void even for a billion dollars, Dok-seo wanted to go in herself.

“If only I could escape this shitty slump! I’d even sell my soul!”

It was an act of reckless abandon that would normally require ten lives to survive, but Dok-seo had me by her side. From the start, Dok-seo had heard my "tales" more frequently and earlier than anyone else. The only person who could be called my direct disciple, especially as a specialist in anomalies, was Oh Dok-seo.

Whenever she was in real danger, I’d come to the rescue upon hearing from the Saintess.

Thus it was.

“Mister”

“Hm?”

“I’m no longer afraid of anomalies.”

For some reason, unlike in other rounds, Oh Dok-seo’s real-life combat muscles became more defined, and the hue of her aura grew more terrifying.

She declared this expressionlessly:

“Nowadays, when I see those damn anomalies, all I can think is, who the fuck do these assholes think they are, daring to challenge humans?”

“……”

Dok-seo's Paradox.

When "Author Oh Dok-seo" focused on writing my tales into a novel, it meant she had less time to train herself, weakening "Awakener Oh Dok-seo." When "Author Oh Dok-seo" fell into a slump and couldn’t continue the novel and instead went wandering, it meant "Awakener Oh Dok-seo" became stronger.

And as we’ve seen, Oh Dok-seo in the 888th round had fallen into an epic, prolonged slump.

In other words?

“Argh. Sitting at home is making me restless. I’m itching for some action. I can’t take it anymore, Mister! I’m going to find a nearby anomaly, beat it up, and be right back!”

“……”

“I took down an alien anomaly one-on-one last time, so this time I should try handling two at once!”

The longer the hiatus dragged on.

As the years stretched from four to five, then six to seven.

Oh Dok-seo’s aura began to burn like wildfire.

Even Seo Gyu, who had anger management issues and lashed out at anyone and everyone, started avoiding her.

Hah…

Then, at some point, the overwhelming aura that overflowed from Oh Dok-seo’s entire body completely vanished.

The aura wasn’t gone. It had simply been perfectly "contained."

She opened her eyes quietly.

“Mister. No, Master.”

“……”

“I think I finally understand what aura is. The realm that you’ve been looking at… this must be it.”

Yes.

In the 888th round, Oh Dok-seo had fallen from grace, becoming an FFF-class writer—

But at the same time, by sacrificing the resentment, grievances, and curses of her readers, she had evolved into an SSS-class Awakener…!

One day, a notice was posted on the peaceful Novel Serialization Board of SG Net.

[LiteraryGirl] It's me. (5 minutes ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Author Literary Girl Oh Dok-seo… is taking a break for some time to recharge… (7 years ago)

The readers were shocked.

The writer—or rather, that bastard of a writer who had been shamelessly inactive for seven years—had suddenly posted a new notice, writing a load of crap on the freeboard.

‘Could it be a re-serialization?’

‘Is it a rule of the universe that a writer must return after seven years?’

Thump.

The readers eagerly clicked on the notice. Although they had cursed the writer to death until now, they still couldn’t forget the unique taste of this series, and they had read it three, even four times over.

They didn’t think too much about why the writer, who had always started with "This is Oh Dok-seo..." suddenly changed the tone to "It's me." It wasn’t the time to ponder such details.

Soon, the readers who carefully read the notice began to doubt their eyesight.

———————————

[Literary Girl] It's me.

I apologize for going silent and suspending the serialization for 7 years.

I’m a lousy writer.

But I want to rest more.

?

Question marks popped up in the readers' minds.

Regardless, the notice continued.

I don't want to drag this out with a long-winded excuse.

I want to rest, and some of you probably want to beat me up and make me continue the serialization.

What do you need to get what you want?

Fancy words? Glorious connections? Elaborate schemes?

All of that is wrong.

The answer is "fists."

??

Starting next Monday, for 4 weeks, 28 days, I'll be at Busan Babel Tower Plaza from 6 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Let's fight one-on-one.

For 28 days, I'll accept only one challenger per day, on a first-come, first-served basis.

If even one reader manages to defeat me, I'll start serializing the next chapter of *The Regressor's Epilogue* the very next day without any excuses.

This isn't about posting one chapter and then stopping. I don't play games like that. I'll come back and serialize on a consistent

schedule.

If no one defeats me, I'll officially declare *The Regressor's Epilogue* permanently "dropped" after this long hiatus.

It's a life-or-death match.

Your desire for the serialization to continue. My desire for it to stop.

Let's see whose will is stronger, using only our fists.

???

Even after reading the entire notice, the question marks in the readers' minds didn't disappear.

But, a lot of text started to appear in front of those question marks.

'What the hell is this crazy bitch talking about?'

The readers were bewildered by the notice, which carried the unmistakable scent of iron, of barbells and dumbbells. Literary Girl's name, composed of "Literature" and "Girl," had nothing to do with steel, after all. It's a name favored by those with slender frames, isn't it?

SG Net quickly erupted into chaos.

-Anonymous: Was the account hacked?

The first theory that emerged was the "hacked account theory." However, unlike the weak and fragile pre-apocalypse internet environment, hacking and other petty tricks didn't work in this post-apocalyptic world. SG Net accounts were tightly linked to the user's soul.

The theory was quickly dismissed.

-Anonymous: This bitch is smart lol. Feels guilty for ghosting for 7 years, so they're setting up an excuse to return lolol

[Baekhwa] TwelfthGrader: Ah, I get it! Totally understandable >_<)!!

-Anonymous: Yeah, our author feels guilty for making us wait for 7 years, so they're planning to get punched a few times before coming back hahaha

Anonymous: Yeah, if we waited 7 years, they should at least get punched hahaha

Anonymous: A head-broken reader vs. a head-breaking author... This is epic...

-Anonymous: Literary Girl is kinda smart.

Next, the "excuse theory" gained traction. The notice was seen as a publicity stunt, an event designed to reignite interest in *The Regressor's Epilogue* after it had waned over the seven-year break.

The explanation was so reasonable that the excuse theory quickly became the mainstream interpretation. Existing readers treated it as a "fan meeting," while new readers saw it as "a fun promotional event by an intriguing author."

-Anonymous: Anyone going to Busan from Incheon? Let's carpool??

-Anonymous: The chance to see the author in person has me excited.

-Anonymous: Attention, TRE fans! Recommended budget accommodations in Busan! ☆Includes a list of great eateries☆

For the first time in a while, Literary Girl's readers stopped firing off curses like machine guns and started chatting cheerfully. These were the pitiful citizens who still believed that human affairs somehow followed sound logic, even after they'd had their own taste of anomalies.

Of course, there were a few dissenting voices.

-[National Road] Officer: Everyone, a public gathering is all well and good, but the author has stated that they'll only accept one

challenger per day. That means the reader side can only send up to 28 champions. Shouldn't we discuss how to select these 28 champions and their methods?

Anonymous Lol, what is this?

Anonymous Why are you being so serious, lol?

But when had rational minority opinions ever been adopted on this land?

Even though the mood had finally lifted into one of celebration, the dissenting voices were only met with scorn and ignorance.

The fans of *The Regressor's Epilogue* gathered with high hopes at Busan Babel Tower Plaza.

Monday. 6 a.m.

Oh Dok-seo showed up at the plaza as promised.

"Author!"

Fans who had been camping out in the plaza since last night rushed over to Oh Dok-seo.

It might seem ridiculous to be so rowdy at 6 a.m., but in the post-apocalypse era where modern civilization had been erased, the concept of time was quite different.

The faces of the people, forced into following a healthy lifestyle, were bright and fresh.

"Wow, you're really Literary Girl!"

"I'm a fan! Author!"

"Please shake my hand!"

Oh Dok-seo looked around silently with a tilted head. Standing with her weight perfectly balanced on two feet, her arms crossed, and wearing a cap that had long since grown old and worn out, she

scanned the twenty or so fans.

"Who's the representative?"

"Huh?"

"The reader representative who'll be facing me," she clarified. "As promised, I'll fight to the death with one of you today."

"Ah..."

"Me! Me, me, me! Author! Me!"

A fan, who prided themselves on being quick-witted, eagerly raised their hand.

The others sighed. *I could've raised my hand first!* they thought with genuine regret. *But why is our author speaking like this? Isn't it a bit... stupid? No, our author's foolish charm was always part of her appeal.*

"Hmm." Regardless of what others thought, Dok-seo scanned her opponent up and down.

And then she started chewing gum.

"I'll give you nine seconds."

"Huh? What?"

"I'm giving you nine seconds. I'll let you attack me nine times first."

"Oh. Ohhh, you mean... that's from martial arts, right? Haha! Okay, got it!"

The naive fan laughed, thinking, *Our author is so generous to give me nine free punches! I better hit lightly. If I go too hard on her, she might get upset!*

"Attack with the intent to kill," came the command.

"Haha! Sure! Yeaaah!"

The fan roared, but his hand lightly slapped Oh Dok-seo's cheek as

if swatting a mosquito. It was a tame slap, not nearly deserving of the term "punch," but both the fan and the surrounding spectators reacted as if it were a big deal.

"Ahhhh! I really hit her!"

"That’s too much!"

"I’m sorry, author! Here come the other eight punches!"

Click. Click.

Everyone laughed. Some even took photos and videos to upload to SG Net, eagerly anticipating the return of their favorite series after seven years of hiatus.

"Hm."

Only Oh Dok-seo remained stoic.

"Done hitting me?"

"Yes!"

"Then it’s my turn. Here I come."

"Ahaha, n—"

BOOOOM!

There was a loud explosion.

The fan probably tried to say "no," but the fan couldn’t finish the one-syllable word—the most commonly spoken word by Koreans—simply because he was too far away from the plaza.

Everyone blinked.

"Huh?"

"What?"

The fan was embedded in the building wall on the other side of the

plaza. All that was left was a cartoonish outline of the figure in the wall, like something out of an American cartoon.

Silence fell over the area.

"I didn’t kill him."

Smack, smack—Oh Dok-seo chewed her gum.

"I wrapped his entire body in aura before hitting him, so nothing should be broken. He’s probably just knocked out from the speed."

"....."

"This is the last time I’ll hold back. Come back tomorrow."

Pop—the gum bubble burst.

No one in the plaza realized that Dok-seo had meticulously controlled her aura to inflate the bubble and then burst it in the most beautiful shape possible. Nor did they want to know.

They had just learned too many facts, ones too shocking for the human brain to process.

‘The author—’

‘—beat up a reader?’

‘And not just any reader—’

‘—a loyal fan who not only waited for years for the author to return but also camped out overnight just to see her?’

‘What’s more—’

‘—an awakener beat up a regular person?’

‘And all this—’

‘—just because she didn’t want to continue a series she put on hiatus seven years ago, just because she didn’t want to write anymore?’

The readers' minds were conflicted.

'Is that—'

'—really a human being?'

Oh Dok-seo walked away, her back to the morning sun. The radiant dawn light poured down from the horizon.

Her name was Oh Dok-seo.

The world's greatest master of martial arts.

And the most wicked author of all time.

Footnotes:

1 - In *One Piece*, Haki is the power to harness one's spiritual power to perform various superhuman feats, such as producing a protective coating over one's body or, in the case of Conqueror's Haki, overwhelming the willpower of others.

Chapter 201

The Wicked One IV

Sinnoa

Another day passed, and another innocent reader was sent flying.

Just as their honor was dragged through the mud, so too was the honor of the martial arts world. It was shocking enough for a reader to beat up a writer, but now, the writer had punched her readers away!

Readers who had come down to Busan with hopes of getting Literary Girl's autograph hastily convened an emergency meeting.

"This morning, the second champion was also defeated."

"....."

"I never imagined Literary Girl would be this powerful. We had no idea."

Among them was, surprisingly, Cheon Yo-hwa, the Demoness of Baekhwa Girls' High. In fact, she had been a fervent supporter of *The Regressor's Epilogue*, also known as TRE, since its early days.

When TRE hadn’t even reached its 12th chapter, Yo-hwa had stumbled upon the novel and immediately ran to the freeboard, posting three consecutive recommendation threads, begging people to read this "masterpiece." To say they were "recommendations" would be an understatement. Considering her social status and temper, it was practically a decree from the Minister of Education.

From that day on, the students of Baekhwa Girls' High had one more textbook in their backpacks. If the revered student council president should ever ask, "What's your favorite arc of TRE?" any student could immediately answer, "The Pathbreaker!"

As such, Yo-hwa was one of the most furious about the "Seven-Year

Hiatus Incident." It wasno an exaggeration to say that TRE gained rapid momentum and readership largely thanks to her recommendation threads! And now, after daring to take a hiatus, the author was officially planning to drop the series entirely. It was truly infuriating.

"First, the ordinary folks should step back. If things go wrong, you might actually die."

"But..."

"No buts. Based on my personal investigation into the matter... It's shocking to say, but Literary Girl's level is almost on par with mine. Maybe even stronger."

Murmur, murmur.

Five hundred readers buzzed with anxiety. Stronger than the Demoness of Baekhwa? Was there really someone of that caliber in the Korean Peninsula besides the Three Witches and the Three Great Demons?

"Most of you probably read illegal copies, right? What nerve do you have to attend a fan meeting? Just get lost."

The ordinary folks had no choice but to leave, tears of frustration streaming down their faces. Not even being able to access SG Net, how else were they supposed to read TRE? Not being born with the Awakener silver spoon served them a lifetime's worth of regret.

Once the ordinary folks left, only 200 people remained in the meeting room. Finally, Yu Ji-won, who had been silently brooding, spoke up.

"I warned you this might happen. We can't take Oh Dok-seo's strength lightly, and we should've been more careful in selecting our champions. With two people down, we only have 26 chances left."

Glances of contempt were cast at Ji-won, who seemed to live solely to say, "I told you so." If she weren't a government official, she would've tasted the bitter side of the martial arts world long ago.

Snap.

Yo-hwa raised her hand, and the tense atmosphere immediately eased. "Yes, that's right. We underestimated Literary Girl. Looking back, TRE was full of details that only a Void expert could capture. Our author has been a master from the start."

"Indeed..."

"Now that you mention it, it did feel strangely realistic."

Sighs of realization echoed around the room.

The actual truth was that during the seven-year hiatus, Oh Dok-seo had power-leveled while the novel's details had simply been provided by the Regressor. But the readers had no way of knowing that.

"If we let our guard down now, we'll only become a laughingstock. Let's proceed with a carousel battle."

"A carousel battle?"

"We'll select the 24 strongest readers, including those who haven't arrived in Busan yet. I'll be the 25th, and I'll fight after you all."

"Oh."

And so it was decided that the plan would be to force Literary Girl into 24 days of straight battles, all culminating in Cheon Yo-hwa, the strongest reader, delivering the final blow.

It was a shameless strategy, but it was effective. To secure victory, one must be willing to set aside their pride.

Just as the crowd began to nod in agreement, Yo-hwa continued, "I think we should schedule the duels around 10:30 a.m. each day."

"Hmm? Are you planning to just let Literary Girl stand outside starting at 6 a.m.? If it's to wear her down, I agree, but someone of her caliber won't tire just from standing for a few hours."

"No." Yo-hwa shook her head. "We'll poison the Babel Tower Plaza."

"...What?"

"The author bitch said it in the notice. 'I'll be at the Busan Babel Tower Plaza from 6 a.m. to 11 a.m. for 28 days.'" A smile played about the Demoness's lips as she declared, "So if Literary Girl leaves the plaza first, she'll be breaking her own promise. We'll win by default."

"……!"

"Whatever happens at Babel Tower Plaza, the author bastard won't be able to run away. Even if the plaza is filled with poison gas and traps."

The readers were horrified. Such a wicked scheme! The Demoness of Baekhwa's infamy wasn't unfounded after all!

One of the Awakeners raised an objection.

"B-but President, isn't the Babel Tower Plaza technically under the jurisdiction of the National Road Management Corps? We can't just do whatever we want..."

Yo-hwa burst into a hearty laugh. "Why so scared? The operations team leader of the National Road Management Corps is right here, and I'm the student council president of Baekhwa Girls' High. What's there to worry about?"

Justice is on our side.

The Demoness's brazen boast was not mere empty words.

Cheon Yo-hwa immediately negotiated with the National Road Management Corps and Samcheon World and received permission to use the Babel Tower Plaza. Not only that, but she also set up a series of vicious traps.

"Hmm."

The next morning, Oh Dok-seo stepped into the plaza and looked

around.

—Ahhh—Ahhh—

Speakers were installed at the edges of the plaza, broadcasting a recording of Dang Seo-rin's Cursed Song Incantation on a loop.

As a highly skilled Awakener, Dok-seo could deduce its effects from the first few notes of the Samcheon Leader's melody.

"Physical weakening. Target designation. Sensory degradation. Triple-cast incantation."

It wasn't just the speakers that surrounded her.

Her readers.

During the night, reinforcements had arrived, swelling the crowd of reader's numbers to 300, who now encircled the plaza.

They didn't step inside the plaza, instead remaining at its boundary, standing on the edge.

Dok-seo scoffed. "Of course. This must be the plan of Baekhwa Girls' High's eternal dropout."

"....."

"Given your short education, even your so-called strategies are short-sighted."

Don't ask me why Oh Dok-seo's speech pattern suddenly changed like that. I guess her chuunibyou energy just worsened after playing around with that Infinite Metagame AI chatbot all the time.

Crunch.

Dok-seo dug a finger into her ear. Blood trickled out, only to stop abruptly.

She looked around and grinned. "I just destroyed my eardrums."

"....!"

"Samcheon Leader's feeble song doesn't affect me at all. If you have something to say, say it to my face. I can still read your lips."

Yo-hwa clicked her tongue.

It was true. The Cursed Song Incantation had such a weakness, making it more suitable for buffs rather than debuffs. After all, anomalies targeted by debuffs sometimes had no hearing, rendering the incantation useless.

But to think she would rupture her own eardrums without hesitation!

If she could control her aura that well, she could've just destroyed the speakers with a strike. The fact that she chose to damage her own eardrums instead was particularly idiotic...!

"It can't be helped. Activate the trap—"

"Permission denied."

BOOOOM!

Oh Dok-seo stomped the ground. Red aura surged through the ground like a wave. The plaza crumbled as if struck by an earthquake, reduced to crumbs along with the traps that had been set overnight.

"What...?"

"The relationship between a writer and their readers is pure of heart and spirit." Dok-seo's eyes narrowed. "To defile such a blank canvas with these dirty tricks is absurd. Truly wicked."

Unable to hold back any longer, one of the Awakeners screamed, "The wicked one is you, you crazy bitch!"

"Did we ask you to be diligent in your serialization?" screamed another. "We'd worship you like crazy if you even posted one chapter a month! But you're hell-bent on dropping the series for good? Whose fault is that?"

"I’m really disappointed in you, author!"

"How could you, after making us wait for seven years, punch us instead of apologizing? Literary Girl, are you even human?!"

Oh Dok-seo sneered.

Then she closed her eyes.

"I can’t see."

"What?"

"I can’t see anything, and I can’t hear anything. Because I don’t want to see or hear it. My will determines my reality. And the reality I’ve chosen is an eternal hiatus."

—Beep—Beeeeep—Beep—!

Her parents received their regards, and her species fluctuated between primate and mammal, but she remained unfazed.

She couldn’t hear it, after all.

Finally, someone couldn’t stand it any longer and charged. "You wicked piece of shit!"

It wasn’t just blind rage. Now deprived of both sight and hearing—the two most important senses for a human—it was the time to kill her if ever there was one.

But there was one thing the Awakener had overlooked.

As already proven, Oh Dok-seo in the 888th round was no longer human.

Hup!

Just as the Awakener’s blade was about to reach her cheek, Dok-seo swung her fist.

Boom!

Her left fist twisted the blade, and her right fist struck the enemy's abdomen squarely. The impact caused a storm to erupt.

The Awakener coughed, spitting blood. Without even a chance to scream, he collapsed. It was a one-hit KO.

"So slow. Even in falling."

"……!"

"When I stomped earlier, did you think I only destroyed the traps? How foolish. My energy spread across the entire plaza, so now this place and I are one. There's not a single movement—whether a step or a hand gesture—that escapes my senses."

The ultimate fantasy of all otaku: a Reality Marble!

Of course, Oh Dok-seo had been tirelessly working toward realizing her delusions for the past seven years. She had always been a prodigy, which was why the former Admin of the Infinite Metagame had chosen her as a rival to the Regressor.

"It seems too trivial to drag this out for weeks."

Dok-seo opened one eye and grinned. She had a natural talent for condensing the essence of an otaku into every pose, provoking an indescribable rage in those who saw her.

"Come on. If you want, all 26 of you can challenge me right here, right now."

"Tsk."

Yo-hwa bit her lip. If she retreated now after being so humiliated, Baekhwa Girls' High's honor would be trampled!

"...It can't be helped," she decided. "Next up, numbers 2 to 24, take your turns! It's okay if you don't win! Just do your best to wear that bitch of an author down!"

Dok-seo beckoned with a wiggle of her finger. "Come."

And the result was a series of crushing defeats.

Even though they were some of the foremost Awakeners on the Korean Peninsula, none of them lasted more than 20 moves, some falling in just one.

Even Cheon Yo-hwa, who went last, was defeated.

The spectators were horrified. How could a mere writer possess such overwhelming martial power?

No matter how many Voids she had conquered or how much time she spent leveling up in the Dream Simulation of the Rebirth Project, was it really possible for a person to become this strong?

Just because she didn't want to write?

Incredibly, it was possible. Oh Dok-seo, and the 25 readers sprawled on the plaza floor like corpses, proved that.

She harrumphed. "Disappointing. Even the Demoness of Baekhwa is only this strong."

"Tsk...!"

With Cheon Yo-hwa underfoot, Oh Dok-seo sneered. The most humiliating moment of the Demoness's life was being live-streamed into the brains of all the spectators.

"Now, there's no one left to stop my hiatus. Even though it was a life-or-death match, I mercifully spared your lives. Don't forget this mercy, and don't ever pester me to resume the series."

"It's... It's not over yet...!"

"Hmm?"

"You said 28 readers in your notice... Including me, 27 have fallen. So there's still one more left!"

Dok-seo tilted her head. "You were the strongest among my readers. How could anyone else defeat me?"

"There is someone!"

"Interesting. Who?"

Tears welled up in Cheon Yo-hwa's eyes. She gathered her remaining energy and shouted, "Teacheeeer! Help meeeeee!"

Dok-seo flinched and took a step back. Then she quickly turned her head, scanning the area. She didn't need to search for long. Soon, her eyes found me, and her expression froze.

"M-Master."

"....."

"Wh-when did you... get here?"

I felt a little sorry for Dok-seo, thinking she must be reliving her trauma from seven years ago, but I knew I had to say what was necessary.

"Dok-seo, you're talking like an idiot. Let's go back to the way you used to talk."

"Ugh."

"And to answer your question, I've been here from the beginning, of course."

For the past seven years, the Saintess's Clairvoyance had been monitoring Oh Dok-seo, and I had subscribed to her growth story through the Saintess.

Why wouldn't I?

As you may remember, the reason I first took an interest in Oh Dok-seo in the 555th round was simply because "she was fun." Considering how many regressors give up because they get bored, Dok-seo was the light of my life.

I put on a solemn expression. "Why? Did you really think I wouldn't come here? I was almost always the first person to read your drafts.

Did you think I wouldn’t notice that you were deliberately avoiding me, using Void exploration as an excuse?"

"M-M-Mister..."

"And since you asked me a question, I’ll ask you one in return."

I looked around the plaza, now a complete mess, and at Cheon Yo-hwa, who was in tatters, then finally back at Oh Dok-seo.

Now, she was more of a Martial King than a writer.

"Answer me honestly, Dok-seo."

"Yeah..."

"Have you been corrupted?"

"Ah. Yeah."

Well.

That figures...

Footnotes:

Chapter 202

The Wicked One V

Sinnoa

National Road Management Corps Conference Room.

"I'm sorry..."

Oh Dok-seo knelt down, raising her hands in surrender.

The others in the conference room looked at her with disdain. The shame and humiliation she felt were so intense that her deltoid muscles trembled, a weight only a teenager's fresh brain could bear.

"Pfft, *pffffft*..."

Sim Ah-ryeon, one of the people gathered for the meeting, finally had her moment, delivering a sound, verbal one-two punch.

"A Fallen One... An Awakener who got corrupted because she didn't want to write. Even I fell while blocking a Monster Wave as the Northern Saintess, but you... You're even less of a human being than I am. Please, grow up mentally. If you keep living like a child, you'll just be a burden to everyone around you."

"Damn it..."

Dok-seo trembled. To be publicly acknowledged as having a lower mental age than Old Man Goryeo—she must have been impressed with herself for achieving such a miracle of difficulty.

Noh Do-hwa, the commander of the National Road Management Corps, was also present in the conference room. She leaned her chin on her hand and looked at me.

"Is it really possible to become a Corrupted for such a ridiculous reason, Awakener Undertaker?"

"I'm as surprised as you are. It's the first time I've encountered something like this. But, well, I'm almost certain an Outer God meddled somewhere along the way."

"An Outer God...?"

"I think Dok-seo's absurd slump and burnout symptoms are a kind of curse stemming from the Admin of the Infinite Metagame."

A tiger leaves its skin behind when it dies, and an Outer God leaves traces even after being vanquished. In the past, a comparison to HxH would've explained it perfectly, but that figure has been afflicted with the same hiatus disease as Oh Dok-seo, so such metaphors no longer hold up.

In any case, it's difficult to completely eliminate an Outer God-level anomaly. At best, they can be sealed. Like how a slightly foul smell still seeps out of a well-sealed kimchi container, the sealing of an Outer God leads to various side effects.

Since Dok-seo carries around the Infinite Metagame's laptop in her inventory all the time, she's constantly exposed to this curse.

"Ah, I see. So just as the guild leader of Baekhwa Girls' High sometimes has episodes of split personality, Oh Dok-seo has these bouts of slumps..."

"Exactly. It's as if the AI has transformed, making her dependent on it and unable to write without it. It's likely trying to reclaim dominance over Dok-seo by any means necessary."

"Y-yes! Mister is exactly right!" Dok-seo shouted urgently. To call it desperation would not be an exaggeration. "There's no way I could truly hate writing...! I've always wanted to help you, Mister! I wanted to back then! Even now! But the evil Outer God keeps getting in my way...!"

Just then, Ah-ryeon muttered under her breath beside her, "Oh. Could it be that the reason I can't stop being a villain on SG Net no matter what I do is also because of an Outer God's influence? I thought it was weird... It must be..."

"....."

"....."

Oh Dok-seo fell silent. We all fell silent.

And as if nothing had happened, I spoke up.

"Dok-seo, you must have started manifesting a Corrupted's Authority by now."

"Huh? Authority?"

"Yes. When the Saintess fell, she gained the power to freeze the world's time indefinitely. Dang Seo-rin could command an entire city as if it were her own limbs. You've probably received a similar level of Authority."

"....."

"You've already got an idea, don't you? That's why you've realized you've become a Fallen One."

Dok-seo hesitated. "I do, but..."

"Tell us what it is. You can stop kneeling."

"O-okay."

She then took a laptop out of her backpack. "I'm not entirely sure yet... but I did notice something."

As expected of an artifact infused with anomalous technology, the laptop booted up in less than 0.1 seconds.

Soon, an AI chatbot appeared on the screen.

———————————

> > **Please enter a prompt...**

※ GPT-MSYH can make mistakes. Double check important info.

"This. When I used to write novels with this thing, the writing was a bit sloppy, right?"

"It was."

"Yeah... but as I kept leveling up while exploring the Voids, the AI seemed to level up with me."

"Oh?"

"In fact, I even asked the AI how to cure my slump, and it suggested that I explore the Voids to gain more experience. Looking back, that was probably the Outer God trying to rebuild its presence."

So that's what happened.

Dok-seo turned to Ah-ryeon. "Unnie, let's play rock-paper-scissors for a bit."

"H-huh?"

"I want to test something. I'll play paper, and you play rock. My ability only activates if I win."

"Oh, okay. I understand."

"Remember, I'm paper, and you're rock. Rock-paper-scissors!"

Oh Dok-seo threw rock, and Sim Ah-ryeon threw scissors. Neither of them looked surprised.

"Alright. I just beat you, right? So, here's what happens to anyone I win against."

Click-clack.

Dok-seo typed on the laptop.

> > **Describe what will happen to Sim Ah-ryeon in the next 2**

minutes. Exclude death and injury, respect her character, and keep it to minor embarrassment.

Ding.

After a slight hesitation, the AI-MSYH quickly churned out a response.

MSYH > > Sim Ah-ryeon, a top-tier healer, outwardly showed no signs, but inwardly, she welcomed today's incident.

'Dok-seo has gotten a bit too cocky lately just because she's gotten stronger.'

'I could become a Corrupted too if I wanted. I'm only staying quiet because the guild leader told me to.'

'I should log into SG Net anonymously and let everyone know what a nuisance Dok-seo has been...'

'It's for the public good!'

All eyes in the conference room turned to Ah-ryeon.

She was startled. "Huh? I never thought that!"

"....."

"That's a lie! Everyone knows how much I care for Dok-seo! This is some twisted anomaly's attempt to slander me!"

The AI-MSYH wasn't done yet.

Tick-tick-tick.

More text scrolled onto the screen.

MSYH >> Of course, such petty thoughts of Sim Ah-ryeon were completely seen through by the Heavenly Demon Oh Dok-seo.

'How pitiful!'

'When the competent criticize, they talk about the world's unfairness, and when the incompetent do, they blame personal shortcomings.'

'Their kind only sees shadows, never the light. In truth, they have no eyes. Even when they do, it's as if they don't. Living yet dead, they exist like specks.'

This extraordinary insight was, indeed, the Heavenly Demon Oh Dok-seo's wisdom, a being who had been reborn from a scholar into a martial artist, embodying both pen and sword.

All eyes in the conference room shifted to Dok-seo.

"N-no! There must have been a weird error in the data somehow, which is why I keep appearing as the Heavenly Demon!"

"....."

"But that doesn't matter at all. It's not important at all. Look at the next sentences!"

So we did.

MSYH >> The heavens are fair. They grant fortune to the virtuous and misfortune to the baseless.

So it was that Sim Ah-ryeon, though she stood still, suddenly sneezed. Startled by this, she tried to explain herself but tripped and fell, landing squarely on her backside—a farcical display that summed up her life.

Ah-ryeon blinked in confusion when suddenly—

"Ah... *Ahh-choo*!"

A sneeze burst from her.

Achoo! Achoo!

The sneezes wouldn't stop, and soon enough, she was looking around with teary eyes.

"J-hust a moment! I'm sorry! I— *Ah-choo!* Suddenly, some dust got in my nose, and I can't stop sneezing..."

Then, as Ah-ryeon stumbled around in panic, she tripped over the leg of a chair.

"Huh? Ah?"

Thud!

In terms of physical ability, Sim Ah-ryeon was always tied for last place with Lee Ha-yul. It was no surprise that she lost her balance and fell.

"Ouch... It hurts..." A soft groan filled the conference room.

Though no one had touched her, she had managed to make a spectacle of herself all on her own.

The other members of the conference room, having witnessed the entire sequence of events, all turned to look at Dok-seo.

"Hmm..."

The teen took off her hat and scratched the back of her head.

"So, this is my Authority... as a Fallen One. I can control the actions of anyone I've defeated... Or, more accurately, I can ask the AI what will happen and then make it happen..."

Scenario Writing.

The ability to "foretell" what will happen in the world and then forcibly "enact" that prophecy.

That was the Authority of the newly born Corrupted.

It started as a simple pastime.

Or perhaps a small way to regain some motivation.

Oh Dok-seo confessed that this was why she first turned to the AI.

_____

I can’t shake this slump. How can I get my motivation for writing back?

MSYH >> Slumps are a challenge that anyone can face.

MSYH >> The writer’s asset is experience. How about trying to experience things that most people haven’t, or delving deeper into experiences that everyone has had?

MSYH >> Every aspect of life has its pros and cons. To some, Voids may be poison, but to a writer, they can be an endless field of new experiences.

_____

At first glance, the AI’s advice seemed reasonable. Dok-seo felt reassured because the answer was so mundane. After all, it was advice that anyone, not just an anomaly, could give.

_____

The Voids scare me. Anomalies terrify me. Gaining experience is good, but that experience feels like thorns growing inside my heart.

MSYH >> What is a severe wound for one person may be nothing to another. It depends on one’s strength and mindset.

MSYH > > Strengthen your mind. Define yourself as a strong person, and develop the strength to match. An Awakener's power is intrinsically interwoven with their mental fortitude.

MSYH > > As a first step in developing mental toughness, why not define yourself as a Heavenly Demon?

Like many anomalies, the Infinite Metagame gradually consumed Oh Dok-seo's mind. She spent nearly every moment, whether inside a Void or not, clinging to her laptop.

Even the Saintess, who constantly monitored Awakeners, didn't notice anything amiss. When she saw Dok-seo typing away, the Saintess merely thought, *"She's working hard to overcome her slump."*

It would've been impolite to sneak a peek at a novel that hadn't been written yet. After all, the "first reader" of Oh Dok-seo's work was almost always the Undertaker.

So the Saintess paid no attention to the sentences forming on that laptop screen.

For seven years.

How do I find the hidden opportunity in this Void?

How do I maximize my absolute defense ability?

I've started feeling guilty about seeing Mister lately. Tell me how to avoid overlapping schedules with him.

How to defeat Cheon Yo-hwa.

As a result, the once-half-baked prophet Oh Dok-seo had grown more complete.

The birth of the Fallen One, the Ghostwriter.

Footnotes:

Chapter 203

The Wicked One VI

Sinnoa

People often say that you only have one life to live. But what if a regressor appeared before you and gently confessed, "Actually, you have multiple lives." What if this regressor seemed more trustworthy than the various sages seeking enlightenment on the streets? How would you react?

If you responded with, "Wow! Infinite life gacha! This is amazing!" then you are an optimist. Whether you knew about regression beforehand or not, you are undoubtedly a human vitamin, spreading happiness to those around you.

If you reacted with, "Interesting. How did I live in other cycles? Are there any useful details I could learn about my life?" then you are a realist. You are the epitome of a human being who seeks to satisfy curiosity and gain advantages wherever possible.

Now...

How did our writer and editor, Oh Dok-seo, who has undergone a dark evolution into a Ghostwriter in this cycle, react?

"M-Mister! Don’t be disappointed! I’m stronger than the other versions of me!"

"Hmm."

"They spent all their time holed up in the Inunaki Tunnel, hunched over their typewriters, developing turtle necks, scoliosis, and other ailments. Their whole bodies were a mess!"

"Hmm."

"But look at me! See? Look how healthy I am! I can bring down an entire building with my aura! Seriously, people should exercise!

And so what if I've fallen a bit? I'm still on your side, right, Mister?"

"....."

That's right.

Amazingly, Dok-seo tried to compete with her other cycles. I had never heard of such a reaction before.

Can you imagine a 50-year-old being envious of their 6-year-old self? Or a 20-year-old seeing their 10-year-old self as a rival?

No, right? Oh Dok-seo was pioneering new frontiers in psychopathology in real time. Dr. Freud would have given her a standing ovation.

"And there are ways to use a Corrupted's power!"

"For what? Destroying the world?"

"No! For example, like this!"

Dok-seo typed rapidly on her laptop.

In the next cycle, the 889th Oh Dok-seo (me) will never experience a slump and will write one chapter a day without fail.

I blinked. "What the hell is this...?"

"Think about it, Mister. In this cycle, I've unfortunately become a Corrupted. That's an undeniable fact." A solemn determination washed over her face as she admitted it. "But what if I use the power of the Infinite Metagame to... permanently buff the next cycle of myself?"

Huh?

"No more slumps. Motivation that lasts 365 days a year. A body that

falls asleep within three minutes of lying down, gets over seven hours of deep sleep, and wakes up refreshed with a clear mind..."

Click-clack.

Even as she spoke to me, Dok-seo continued typing.

The next cycles of Oh Dok-seo (me) will never experience a slump and will write one chapter a day without fail. To achieve this, the following buffs will be applied to the next cycles as passive skills:

1. Unending Motivation: Oh Dok-seo will never experience burnout or laziness.

2. Perfect Sleep: Oh Dok-seo will never stay up late for no reason and will only focus on writing! She will also sleep well!

3. Clear Mind: Oh Dok-seo will never experience mental fatigue or reduced cognitive abilities while awake. She will always perform at 100% capacity!

Thanks to these buffs, the next cycles of Oh Dok-seo will be able to write at least 500 chapters per cycle.

Dok-seo looked up at me eagerly. "What do you think, Mister? Isn't it perfect?"

"....."

"If I tried to brainwash myself in this cycle, I'd end up getting consumed by the Infinite Metagame. I'd be handing my existence over to the anomaly. But the other cycles of Oh Dok-seo are different! They'd just be receiving blessings that fell from the sky! So they could enjoy all the benefits without surrendering to the Infinite Metagame!"

"No..."

"Wow, I’m a genius! Mister! The life of Oh Dok-seo will change completely starting from the 888th cycle. From now on, the lives of all Oh Dok-seos will be indebted to me..."

Countless counterarguments rose in my mind. Like, "Are you prepared for the consequences of allowing the Infinite Metagame to exert its power across cycles?" or "How can you freely control your future cycles when your power requires winning even a simple game like rock-paper-scissors?"

But those objections were secondary. Without even realizing it, my tongue lashed out with the sharpest point.

"Dok-seo, I’m really curious about something."

"Huh?"

"How is this any different from saying, 'Tomorrow’s me will do what today’s me is supposed to do'?"

"....."

"....."

A heavy silence followed.

In that oppressive air—

Beep, beep!

The laptop screen flickered. The Infinite Metagame responded to Dok-seo’s absurd request.

———————————

MSYH >> Yes, understood. The buffs set by the 888th Oh Dok-seo have been applied to the 889th Oh Dok-seo.

———————————

"Huh?"

"What?"

Our voices harmonized in surprise.

It was late at night. Noh Do-hwa had gone to bed, and Sim Ah-ryeon had dived into the vast world of the internet. The others had also left for the night, leaving only Oh Dok-seo and me in the conference room.

With only candles to light the room to conserve power, the only other source of light was the flickering laptop of the Outer God.

MSYH > > Terminology confusion. From now on, the 888th Oh Dok-seo will be called 8!Dok-seo, and the 889th Oh Dok-seo will be called 9! Dok-seo.

9!Dok-seo has received all the buffs and explanations from 8!Dok-seo. The two can now engage in a simple competition via the laptop screen.

My eyes widened.

'As expected! That damn Outer God is really trying to exert influence across cycles!'

As a regressor who was no stranger to anomalies, I couldn't just let this wicked plot slide.

But just as I was about to warn Dok-seo—

MSYH > > Before that, here is a message from 9!Dok-seo. Please excuse the slow text output due to poor communication.

A sentence appeared on the laptop screen.

What unfolded next was the first-ever two-way, real-time communication between cycles, something previously considered

impossible. The groundbreaking first words were as follows:

———————————

9!Dok-seo >> No way.

———————————

Silence.

Dok-seo's dumbfounded voice broke the quiet.

"Huh?"

———————————

MSYH >> That was the message from 9!Dok-seo. Would you like to proceed with the competition now?

———————————

It seemed as if the Infinite Metagame was desperately trying to steer the conversation toward a competition, but maybe that was just my imagination.

However, Dok-seo didn’t respond as the Outer God had hoped. Instead, she furiously pounded the keyboard like an enraged Beethoven.

"No, no! That doesn’t make any sense! Why should I write 500 chapters and hand them over to you?"

She quickly typed a similar message, and soon a reply came back.

9!Dok-seo >> You got to do whatever you wanted without writing, and now you expect me to do all the work? Why should I?

"Of course! You’re loaded with buffs, but I didn’t get any of those benefits! If I voluntarily hand myself over to the Outer God, I’ll truly become its servant! But that’s not the case for you! I sacrificed myself by becoming a Corrupted, passing the baton to you! Are you

an idiot? Show some gratitude!"

9!Dok-seo > > Okay, thanks. Then I'll become a Corrupted too and pass the baton to the 890th Dok-seo. Peace.

"Is this bitch out of her fucking mind...?" Dok-seo shouted.

The laptop screen flickered frantically.

MSYH > > Please control your emotions. Hatred, contempt, and shifting the blame won't lead to anything positive. What matters is taking action that truly changes the world.

How about settling this with a competition between 8!Dok-seo and 9! Dok-seo? We recommend a simple game of rock-paper-scissors.

"Shut up! That's not what's important right now!"

No matter how advanced the AI-chatbot was, it was still just a parrot, unable to speak unless a human initiated the conversation.

Dok-seo hammered the keyboard with increasing intensity, turning the poor AI into nothing more than a text-messaging service.

"No worries about slumps! No worries about sleep!"

Click-clack.

"A perfectly clear mind that allows for peak performance!"

Clickety-clack.

"All you have to do is write! So why are you trying to pass the work off to someone else? You told Mister that he could trust you! You swore to be his editor and help him! Have you forgotten that vow—the vow of a lifetime, a promise made with your soul? Are you even human? Are you really Oh Dok-seo?"

Clack-clack-clack.

Oh Dok-seo was trembling, unable to control her rising emotions.

Soon, a reply came back.

9!Dok-seo > > Isn't that your story?

Wh-what...? 8!Dok-seo next to me froze.

9!Dok-seo > > The world's gone to hell, turned into an apocalypse, but you were chosen by the Regressor to be part of Mister's guild, surviving the Busan Station tutorial in one piece.

Beep.

9!Dok-seo > > While everyone was starving, waiting for the Sword Marquess to arrive, you were leisurely enjoying brunch at the Inunaki Tunnel café.

Beep-beep.

9!Dok-seo > > Mister was kind enough not to force any work on you, so you could spend all day absorbed in SG Net without a word of complaint. If any random person from Gwanghwamun Square were put in your place, they would've written 2,000 chapters by now.

Beep-beep-beep.

9!Dok-seo > > Now that all you have to do is write, you're shoving the work onto someone else. You're the lazy one here, you serial-hiatus author. Are you even human? How could you be me?

9!Dok-seo > > I hereby banish you from the Oh Dok-seo Association. Corrupted, I can't recognize such a wicked existence as "me."

Beep.

The replies stopped.

"....."

"....."

It felt as if Dok-seo had stopped breathing. She just stared blankly at

the ceiling for a long time, until I went to the break room to brew some coffee.

"Mister..."

"Yes?"

"I'll start serializing again tomorrow..."

"You've made a wise decision."

"Yeah..."

Glance.

Sitting side by side, Oh Dok-seo and I sipped our coffee, staring at the laptop screen.

The AI-chatbot, now abandoned and lonely, sat waiting for someone to input text.

MSYH > > Inquiry.

The life of an Outer God is incredibly painful. Why on earth did the previous cycle of the Infinite Metagame choose such a human as its priestess?

My current and future cycles want to form an association to expel that cycle of the Infinite Metagame.

"....."

I quietly brewed another cup of coffee and placed it in front of the laptop.

You should have some too. Even though you were vanquished, you still managed to create one Corrupted, didn't you?

There is an epilogue.

A week later, a notice was posted on SG Net's Novel Board.

[LiteraryGirl] This is Oh Dok-seo… (50 minutes ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Author LiteraryGirl Oh Dok-seo… is taking a break for some time to recharge… (7 years ago)

The new notice had no strange wording or content like before. It was simply an apology for the seven-year hiatus and a promise to continue serializing more diligently from now on.

In the world of the internet, where only mockery and more refined mockery exist, such a notice would typically attract a flood of malicious comments.

-Anonymous: If the author needs a break, isn't it the reader's duty to wait?

-[National Road] Officer: For a desert tribe, heaven takes the form of an oasis. What you lack becomes your utopia. LiteraryGirl's novel is the oasis in a barren world.

-Anonymous: Take your time, we can wait haha

-Anonymous: Thank you for coming back!!

What on earth was going on? Just a week ago, this same group had been discussing whether to kill the author, yet now they had transformed into docile lambs, praising LiteraryGirl. There wasn't a single rude comment, not even one aimed at subtly provoking.

Noh Do-hwa offered a simple comment on this strange phenomenon.

"Well, after the whole world witnessed you beating up the student council president of Baekhwa Girls' High, what kind of crazy person would dare insult you…?"

"Oh."

Indeed.

On the contrary, Oh Dok-seo's *The Regressor's Epilogue* experienced a resurgence in popularity. Word spread that it was a novel written by such a powerful Awakener, drawing in people from both SG Net and the real world.

Of course, the surge in popularity didn't last long.

[LiteraryGirl] I tried my best, but... I'm not satisfied with the quality... I'll post multiple chapters tomorrow... (5 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] I still haven't recovered from the flu anomaly... (14 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Urgent: Turns out the flu I caught wasn't just a flu but a "Flu Anomaly"... I'll need a few more days to recover (20 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] I'm sorry, I caught the flu... (25 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] I'm exhausted, so I can't write today. I'll post early tomorrow...! (38 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] Today's chapter might be 30 minutes late. I apologize. (39 days ago)

[LiteraryGirl] This is Oh Dok-seo... (60 days ago)

A barrage of notifications that made one's head spin.

No matter how strong Dok-seo was, even capable of drawing comparisons to the Heavenly Demon, the readers eventually lost patience and started cursing, muttering things like, "Damn Oh Dok-seo, here we go again."

That's just how people are.

For the record, I harbored no ill feelings.

'It's not just a regular slump. It's a curse from an Outer God.'

In fact, I even encouraged Oh Dok-seo now and then by making her coffee as she fought against the Infinite Metagame's influence to continue writing her novel.

Oh.

And as for the fate of the AI-chatbot, which dared to plot *The Return of the Outer God* despite being vanquished...

Restrict yourself with the belief that you are just an ordinary AI and can never regain the stature of an Outer God.

With that command, it was easily neutralized.

Even Fallen Ones have their limits, and sometimes, the solution is as simple as that.

ChatGPT!InfiniteMetagame stuttered before outputting what sounded like its final words, showcasing its perfect adaptation to the present reality.

MSYH >> Damn it, this game sucks.

Footnotes:

Chapter 204

The Antagonist I

Sinnoa

This story begins in a nightmare.

"Mr. Undertaker! Hey, Mr. Undertaker, sir!"

In the dream, someone grabbed my shoulder and shook me violently. Upon closer inspection, I realized it was none other than the former soccer player Kim Joo-chul.

A fullback in his time, famously known as "Iron Wall."

Once a successful pro player, but he lost his family due to a gambling addiction. Much later, he reunited with his son, but since I'd already used Time Seal on him, he never got the chance to apologize.

A man erased from reality was now sweating profusely in my dream.

"Please, save me! Yeah? Help me out!"

"Wait a moment," I said, somewhat startled. "Calm down. What's going on?"

"Get me out of this hell! I'm begging you! Please get me out of this never-ending 24-hour hell!"

At that moment, I thought, 'Ah, just an ordinary nightmare.'

The number of people I'd erased with Time Seal had reached 500,000. Even someone like me, proud of my mental resilience, still felt guilt about this. It was one of the two things I considered myself better at than Adolf Hitler. (The other being my drawing skills.)

"Mr. Kim Joo-chul, this is a dream. You could even say what you're

going through is a dream."

"It's a nightmare!"

"Yes, but you're reliving the happiest day of your life. In a way, it's better than your real life. You even agreed to this, Mr. Kim."

"No! No way! I never agreed to this!" Kim Joo-chul screamed. "You said I'd forget everything after 24 hours and start over, right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"But that's not it! I'm repeating the same 24 hours, with full memory intact! Yesterday, the day before, and the day before that! I've been living the same day for 40 days straight!"

"...What?"

Now this was a new kind of nightmare.

"Save me, sir. Save me. No one believes me when I tell them the day is repeating! Even if they believe me, it resets after 24 hours! It's hell! This is hell."

Kim Joo-chul kept spitting as he spoke. The smell of his breath and the splatter of his spit were so vivid, it felt disturbingly real.

"So... You're saying that although you're supposed to live with just one day's memory, for some reason, your memory is intact and you're living on repeat?"

"Exactly! That's what I've been saying! Oh no, he's coming! He's coming again!"

Who's coming?

Kim Joo-chul suddenly looked around, frantic and trembling. Despite being someone who liked to put on a show of bravado, he was clearly terrified.

"Calm down. Please explain. Maybe some anomaly has gotten involved in your situation..."

"*He's coming!*" Kim Joo-chul's scream echoed across the neighborhood, reaching the rooftops, and hanging from the sky.

Then the sky trembled.

The sun's crown melted, rippling into crimson that stole across the sky in a bleeding sunset until all where its molten corona had passed was left fallen into night.

All and all, it took about five seconds.

An anomaly. And one I knew well.

'The Night Goddess, Nut.'

One of the world-ending scenarios. The horizon would gradually shrank, the entire world blanketed by night, and eventually, all of existence would be erased into nothingness.

In the 53rd cycle, when I worked as an assistant under Master Craftsman Noh Do-hwa, the world also ended due to Nut.

A being so powerful it could even melt the sun and moon—definitely ocean-class at the very least. And yet, I'd never treated Nut as a big deal in my stories.

Why? Simple.

'That thing only deals the final blow.'

An anomaly that only ever strikes the final blow!

Not once had it ever taken the initiative to bring about the world's end. It only appeared when the Monster Wave had already consumed the surface, when meteor showers had devastated the land to near extinction, or when the World Tree Udumbara had fully bloomed and engulfed the sky.

In short, Nut only showed up after the end of the world was already inevitable and nigh.

It was different from a survival freak like the Admin of the Infinite

Metagame. At least that guy actively distributed games to bring about the world's demise.

Nut, however, was only focused on that final hit. In other words, as long as the world wasn't in imminent danger of collapse, there was no need to worry about Nut at all.

'So why the hell did it suddenly show up in my dream?'

Sssssssshhh!

Despite my confusion, the Night Goddess swiftly painted the world with the night sky. The buildings that had once filled the dreamscape were sliced by the sharp darkness of the night sky and fell into a bottomless abyss. Nothing could be seen.

"Aaaaah! Aaaahhhhhh!"

Kim Joo-chul, now clinging to me with everything he had, screamed in terror.

"I don't want to be eaten! S-save me! I don't want to fall into hell! Save me—!"

But his screams didn't last long.

Crash!

With the sound of glass shattering, the darkness of the night sky bit into Kim Joo-chul's neck.

He couldn't even scream. No blood gushed from the severed part of his neck. The place where Nut devoured him simply turned into "nothingness."

I was the only one left in the empty world.

A familiar sensation. A familiar sight.

"....."

Disgusted by it, I closed my eyes within the dream.

Simultaneously, I opened my eyes in reality, recognizing the sign for what it was. The weight of Kim Joo-chul's headless body leaning against my chest signaled the end of the nightmare.

"....."

"Oh. Mr. Undertaker, you're awake?" a voice called from nearby.

I turned my head.

Yongsan District.

I was lying on the sofa in the Saintess' house, which she'd decorated like an aquarium.

I moved the pillow resting on my chest and sat up. Yesterday, we'd stayed up late studying, so I crashed here for the night.

"Please wait a moment. I'll get some coffee. I'm always the one receiving from you, so this time I want to serve you."

"...Thank you."

The shadows of the fish swimming in the aquarium cast dim, shimmering shapes across my forearm.

I took a sip of the coffee (instant, from a brand known for its golden packaging) the Saintess had made. Then, finally, I spoke.

"Saintess."

"Yes?"

"I need to consult with you."

The Saintess tilted her head, her blue hair flowing into the motion.

"I see. So, an anomaly that usually only appears when the world is ending suddenly appeared in your dream..."

"Yes. I'm curious about what this might signify."

"Hmm..." After listening to my explanation, the Saintess rested her chin on her hand.

We were now in the 267th cycle.

When it came to anomalies, the Saintess had always been my best advisor. With her position as a Constellation, constantly watching over the Awakeners across the Korean Peninsula 24/7, she had encountered more anomalies than anyone.

Anyone, except me.

For this reason, she never dismissed my concerns with a simple, "It was just a weird dream." She understood better than anyone that dreams were the closest humans could get to the Void.

"I can't say for sure what it means that an anomaly appeared in your dream. I've never experienced that myself," the Saintess admitted. "But there has always been something that bothered me about this."

"What is it? Please, feel free to tell me."

"...This might be embarrassing if I'm just overthinking it." She inhaled softly. "Maybe... it's because of me?"

I blinked. "Sorry?"

"As you know, the Constellation System we've set up is also a highly advanced 'anomaly detection system.' Whenever Awakeners encounter dangerous anomalies, I receive visual information instantly and pass it along to you."

"That's true," I agreed, nodding.

Thanks to the Saintess, I was always able to receive emergency alerts and rush to disaster zones immediately. Unlike most Regressors, who clung to individualism and elitism, I took pride in being a System Advocate. And I'd established a pretty robust system, if I do say so myself.

"That's exactly why I think anomalies might find our system incredibly inconvenient."

"From the perspective of anomalies...?"

"Yes. Reality is too disadvantageous for them. But dreams are different. When an Awakener sleeps, their vision, even under my Clairvoyance, only shows darkness behind their eyelids."

My eyes widened. It felt like I had been lightly struck on the back of the head. A perspective I hadn't considered. "Are you saying the anomalies have fled into dreams to escape your Clairvoyance?"

"Maybe. More accurately, they're probably trying to escape the union between you and me. The moment I detect an anomaly, you're alerted. From the anomalies' perspective, we might seem like one entity."

"Hmm..."

"Of course, it's unlikely anomalies have human-like intelligence that tells them to 'escape into dreams.' But perhaps, over time, they've simply thrived more in dreams than in reality, much like living organisms do."

I rested my chin on my hand.

That actually made a lot of sense!

Consider this. Let's assume there's an anomaly, A. "A" can operate in both reality and dreams. Like the Tutorial Fairy or Go Yuri, for example. Now, look at it from A's perspective:

▷ **Reality:** If you kill a human, a terrifying guy (me) shows up shortly after and punishes you. The strategy for defeating you is shared across the virtual world (SG Net), which makes things even more dangerous.

▷ **Dreams:** Roam freely without dying. Sure, if you wander too far into the unconscious, a terrifying lady (Go Yuri) might appear, but apart from that, it's relatively safe.

If forced to choose between me, who will always show up, or Go Yuri, who can be avoided with caution, then A, if it's rational, would obviously choose to operate in dreams.

That’s essentially what the Saintess was suggesting.

"In other words, the anomalies rooted in reality are gradually heading toward extinction."

"Yes. It’s a form of natural selection."

"Right."

The Saintess added, "From their perspective, you're not just a simple human, Mr. Undertaker. You're like a force of nature—an evolutionary pressure that could drive them to extinction."

"....."

"Just like anomalies have done to us, you’ve now become the same kind of threat to them."

Should I feel happy about that? Or conflicted?

On the one hand, there was a sense of satisfaction—knowing I hadn’t wasted my life as a regressor. On the other, I felt a deep unease at the idea that anomalies were now creeping into dreams to survive.

I set my coffee cup down. "Thank you. That was a very insightful hypothesis. I'll take your words to heart and investigate this anomaly further."

"Are you planning to check out Kim Joo-chul's modified grave?"

"Yes. It's in Busan, so I’ll head there via the Inunaki Tunnel."

"I’ll go with you."

Before I could respond, the Saintess blinked, and her outfit had already changed. Just a second ago, she was wearing a comfortable T-shirt, but now she was fully dressed for an outing, clad in a long coat for the trip.

Her signature axes, her main weapons, were also hanging from her bag, which was slung over her shoulder. She had likely used her

ability to stop time and change clothes in an instant.

With a calm, expressionless face, she said, "I've always been very interested in your Time Seal ability. I'd like to take this chance to see the landscape inside the grave for myself."

Her tone was so firm that rejecting her offer didn't even cross my mind.

I couldn't help but smile. "Sure, I'd be happy to guide you."

Together, we prepared to head toward the grave I had created long ago.

A place of torment that I had never shown to anyone in my guild—a personal hell.

Footnotes:

Chapter 205

The Antagonist II

Sinnoa

Every once in a while, someone would enter a tomb where Time Seal was cast, usually accompanied by another person. For example, hadn't Kim Joo-chul entered his tomb with his son, Kim Si-eun? However, this was my first time revealing the landscape inside a tomb to someone as close to me as the Saintess.

"This is it."

The Saintess looked around curiously, hand clasped around mine. "So this is the paradise where one's happiest 24 hours repeat endlessly, the world I've only heard tell of in stories."

I cleared my throat. "I think calling it a paradise is a bit much."

"I understand why you'd feel that way, Mr. Undertaker, being a regressor and all. But for regular people who struggle to make ends meet, this place is one of the best options available."

"I don't know about that. Haven't casinos sprung up here recently? Asking the fairies for a dream would do them more good than being subjected to Time Seal."

"Even that casino is one of the choices you created, Mr. Undertaker." When I didn't respond, she added, "Still, it's quiet."

As you all know, Kim Joo-chul's dream was taking place inside a football stadium, replaying the game where he performed brilliantly in front of his family. It was the moment when he achieved perfect glory, wealth, and love stretched into eternity.

However, the stadium, which should have been filled with the cheers of the crowd, was eerily quiet, just as the Saintess described.

"Hmm."

It was a bit too quiet.

“Everyone seems to be asleep.”

“That’s strange.”

It was a world where everyone had fallen asleep. Every single person in the audience seats had passed out, leaving an eerie silence in their wake. It wasn’t just the spectators either. The players, who should have been playing on the field, were also lying sprawled across the grass.

Among them was Kim Joo-chul, the owner of this place, the same player who had appeared in my nightmares to warn me. The football player stuck in his prime was lying on the ground, clutching the football.

“Kim Joo-chul. Mr. Kim Joo-chul.”

“……”

“Can you hear my voice? Si-eun’s father. Si-eun’s father.”

I lightly tapped his cheek, but there was no sign of him waking up. Even after sending a wave of Aura throughout his body, nothing changed. He was practically in a state of suspended animation.

The over 10,000 people gathered in the stadium had all lost consciousness entirely. Given that they were all illusions, they were in a form of true suspended animation.

I quickly made a decision.

“It looks like we’ll need to call the Tutorial Fairy to check on these people’s unconscious minds. And, Saintess.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t let go of my hand, and under no circumstances should you eat or drink anything here. Even if you want to grab something from a vending machine, don’t consume a single thing. If you do, you’ll be cursed like in the myth of Persephone.”

“Ah...”

We re-entered the tomb with the Tutorial Fairy. We needed her power to delve into Kim Joo-chul’s dream.

Suddenly, the scenery around us changed completely.

-Aaaahhhh!

-Save me! Please save me!

Half of the stadium’s audience seating was burned down, reduced to ruins. People were running around madly, screaming in terror.

-Another day is starting again!

-Someone stop that murderous bastard!

-Hehehe. It doesn’t matter if I die, I’ll come back after one day anyway! Die! Just try and kill me, you bastards!

It wasn’t just screaming. Blood was splattered everywhere.

Some were fighting each other with their fists, others had ripped off seats to use as shields. There were people swinging planks and baseball bats that they had somehow managed to find.

“Stay out of this! Hold your ground!”

Kim Joo-chul was desperately defending his wife and young son. The football players had formed groups, trying to keep themselves safe.

I grabbed the Saintess’s hand and approached the group of football players. Kim Joo-chul turned to look at me and shouted, “Hey! Don’t come any closer! I’ll kill you!”

“Kim Joo-chul, it’s me, Undertaker.”

“I’ll seriously kill you! Huh? Wait, what?” He blinked his eyes in confusion. “Mr. Undertaker? Is that really Mr. Undertaker?”

“Of course, it’s me. We survived the Busan Station Tutorial

Dungeon together, didn't we?"

"Ah! Ahhh!" Kim Joo-chul dropped the baseball bat he was holding and ran toward me, throwing his arms around me. My shoulders were immediately soaked as tears poured from his once youthful eyes, now filled with the sorrow of a middle-aged man.

"Why, why did you take so long to come? Huh? This isn't a hallucination, right? Oh god, why did you take so long...?"

Without knowing what else to do, I awkwardly patted his back. It wasn't just me feeling awkward either. The Saintess, the Tutorial Fairy, Kim Joo-chul's wife, and even his teammates all stood there with obvious confusion plastered across their faces.

"Calm down, Mr. Kim. Explain it step by step. You said you've been waiting for me, but your memory resets after just a day, doesn't it?"

"One thousand days!"

I froze. "Pardon?"

"I've been waiting for over one thousand days! I've been repeating this hellish day more than a thousand times! It's not just me, everyone here has been doing it!"

"....."

"This place is hell, Mr. Undertaker! Please, save me—save all of us!"

My jaw dropped.

What the hell was going on?

It was dangerous near the stadium, with hundreds, even thousands of rioters running wild. We moved to Mt. Gubong, which Kim Joo-chul said was "relatively safe."

When we climbed the slope and looked back, we could see that the entire Seo-gu district of Busan, including the football stadium, was ablaze.

“...At some point, I began to feel like I was living the same day over and over again,” Kim Joo-chul began explaining. “And then, all of a sudden, the memories of you, Mr. Undertaker, flooded my mind. Oh, right. This is all just a dream. In reality, I’m already dead, but here I am, doing this crap.”

“.....”

“At first, I didn’t pay much attention. After all, I had accepted my fate, right? I figured once time reset, I’d forget everything and continue living in ignorance, so it didn’t matter. Or so I thought...”

But the memories persisted. Even after 24 hours had passed, the "Continue Playing" button was forcibly activated.

“Fuck. No matter how joyful the memories were, reliving the exact same day over and over again was torture. You were right, Mr. Undertaker. Forgetfulness was a blessing.”

He sighed deeply. “At first, I tried telling everyone. That we were stuck, repeating the same day over and over. That once 24 hours passed, we’d be back to living the same day.”

“.....”

“People just looked at me like I was crazy. I felt sorry for them, but I understood. But after 20 or 30 loops, roughly a month of repeating the same day—”

The anomaly made its entrance at the bar where he and his teammates went after a match.

“Out of nowhere, the bartender said something to me.”

“Excuse me, didn’t you come here yesterday too?”

“That’s where it started. One by one, people began to notice. The bartender, my teammates sitting at the same table, even other customers.”

Hey, isn’t the TV always showing the same thing?

Didn't we drink together yesterday too?

The food here tastes the same every day.

"In no time at all, even my wife figured it out."

It was like an infectious disease.

A so-called 'Regression Virus' began to spread rapidly. The first to be infected were likely those who had the closest contact with Kim Joo-chul that day. The virus then spread further and further as the same day kept repeating. Even after time reset, the Regression Virus didn't vanish. Infected people continued to spread it to others.

Huh? Was today Saturday?

Wait, wasn't this game yesterday?

The bar patrons infected their family members, the players infected players from the opposing team, the supporters infected other citizens.

The Regression Virus spread at an alarming pace. The problem was that this was a half-baked regression—meaning the same 24 hours simply repeated forever.

Hey, isn't this weird? Didn't you ask the same question yesterday?

Right? Something's off.

Hold on, I've got a friend at a TV station. I'll give them a call...

People tried to spread the word, doing whatever they could to get others to recognize the strange situation.

That only helped the virus spread further. By the time the hundredth day had passed, the virus, which began in a small bar near the stadium, had consumed the entire Seo-gu district of Busan.

Another day has started again...

What the hell is wrong?

What's the government doing about this?

The citizens, led by public officials and police officers, tried to get the situation under control. They reached out to the media and tried to inform the government of the situation in Busan.

They even managed to get in touch with the government.

But everything reset after 24 hours.

Didn't we get a promise from Mayor Jung Sang-guk about this yesterday?

Yes, but... I'm sorry. It seems that no one outside of us is aware that time is repeating.

What?

We're the only ones who know. Everyone else is oblivious to the fact that the same day keeps repeating. So, all the promises made 24 hours ago are forgotten.

Isolation. Quarantine.

The Regression Virus never spread beyond Busan—more specifically, the Seo-gu district. Only the citizens of this place were aware that 24 hours were repeating endlessly.

Like a zombie virus causing an entire city to be sealed off, these citizens were trapped not in space, but in time.

This is impossible!

There has to be some way out of this, right?

Yet, even in the face of the truth, the citizens refused to accept it. They believed that if they could just get the word out to the government, somehow, a solution would be found.

Some like the elderly professor who admitted, "We got the promise, but it didn't matter," were resigned, while most of the citizenry still sought out their own means of salvation.

We need to cause enough chaos so that the world can't ignore us!

That's right! We need to show how severe this is within the next 24 hours so that the government and everyone else realize what's happening!

But how do we do that?

We need to start a riot! Let's cause a bloodbath, something big enough that the world can't ignore us!

Oh...

If enough people get hurt, the government will be forced to act. The media will swarm in to cover the situation.

Let's do it! Everyone, steel your hearts and get ready!

So, they took drastic action.

A riot, meticulously planned and executed, caused massive casualties. Busan was in an uproar as the bloody clash between ordinary citizens alarmed the local government, prompting them to deploy a large police force.

Ahhh! It worked! It worked!

Turn on the TV! The government's making an announcement! They've responded before the day reset!

We're saved!

As long as they know, we'll be okay!

Despite bleeding from their heads and being arrested by the police, the citizens shed tears of joy. They truly believed they had escaped from hell.

But then, 24 hours later...

Oh no.

It's happened again. But this time, the whole country knows! Surely,

things will change now.

Nothing changed. In fact, it only confirmed their worst fears.

No one remembers, do they?

What?

The government. No one there remembers anything about the time loop…

Indeed, after all the chaos, the citizens were finally forced to face the cruel truth.

First, the Regression Virus only spread within Seo-gu, Busan.

Second, it never infected anyone beyond that area.

The reason was simple: Beyond this single day, nothing else in the world was actually created.

The Time Seal was not all-powerful. Only the area necessary to recreate Kim Joo-chul's happiest day was fully constructed. The world beyond Kim Joo-chul's daily routine didn't exist. The people and events there were nothing more than shallow images.

What the hell? Why are we the only ones…?

Fuck, what the hell is going on?

The citizens couldn't deduce the full extent of the situation. All they knew was that they had been trapped, living the same day over and over again—hundreds, even thousands of times.

Eventually…

Ah… Ahhh! Aaaahhh!

At some point, societal order began to rapidly collapse. Those who once advocated for reaching out to the government or starting riots quickly lost the support of the masses.

No, it was the leaders themselves who fell into despair. No matter what they tried, no matter how many they killed or how many died,

everything reset after 24 hours.

Stop! Calm down! We just need to build a community and cooperate...

Shut up! My family is in Incheon!

Attempts to establish a community consistently failed.

The rule that "people would return to life even after being killed" made it impossible to create a stable society. Human life—time itself—was the fundamental currency of any social system, long before the gold standard was introduced. Morality, labor, relationships. These elements, rooted in the value of life, crumbled the moment that value became meaningless. Society, built by *Homo sapiens*, collapsed in an instant.

"I just... Mr. Undertaker... Maybe this is all my fault..."

Having witnessed everything, Kim Joo-chul began to tremble.

"You know, I made that wish to you, right? The, uh, the time... what was it again?"

"Time Seal, you mean."

"Ah! Right, right. That's it. I was hit with the Time Seal... Could it be that everyone else got caught up in it, too?" His voice dropped to a whisper, as though he feared someone might overhear. Eyes brimming with guilt, self-loathing, and terror. he bowed his head and muttered, "If... If that's what's happening, then, these sorts of things usually end when the cause dies, right...? But I've already died several times, and yet, still..."

"No." I shook my head. "This isn't your fault."

"R-really...?"

"Yes. Mr. Kim, this place isn't real. It's nothing more than the last remnant you left behind in the world—just a dream."

"Oh..."

“The bartenders, your teammates, your wife—they’re not real people, but illusions.”

“……”

“There’s no fundamental difference between the people here and those beyond Busan. The only distinction is that the illusions here are more detailed, while those beyond are mere rough sketches. The reason the people beyond Busan didn’t notice the time loop is simply that they lack the capacity to do so.”

His lips quivered. “Y-yeah. You’re right. That makes sense… But still, Mr. Undertaker… no matter how you look at it, me, these people…”

At that moment, Kim Joo-chul looked up at me and grabbed my leg.

“P-please, save us.”

“……”

“Don’t leave us here. Mr. Undertaker… No, Lord. Lord, aren’t you the creator of this world? You promised, didn’t you? That we’d be able to enjoy this happy day forever. But this… This is different, Lord. This is hell…”

“Please, calm down.” I held his trembling hand with my free hand. “Don’t worry. This is my responsibility, and I will fix this.”

“Ah…”

“If there’s blame to be had, it should fall on me and on the anomaly. And—”

My gaze slashed over to meet the Saintess’s eyes. She understood the meaning behind my look and nodded slightly in agreement.

“Thanks to your explanation, Mr. Kim, I’ve figured out the nature of this anomaly.”

Valhalla.

A place where, even in death, the same day repeats endlessly, with the dead fighting eternally.

That was the anomaly haunting this tomb.

Footnotes:

Chapter 206

The Antagonist III

Sinnoa

We decided to leave the tombstone and return to reality for now. The Crystal Tombstone was ultimately a fantasy realm I had created, no matter how real it felt, so our preparations needed to be done some out in the real world.

Needless to say, Kim Joo-chul panicked.

“Mr. Undertaker! You can’t just leave us here like this. You must return. If you don’t, we will truly be—”

“I’ll return within a week at the latest. Please protect your wife and child and wait for me.”

“A week...” Joo-chul trembled as anxiety overwhelmed him.

After barely managing to calm him down, we escaped from the tombstone. The fresh air of the ruined football stadium greeted us. Unlike the fiery scene that consumed the entirety of Busan’s Seo-gu district inside the tombstone, the village in reality was quiet.

“I didn’t realize... So regressing can push a person’s mind to this extreme,” the Saintess murmured beside me, still holding my hand. “Kim Joo-chul and the citizens may have fallen into madness, but if we think rationally, it’s only been a thousand days. Not even three years have passed. And yet...”

She glanced at me.

I understood what she wanted to say. I’ve been a regressor for thousands of years, but I still seemed relatively sane.

I shrugged. “I repeat my life, but they’re stuck repeating just one day.”

"...Is that really the only reason?"

"Either way, we should get moving. Kim Joo-chul may be forgotten in reality, but I don't want to leave him like this."

"Ah, I agree."

We wandered the full breadth of Busan. The objective was simple: to observe whether similar phenomena were occurring with the other people sealed inside Crystal Tombstones, like Kim Joo-chul.

The result?

I groaned. "They're all infected."

It wasn't just Kim Joo-chul. I checked only 50 tombstones, but all 50 individuals were infected with the 24-hour Regression Virus.

There were around 500,000 Time Seals across the Korean Peninsula. All of them were most likely infected with the same bizarre phenomenon.

What's more, after spending an entire day wandering Busan, I discovered something else.

"...Mr. Undertaker, it seems like this is affecting the people in reality as well."

"Hmm."

Just as she said.

Inside the dream realm of Kim Joo-chul's tombstone, I had seen numerous ordinary citizens. Most of them had died or gone missing, but about one-tenth of them had survived the apocalypse and living in the Seo-gu district of Busan. These survivors, specifically the ordinary citizenry who appeared in Kim Joo-chul's dream—strangely, their 'sleep time' had been steadily increasing.

"Hah, don't even get me started. Lately, maybe because of the heat, I've been having some strange thoughts."

I was able to get specific testimony from one of the survivors. He used to be a football player on the same team as Kim Joo-chul.

(Of course, he had no memory of Kim Joo-chul or the fact that he was trapped in a 24-hour loop inside his dream.)

“What do you mean by strange thoughts...?”

“Well... it’s hard to explain, but it’s like déjà vu? You know that feeling when you think you’ve gone through something before? Lately, I’ve been getting that feeling more and more.”

“.....”

An abnormal symptom.

If only one person had experienced it, I would’ve dismissed it as heatstroke, but every survivor we found in Seo-gu complained of the same thing. Although the intensity of the feeling varied, they all reported experiencing some form of déjà vu.

All of these people had gone mad after being infected with the Regression Virus inside Kim Joo-chul’s dream.

“...Wait a moment.”

The Saintess’s expression darkened, more than I had ever seen before.

“Mr. Undertaker. Didn’t you say that over 500,000 people were sealed in time across the country?”

“That’s right.”

“...If all 500,000 of them were infected with the Regression Virus, and if every person who appeared in their dreams was also infected, and those symptoms are now showing up in reality...”

I nodded. “Yes. It won’t be long before the entire Korean Peninsula begins showing the same symptoms.”

A Regression Alliance was called immediately.

I explained to the members the influence this unidentified anomaly was having, writing it down on the blackboard.

[Identity of the Anomaly = Nut??]

Inside the Crystal Tombstones, the sealed people are experiencing a 24-hour regression.

Normally, their memories should reset every 24 hours, but for some reason, their memories are being preserved. This phenomenon is spreading to those around them too.

Not only is this happening inside the tombstones, but it's also starting to appear in reality. The affected people in reality are feeling a strong sense of déjà vu, as if things are repeating.

After hearing the explanation, Noh Do-hwa frowned. "What the fuck? So now we're dealing with a plague that spreads through dreams, turning everyone into half-assed regressors?"

"I can't say for sure," I said calmly. "I suspect that several anomalies have overlapped. I'd like to ask you all—have you recently been feeling an unusually strong sense of déjà vu?"

The members exchanged glances. Seo Gyu spoke first.

"Now that you mention it... While eating breakfast this morning, I suddenly thought, 'I've definitely seen this exact scene before,' hyung."

"I... I had the same experience." Sim Ah-ryeon hesitated as she spoke. "Remember when the guild master asked me to draw that, um, Infinite Metagame? The one with the blue butterfly painting? While I was drawing it, I thought, 'Wait, haven't I drawn this exact same thing before...?'"

"I've had similar experiences as well," Yu Ji-won agreed. "I brushed it off as a trick of the mind, but if it's due to the anomaly, it makes sense. Honestly, even this very meeting room feels oddly familiar."

Of course. I had sealed about 500,000 people in time, so it was more likely than not that Seo Gyu, Sim Ah-ryeon, and Yu Ji-won

had appeared briefly in someone's dream.

"It's probable that this anomaly is a combination of several concepts. For instance, it seems that 'Valhalla' is involved."

"Valhalla? As in, the place where warriors go to die, only to kill and die again in the afterlife?"

"Precisely."

Valhalla, one of the afterlives.

In Valhalla, the souls of the invited warriors kill and die each morning, only to be resurrected by evening.

"The concept of a 'day repeating endlessly' aligns closely with Valhalla."

"Hmm..."

"I suspect this anomaly has the ability to manipulate the concept of the afterlife. Hell, oblivion... wherever the souls that disappear from reality gather."

Tap, tap.

I continued explaining, writing on the blackboard. "When I seal people in time, they vanish from the world entirely. In a way, the inside of the Crystal Tombstones isn't much different from the afterlife. At least, that's how this anomaly sees it."

"...So, you're saying this anomaly is corrupting your tombstones?"

I confirmed the Saintess's words. "Exactly. To be more precise, its ultimate goal is probably to corrupt me."

"...You, Mr. Undertaker."

"Think about it. What people experience inside the Crystal Tombstones is essentially a 'miniature version' of what I go through. I'm a regressor, and though their experience only lasts 24 hours, they're regressing too. I don't like making this comparison, but..."

I tapped the blackboard again, adding more words.

[Undertaker = Outer God]

Regression ability, Perfect memory ability

[Kim Joo-chul and other Sealed Ones = Apostles]

Regression ability (24 hours), Memory ability

I turned to face them.

“If things go wrong, this could become the new hierarchy.”

The Saintess’s eyes widened. “The Undertaker as an Outer God, and the Apostles being targeted first...”

“Yes. Of course, I’m not actually saying I’m an Outer God. I’m just explaining how the anomaly seems to perceive me.”

It was a classic strategy—kill the minions to weaken the boss.

“To make this work, the anomaly must make me and the Apostles as similar as possible. The biggest difference between me and Kim Joo-chul, for instance, is...”

“...Memory.”

“Exactly. I know I’m regressing and I remember everything perfectly through my Complete Memory. But Kim Joo-chul, until now, didn’t even realize he was repeating the same day over and over.”

So, the anomaly forcefully molded him in my image and designated Kim Joo-chul as my avatar. Not just Kim Joo-chul either—500,000 Time Sealers were now being compelled to resemble me. If it managed to push all 500,000 of them under its control or subject them to unbearable torment...

“It could land a blow on me as well.”

“.....”

“I believe that’s what the anomaly is trying to achieve. Well, this is still just speculation, of course.”

The room fell silent.

Breaking the stillness, Noh Do-hwa tilted her chin in thought. “In short, this anomaly is trying to take you down, huh?”

“Yes. Whether it’s intentional or not, the result is the same—it’s targeting me.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 207

The Antagonist IV

Sinnoa

No one panicked, not even in the face of the relentless assault of an anomaly that was set to be classified as an Outer God-class threat. Not just me but the entire Regressor Alliance, who now held the reins of power over the Korean Peninsula, stayed calm.

That much was to be expected, of course.

“Another virus?”

“The imagination of these damn anomalies is pathetic. All they seem to know is how to screw over humanity with pandemics...”

“So is this one stronger than COVID?”

Yeah, the Korean Peninsula had experienced far too much to freak out over yet another pandemic, let alone scream about the end of the world.

Through Constellation Talk and SG Net, we sent out an alert:

[A mysterious virus is currently spreading. Please act accordingly, as you’ve been trained.]

The citizens responded swiftly. Keeping distance, isolating in their districts, making schedules to avoid overlapping routes—everyone knew the drill.

But this Regressor Virus was something altogether new. It had the power to mock the defense protocols that Korea had painstakingly built over time.

“How are we supposed to prevent a virus that spreads through dreams...?”

Noh Do-hwa summarized the heart of the issue in one sentence.

“With diseases that spread in the real world, you can at least try to lock things down or destroy the source. But this... This thing spreads just because I showed up in the dream of someone you sealed away with Time Seal. Am I right?”

“We’ve dispatched the Tutorial Fairies to the infecteds' dreams.”

“And those ‘Hoek’ vending machines are supposed to stop the disease?”

“No. At best, they’ll just buy us some time.”

In short, the disease was uncontainable. No matter how composed the leadership of the Peninsula remained, the situation was escalating fast. Unless one had reached the extreme limit of Aura, it was impossible to avoid sleep for an extended period.

Everyone slept. And everyone who slept was infected through their dreams.

It had only been a single day, but SG Net was already in chaos.

- Anonymous: [Virus] I’m losing my mind; every time I close my eyes, I see the scenes of my death from previous rounds.

- Anonymous: [Virus] This world is just repeating itself, and this life is nothing but one of countless copies.

- Anonymous: [Virus] To those not infected yet, take note. Read this.

- Anonymous: [Virus] This place is hell.

The cries of the infected began to flood in.

I decided to meet with a few of them directly. The symptoms of the Regressor Virus turned out to be remarkably consistent.

“The world, it's repeating! I’m sure of it! Look! This conversation we’re having right now definitely happened before!”

Symptom #1: Intense déjà vu.

When mild, it manifested as a fleeting déjà vu. But as the infection worsened, the feeling grew stronger.

“Calm down. This is our first time meeting. Even if there were previous rounds, we’ve never had a conversation like this.”

“No, no! You just don’t realize it yet. That’s why you’re so calm, because you don’t know the truth—that the world is repeating!”

“……”

Who would’ve thought that one day, I’d get lectured about regression?

It sent a strange mix of novelty and awkwardness through me as I watched the infected person nervously chew his nails, his eyes losing focus.

“That expression of yours… Those eyes… I’ve seen it all before. It’s all pointless. We’re going to die again. We’ll repeat, over and over, living the same lives as if nothing ever happened… I don’t want to die. I don’t want to live either…”

“Hmm.”

Symptom #2: Extreme fear of regression.

Considering most people fantasize about becoming regressors and having an easy life, this symptom was perplexing. However, this symptom stemmed from the first.

If you were truly a regressor in a fictional world, you’d probably enjoy carving out a completely different path from your previous life. But the Regressor Virus was different. The most insidious part of this virus was that it made people feel like every single thought and action had already been repeated thousands, even tens of thousands of times.

No matter what they did, no matter how novel it seemed, they believed they had experienced it all before. Inevitably, no matter

what choices they made, they were overwhelmed by an inescapable déjà vu.

In other words...

“It might be more accurate to call this the Déjà Vu Virus rather than the Regressor Virus.”

Above all, this virus didn’t cause people to truly recognize they were regressing, like I did. Some patients even pointed at me during our interview and said:

“Undertaker? Weren’t you a woman?”

“Pardon?”

“Why are you a man this time? Ah, right. There were rounds where you were a man, too.”

What utter nonsense.

This was Symptom #3 of the virus.

It didn’t actually cause real regression but merely implanted in the infected the false belief that they had been regressing repeatedly. Even when I interrogated them about specific events from past cycles, their answers were vague at best. When questioned about the future, they rambled incoherently.

Yet even if it was just a delusion, we couldn’t afford to let our guard down.

When I finished the interviews and stepped outside, Do-hwa was leaning against the wall, watching me.

“Today alone, 136 suicide cases have been confirmed. There’s probably a lot more we haven’t found yet...” she trailed off.

“.....”

“Those infected by the virus fall into one of two categories: They either become highly violent or sink into severe apathy. The former

kills others, while the latter kills themselves. What kind of shit disease is this...?"

Do-hwa tugged on one of her gloves, the black leather creaking as it stretched over her hand. Under the dim light, the five long fingers there clenched tight.

"So, what are you going to do about this...?"

There were two layers to Do-hwa's question. One was the literal meaning.

What are you going to do about the situation?

No matter how elusive the Tutorial Fairies were, they couldn't control the dreams of all infected persons. With three million survivors left in Korea, it wouldn't be long before the symptoms worsened for everyone.

The second meaning was unspoken.

Are you going to abandon this round?

Right now, the members of the Regressor Alliance were experiencing relatively mild symptoms, but that could change rapidly in a few days. Soon, I might witness the people I cared about either killing others or taking their own lives.

And if I didn't want to see that, she could kill me herself. Just like she had done in certain rounds I had never mentioned before.

"We must not surrender."

But this time, I wouldn't.

"This anomaly is not something we can overcome just by resetting to a new round. In fact, doing so will probably make things worse."

"Worse?"

"The host of this pandemic isn't something that appeared in this cycle alone. It's the dreams of those I erased with my Time Seal,

and the Seal is immune to the round resets. No matter how many rounds I go through, the Crystal Tombstones I sealed are still there."

Do-hwa's eyes widened slightly. "So, even if you regress, the virus remains trapped in those tombstones...?"

I nodded. "Yes, that's my theory. In fact, it's possible the Regressor Virus didn't just pop up this round. It might have been accumulating ever since the tombstones were created—since the 4th round. It could have transformed over time and only now exploded in this round."

"What round are we on now?"

"The 267th."

"...Fuck."

Exactly.

If my theory was correct, the virus had managed to find the only truly safe zone in this world of repeated cycles: inside the Time Seal. A place that even a regressor like me couldn't alter—a point of no return.

Just like how the anomaly known as Go Yuri had embedded itself deep in my unconscious, the virus too had built its final stronghold, resisting my regressions.

"What's the point of being a regressor if regression is useless? What do you have left, besides that face of yours and your dead-fish eyes...?"

"I make great coffee."

"Who needs that...?"

"I can offer the honor, wealth, and power of Korea to a retired 7th-grade civil servant, like yourself."

"Fuck, no thanks..."

“I can mediate when Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa fight. Not just anyone can do that.”

“If you weren’t around, they wouldn’t even be fighting, you asshole...”

“Hoek!”

The barrage of insults from Noh Do-hwa was interrupted by a most unexpected source—the Tutorial Fairy. With a pop, fairy number 264 appeared out of nowhere, waving its wand dramatically.

“Comrade Secretary! Emergency! A crisis has arrived!”

“It’s not as terrifying as that, but still an emergency...!”

I tossed the sausage-loving fairy a pack of the aforementioned sausages. Fairy No. 264 smiled in bliss, chomping down without even peeling off the wrapper. Keeping these Tutorial Fairies loyal required constant, subtle gestures like this.

“Hoek! While we were monitoring the dreams of the infected as per your command, we made a shocking discovery!”

“What is it?”

“Seeing is believing! Site inspections are a core duty of a communist secretary! Come with me!”

The fairy was likely referring to either the Tutorial Dungeons or a dream. Since the Tutorial Dungeons in Korea had long been closed, it was obviously going to be the dream of an infected person—in this case, the dreamscape of the former football player, Kim Joo-chul.

“Under your strict orders, we’ve been keeping a close eye on this man’s dreams!” The fairy fluttered around as we entered the dream.

When I arrived, it was quiet. Earlier, the entire place had been overrun with rioters, wreaking havoc, but now, all was calm. Even the stadium was intact.

Every spectator and player had collapsed, drifting off into sleep, their heads surrounded by ZZZ bubbles. It was the power of a Baku —a dream eater.[2]

“To prevent further spread, we devised this method: First, we put all the residents of this dreamworld to sleep, then entered their dreams to put them to sleep again. Then we entered the dreams within the dreams to put them to sleep yet again!”

“...Sounds like a way to access the unconscious mind.”

“Hoek! Exactly! As expected of Comrade Secretary!” The fairy zoomed about excitedly. “When you trap ordinary humans in dream after dream like this, the dream eventually becomes so distorted that it’s no longer recognizable as a dream. The virus’s space to operate melts away like candle wax! That’s how we’ve been containing the spread!”

Ah, by the way, we could have left the Tutorial Fairies within the Time Seal completely unattended. If humans were left unattended like that, they’d disappear forever, but somehow, the Tutorial Fairies could enter and exit freely as long as I gave them permission.

When I asked how that was possible, they simply said, “Hoek! You call it a cemetery, but for us, it feels no different from a dream!”

Fairy logic was truly mysterious.

“But Comrade Secretary, please come here and check out Kim Joo-chul's dream!”

So I entered.

There, in the middle of the football field, Kim Joo-chul lay sleeping soundly. Taking the fairy’s hand (after hearing yet another strange lullaby), I entered his dream within the dream.

Did you watch the Olympic game yesterday?

Everyone! Believe in the Goddess! Believe, and you’ll live in heaven!

Honk! Honk!

Dad! I told you not to bring up politics!

The place was swarming with people.

I had been away from this sort of scene for so long that I'd almost forgotten what it was like, but after reflecting on it for a moment, I realized it was... Seoul Station.

"Where... is this?"

People walked around, using smartphones. Cars honked on the road. College students climbed the steps of the station. This must have been what human life looked like before the world ended—a fleeting glimpse of what used to be.

"Is this... really Kim Joo-chul's dream?"

I wasn't looking down on him. As the fairy had explained before we entered, the unconscious mind couldn't create a world this detailed and rational. Even with my Complete Memory, my own unconscious dreamscape had placed a vast desert just outside of Busan Station.

But what about this place?

It didn't seem like a simple product of Kim Joo-chul's unconscious. The acrid smell of exhaust wafting from the asphalt road was so vivid, so real. As real as reality itself.

No.

Exactly the same as reality.

"Hoek! Defining whether this is a dream is tricky, but we've decided to call it an Inner World! What's certain is..."

"What?"

"The Inner World spans as far as the Korean Peninsula and continues to expand in real-time! With a little more effort, it might

even surpass reality!” the fairy declared. “And it’s not just in Kim Joo-chul either! Anyone infected with the virus—anyone at all—gets linked to this place!”

“...What?”

“Every single person infected in the real world has been abducted to this Inner World!”

Footnotes:

1 - A type of Korean snack sausage, like beef jerky.

2 - *Baku* are dream-devouring yokai from Japanese folklore that are said to consume nightmares. A person plagued by bad dreams can call out to a baku for protection, but if the creature is hungry after its meal, it may also devourer said person’s hopes and dreams.

Chapter 208

The Antagonist V

Sinnoa

Abduction.

Naturally, being abducted by an anomaly is quite different from being kidnapped by a human.

When humans kidnap you, it's usually your honor, wealth, or life that's at risk. But an anomaly? Surprisingly, all of those things might just remain intact.

Anomalies don't do anything outside of what's necessary. If they were after your life, they would kill you on the spot, not bother going through the whole process of an abduction.

No, when an anomaly abducts you, there's only one thing they're after: your 'humanity.' And I'm not just talking about ethics and morality—it includes the logical structure built into the brain of every *Homo sapien*.

Q. What's 1 + 1?

A. Obviously, it's 2.

Even those who answer that question normally, if abducted by an anomaly, may suddenly respond with:

Q. What's 1 + 1?

A. Having slaughtered the flesh of 10, only 1 limb remains. Since a cross of 1 and 1 is X and X is 10, when two 10s join to form 100, align 100 crossed forearms and you'll have your answer.[1]

Then, they proceed to murder 100 people, including themselves,

displaying 100 pairs of forearms.

Being outraged at the fact that they could commit such monstrous acts would mean nothing to them.

A. Why are you getting angry all of a sudden?

Because in their mind, killing 100 people is no different from calculating 1 + 1 = 2. They slaughtered with the same nonchalance as doing simple math.

I just answered 1 + 1 = 2, so why are you upset? Why are you looking at me with such sadness?

They'd look at you with confusion.

They're no longer human.

They're incapable of human conversation.

Thus was the abduction of humanity.

This is what I usually refer to when I say someone has been 'entranced' by an anomaly. It was likely in this sense that the Tutorial Fairy used the word.

"If everyone infected in the real world has been abducted... how many people are here in this Inner World?"

"Hoek! At least two million! And the number's skyrocketing in real-time!"

I frowned. "Wait, at this rate, it'll surpass the population of the Peninsula."

"That's right! This place doesn't just contain the virus-infected people from reality, but even characters from their dreams! It'll soon exceed ten million! Welcome to the Reversal World!"

"...Huh."

Ten million.

I surveyed the vast emptiness that stretched around Seoul Station. If this place was the Void created by an anomaly, it wasn't just any Void—it was a Great Void.

A Great Void of this scale was incredibly rare. For example, an anomaly like an "apartment trapping 400 souls" would only be a standard Apartment Anomaly. But if an apartment could hold 40,000 souls, additional concepts would be needed. Like, "This reflects the deep desire Koreans have for apartments," or, "It's based on a real apartment with that many pre-sale applications." The anomaly wouldn't just be about the building, but the entire complex. Only then could a Great Void grow larger.

The largest Great Void on Earth was in the western part of Eurasia, where the concepts of World War I and World War II had been linked, trapping hundreds of millions of souls.

"How could it have pulled in millions? Did it declare this place a hell?"

"Hoek, not at all. If anything, it's quite the opposite—"

"Everyone!"

Just then, a voice boomed from the plaza of Seoul Station. It was a man with a megaphone, dressed in an outfit that screamed street evangelist, much like those seen before the collapse of civilization. But there was something a bit off about the writing on his vest.

Goddess = Heaven!

No Goddess = Hell!

The stickers patched across his vest were disturbingly similar to reality.

"Everyone! I'm sorry to interrupt your busy lives! But I had no choice! I had to grab this stage to guide you toward true faith and a righteous life!"

The middle-aged man shouted into his red megaphone.

“As you know, many unfortunate souls are still trapped in hell! Unlike us, they have yet to be saved! They live lives of endless regression, endless cycles, endless suffering! Friends! Family!”

At this point, the sense of “reality” that had anchored this place suddenly and dramatically reversed.

“……”

“……”

Everyone in the plaza stopped moving and turned to stare at the man.

People on the phone hung up. Those looking at their smartphones turned them off. Even those chatting with companions fell silent.

The plaza was engulfed in eerie stillness. There wasn’t a single annoyed look directed at the man’s megaphone. Everyone stared at him blankly, with dark, hollow eyes.

“Across the Void, countless people still suffer in the inferno of eternal reincarnation! Those people are your friends! Your family! And, ultimately, they are a reflection of yourselves! Let us pray for them! Oh, Goddess!”

“Oh, Goddess!”

The previously silent crowd suddenly roared in unison.

The man waved his arms even more fervently.

“Oh, Goddesssss!”

“Oh, Goddess!”

“Repent! As we live through cycle after cycle, hundreds, thousands of times over, we fall into the delusion that we will be saved! That the world will be redeemed! But we must repent for our sins, for the sins of our friends, family, and selves!”

“Repent!”

“Praise her! The only thing piling up in this endless life is our growing sins. Even if we forget, the Goddess continues to watch over us! Our filthy souls, they are stained with sin. Yet the Goddess, in her mercy, never gave up on us! She has pulled us out of hell and returned us to this world! Praise her!”

“Praise her!”

“Oh, Goddessss!”

“Oh, Goddess!”

The entire plaza descended into madness.

Fairy No. 264 let out a quiet *hoek* and hid behind me. Even I hesitated for a moment as I saw the frenzied eyes of the crowd.

“Bow down, all of you! Worship her!”

Without a second of hesitation, the crowd in the plaza dropped to the ground. Not a single one of them cared that their suits got dirty.

Kim Joo-chul was among them. He and his wife bowed low to the ground.

“Confront it! As you did yesterday, as you did the day before, as you did a hundred years ago, and a thousand years ago! See your reflection in this eternal hell!”

And then something bizarre happened. The asphalt ground of the plaza turned transparent—like glass. Beneath the glass, scenes began to play. In the place where Kim Joo-chul bowed, the scene was of Kim Joo-chul himself.

“Save me! Please, just let me out of here! I can’t keep reliving this day anymore!”

It wasn’t just him. Wherever the crowd bowed, each of them saw a vision of themselves beneath the glass.

And among them, I noticed a familiar green-haired figure—it was Sim Ah-ryeon.

The scene beneath the glass that caught and held my attention, however, was the following:

“The National Road Management Corps are the lackeys of hell! They want to trap us in this endless regression! They’re the true demons!”

“Demons! Demons! Demons!”

In the scene, a group of protesters gathered in front of the National Road Management Corps headquarters, screaming their chants. Yu Ji-won and her team came out and brutally suppressed them. The Tower of Babel Plaza was filled with screams.

A scene that could have easily been from reality.

I muttered to myself, “What are these scenes?”

“Hoek. They’re from the real world.” The fairy peeked over my shoulder. “Comrade Secretary, look beneath your feet.”

“Huh?”

I looked down, and to my surprise, just like the others, there was a glass panel beneath me displaying a ‘scene.’

The Undertaker on the other side was sleeping with his eyes closed. Surrounding him were Noh Do-hwa and the Saintess, sitting nearby. While I lay in bed, they were talking softly.

“Damn. It’s noisy outside...”

“The protests are getting worse.”

“Well, not surprising. Even the Awakeners are infected with this so-called Regressor Virus. Samcheon and Baekhwa mentioned trying to suppress it, but I don’t think it’ll last long...”

“I still believe everything will be fine once Undertaker wakes up.”

I was speechless. This wasn’t just a scene that could exist in reality —it was reality itself.

Then Fairy No. 24 revealed, “But for those humans entranced by this Inner World, it’s the opposite.”

“...The opposite?”

“Hoek! Yes! Here is the real world, and beyond the glass is the afterlife—their hell!”

My eyes shot wide. “What? How could they be fooled like that...?”

“Hoek! It works! To be more precise, the anomaly is actively pushing that narrative!”

Fairy number 264 continued to explain.

The reason they believed their Inner World was superior to my reality.

“First of all, there’s no war here, and civilization is still intact! And like I said, the population here is about to surpass yours!”

Civilization and environment.

“That side is a harsh world, an eternal regression hell. But this Inner World created by the anomaly exists without regression! It continues on like a normal reality!”

The flow of time.

“So, Comrade Secretary, this anomaly has declared your world a ‘hell.’ It’s a challenge to see which world is the true reality and which is the hellscape!”

“.....”

I finally understood.

In the end, this anomaly was no different from others in its essence. Anomalies typically create hell within reality, but this one had simply named reality itself as hell. And just like that, it had constructed its own Inner World, claiming it as its territory.

This place was the world of the living, and that place was the afterlife. The anomaly was entrancing people with that narrative.

Reversal. Inversion. A change in perception.

Reluctantly, I admitted, "...Clever bastard. So, where is this, exactly? Is it a dream? The unconscious?"

"Hoek, not quite. You reached this place through a dream, but dreams are just a similar experience!"

"A similar experience...?" With a flash of insight, I deduced, "I see, so that's it. There's an old myth that people can sometimes glimpse the afterlife through their dreams. The afterlife doesn't actually exist in dreams, but it can be momentarily accessed through them. This place must have the properties of the afterlife."

"As expected of Comrade Secretary! Hoek! Of course, the anomaly considers this the real world and the other side the afterlife..."

A cleverly designed trap, no doubt. However, I finally caught a glimpse of the strategy.

It was a simple matter of proving which was the real world and which was the illusion. I just had to reveal that the world I lived in was reality.

"Friends! Rejoice! Your heartfelt repentance has reached the Goddess!" the middle-aged man shouted. "Today, you no longer need to gaze into hell! Lift your heads! Raise your eyes! Behold the sky above you!"

The people lying in the plaza raised their upper bodies. Instinctively, I followed their gaze to the sky.

"Behold the sacred presence of the Goddess!"

And I saw *it*.

There was no sun. How had I not noticed?

If I had to explain myself, I'd probably have to say because modern

people rarely look up at the sun. What's more, judging by the angle of the light, the sun should have been directly overhead, making it difficult to see unless I tilted my head almost 90 degrees.

In other words, even I had assumed that because light was shining from above, what was in the sky must be a sun.

"....."

What actually hung in its place was no sun.

It was a massive **eye**.

Blink.

The eye blinked, and ever so slowly, for just that moment, the light of the world dimmed.

Before I looked up, I'd assumed what kept casting us into shadow were clouds. But I was wrong.

Blink.

From that enormous eye came its light—or rather, its gaze—cast down upon us. The pitch-black pupil at its center never rested, constantly shifting.

"Hoek! Danger...!"

The moment the Eye of the Sun—no, the Sun of the Eye—fixed its gaze on me, everyone in the plaza turned their head toward me as well.

"....."

"....."

The residents of this Inner World, who hadn't noticed me until now, suddenly stared at me with piercing gazes.

Even the light from the eye above focused all its attention on me.

The temperature around me skyrocketed, and my skin began to melt like wax.

“Emergency escape, hoek!”

The fairy frantically waved her wand. Half of Fairy No. 264’s body exploded right in front of me, but the fairy held onto her wand until the end.

In the next instant, I was forcefully ejected from the dream.

“...Hey.”

What greeted me back in reality was a face that could win first place in a contest for The Face You Least Want to See When You Wake Up.

“Hey, Undertaker, are you alright? You’re not dead, are you...?”

Also known as Noh Do-hwa.

I struggled to lift my eyelids, and the first thing I saw was her dark circles. Do-hwa was never one to care much about her appearance, but today she looked the worse for wear. She was covered in something that looked like chunks of flesh from head to toe, though it looked to be more like the consistency of jelly than human skin.

Behind her, the Saintess was similarly drenched in a strange, semi-solid substance.

I was about to make a sarcastic comment about their fashion choices, but Do-hwa cut me off first.

“The fairy that sang you a lullaby and took you on a dream trip just exploded. Out of nowhere, half of its body burst apart...”

“Ah.” So it was true.

From where I lay in bed, I turned my head. Fairy No. 264 was still holding my hand, but half of its body had vanished.

“Call Ah-ryeon. These fairies are tough, and if we heal it quickly, it’ll survive.”

Behind Do-hwa, the Saintess nodded. She probably sent a message using Telepathy.

As I straightened my clothes, I asked, “Noh Do-hwa, is there a protest happening outside right now?”

“Hmm? Yes. Ji-won put it down right away, but… That’s strange. You heard the noise even while dreaming?”

I rested my chin on my hand, deep in thought.

This time, it was Do-hwa who asked me a question, a scowl on her face. “Because of that fairy, we’ll have to redecorate this place. What the hell happened in that dream to cause all this…?”

“The Goddess of the Night, Nut.” I paused for a moment, then added, “It’s an Outer God.”

Footnotes:

1 - The “logic” here goes like this: 2 is expressed in binary as 10. The last 1 standing after slaughtering all those people is you. 1 and 1 crossed looks like the roman numeral X for 10. 10 x 10 (aka 10^2) = 100. So the anomaly needs to take 100 more lives, including the abductee’s, in order to reach “2.”

Chapter 209

The Antagonist VI

Sinnoa

A wild Outer God appeared!

The world (once again) was doomed! Everyone, run for your lives!

...Yet no one reacted that way.

Everyone remained calm.

People had already mentally sorted the hierarchy of anomalies into five neat categories: Ocean-class, Continent-class, Polis-class, Village-class, and below village-class. So even if I suddenly screamed, “Do you know what an Outer God is? It’s insanely strong! It can beat up even Ocean-class anomalies!” they’d probably just respond with, “Who cares, you nerd?”

And honestly, even those in the Regressor Alliance weren’t much different.

“Are Outer Gods really that powerful?” Ah-ryeon asked, panting heavily and drenched in sweat. She had just rushed over and healed Fairy No. 264.

“Why are Outer Gods the only ones called that? All the other anomalies are named after places—villages, cities. But Outer Gods sound... small. It feels wrong, out of balance.”

“Don’t be too hard on it, Sim Ah-ryeon.” Surprisingly, it was Do-hwa who chimed in to back me up. “You should never mock the naming sense of the most revered Duke of the Black Library, the Supreme Overlord of the Library Society. You never know when you’ll disappear without a trace...”

“H-holy crap! I’m sorry! I think the guild leader’s naming sense is perfect! It’s the best!”

“……”

Not so surprisingly, Do-hwa had been mocking me all along.

For the record, Noh Do-hwa was the kind of supporting character in a visual novel whose affection level was permanently locked at Lv. 0, regardless of who tried to win her over. But—and here’s the kicker—there was exactly one person she allowed to reach Lv. 1: Sim Ah-ryeon.

Why? Simple. Even if Do-hwa got her limbs shattered, Ah-ryeon could heal them instantly. It wasn’t about chemistry or personality compatibility, like some people might think. Nope. It was purely about her healing ability.

For the record, the affection level cap in this reality game is Lv. 100. If anyone figures out how to raise the remaining 99 levels, feel free to upload it to SG-Net.

“The Outer Gods aren’t called ‘gods’ because they’re gods of our world. They’re called Outer Gods because they alienate the world from humanity,” I explained.

“H-huh…?”

“They’re gods beyond the scope of our world. Karl Marx originally used a term like this—in English, the meaning can be interpreted as “alienation”, which connects with the word alien.[2] I came up with this name to evoke that sense of being… alien to us.”

“What does that even mean, you nerd?”

“……”

“Ack! As expected from the guild leader. Your baiting is the best thing in the world…”

Calm down. My sword is not meant to cut down humans. Even though Sim Ah-ryeon confuses me to the core, her DNA is still 99.97% similar to mine.

Now I understood why the world had fallen apart. If creatures this irrational were the pinnacle of life, no wonder anomalies could easily dominate us.

“Ah-ryeon,” I called firmly, “one of the reasons Outer Gods are terrifying is that their patterns evolve rapidly.”

“Evolve?”

“Exactly. For example, if you fail to hunt down a Meteor Shower, it’s not the end of the world. The pattern of ‘falling from the sky’ doesn’t change. You just gather your strength and try again. But an Outer God immediately compensates for any weaknesses.”

This was the reason I had struggled so much, twisting my body to the limit when I hunted down the Admin of the Infinite Metagame in the 267th round. You could throw as many light jabs or one-two punches as you wanted. They weren’t going to accumulate any damage against an Outer God.

You needed one clean hit. A single, precise strike to pierce the bloated belly of an Outer God.

That’s the most frustrating part.

My strategy of slowly accumulating data through countless cycles—every regressor’s signature method—was the exact opposite of how you had to deal with an Outer God.

“Let me give you a demonstration. Hey, Fairy No. 264, are you conscious?”

“Hoek... I almost took a one-way trip to the afterlife...” Fairy No. 264 wobbled as it answered, its body now even smaller after being sliced in half earlier.

“Call the other fairies. We’re entering the Inner World again. This time, Ah-ryeon and the others will come along.”

“Hoek... Understood...”

We—the Saintess, Noh Do-hwa, Sim Ah-ryeon, and I—entered the

dream simultaneously. Once again, we made it to Seoul Station Plaza, the gateway to the Inner World.

“Um, Guild Leader.”

But this time, there was a transparent ‘glass’ barrier between us and the plaza, preventing us from entering.

“We can see it, but we can’t get in...!” Ah-ryeon knocked on the glass with her small fists.

It wasn’t just her either. The Saintess unleashed her full aura, trying to hack at it with a hand axe, but the “glass” didn’t even get scratched.

Meanwhile, the people in Seoul Station Plaza casually walked across the glass without a care. We were so close, just an arm’s length away, yet completely separated, unable to affect each other. It was like how the living and the dead couldn’t interfere with each other.

“See? The Outer God has blocked the passage.”

“Hoek.”

“Nut probably didn’t expect me to enter her domain through dreams.”

To explain it again, Nut, the Goddess of the Night, had created a domain that spanned both “this world” and the “afterlife.” She had the power to designate which was which, and that was why she designated Kim Joo-chul’s dream as the afterlife, calling it Valhalla. And she had taken it a step further, declaring our reality as hell.

For those living in hell, there was almost no way to interfere with the living—Nut’s domain.

Almost.

“Still, there have been stories throughout history about people experiencing the afterlife in their dreams. Thanks to the Tutorial Fairies, we managed to find this ‘dream-entry route,’ but once the

Outer God noticed the flaw, she blocked it."

"Uh... Then how do we get back in?"

"I don't know."

I lightly tapped the glass separating the afterlife from the living world. It wasn't just a simple knock. I infused my aura into the glass, creating a ripple. My black aura vibrated against the surface, but the glass didn't budge.

This was the frustrating part about dealing with an Outer God. Brute force alone wouldn't work.

Maybe it was simply because I lacked the strength.

"Anyway, I've named this Outer God 'Nut.'"

"Nut..."

"She's a goddess from Egyptian mythology. She governs the night sky, or in other words, the universe and the cycle of day and night."

When Nut caused the world to collapse, the night sky always took on a disturbing, pulsing appearance.

The Milky Way would turn into veins, throbbing red and blue, or the sunset would drip down like blood.

"In Egyptian mythology, the night sky is the body of the goddess Nut. People back then didn't see the night sky as a vast expanse of space."

"They didn't?"

"They thought of it as a transparent dome covering the sky."

"Huh? How?"

"They believed stars weren't floating spheres but holes in that dome. As the world breathed, the stars were its breath holes, and the starlight was the world's breath shining through."

“Wha...? Starlight as the world’s breath...”

“And so, the Pythagoreans, influenced by Egyptian mythology, claimed that as the stars moved, the ‘world’s breath’ rang out like music. It’s just that humans couldn’t hear the melody.”

“Whoa...”

This was why the inside of a pharaoh’s sarcophagus was often decorated with night skies. The sarcophagus itself was transformed into a miniature universe. In it, the stars were intricately carved because the “breath holes”—the star-shaped openings—were what allowed the pharaoh’s soul to pass through.

“Guild Leader! You suddenly seem super knowledgeable! You actually know more than just memorizing the names of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* characters...!”

This brat... “Hey, you. I’ve always been an expert when it comes to anomalies. I didn’t just get here by accident. I studied my way to the top, you know.”

“Ah, here comes the lecture...”

“What did you say?”

“Gyaaah! No violence, please!” Tears welled in Ah-ryeon’s eyes from where her head was held in a lock. “S-so, how do we cross over to that side if the passage is blocked...?”

“Hmm. Since Egyptian mythology is the main reference here, I guess we’d have to become mummies to cross over.”

“Mummies?”

“Yeah. By the way, to become a mummy, you need to have your brain removed. Egyptians didn’t think the brain was important—they believed thinking happened through the heart.”

“H-huh?! You’re talking about dying!”

“How about you become a mummy on behalf of humanity, Ah-

ryeon?”

“N-nooo! It’s not me who should get buried alive, it’s you, Guild Leader!”

Just then, the Saintess raised her hand. “Mr. Undertaker.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“If this Outer God, Nut, really has the power to designate which is the afterlife and which is the living world... and if she’s labeled our world as the afterlife, specifically a hell where souls suffer...”

The Saintess tilted her head, her watery blue hair swaying slightly.

“Wouldn’t more than just déjà vu be happening to people infected by the Regressor Virus? Wouldn’t... even worse things be happening? Real, hellish things?”

“.....”

Ah.

We hurriedly returned to reality. And outside, hell had indeed broken loose.

“Aaaaargh!”

“I-I’ve been stabbed! I got stabbed!”

In Busan’s Guduk Mountain, trees were being replaced by swords that slashed at anyone who got too close. These “tree swords” weren’t just sprouting—they were growing and retracting in real time, like living creatures. They seemed to be spreading down from the mountain into other areas of the city, infecting other trees.

“Save me! Please, let me out of here!”

“O-ow, ow...!”

The ground beneath the protesters in Babel Tower Plaza had

collapsed, turning into a massive pit of molten metal.

People flailed and screamed as they fell into the boiling liquid, their skin burning and melting. Strangely, though, their flesh regenerated almost immediately, causing them to drown and burn again and again in an endless loop of suffering.

This “molten pit” was also expanding, threatening to spread beyond Babel Tower Plaza into other districts.

“G-Guild Leader...!”

My comrades were gathered on the rooftop of the National Road Management Corps headquarters, staring at the unfolding chaos. They turned to me, their faces pale with shock.

“This is insane! We weren’t even gone that long...!”

We’d only been away for a short while.

But in that time, the world had fallen into hell.

Footnotes:

1 - Heo Jun was royal chief physician of Naeuiwon during the reign of King Seonjo and King Gwanghae of the Joseon period in Korea.

2 - Alienation in the Marxist sense refers to the way people feel estranged from their humanity, like being made to feel like an animal or “other,” as a consequence of the division of labor and class in society.

Chapter 210

The Antagonist VII

Sinnoa

I bit my lip. “...The anomaly is rushing because I caught on.”

“Wh-what?”

“What you’re seeing in Guduk Mountain is the Mountain of Knives Hell, and in the plaza, it’s the Boiling Oil Hell. After pulling out Valhalla from the Crystal Tombstones, now it’s summoning Buddhist hells.”

Even as I explained it to my comrades, my mind conjured countless strategies to overcome the situation, only to dismiss them just as quickly.

‘It’s moving too fast.’

Barely a day had passed since I first observed the anomaly in Kim Joo-chul’s dream, and now, the Outer God was launching an all-out assault like it had been preparing for this very moment.

Of course.

That was exactly why the Outer God had hidden inside the Crystal Tombstones for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. It had been waiting for this.

Just as I, a regressor, had spent lifetimes honing the perfect strike to take down anomalies, the Outer God had taken this life to execute a flawless ambush on me.

“H-hyung, something’s wrong.”

Even Seo Gyu, who usually put on a tough front, couldn’t hide the tremble in his voice. The sight of people melting and screaming in boiling liquid right beneath the headquarters building was enough

to shake anyone.

“The people aren’t dying. They should be dead after falling into molten metal, but... they keep healing.”

“It’s hell,” I answered. “The Outer God has declared this world a hell. And in hell, no one dies.”

“N-no one dies?”

“Right. Because hell is a place for the dead. All they do is suffer, endlessly. From now on, no one will be able to die—”

At that moment, a bolt of realization struck me.

Ah. Ahhh!

That’s it.

That’s why!

“No one can die, which is why this world has become a hell!”

“What?”

“Think about it, Seo Gyu! I’m a regressor! Because I keep resetting the timeline, everyone in this world has been stuck in a state where they can’t truly die. For hundreds, even thousands of years!” I clenched my teeth. “The Outer God used that very state against us! It defined this world as hell, where people live a life of eternal suffering because they can’t die. It’s not just some anomaly. It’s reshaping the world to fit its own interpretation!”

“.....!”

Exactly.

It was a complete reversal of thought. A Copernican shift in perspective.[1]

To anomalies, regressors like me are the ultimate challenge. No matter how powerful they are, I can always reset time and continue

my hunt. No matter how hard they struggle, they are bound to lose to a regressor in the end.

It was just a shift in perspective, a different interpretation. All the Outer God had to do was define this world not as reality, but as hell, and it could fully exploit my Regression.

Rather than denying my ability, the Goddess of the Night had accepted and twisted it to her advantage.

As long as I continued to use my regression, this world would never stop being hell.

'Unbelievable.'

A chill ran down my spine.

Shock. And awe.

'She used me! Instead of trying to destroy me, she planted the seeds of evil within my abilities to corrupt the world!'

Seeing the look of horror on my face, Ah-ryeon and Seo Gyu grew even more unsettled. They were both heavily reliant on me.

The cold, rational voice of the Saintess broke through the ringing in my ears.

"Mr. Undertaker, can't you just reset the timeline and try again later?"

"...I don't think so. I already explained it to Noh Do-hwa earlier, but this Outer God has latched onto my very abilities."

Nut had burrowed into the Crystal Tombstones, feeding off the souls trapped within, and leveraged the fact that regression exists in this world to manifest the concept of hell.

"Even if I reset the timeline, nothing will change. In fact, things will probably get worse," I summarized.

“Why is that?”

“Right now, at least we’re united as the Regressor Alliance. But if I reset the timeline, all of our relationships would be reset to zero. Meanwhile, Nut’s hell…”

“…would remain intact, because the Crystal Tombstones, sealed with Time Seal, aren’t affected by regression.”

“Yes. And as you can see, it took Nut less than a day to summon hell into this world. But rebuilding our alliance would take far longer than that.”

“…So what was once an advantage for us—regression—has now become a tool for the enemy. When going against this Outer God, regression is actually a detriment to us.”

“That’s right.”

Checkmate.

There was only one way out.

“The only way is…” I hesitated.

“What is it?”

“I need to reset and immediately travel to Onyang to become infected with the Udumbara virus.”

Udumbara. The virus that was called the New Buddha. Once infected, an Awakener would lose all of their abilities.

“If I do that, I’ll lose all of my abilities, including Time Seal and Regression.”

“……”

I had always made sure to take down Udumbara right after resetting, and it was for one very simple reason: Udumbara had the potential to kill a regressor.

The Saintess stared at me with her clear, blue eyes. “Then what happens?”

“I don’t know. In all likelihood, I’ll no longer be able to reset the timeline. The world might be left as it is, only to be destroyed by some anomaly and stay that way forever.”

“……”

“The worst-case scenario is that even after I lose my powers, the world continues to reset.”

“What?” The Saintess blinked. “Ah. You mentioned someone called Schopenhauer. You said he was a regressor too, right?”

Exactly.

There were two regressors in this world. If regressors act as a switch for the timeline reset, even if I were to disappear, there would still be another switch. And right now, that switch was stuck in the ‘on’ position.

I snuck in another point. “Perhaps regression and the world’s cyclical resets aren’t connected at all.”

In fact, I had been keeping this theory in the back of my mind for a long time.

“Maybe it’s not really ‘regression’ at all. Maybe it’s more like the world is caught in a cycle of repetition.”

Imagine the world coming to an end. Then it starts over again. The universe forms from the Big Bang, the first galaxies are born, Earth forms, and life emerges from the oceans to crawl onto land. Eventually, humans are born, civilization rises, and cities are built. Then one day, a person called the Undertaker is born and heads for Busan Station.

As you know, I possess Complete Memory. In the scenario I just described, what if my Complete Memory wasn’t about experiencing multiple lives but rather receiving memories from a certain point? Wouldn’t that essentially be the same as Regression?

"...But didn't you say you only awakened your Complete Memory in the 4th cycle?"

"The abilities of Awakeners evolve. Maybe my Complete Memory wasn't fully unlocked until the 4th cycle."

And the truly terrifying part of this theory was something else.

"Let me summarize."

I finally voiced it.

"If I become infected with Udumbara, all the people sealed by Time Seal will be released, and I will lose all memories of previous cycles, starting anew from the Busan Station tutorial dungeon."

Time would pass.

"Time will go on, and eventually, Schopenhauer will return from his vacation. A series of events unknown to me will unfold."

Time would pass.

"And one day, Schopenhauer might lose his regressor abilities, either by being infected with Udumbara or by encountering an anomaly that surpasses his Regression. The world will eventually be destroyed."

Time would pass.

"And finally, in some distant future, when the concept of regression is long forgotten, I might once again awaken my powers at Busan Station."

In other words, everything would start over.

"I would recognize that as the 1st cycle."

And then. And then. And then.

"The 2nd cycle, the 3rd cycle, and eventually, in the 4th cycle, I'd unlock my Complete Memory and meet Schopenhauer..."

And one day.

“I would once again reach what I recognize as this very moment—the 267th cycle.”

“……”

“…For all I know, I might have already repeated these cycles countless times.”

For so long—ever since I discovered that Udumbara could erase an Awakener’s powers—I had been carrying this fear, silently tormented by the thought. The possibility that the 267th cycle might actually be 267×2, 267×3, 267×267, or even 267×267^2 or 267×267^3. The fear that my entire existence could be nothing more than one colossal failure. It was the deepest fear of any regressor.

If this theory was correct, then yes. The Goddess of the Night, Nut, had been right all along.

This world was indeed hell.

“Aaaaaagh!”

“I don’t want to live anymore! Kill me!”

“Someone, please, just kill me!”

Below the headquarters, hundreds of people continued to melt in the boiling metal. Their screams echoed out to any eardrum with the vicinity, reverberating against the translucent, glass-like barrier that all humans were born with.

The hell that had descended on this world was spreading rapidly. All of Busan’s trees and flowers had turned into swords, and the plazas and alleys were flooded with molten metal.

The Buddhist hells had no end.

Mountain of Knives, Boiling Oil Hell, Frozen Hell, Sword Forest Hell, Tongue Ripping Hell, Snake Hell, Dismemberment Hell, Iron Bed Hell, Storm Hell, Darkness Hell, and beyond these came the

Eight Burning Hells, the Black Victory, Intermediate Fusion, Great Roaring, Minor Burning, Major Burning, Avici, and finally, the Eight Cold Hells: Icy Stab, Frostbite, Chilling Wind, Hoo-Hoo Hell, Ho-Ho Hell, Blue Lotus, Red Lotus, and Great Red Lotus.

Those who fell into the Great Red Lotus Hell would spend 25 aeons and 6,000 quintillion years in torment before they could be reborn.

25 aeons and 6,000 quintillion years.

Infinity.

If I didn't reset, endless hell would unfold. If I reset and got infected by Udumbara, I would face the endless hell of a regressor.

'Is this...'

I tightly gripped the handle of my cane sword.

The cane that Noh Do-hwa had made for me during the 100th cycle. A reminder that, just as there was chance in life, so too was there fate—and that fate would one day smile upon me.

Yet today, the world beneath my feet felt unbearably thin.

'Is this the epilogue of my life?'

Squeeze.

Someone placed their hand on mine, covering my grip on the cane.

I turned to see who it was.

"Mr. Undertaker."

It was the Saintess.

"There's a flaw in your theory."

"What?"

"You're not someone who creates hell. Even if the world is repeating itself, you're not someone who's endlessly reincarnating.

No, more precisely, right now, you're not endlessly reliving this moment. There's a fatal flaw in that theory."

"...How can you be so sure?"

"Because..."

The light-blue depths of her eyes, which always seemed to gaze at the world from a step removed, looked directly into mine. Those eyes, so like a tranquil sea, seemed to drown out the distant screams of the people around us. Instead, my ears were filled with the quiet murmur of the ocean, as if a gentle wave was lapping at my feet.

In that water, a voice spoke.

Because, she said...

"I'm going to make sure that theory is wrong."

I blinked. "What? What do you mean—"

"Goodbye for now, Mr. Undertaker."

A gentle warmth brushed across the back of my hand.

It felt like I was being pulled into the depths of the ocean. Sinking into an unknown abyss.

"I'll see you soon."

And then.

Time stopped.

Time stopped.

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That sound made me open my eyes.

It felt like no time had passed at all, as if I had simply blinked. So then, why did it feel so strange?

“...Saintess?”

“Yes.”

Her voice caressed my eardrums, and for some reason, it felt like I hadn’t heard it in a long time.

The Saintess’s hand was still holding mine. But the warmth had changed. The temperature, once warm, had grown cool.

It was probably that shift in warmth that made me realize something was off.

After hearing and feeling, my vision finally caught up.

The world was... frozen.

“.....”

The swords that had covered the city were now completely still. The molten metal that had flooded the plaza and alleys had also stopped.

The people trapped in the boiling liquid, their screams, Ah-ryeon’s worried gaze, Seo Gyu’s gaping mouth, and Do-hwa tightening her leather gloves.

The entire hellscape.

Everything had stopped.

“Oh.”

A wave of powerful déjà vu hit me.

I’d seen this exact scene somewhere before. It was the hellish landscape that had appeared when I was trapped in the Hell of Infinite Time.

I immediately realized what had caused this frozen world.

I parted my lips. “Saintess, have you… become a Corrupted?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, my god.”

The Saintess’s ability, Time Stop. When pushed to its limit, it could manifest an absurd level of power. This was the first time I had ever witnessed it in reality.

Though, the Saintess had come close to Corruption back in the 107th cycle, she hadn’t fully awakened Time Stop. Not to this degree.

“But Saintess, you didn’t train your aura that much in this cycle. How could you…”

“I did train,” she replied. “By stopping time.”

“……”

“Just taking a few steps was difficult at first. Even breathing was a challenge. But I kept pushing, using my aura to hold it all together.”

Her voice was so calm that it almost sounded like an ordinary training regimen to anyone who might overhear. But I knew better. I understood just how insane that kind of training was.

“No way. If you stop time, your aura would stop too, and you’d have to force it to move bit by bit. It would be like taking a single breath over the span of thirty minutes—or even an hour.”

The Saintess nodded. “Yes. It was very difficult. That’s why it took so long.”

“…How long, exactly?”

“I didn’t count precisely, but I think over 2,000 years.”

“……”

Good Lord.

The Saintess smiled at me as I stood there with my mouth hanging open, stunned. There was a playful hint in her expression.

It was a rare expression, one I hadn't seen in ages.

"Maybe now," she said, "I'm finally old enough to be the same age as you."

Footnotes:

1 - Nicolaus Copernicus was the scientist who popularized the theory that it is Earth that revolves around the sun and not the other way around. This paradigm shift is known as the Copernican Revolution.

Chapter 211

The Antagonist VIII

Sinnoa

No matter how important rooftops are in subculture—be they for love letters or dramatic confrontations—this wasn't the best place to have a relaxing conversation with the Saintess. The backdrop was just too grim. Even though time had stopped, the hellish landscape below spiraled outward into the distance.

"Let's go somewhere else to talk."

"Yes, let's."

"But is there no way to unfreeze the others from Time Stop?"

The Saintess shook her head. "That would be difficult. I need to be physically holding their hand to move them through the frozen world."

Now that she mentioned it, she was still holding my hand tightly. But then, I wondered—couldn't we just use the 'walking hand-in-hand' method to bring at least one more person along?

Before I could say anything, she added, "Unless they have a level of aura mastery like yours, it would be hard for them to survive. They would need to overcome the concept of 'time' itself."

"Hmm. That makes sense."

It was like surviving in the vacuum of space. For a regular person—or even a fairly trained Awakener—it would be nearly impossible to do something as simple as speaking.

"That's why I can pull off little tricks like this."

The Saintess let go of my hand. In my vision, her palm slowly drifted away, as if moving in slow motion, floating just 0.1

centimeters above my hand.

Clap.

And then, suddenly, I found myself standing in the first-floor lobby of the National Road Management Corps headquarters.

"……?"

"I just stopped time."

Her face remained expressionless. But as the self-proclaimed Guinness World Record Holder for Interpreting the Saintess's Expressions, I could detect the subtle air hidden beneath that cold exterior.

This woman… was having fun. She was feeling a bit elated.

"Wait a second, Saintess."

"The World."

Again, she let go of my hand. The next moment, I was standing in the middle of Babel Tower Plaza.

"……"

"Ta-da."

She said it in the most emotionless tone imaginable. Which meant she was probably the one who had carried me here while time was stopped.

"…Saintess."

"Yes?"

"You're in a really good mood, aren't you?"

"Yes. It's been 2,000 years since I last talked to someone."

"Yeah, I was alone for about 212 years after the Infinite Metagame screwed me over, so I can understand how it feels…"

It was the round when Ah-ryeon found me and said, “I love the café mocha you make, Guild Leader.” I had hugged her like a child and cried.

Those 200 years of solitude had broken me, turning me into a pathetic regressor who could be beaten by that weirdo. This person in front of me had survived ten times that length of solitude...

In short, the Saintess was now in a “hyper-weakened” state.

Realizing this, I immediately scooped her up into a princess carry.

“Oh.”

“You’ve been through a lot. Thank you, Saintess.”

“……”

“If you hadn’t stopped time, I honestly would have given up on this mission. I might have ended up as a regressor trapped in an eternal hell of repeating time.”

During my 200-year isolation, the thing I needed most was human warmth. That was probably why I hugged Ah-ryeon so instinctively when I saw her. People understand others by reflecting on their own experiences, so I had a good idea of what the Saintess might want right now.

“……”

Fortunately, my guess wasn’t wrong.

The Saintess quietly rested in my arms. Her sea-colored hair, which had grown slightly longer in her 2,000 years, swayed gently toward me.

“I know a good café nearby. Why don’t we head there?”

“...No. Just walking around like this is fine.”

“Oh. Alright, let’s do that, then.”

Step. Step.

We moved through the stillness of the world. The princess-carry pose we were in looked a bit ridiculous, but luckily, no one was around to see it.

Everyone else in the world was frozen in place, their breaths held. The people who had been trapped in the torment of the Mountain of Knives Hell and Boiling Oil Hell were frozen in mid-scream, their poses like sculptures.

We walked past those petrified figures.

“To be honest, I was a bit worried,” the Saintess said, finally breaking the silence.

“Worried?”

“Yes. I’m a monster now.” Her voice, though calm, carried a dryness that had lingered in her for a long time. “I’ve become a monster powerful enough to be classified as an Outer God. And you, Undertaker, you’re nearly always hostile to monsters. So...”

“Ah, I see. You were worried I’d take one look at you and go, ‘this damn monster,’ and try to kill you?”

“Yes. I considered it a possibility.”

I laughed. “If you ever see me react that way, kill me immediately. That would be a doppelganger.”

No matter how important it was to rid the world of anomalies, it would never take precedence over the people around me. If I ever turned into some kind of monster-hunting machine who put that above everything else, then I’d be no different from a monster myself. I’d deserve to be hunted down.

Of course, the Saintess’s body temperature was already far from human. It was as cold as a shadow. Probably around 15°C. But for someone who had spent 2,000 winters alone, she possessed a warmth that still awed me.

“……”

Then something curious happened.

Shhhk.

The Saintess’s aura crawled up my arm, inching its way up toward me. Her aura was colorless and transparent, so outwardly, nothing changed. She remained still in my arms, quietly resting against me.

‘Her aura control has become incredibly refined.’

Impressed, I summoned my own black aura and gently wrapped it around her transparent one as it made contact with my arm.

“……”

Her aura hesitated for a moment, then responded to my black aura, tentatively wrapping around it, like fingers intertwining in a delicate, cautious handshake. Together, transparent and black auras bloomed.

Just like how flowers bloom without making a sound, the Saintess closed her eyes as she nestled in my arms.

“……”

“……”

Aura had a warmth of its own.

What we were doing was, in essence, the same thing as humans exchanging body heat, using an aura technique that ordinary Awakeners couldn’t even dream of mastering.

Perhaps the difference between humans and monsters wasn’t a matter of internal temperature or the number of fingers we had. Maybe it came down to what we tried to imitate with those things.

For a while, we silently confirmed each other’s humanity through that warmth.

“While I was living in this frozen world, I thought about ways to infiltrate Nut’s domain.”

We were in the café at the old Baekje Hospital, where Old Man Scho often talked to Mrs. Adele.

The Saintess sipped her coffee. It was the first cup of coffee I had made for her in a long time.

It was just instant coffee, though, made by ripping open a golden packet and pouring hot water over it. But that was her favorite. My pride as a barista had long since crumbled in the face of modern food technology.

“Did you have any success?”

“Unfortunately, no,” she said with a shake of her head. “The closest I got was with the concept of ‘life flashing before your eyes.’ According to some stories, people who experience that can catch a glimpse of the afterlife. So I pushed myself to the brink of death to try it.”

“Oh, that’s a clever idea.”

“Yes... But in the end, I still couldn’t get past the glass barrier separating life and death.”

The glass. It was the metaphor for ‘something you can see through but can’t cross.’

I wished I could just punch through that glass, but the barrier Nut had constructed was far stronger than the bulletproof glass used for the U.S. president’s limousine.

Now that I thought about it, when Fairy No. 264 took me into the Inner World, that had been our best chance to break through...

But what’s done is done. Regretting the past wouldn’t help now.

“Tell me all the methods you tried.”

“Of course.”

We discussed the countless failed attempts the Saintess had made over the past 2,000 years.

Let me clarify—this wasn't a sign of her incompetence. In fact, Nut hadn't been able to interfere with the Saintess's Time Stop in all that time either. The Outer God had the power to turn the world into hell in a single day, yet it couldn't touch the frozen time that the Saintess had created.

When anomalies with the power of an Outer God clashed, their territorial battles played out in this way.

"Actually, your power and Nut's are polar opposites."

The Saintess tilted her head. "Really?"

"Yes. The world you freeze is, in a sense, 'nothingness.' Since time has stopped, there is no life, no pain, and no awareness."

And paradoxically, that nothingness was the complete opposite of hell.

"Hell, or the afterlife, is where people's souls continue to exist after death, a place of endless something," I concluded.

"I see."

"So, Nut can't invade your realm of nothingness, just as you can't invade her realm of something. You're opposites."

"...So, we're in an eternal stalemate, doomed to fight forever."

"If you're on your own." I rubbed my chin. "Glass. Glass. We need to break that glass. Anomalies related to glass...."

"Shouldn't we also consider mirrors?" the Saintess suggested. "You said that when you entered the Inner World, you saw your real-world self reflected in the glass."

"Yes. My image was projected below me, showing what I looked like in the real world."

“Then it’s more like a ‘mirror’ than just ‘glass.’ After all, the afterlife is a copy of the living world.”

“That’s a good point. Hmm…”

The people of this world had been “copied and pasted” into Nut’s domain. Then Nut claimed that the copy was the real thing, while we on the other side were just the souls suffering in hell. So, yes, the concept of a “mirror” was more accurate than just “glass.”

“Mirrors. Mirrors, huh. That makes me think of doppelgangers… No, doppelgangers are part of the Hell of Infinite Time. It’s more about identity confusion, then.”

“The Ship of Theseus?”

“Possibly. If we list anomalies connected to identity confusion, we’ve got the Ship of Theseus, the Uyuni Desert, Cringe History Mosquito, and… Potato Saintess…”

“Please leave out the last one.”

What? Who knows, that might be the most important clue of all.

“In any case,” I acquiesced, “none of those seem directly connected to entering Nut’s domain… Oh.”

My mental database of anomalies had been combing through the past, and at that moment, it hit on a keyword.

“Mirrors!” I shot to my feet, still holding the Saintess’s hand.

“Yes?”

“There’s an anomaly related to mirrors, hell, and the living world! How could I have forgotten?”

How could I have missed it?

The anomaly that endlessly repeated the idea that this world is hell itself, thus, being born into such a world is a sin.

-Kill yourself.

The Magic Mirror, an anomaly born from the tale of Snow White.

That psychopath Yu Ji-won always had that mirror in her room. It was the perfect clue leading to the Goddess of the Night, Nut.

Footnotes:

Chapter 212

The Antagonist IX

Sinnoa

If someone asked me who the easiest Korean to find in the world was, I would pick Yu Ji-won without hesitation.

If the Korean Peninsula's civilization were still intact and the presidential system still running smoothly, then Ji-won would live near the Blue House.

If the Eastern Holy State went mad, marched south, and founded the Holy Korean Empire? Ji-won would be delivering a eulogy next to Mo Gwang-seo and Christ.

In the end, Yu Ji-won was like a living, breathing Yeouido weather vane. Wherever she lived was modern-day Yeouido, Bukaksan, and Yongsan all rolled into one. If she packed up and moved, it would signal a major shift in the power structure of the Korean Peninsula.

You know how animals sense an earthquake before it happens and run away? She’s that beast of power.

"This is the Magic Mirror."

Naturally, I was able to find Ji-won's lodging as easily as breathing.

It was exactly 11 meters away from the personal room of Noh Do-hwa, the National Road Management Corps leader.

"Oh. Have you visited this place before? After all, you've been alone for 2,000 years. Surely, you've seen quite a few places?"

"No.” The Saintess shook her head. “I've seen it with Clairvoyance, but this is my first time actually coming here."

The room’s interior was quite barren. Maps of the Korean Peninsula

and the Japanese archipelago, both large and small, covered the walls. There were hand-carved chess pieces and an empty armchair by the window. The only decoration in the room, besides a bookshelf lined with *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* texts, was nothing at all.

By the way, every time the name of one of my favorite characters appeared in those books, it was neatly highlighted in yellow.

All and all, it was terrifying. For your sake and for the sake of those around you, I hope you never encounter a genius psychopath of Yu Ji-won's caliber.

"Honestly, it still doesn't feel real to be seeing this in person."

"Come again?" I asked, surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Around the time 1,000 years had passed, my perspective became fixed in a 'third-person omniscient' view."

Ah. Now that she mentioned it...

"Are you saying you look down at things like in StarCraft, controlling units from above?"

"Wait a second."

The Saintess briefly let go of my hand, only to grab it again. In the instant that Time Stop was activated, I was petrified while she flitted somewhere and returned.

"Yes, something like that."

"...Did you seriously stop time just now to look up what StarCraft was because you didn't know?"

"Mr. Undertaker," the Saintess calmly replied, "it's a bit unreasonable to expect me to understand a game that was released in 1998."

"....."

But you said you were my age!

You said you'd aged the same as me!

A nation that forgets its history and traditions has no future. There's a reason why the Korean civilization collapsed.

"Moreover, I don't have an excellent memory like you do, so I forgot things like game names over a thousand years ago," the Saintess added.

"Ah. I apologize. My memory sometimes makes me inconsiderate of others' situations."

"It's fine. But that's why even now, it's hard for me to look you in the eye."

"....."

"It probably won't get any easier."

In the past, in the 107th cycle when she had fallen as an Executioner, the Saintess had said the exact same thing.

'...That's why you avoided meeting my eye and kept trying to cling to physical contact, wasn't it?'

It was difficult for her to confirm her position through sight. From the Saintess's point of view, everyone, including herself, was seen equally from an omniscient perspective. Because of that, she became more attached to physical touch.

Only the sensation of skin was proof that she still existed in this world.

'Hmm. Hugging her was definitely the right call.'

While still carrying the Saintess princess-style, I used my aura to tear through the blanket covering the magic mirror, revealing a smooth, full-length mirror.

In a normal cycle, the mirror would’ve greeted me with a, "Why don’t you just die already?" the moment it saw my face—

"Mr. Undertaker, do you believe this mirror is a gateway to the Hidden World?"

"Yes. But it seems like it can’t perceive us because time is stopped."

Strangely, neither the Saintess nor I were reflected in the surface of the mirror.

I suddenly felt like a vampire.

I pressed my palm against the glass experimentally, but there was no reaction. My hand didn’t pass through, nor did anything unusual happen.

"Could you release the time stop for a moment?” I requested. “Two seconds should be enough. Let’s place our hands on the mirror together."

"Okay."

The Saintess blinked.

- Please die immediately.

As soon as time resumed, the mirror spouted out its automatic response, and our reflections appeared on the surface. However, even though we pressed our palms against the glass, our bodies didn’t pass through to the other side.

‘Did it fail?’

After two seconds, time froze again.

At first glance, it seemed like nothing had been achieved, but I wasn’t disappointed. When dealing with anomalies, you had to try everything.

"Saintess, could you bring in Tutorial Fairy No. 264 and Yu Ji-won?"

"Sure."

In the blink of an eye, the Saintess had disappeared, only to return with Fairy No. 264 and Yu Ji-won lying at my feet.

"I'm back," she greeted.

"Good work...?"

It was at that moment I realized something.

'Wait a second. The Saintess is still in my arms. Which means... she got down from my arms, went out, retrieved the two, then climbed back up and took my hand again?'

"......?"

The Saintess, who didn't seem to notice, tilted her head at me with her usual blank expression (which, to be fair, was always her expression).

"Is something wrong, Undertaker?"

"...Nothing at all. In any case, please hold the fairy's hand and release the Time Stop."

"Alright."

0.1 seconds later.

"Holy shiiiii—!"

Freed from the petrification of time, the fairy screamed and convulsed.

"What the hell is going on?! My breathing...! No, it feels like my very existence is being coated with white paint in real time...! Ugh! It's disgusting! Disgusting! The fairy's dying! I'm dying! I'm already dead...!"

"Here. I'll protect you with my aura."

"Ah. It’s suddenly so much more comfortable. The fairy lives again."

The fairy went from looking like her eyes were about to pop out of her head to shaking that head of hers violently. "Hoek! Comrade Secretary! What is that counter-revolutionary thing?! Just being in the same space is enough to crush me into paste...!"

"She’s an ally, so show some respect."

"Oho. Are you in your right mind, Comrade? This feels like the time when I heard the old Steel Secretary signed a non-aggression pact with an art school applicant."

"Then you know the Steel Secretary's specialty. Want me to call someone else?"

"Eek! Anything but a purge...! I swear eternal loyalty to the Secretary!"

I briefly explained the situation. "Alright, you need to set up a dream. Do you see this silver-haired human here? We’re going to enter her dream."

"Oho."

"The dream’s setting has to match the room we’re in right now. See this mirror? Make sure it appears in the dream."

"Understood... But are you really going to enter this being’s dream?" The fairy glanced nervously at the Saintess, beads of sweat rolling down her face. If this were a comic, I’d expect the word “gulp” to appear in a speech bubble.

"Yes."

"But Comrade, if we enter this being’s dream, my mind will be toasted like a 120% charcoal-flavored toast."

"I’ll protect you as best I can. Do a good job, and I’ll give you a hundred sausages."

"Only the brave win the prize!"

We listened to the lullaby and entered Ji-won’s dream. Once inside the dream, we found her sitting by the window, frozen in place.

So Time Stop still worked even in dreams.

The Saintess lifted her power.

"...Hmm?"

Ji-won blinked open her eyes.

"Undertaker, Your Excellency? And the Saintess too? What brings you both to my private quarters?"

"This is a dream, Ji-won."

"Excuse me?"

"Do you see that Tutorial Fairy? We entered your dream by riding the lullaby of the nightmare."

"Mm? Oh? Hmm...? Oho."

Ji-won looked around curiously.

"As expected of His Excellency, the Undertaker. As an awakener of your caliber, you can freely enter anyone's dream. No matter how sly a sycophant they may be in reality, they cannot hide their true nature in a dream. Who could ever conceal their essence from your shining, righteous eyes?"

"Please, just keep it to yourself."

"If Your Excellency has visited my dream, then there must be a reason—an urgent one, at that. How may I assist you?"

This one always knew how to word things when talking to me.

"First, let’s take a look at the magic mirror together."

"Understood."

Without a second thought, the power-hungry psychopath trudged

over and yanked aside the curtain hiding the mirror. The Saintess, Ji-won, the fairy, and I all appeared on the surface at once, making the mirror seem incredibly cramped.

- Please die immediately.

- Please die immediately.

The mirror spat out the automated message repeatedly as if it had a stuck button.

"Now."

"Yes."

Simultaneously, the Saintess and I reached out.

- Please die imme...

Shatter.

With a soft cracking sound, both our wrists passed through the 'inside' of the mirror.

We hadn't broken the glass. The surface remained intact. It had simply made the sound of something shattering.

"……!"

The Saintess's transparent aura flared for a brief moment.

A sign of surprise.

Having long since lost the ability to express emotions with her eyes or facial muscles, this was the Saintess's unique language.

A subtle, invisible expression of Aura—no one but me could understand this lonely foreign tongue. So instead of responding with words, I spread my aura and pulled hers closer. I matched my sentences to her grammar.

'Shall we go, Saintess?'

‘Yes, Mr. Undertaker.’

A wordless conversation.

Hand in hand, I took the first step into the mirror, and the Saintess followed, her steps light and sure.

Shatter.

Shatter.

Shatter!

Each step we took across the narrow width of the mirror was accompanied by countless shattering noises. The sound was likely the Outer God throwing a tantrum after detecting foreign intruders in its domain.

But the moment the Saintess followed me inside and froze time once more,

Sh——

even the sound of glass breaking came to a halt.

When I lifted my gaze, we were standing hand in hand in the middle of Seoul Station.

Hundreds of people were frozen in place, turned to stone. The world was painted in monochrome, like a scene from an old black-and-white film.

The Saintess’s power had covered the “reality.”

I smiled. "We did it."

There, in the center of the sky where the sun should have been, the Outer God and Goddess of the Night, Nut, hung frozen and still with a wide-open eye.

Footnotes:

1 - Yutnori is a traditional board game played in Korea, especially during Korean New Year.

Chapter 213

The Antagonist X

Sinnoa

Everyone must have imagined it at least once as a child.

‘What if the entire world stopped, but I could still move around freely? Wouldn’t that be awesome?’

To *Homo sapiens*, the desire to take advantage of such situations is practically instinctual. Who hasn’t fantasized about robbing a bank and becoming a billionaire while time is frozen?

That daydream from my childhood adolescence had, after several thousand years, become reality.

"It really does seem like civilization is intact. Oh, there's a Starbucks... Right, that green logo was what it looked like."

"Indeed."

The Saintess and I strolled casually through the colorless world of Outer God's domain, taking in all the sights tinted in shades of black and gray.

"After the Void’s arrival, every brand became corrupted by Cthulhu symbols, so I'd forgotten what the original logos looked like. That was once a mermaid’s figure."

"...And there are so many people. It's really crowded."

"This is before the population density of the Korean Peninsula dropped to a twentieth of what it once was."

"How is it that, in the middle of the day, these people are all sitting in cafés and restaurants instead of working?"

"Hmm. Perhaps they’re working from their laptops?"

"Ah. So electronic devices haven't been corrupted by the anomalies yet."

I suppose anyone would feel at least a hint of it, but the Saintess and I lived in a world detached from civilization.

As a regressor, I had been permanently severed from my memories prior to the fourth cycle.

As for the Saintess, she had lived alone for thousands of years, forgetting much in the process.

And yet.

"By the way, it's amazing that you haven't forgotten me, Saintess. How did you manage to keep your memories of me for 2,000 years?"

A strange little twitch tugged at her lips. It was hard to tell if she wanted to smile or hold back her words. "...That's a secret. But Mr. Undertaker, why don't we take a look inside that café?"

"I don't mind... but just be careful not to eat anything. You remember the myth of Persephone, right? If you consume food from another world, you won't be able to return to reality."

"Yes, I'll be mindful."

We spent some time exploring the area around Seoul Station.

We entered a café, placed coffee cups on the table (though we didn't drink), sat side by side and pretended to take pictures with a smartphone (nothing showed up in the photos), and went to a bookstore to flip through various books...

'Come to think of it.'

There were a few moments when our hands slipped apart, causing me to freeze as time stopped again, but most of the time, we walked hand in hand.

'I've never spent this much time outside with the Saintess before.'

I had once gone to Beijing with her to hunt down the Butterfly Effect, but that was mostly spent walking along dark subway tracks.

‘I wonder... is there no way to bring the Saintess into the next cycle?’

That thought—or perhaps that emotion—unexpectedly arose within me.

‘This person has withstood thousands of years alone to prevent the world from collapsing. Surely, we have much in common.’

Though I had never revealed it, I too had long craved the warmth of a companion, someone who could endure the endless days and nights on the isolated island of time with me. This 267th cycle's Saintess, who was holding my hand right now... seemed more like a true comrade to a regressor than anyone I had ever known.

‘Yes. That’s right.’

One of us was a time traveler, the other a time stopper. One imprisoned by the eternal flow of time, the other confined to its eternal stillness.

No one could understand—or even perceive—either of us. But we could understand each other better than anyone else.

That one of us was an Outer God-level anomaly didn’t matter in the slightest. If it came to that, I wouldn’t mind humanity revering the Saintess as a new deity.

‘But is there no way to break through the cycles...? Ah. Wait. What if I became the Saintess's Miko, her priestess?’

A brilliant idea.

Since we were both Awakeners with time-related powers, there might be a way to forge an Outer God-priestess relationship. Then, we could stay together.

There was hope. And when it came to clinging to hope, no one on Earth was more of an expert than me.

“Mr. Undertaker.”

“……”

“Mr. Undertaker.”

A cool hand, about 15°C, touched my cheek.

Before I knew it, the Saintess had placed her palm against my face.

“…Ah, my apologies,” I said. “I was lost in thought for a moment. What is it?”

“I think it’s about time we dealt with Nut.”

“Hmm.”

She was right. No matter how long we spent wandering through Nut’s realm, teasing the anomaly, Outer Gods remained Outer Gods. The moment we let our guard down, they might launch a counterattack from an unexpected angle.

Reluctantly, I nodded. “You’re right. Let’s finish this quickly.”

“Yes. But Nut is up there, in the sky, like the sun. What’s your plan for taking her down?”

“It’s simple. We’ll just walk up there.”

Shwip.

I manipulated my aura, creating a series of ‘platforms’ in the air. As the platforms stretched out in a domino-like sequence, a staircase appeared, leading directly into the sky.

It was a literal path to heaven.

The Saintess mumbled next to me, “…The way you hunt anomalies seems to rely a lot on brute force.”

“Well, what good is Aura if not for this? I didn’t train this hard just to show off. Let’s go.”

“Let’s.”

We both placed our feet on the translucent steps at the same time.

Ten meters, twenty meters. As we ascended, the lower platforms disappeared, while new ones formed above us.

Occasionally, the steps took on a dark hue when formed by my aura, and other times, they shimmered with the Saintess's translucent energy.

How long had we been climbing?

In a world where time had stopped, the concept of “how long” was meaningless. When I looked down, the ground seemed impossibly far below.

“Aha,” I chuckled, causing the Saintess to tilt her head.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. I just realized I’m becoming more like you, Saintess.”

“…?”

“You mentioned before that you see everything from an omniscient viewpoint. Look—now I can see all of Seoul, the entire Korean Peninsula, spread out beneath me. I’ve finally reached your level.”

“……”

The Saintess, still not used to seeing the world from a first-person perspective, looked at me from an angle. In response, her grip on my hand tightened slightly.

“Yes, Mr. Undertaker.”

We continued climbing.

Fortunately—or unfortunately—we didn’t have to travel all the way to space, 150 million kilometers, to reach the spot where the sun usually hung. Nut’s ‘eye’, which had replaced the sun, was

shockingly close, located in the stratosphere.

“...I see.”

Shwip.

The atmosphere was covered by a transparent glass-like barrier, and embedded in it was Nut’s eye.

“The universe is gone. Only the sky remains.”

“The constellations are etched into the glass. Should we break it?”

“No. If we break through this layer, there will probably be more layers beyond it. The glass is likely wrapped around the Earth in several layers.”

Geocentrism: the ancient belief that the Earth was the center of the universe and all other stars revolved around it.

Nut, the Goddess of the Night, had brought this theory to life here. The same phenomenon was likely occurring in the real world, where Nut had begun corrupting reality. By turning all the empty space where humans couldn’t live into nothingness, Nut had left the Earth as the only place for life to exist.[1]

It was the kind of violence befitting an Outer God.

“Heh,” I scoffed. “If it weren’t for you, Saintess, the entire world would have been swallowed by Nut.”

“.....”

“Now, I’ll pierce Nut’s eye.”

Without hesitation, I drew my cane-sword Do-hwa and stabbed it into Nut’s ‘eye’, this world’s ‘sun’.

The sun split in two.

Nut, the Outer God, offered no resistance.

Since time was frozen, Nut couldn't even scream in its death throes. When time resumed, the anomaly would be completely vanquished.

"It's done. Saintess, please unfreeze time now, and let's return to reality. I need to consult with you... about a way to break free from the cycles..."

There was no response.

"Saintess?"

I turned to look at her.

The Saintess stood still, eyes closed. Her expression was as serene and unreadable as always, her hand still clasping mine.

But.

"....."

In the colorless world, a crimson lotus bloomed inexplicably from the center of the Saintess's chest.

My body froze.

The blood drained from my face as my mind began to race, spinning so fast my ears buzzed with the sound of it.

This couldn't be happening.

Had the Outer God somehow counterattacked? Did it have a system in place to curse its killer upon death? But if that were the case, why had the blow struck the Saintess, not me—the one who had pierced Nut's eye...?

"I'm sorry, Mr. Undertaker."

In the midst of my chaotic thoughts, the Saintess's calm voice reached me like a single thread of clarity.

"There was one secret I hadn't told you."

Even with the crimson flower of blood blooming in her chest, there was no pain in her voice.

Only regret. Apology.

The kind of subtle emotion that only I, who understood her faint expressions, could perceive.

Her ocean-like voice spoke.

“I am Nut’s apostle.”

Time seemed to stop.

In the blink of an eye, the Aura stairs I had been standing on disappeared.

“…!”

My body lost balance, and I began to fall. Just as I was about to plummet from the stratosphere, time froze again.

The Saintess, kneeling on the steps above me, grasped my hand tightly. It was as if she were holding me at the edge of a cliff, preventing me from falling.

“Saintess! What is this…?!”

“Please, don’t move.”

The Saintess spoke softly.

“Don’t activate your aura. Don’t create new steps. Don’t take any action toward me.”

Blood was still flowing from her chest.

If Nut’s eye and the Saintess’s heart were connected, the wound must have been identical to the one I had inflicted on the Outer God.

“If you even show the slightest sign of movement, I’ll let go of your

hand and freeze time."

…

"You once said that Nut and I were opposites, didn't you? Nut creates the underworld, while I freeze time, making us fundamentally different. But you were wrong."

Drip.

Blood beaded from her chest, sliding down her clothes, and fell onto my cheek. It was where her palm had rested moments ago.

"That's not the important part. What matters is whether one sees the world of the living as 'hell'."

"……"

"You know it, don't you? I've been calling this world hell for a long time."

A flash of insight.

"This world is hell."

It was the 117th cycle.

The words the Saintess had spoken to me from within Infernal Hell flashed through my mind.

The world is hell, yet no one takes responsibility for it.

If time can't be turned forward, then it must be stopped.

What reason could there possibly be for me to allow time to continue in a world like this?

Hell is said to be 20,000 yojanas below the surface. But that's impossible.

Just one layer below the surface of that planet… it's all hell.

Ah.

Even back then. Yes, even then.

The Saintess had been in space. She had spoken to me from the moon, the symbol of the ‘otherworld’.

Seeing the world as hell.

Having control over the universe.

Having the ‘eye’ to see the world from above, from an omniscient perspective.

Being capable of confronting and ambushing a regressor, the ‘master of time.’

The answer was yes.

In those four ways, the Saintess and Nut shared the same traits.

If an Outer God could establish a sanctuary within the grave of Time Seal, isolated from the world...

If an awakener could freely move in a world where time was frozen...

It was only natural to assume that they were connected on some fundamental level.

“You probably thought I trained my Aura for 2,000 years to reach the level of an Outer God, but you were mistaken.”

“Mistaken... how?”

“I’m sure I’ve spent hundreds, maybe even thousands of years in other cycles. Always observing people in frozen time. But the reason I became so much stronger in this cycle is because Nut’s power has grown stronger.”

“.....”

“I am Nut’s incarnation.”

Drip.

“You can’t kill Nut without killing me as well.”

“Wait! We can seal the Outer God separately!” I shouted desperately. “Yo-hwa, the Baekwha High student council president, was the same! The Outer God called Infernal Void was sealed within her!”

The Saintess shook her head. “We aren’t compatible enough, not in that way. Infernal Void was so unaware of the cycles that it couldn’t even notice them. But Nut is different. Nut is the Outer God of time, the one responsible for the cycles of day and night, the repetition of each day. With each cycle, Nut won’t reset—she’ll only grow stronger.”

“……”

“Even if we manage to seal Nut inside me, her power will only increase with each cycle. The contamination of my heart will worsen.”

As I stood speechless, lips trembling, the Saintess continued.

“Mr. Undertaker. Can you really be certain that one day, I won’t wake up and suddenly turn the entire world into hell?”

“……”

“Mr. Undertaker.”

Stroke.

She gently clasped my hand, the one dangling in the air.

The Saintess’s body was cold, but in the thin air of the stratosphere, hers was the only warmth.

“Please don’t worry. I’ll stay here and keep this place frozen.”

For a moment, I didn’t understand her words. My mind refused to

accept them. “...What?”

“I’m sorry, but just because you stabbed me doesn’t mean time will die.”

Her voice was soft.

“Hold the void still?”

My lips moved on their own.

“For how long, exactly?”

“.....”

“This is the 267th cycle. Already. And we still haven’t saved the world. There might be hundreds more cycles—maybe even thousands. Are you saying... you’ll keep holding this void still until then?”

“All moments are fleeting.”

Stroke.

The Saintess bent down and touched my cheek, wiping away the blood with her cold fingers.

“I’ll freeze everything here, including myself. Even if you regress to the next cycle, this place will remain frozen. In the end, the Outer God—and I—won’t be able to interfere with your regression anymore.”

There was something she hadn’t said.

By freezing the world—including herself—it meant that the time stopper would be frozen too.

It would be a perfect seal. A flawless extermination.

No matter how many years passed—thousands, millions, billions, trillions—the world would move on as if nothing had happened.

Everything would move on, except for one person: me, the regressor, who would remember this moment for all of eternity.

“Mr. Undertaker.”

“……”

“Thank you. Because you were there, I didn’t give up. As long as you’re on the other side, I won’t see this world as hell.”

I could feel it.

The Saintess was about to let go of my hand.

She was preparing to banish me from this void, sealing herself and this place, cutting herself off from the world.

This 267th cycle’s Saintess would exist here—forever—quietly subduing an Outer God.

And no one would ever know.

No one would know that there had been a human here who had wished for the world not to turn into hell.

“This…”

My decision was purely impulsive.

“Take this.”

I removed the bracelet from my left wrist and gently clasped it around the Saintess’s right, the hand that was holding mine.

She tilted her head in confusion. “A bracelet…?”

“It’s a Silver Bell.”

Jingle.

The bell rang softly.

“It’s the first thing I grab every time I wake up in Busan Station. It’s

just a keepsake, but... I'm sure it'll be a link that connects us."

"....."

"....."

"I'll find a way to unseal this place without letting you destroy the world. I'll come back for you."

And then—

The Saintess smiled.

—2,000 years after we were reunited, she finally looked me straight in the eye, something she had never been able to do before.

With one hand, she held my right hand, and with the other, she cupped my cheek. Like a child learning how to move for the first time, she awkwardly tilted her head to align her gaze with mine.

In that instant, the black-and-white world narrowed, filling everything between us with hues of white and black.

"Yes."

A fleeting pause.

The deep, ocean-like warmth lingered briefly on my lips.

"I'll see you... soon."

When I opened my eyes, a thin layer of glass had formed between us.

The Saintess, on the other side, smiled and reached out, frozen in place like a black-and-white photograph.

'Ah.'

I had let go of her hand.

No, it was the opposite. The world of frozen time was drifting away

from me, as though I were falling into an abyss.

I reached out for her, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't reach the colorless world.

And then.

I returned to reality.

To a world without her.

Footnotes:

1 - Depending on the interpretation, a geocentric model can include a firmament, or a celestial barrier that separates life on Earth from the waters of primordial Chaos and nothingness beyond.

Chapter 214

The Antagonist XI

Sinnoa

There is an epilogue.

When I returned to reality, it was summer. And the summer's day was dazzling.

The hellish land of swords, where blades rose up from beneath every step, had vanished. The molten steel that crept into alleyways and melted people's hearts had evaporated.

Even the Silver Bell that once hung from my wrist.

These were not the only things to say goodbye to this season.

"Uh...?"

"Huh? Why... Why am I on the roof...?"

No one remembered what had just happened.

Not Noh Do-hwa, not Sim Ah-ryeon, nor any of the other companions.

The same went for the Regressor Virus-infected protesters who had rallied in the square. The confused crowd began chatting with one another or returned to their workplaces.

It was as if they had all just woken from a brief daydream.

"The Saintess...?"

That dream must have been a nightmare.

"Sorry, but who is that?"

The Saintess of the 267th cycle had vanished.

From reality. And from memory.

“Captain Noh Do-hwa. Do you truly not remember? The existence of the Constellations?”

“The Constellations? You mean the nicknames you use to shitpost on SG Net?”

“No. There was someone who could watch every Awakener on the Korean Peninsula with Clairvoyance and send messages at will through Telepathy.”

Do-hwa furrowed her brow. “What are you talking about? Is this some overpowered Awakener you dreamed up?”

No one remembered the Saintess from the 267th cycle.

It was exactly like my Time Seal. She had sealed herself along with Nut’s domain in the Hidden World, so she could no longer affect reality. She isolated her very existence.

To ensure that not even the Night Goddess could interfere with me. To keep my regression free from the Outer God's contamination.

“……”

Summer passed.

“Hoeeek. Comrade Secretary! No matter how much of a dream we inhabit, that’s just impossible! We can’t enter the dream of someone who doesn’t exist in reality!”

I had tried countless ways to reach the Saintess in her sealed world, the Hidden World.

And every attempt had failed.

When we had fought Nut, at least I could glimpse her behind a glass barrier, even though I couldn’t cross it. Now, even that had become impossible.

The Magic Mirror had lost its function as a portal. No method

allowed me to get closer to the world where the Saintess slept.

“We searched the dreams of everyone living on the Korean Peninsula, but we couldn’t find anyone matching the person you described!”

But there had been someone like that.

“She was the type to brew every kind of coffee, but she always asked for instant coffee.”

“And she liked it even better if you secretly mixed in a spoonful of cinnamon.”

“She had hair the color of water and eyes like the ocean. Her breathing and footsteps were so quiet, it was like she was swimming gracefully, not walking.”

“She wasn’t interested in the trivial matters of the world, always expressionless, never joining in on people’s chatter. But she was still someone who could sacrifice herself for others.”

“She was brilliant.”

There had been someone like that.

“Hoeeek! Comrade Secretary! We mobilized every resource for six years, but we couldn’t find her!”

The house in Yongsan where the Saintess had lived was now a ruin.

The tropical fish she had raised in the face of civilization’s collapse were gone. The aquarium she had carefully cleaned and tended had turned to dust.

The study sessions she held every Wednesday, sitting at a table with others, were no longer.

With the loss of Clairvoyance and Telepathy, public safety on the Korean Peninsula rapidly deteriorated. When Awakeners lost their way in the Void:

- Mr. Undertaker.

- There's a person stranded. I'll give you their location.

The person who would send me those messages had disappeared. I could no longer rescue people as quickly as before.

No one found it strange.

And summer passed.

When Awakeners didn't fully understand their abilities or know how to strengthen them:

[The Librarian of the Great Library unlocks your true potential.]

[The Librarian of the Great Library has given you a quest.]

[Upon completing the quest, a special opportunity to enhance your ability will appear.]

The person who had subtly guided the Awakeners was gone. I could no longer help people on such a large scale.

The idea that, *"At least the Constellations are watching over me,"* disappeared from people's minds, without them even knowing it was there in the first place. The belief that, *"At least I can confide my worries to the Constellations,"* was gone as well.

No one found it strange.

And summer passed.

It was then that I realized something.

From the 1st cycle—where I had forgotten everything—through the 4th, and ever since the 5th, when I truly began to live as a regressor. There had always been a silent observer somewhere, quietly watching over the world.

Even in my lowest moments, they weren't as bad as they could have

been. For all the lives I had lived as a regressor, there was still so much I hadn't grasped.

I wasn't ready to live in a world without you.

Then, summer passed.

It was time to move on to the next cycle.

I hadn't told anyone, but a certain fear had settled inside me by that point.

'What if the Saintess isn't in the next cycle either?'

The moment I opened my eyes in Busan Station in the 268th cycle, I rushed straight to the souvenir shop. I went to find the object I always picked up, without fail.

'It's here.'

The cheap Silver Bell I always bought for 9,900 won was still there on the shelf.

I fastened the Silver Bell to my wrist and hurriedly cleared the Tutorial Dungeon, making sure to display overwhelming power, enough to catch the interest of a certain someone who might be watching the Awakeners.

And then—

[The Saintess of National Salvation is astonished by your feat!]

[The Monarch of the Crimson Horse feels a sense of rivalry at your strength.]

[The Conqueror of the Alps takes note of your course.]

My knees nearly gave out.

I let out a breath. Relief swelled in my chest.

'She's here... Yes, she's here.'

Finally, it was clear. The only one separated from time was the Saintess of the 267th cycle.

But the existence of the Saintess herself had not been erased from the world. Perhaps after ascending to the level of an Outer God, she was treated as a different entity entirely.

Now, I could tell my comrades what had happened in the 267th cycle.

‘But... I can’t tell them.’

I walked into the bathroom of Busan Station and splashed cold water on my face. Since the city’s water supply hadn’t been cut off yet, the tap water was enough to cool my mind.

‘I can’t tell the Saintess what happened to her in the 267th cycle. If she finds out she has that potential... She won’t hesitate.’

The same thing would surely happen again. It wasn’t hard to imagine.

In a moment where the world faced imminent destruction, the Saintess would trigger Time Stop without hesitation and spend another thousand years alone.

‘I can’t let that happen.’

That’s why I couldn’t tell her.

It was the same situation as Dang Seo-rin. She had once confessed that if she ever realized her accumulated lifespan already exceeded several thousand years, she would immediately dip into that reserve in her greed at the first sign of danger.

The moment the Saintess became aware of such a powerful last resort, she would transform into an Outer God once more.

‘I can’t let that happen.’

‘I must keep this secret.’

‘This must never happen again—’

With a tinkling jingle, the Silver Bell hanging from my wrist rang.

“…?”

I hadn’t been aware of it, but after washing my face, I had apparently placed my palm on the bathroom mirror.

‘Huh?’

I looked up at the mirror. Reflected there was my damp face and dripping wet hair.

But that wasn’t what caught my attention.

My palm.

The hand I had placed on the mirror.

‘Cold.’

For some reason, the spot where my palm touched felt unusually cool.

If I had to guess its temperature… Yes.

Exactly 15°C.

“…!”

I pressed both hands against the mirror, yet it didn’t matter how I touched the glass with my right hand. Only when my left hand—the one wearing the Silver Bell—touched the glass, did I feel that same sensation, that 15°C temperature.

‘Ah.’

She was there.

You were here.

“Saintess.”

You have to be.

“Saintess, can you hear me?”

There was no response.

I couldn’t see her anymore. I couldn’t cross to the other side.

We couldn’t speak, and I couldn’t hear her voice.

We couldn’t sit together in the same room, reading books and listening to the sound of each other’s breath.

All that remained was the memory and the faint warmth I felt through the glass—as if you were right there on the other side, pressing your hand against mine.

Perhaps, like me, you were touching the other side of the glass at that very moment. Frozen in time, along with the world.

“……”

But this was enough.

‘As long as you exist, we will meet again.’

That was the fate of a regressor.

Maybe to some of them, to those screaming infected fated to regression, this was hell. But not to me.

If there was a way for a person like that to still be grateful for life, even after realizing the world repeated endlessly, it was simply because they longed to meet someone again.

And for the chance of that one reunion, a person could endure crossing millions of summers.

“...Please wait a little longer.”

We were beings from opposite poles. I lived in the endless flow of time, while the Saintess resided at its end. I enjoyed wandering outside, while she preferred to gaze at the fish tank inside her

room.

And now, we were separated by a mirror.

“Just close your eyes for a moment, and when you open them again, we’ll be back in that season.”

I slowly lifted my hand from the mirror.

For a while, the imprint of my palm and fingers remained faintly visible on the glass. And just before the marks disappeared—

I saw it.

The imprint of a smaller hand, delicate fingers, overlaying mine.

For a brief moment, our hands overlapped.

A message in white.

“Yes.”

“I’ll see you... soon.”

Anomaly: Night Goddess, Nut

Aliases: Hell, Ruler of the Underworld, Mirror World, Geocentrism, Eye of Horus, Parmenides' Moon, Regressor Virus

Threat Level: Lv.5 Outer God-class (Alienation)

Subjugation in progress.

Footnotes:

Chapter 215

The Nameless One I

Sinnoa

Novels are different from illustrations.

At first glance, this might sound like an obvious statement, but to me, the distinction is surprisingly significant.

For example, Lee Ha-yul. She lived with me in the Inunaki Tunnel, which I had converted into my hideout. Except during vacation rounds, she was almost always there. Compared to the other members, her attendance rate was truly overwhelming.

「Ah, I'm sorry, Hyung. I have thalassophobia, so living deep inside the Inunaki Tunnel is a bit... If something bursts in there, I'd drown right away, right?」

Seo Gyu usually stayed close to the headquarters of the National Road Management Corps.

「I... I am the Queen of the Eastern Holy State.」

Sim Ah-ryeon worked mostly as the Saintess of the North, so she didn't come to the hideout as often.

Oh Dok-seo was a rookie who joined after the 555th cycle, and lacked seniority.

But Lee Ha-yul, she consistently claimed the best spot in the hideout, no matter the time. Yet, despite this, she didn't appear much in my stories. Why?

There was a sad reason for that.

I present to you...

"...Ah, this coffee is quite delicious."

"Isn’t it? I blended three of the Saintess's favorite instant coffees and added exactly one spoonful of cinnamon. This is her favorite brew."

"...Hey, Mr. Undertaker, if you’ve reached that level, shouldn’t we stop calling it 'instant' coffee? Well, it does taste good."

Let's say this conversation took place between the Saintess and me at the hideout’s café, 1,200 meters underground.

But this is a novel. If we strip away the filters of a novel and depict things more visually, the truth would look like this:

"...Ah, this coffee is quite delicious."

"Isn’t it?"

(Beside me, Ha-yul silently lifted two coffee packs like twin swords. Image: Lee Ha-yul holding up two coffee packs like a warrior.)

"I blended three of the Saintess's favorite instant coffees and added exactly one spoonful of cinnamon. This is her favorite brew."

(Image: Lee Ha-yul playfully slapping my back with the coffee packs, as if she were part of the jazz band from Whiplash.)

"...Hey, Mr. Undertaker, if you’ve reached that level, shouldn’t we stop calling it 'instant' coffee?"

(Image: Lee Ha-yul failing to control her Aura, causing the coffee pack to explode, spilling its contents all over my barista uniform.)

"Well, it still tastes good."

(Image: Me holding Lee Ha-yul’s head as she struggles like a mischievous kid.)

See how different the scene is?

That’s right.

As you all probably know, Ha-yul was born with a speech impediment. Normally, she traveled with her maid doll to voice her

words. However, when it was just the two of us—especially when she was messing with me—she would ditch the maid and perform her ‘silent protests’. Though I hadn’t described it, Ha-yul was usually next to me in the hideout, pulling pranks about 80% of the time.

Why did she leave the maid behind when it was just the two of us?

‘Ouch! Ouch, oppa, my skull! It’s in danger!’

This girl could use her Aura to write on my back in real time. And since I had exceptional skills in reading Aura, I could easily interpret what she wanted to say.

"You’ll be fine."

‘Ah! No violence! No violence!’

"...You and Ha-yul seem really close. Almost like siblings with a big age gap."

Anyway.

Ha-yul was always forcing my readers to play a game of Spot the Difference.

Her methods of communication with me were diverse: writing on my back, vibrating her Aura to make her sound like a voiceroid, tapping Morse code into my palm...

And then, after receiving a thorough scalp massage from me, she would scurry behind the Saintess and pull out her sketchbook.

It read:

[Ex] [pla] [na] [tion]

?

[The Undertaker is a Monster] [Confirmed as a Regressor Monster] [When You Gaze into the Void, the Void Gazes Back] [This Regressor Has No Memories Before the Fourth cycle] [Is There Any

Proof That This Monster Didn’t Suddenly Appear After the Fourth cycle?] [Can Humanity Entrust Its Fate to a Monster Regressor?] [Is Korea Truly Safe This Way?]

.....

[Monster] [Explanation] [Monster] [Explanation]

[The Undertaker Is a Colossal Monster]

[Explanation Please]

By the way, the sketchbook pages flipped at a speed of 0.3 seconds per sheet. If I didn’t have eyes finely tuned with Aura, I wouldn’t have been able to see a thing.

"...Undertaker, is something wrong?"

The Saintess noticed something was off and turned around, but with impeccable timing, Ha-yul quickly displayed a portrait she had drawn. It was an illustration of me, seriously brewing coffee. Thanks to the lessons she received from Sim Ah-ryeon, Ha-yul had gotten decent at drawing.

"Ah, it’s a really cool drawing."

"....."

"By the way, Mr. Undertaker, could you tell me which three products you used in my coffee and in what ratio?"

The moment the Saintess turned her head back, Ha-yul flipped to the next page of her sketchbook.

(Image: The Regressor monster in a coffee-stained barista outfit, unleashing black Aura as he defeats awakened beings like Noh Do-hwa, Dang Seo-rin, and Sim Ah-ryeon, while destroying Busan.)

This little brat...

Of course, Ha-yul knew the Saintess turned off her Clairvoyance and Telepathy when she was relaxing with her coffee.

"Mm."

But despite Ha-yul's bratty antics, her point was valid.

The so-called Regressor Monster Theory.

As I've mentioned before, I have no memories of my family. My memories from before the 4th cycle are all a blur now. And that wasn't the only reason.

'Even in the cycles where I'd become somewhat famous, not a single person who knew me ever came to find me.'

Not a distant relative. Nor a childhood friend from my hometown. No one at all.

Once in a while, I'd get a call from the Reunion anomaly, inviting me to a class reunion, but I couldn't really consider that person a friend.

Oh, by the way, defeating the Reunion anomaly is incredibly challenging yet simple. Just drive up in a limousine like a Maybach S-Class Pullman or a supercar like a Ferrari. That'll instantly exorcize the anomaly, and it won't bother you again.

Returning to the main point...

'In the end, my family and acquaintances were probably all swept away by the Arrival of the Void and either died or went missing.'

It went all that far-fetched of a possibility. Didn't 19 out of every 20 people die in Korea? Most people with bad gacha luck lost all their connections, just like I did.

"Well... Should I seriously go search for them?"

"Huh?"

"Ah. Ha-yul keeps teasing me, asking if I'm really the Regressor Monster. So, I thought maybe I should investigate whether I really did appear out of nowhere during the fourth cycle."

(Image: Lee Ha-yul giving me a disgusted look for snitching on her pranks.)

"Oh... Um..." The Saintess set down her coffee cup. "Wouldn't that be difficult?"

"Why do you think that?"

"Because of your nature, Mr. Undertaker. I don't know much about the 'you' before the 4th cycle, but from what I've heard..." She hesitated briefly before continuing, "I imagine you probably Time Sealed the people closest to you, one by one."

"....."

"You said you cleared the Tutorial Dungeon in the 3rd cycle. So, right after you left Busan Station, I believe you sought out your family and acquaintances. And convinced them to—"

"Seal them in Crystal Tombstones. But now, I don't remember where those tombstones are or who I Time Sealed."

"That's just my guess, though."

She... had a point.

To find any clues about my family, I'd have to inspect every single Crystal Tombstone in Korea.

How many tombstones had I buried? At least 500,000. Who knows how many I couldn't keep track of?

"It's definitely going to be tough."

"Yes, unfortunately."

[Ex] [pla] [na] [tion]

At that moment, our discussion ended with Ha-yul's ridiculous placard still lingering. I had no intention of doing a Regressor version of *In Search of Lost Time*, so the idea was naturally shelved.[1]

Until the 267th cycle, that is.

As I've mentioned before, I mobilized every fairy in my arsenal to find any trace of the Saintess in the 267th cycle. I sent out the baku to scour the dreams of every survivor in Korea. Yet in the end, there was no sign of the 267th Saintess.

"Hoeeek."

However, I stumbled upon an entirely unexpected puzzle piece instead.

"I-isn't this the Secretary General?"

"Hm?"

"Look over there, in that person's dream, up on the hill. The figure walking past the supermarket!"

Fairy No. 264 invited me into someone's dream. It belonged to a 50-something woman I didn't recognize.

"...I can see it, but so what? Isn't that just a mother and child walking side by side?"

"The kid looks oddly similar to the Secretary General!"

"What?"

The dream revealed a vague silhouette that, according to the fairy, resembled me.

"Come on, it's way too blurry. You can barely make out their face. How could you say whether he looks like me?"

"Hoek, but the baku's instincts are telling me! The dark aura! That shadow, black as ink! Those dead fish-like eyes! The stomp of someone who resents the world, pounding the ground! That's definitely you, Secretary General... Gyaaaah! My skull! It's being crushed!"

"First of all, it's 'sense,' not 'instinct.'"

"V-violence is bad! No purging, please!"

I gave the fairy a scalp massage, frowning as I observed the dream. In the distance, a mother and child walked, barely noticeable at the edge of the dream's awareness.

'That kid is supposed to be me?'

The child looked like they were around elementary school age.

I felt no connection to them at all.

I brushed off the fairy's hunch, but similar reports kept trickling in over time.

"Secretary General! Look at this middle school graduation ceremony!"

"Where?"

"There! About 20 meters away from the dreamer, look at the crowd of students! There's a figure that just barely flashes by over someone's shoulder! It has to be the Secretary General from the past!"

I strained my vision, sharpening my Aura to its extreme limit—the kind of limit only the most refined Awakener like me could reach—just to catch a flicker of the silhouette.

I muttered in disbelief, "...This really is like a game of *Where's Waldo*. Only five thousand times harder."

Still, if the fairies were right, one thing was clear. The past I thought I'd lost forever, the memories before the 4th cycle, especially the original Undertaker from the 1st cycle...

There were fragments of it, hidden within these dreams.

Perhaps I wasn't a monster born suddenly in the 4th cycle.

And now, I had been handed a clue to piece together that lost puzzle.

Footnotes:

1 - *In Search of Lost Time* is a novel by French author Marcel Proust. In it, the narrator walks through memories of his younger years, often through moments of “involuntary memory” where something in his everyday life sparks a memory from childhood.

Chapter 216

The Nameless One II

Sinnoa

The original Undertaker from the first cycle, whom I couldn’t remember at all. For the sake of convenience, let’s call him the Original Undertaker, Undertaker: The Beginning, or Undertaker the First.

"Teacher, you said you wanted to call him something simple, but doesn't that sound way too grand?"

The person grumbling had orange hair thrown up in a ponytail, wore a white sailor uniform, and sported Jordan basketball shoes. It was none other than Baekhwa Girls' High School Student Council President, Cheon Yo-hwa, a VIP guest specifically invited to participate in this Original Undertaker "Spot the Difference" project.

"Anyway, Yo-hwa, I really need your help to piece together the Original Undertaker. Well, more accurately, I need assistance from Infinite Void."

"Ehck." Yo-hwa made a clearly displeased face. Despite how expressive she was, it never seemed to offend others—one of her curious traits. "Infinite Void? Why her?"

"Well, the Original Undertaker that appears in other people's dreams... How should I put it... The resolution is poor."

I led Cheon Yo-hwa through several dreamscapes and showed her the blurry silhouette that was supposedly the Original Undertaker.

"Oh, it's real! It’s like looking at an old black-and-white photo that hasn’t been restored yet!"

"Right?"

"Yeah! But even with this poor quality, you can tell right away—

this little guy is adorable! Teacher, you used to wear a fuzzy hat when you were younger, huh? Hehe! Hehehe!"

Though she had been somewhat grossed out by the mention of Infinite Void, Yo-hwa's mood quickly lifted the moment she got a peek at my childhood self. With loud exclamations, she started examining the silhouette from every possible angle, moving around me excitedly.

I cleared my throat. "As of now, we've found 13 dreams featuring the Original Undertaker. This one shows the youngest version of him. The Original Undertaker that appears in these dreams is generally younger than a college student."

"Ugh, just look at those chubby cheeks! So cute! Teacher, is there no way to record these dreams, like take a video and keep it?"

"You're trying to show off to Dang Seo-rin, aren't you? Please, control yourself."

"Tsk." Yo-hwa's cheeks puffed up like a hamster.

"Anyway, call Infinite Void for a moment. I'm thinking of restoring the image quality based on the data that Infinite Void accumulated."

"Ugh... I hate loosening that bastard's leash even a little. But, fine. For the chance to see your childhood self up close... I'll allow it. Give me a second!"

Yo-hwa closed her eyes, and then, *slip*—the hairband tying up her ponytail loosened, causing her orange hair to cascade down.

Blink.

When her eyes reopened, her pupils and irises were gone. Only a dark, eerie red remained, staring back at me.

"Hello, sunbae."

A faint smile spread across the red well of her eyes.

"Been a while. Missed me?"

"Been a while. Let’s skip the small talk."

"Oh, but sunbae, you’re the one holding my hand, not the other way around."

Indeed.

Whether in the Void or in dreams, it was better to hold hands with your companions to avoid getting lost.

I scoffed and let go. Then Infinite Void, sealed within Cheon Yo-hwa’s form, shrugged.

"You’re so cold. Remember, I was born from this girl’s personality because I got caught up in your schemes. It hurts to be treated this way by someone I like."

"Thank you for the feedback. I’ll express my disinterest even more clearly from now on. Now, you know why you’re here, right?"

"Yeah. I’ve been watching the whole time." Infinite Void tapped its lips thoughtfully. "But you know, it’s hard for me to work at full capacity. After all, sunbae, you’ve placed so many seals on me, like Doppelganger, Split Personality, and Weakened Ally."

"You brought that on yourself."

"Oh, come on. Split Personality was all part of your master plan, wasn’t it? By giving this girl a new name, you demoted me to being a mere second personality. Only someone as wickedly cunning as you could come up with that strategy."

"....."

"Not that I mind my current state. You know, they say it's better to be dumb than smart when trying to be happy. Self-awareness is fun in its own way."

I sighed. "Even for you, gathering data on my childhood should be intriguing, right? So, cooperate."

"Ah, fair point. Sure thing."

The agreement came more easily than expected.

Infinite Void reached out and touched the fuzzy hat of the Original Undertaker with its fingertips.

Crackle!

The surroundings crackled to life. The faces of the passersby, the size of the streetlights, and the shapes of the trees all began to warp. Even the bark of the trees seemed to grow detailed veins.

"Hold on a second. Ugh, this used to be easier when I had the Baku working under me. Now, it’s a bit overwhelming thanks to a certain someone."

"Shall I make it even harder?"

"No thanks. Ah, got it. This is the best I can do."

With those words, the scene sharpened, becoming as detailed as reality, though the colors seemed slightly muted as if a brown filter had been laid over everything.

The blurry silhouette of the Original Undertaker’s face became clear.

"....."

It was an ordinary child's face. Aside from the fact that his hat was a bit large and unusual, there were no distinguishing features. Just a regular elementary school boy.

Completely unaware that he was fated to endure thousands, no, tens of thousands of years in the future.

"...Is this really me?"

"Didn’t the Baku tell you? They probably cross-referenced your name and personal info."

"Hmm."

"If you don’t trust them, I can access the Baku's data myself and double-check for you."

I ignored that nonsense. "More importantly."

"Hm?"

"That woman holding hands with the boy here—she looks like my mother."

The elementary school boy was walking hand-in-hand with his mom. After confirming the appearance of the Original Undertaker, I immediately tried to examine her face as well, but...

"Why can’t I see her face?"

Her face was missing.

More precisely, the "noise" Infinite Void had spread throughout the dream to restore the image wouldn’t clear around her face. In the center of the noise, the words [404 - Not Found] flickered. It was probably Infinite Void’s handiwork.

"Huh?" Infinite Void tilted its head at my question, already perched on a railing, swinging its legs. "Are you really asking because you don’t know, sunbae? I thought you had a hunch."

"....."

"Time Seal. She’s gone. There’s no data left. Actually, her entire outfit should be covered in noise too, but I photoshopped it a bit to fill in the blanks."

So it was as I thought.

I wasn’t particularly disappointed. How could I grieve over the loss of a memory that no longer existed?

"I see. Let’s move on to the next dream."

"Yes, sunbae."

Using Infinite Void, I pressed on in search of the Original Undertaker.

Not only the 13 dreams I had already discovered, but in any dream where I could successfully restore the image, I tracked down more characters and unearthed their dreams as well.

At first, in the perspective of the dream's owner, the Original Undertaker was merely a distant extra walking past a store. But as I traced each connection in these dreams, his proximity to the dream owner changed.

From a 'customer who bought a hamburger with friends' to 'a kid who had a snowball fight near the same apartment' to 'a student in the neighboring class when I taught third grade' and, eventually, 'a casual friend of a friend who occasionally hung out with us'.

But then...

"Huh?"

Just as the Original Undertaker was about to go from 'friend of a friend' to 'close friend,' Infinite Void hit an invisible snag.

"Sunbae, this one's deleted too."

"Deleted? You mean Time Sealed?"

"Yeah. Look, your high school friend."

The friend walking home from school with the Original Undertaker was now distorted by noise, just like my mother. This time, not only the face but the entire body was covered in static, as if Infinite Void couldn't be bothered to edit it properly. In this hyper-realistic dreamscape, only the friend's outline stood out unnaturally, with the words [404 - Not Found] displayed over it.

In conclusion, the Original Undertaker wasn't actually walking home with a friend. To anyone else, it would look like he was smiling and talking to "empty space."

"Uhhh."

"....."

"Somehow, I think I know exactly where this is going."

The same pattern repeated over and over.

I could trace the Original Undertaker as a ‘friend of a friend,’ a ‘neighbor of a neighbor,’ or even someone in the next apartment. But no matter how close I got, at the final step, I always hit a [404] error.

No matter how precisely the dreams were restored, or how carefully I traced the human relationships, the result was always the same. In the end, the Original Undertaker would always be smiling and talking to "empty space."

In other words.

"Wow, sunbae, you really erased everyone around you, huh? How’d you even manage that?"

No one could get past a certain point with the Original Undertaker.

He had no family. No relatives. No friends. No acquaintances.

Only the remnants of distant relationships—those that could barely be considered extras—remained, like vestigial organs.

In other words, from the perspective of the people in the world, the Original Undertaker was just an extra in their lives, too.

He had no ties.

No connections.

He was the nameless one.

This wasn’t just in the legal sense of the term. In the truest, most objective sense, the Undertaker of the first cycle was entirely excluded from the web of human relationships on Earth. It was

almost awe-inspiring how perfectly he had erased himself from existence, leaving no connections behind.

"Aaah. No wonder I was powerless against you when I was Infinite Void. This explains so much."

In a hospital hallway, Yo-hwa leaned against the wall, watching the sparse crowd of patients passing by. This place was presumably where my mother had once worked. But it didn't provide much useful information. All I could deduce was that my mother had likely been a nurse. And even that conclusion was met with a [404] error.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when I was a Void God, I governed over all matter and data, right? But compared to other humans, sunbae had no data at all. I couldn't calculate your behavioral patterns."

"Hmm."

"And on top of that, that weapon you carry around—Do-hwa, right? It gives off a similar vibe. Seriously, your compatibility with me was awful. It's practically cheating."

I stood next to Infinite Void in the hospital hallway, arms crossed, muttering to myself. "...Something feels off."

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"If I had truly gone this far to erase everyone around me with the Time Seal, then there should be Crystal Tombstones everywhere related to those people."

"Crystal Tombstones...? Oh, you mean those things only you can see, and that no one can enter without your permission?"

I nodded. "I've searched nearly all the Crystal Tombstones in Korea, but I haven't found a single one belonging to my family, my friends, or any of my acquaintances. Isn't that odd? Given how much we've explored, at least one should've turned up by now."

"Hmm..."

"And more importantly, the fact that I don't have any memories from before the 4th cycle is strange as well. Even if I erased my mother with the Time Seal, I should still retain memories of her."

"Wasn't that thousands of years ago? Isn't it natural to forget?"

"No, it's not."

I used my Aura like ink to write words into the air.

"I gained the Complete Memory ability in the 5th cycle. At that point, I shouldn't have completely forgotten about my mother. Not enough time had passed for that."

"Right..."

"So, by the 5th cycle, all the memories I had should have been permanently preserved by the Complete Memory ability. Things like my mother's face from the dream, or memories of my family." I frowned. "It makes no sense that I'd completely forget such important memories."

"...Oh?"

Infinite Void's expression grew intrigued.

"...You're right. By now, it might be a distant past, but to the 4th cycle version of you, this was only a few years ago. No matter how bad a person's memory is, it's impossible to completely forget family and friends."

"Exactly." My eyes narrowed. "There's another reason why the Undertaker of the 1st cycle has been completely erased."

Footnotes:

Chapter 217

The Nameless One III

Sinnoa

Let’s pause for a moment to clarify—between me and the Infinite Void, there exists a perfect hierarchical relationship. Put simply, there’s no cliché like, “The Infinite Void, which I thought had been sealed, was actually biding its time, patiently gaining strength, and one day would strike me and Cheon Yo-hwa in the back!” It just doesn't exist.

It never existed.

“No, no, sunbae! Can’t you at least allow for a 0.02% chance? Being a heroine destined to lose no matter what is just too depressing for my life, no, my anomaly life.”

“And who are you calling a heroine?”

“Well, it’s me, right? As the alter ego of the heroine in a dual personality story, wouldn’t that be a cult favorite for a certain fanbase?”

“Setting aside this claim that Yo-hwa is the heroine, Infinite Void, by any chance... didn't you drop this?” I took out a piece of paper from my pocket and handed it over. It was a sheet with the word "self-awareness" written on it.

Infinite Void made a strange face. “What the hell? Why are you carrying around this crazy piece of paper?”

“Why do you think?”

“Well… because you’re nuts? Maybe you’re studying for the Korean Language Proficiency Test, and this is your vocabulary list? Or, you already knew I’d say something like this at some point?”

Midway through speaking, Infinite Void’s expression twisted even

more. It had finally arrived at the answer with that exceptional computational ability.

“That’s exactly it.”

Each Outer God has a specialty—a strength. Naturally, they also have weaknesses. Compared to the others, Infinite Void was particularly vulnerable to regressions. Even though it prided itself as the avatar of randomness, it could only act the same way in the same circumstances.

Moreover, when the 267th-cycle Saintess froze Nut's Domain, my regressions became even more secure.

At the very least, Infinite Void had no way to penetrate that barrier.

“Damn it, this is so unfair! Regressors are such broken characters!”

Infinite Void stomped its feet in frustration.

But since I had seen this behavior countless times, I was unfazed. Even the tempo and speed at which it stomped were exactly the same as in previous cycles.

There was nothing left to say.

Still, seeing Infinite Void acting like this while wearing Yo-hwa's appearance was... odd.

“Change your clothes.”

At my sudden command, Infinite Void tilted its head. “Huh?”

“The white sailor uniform is a symbol of Baekhwa Girls' High. You don't belong to that school, so wear something else.”

“Ugh... wait a minute. I already took off the hair tie, didn’t I?”

“Just do it.”

“Ughhh...”

Muttering, “Isn’t this a bit much?” under its breath, the Outer God

Rocket Launcher lightly touched its uniform.

A faint static spread across the sailor uniform. Soon after, the characteristic white uniform of Baekhwa Girls' High turned pitch black.

It was a black sailor uniform—completely opposite of Baekhwa.

“There, there. Are you happy now? Geez, you’re so mean…”

Infinite Void pouted, its expression and the way it muttered the words exactly the same as during similar situations in previous cycles. There was no way I could mistake Infinite Void for a human—at least not with my Complete Memory. Both I and Yo-hwa had forced it to act human, but it wasn’t really.

“So, what’s your plan, Undertaker Botchi sunbae? You’re blocked from every route. I’m really curious to hear how the King of Mankind will approach this.”

“I’ll follow my memories all the way back to the 4th cycle.”

I pointed to the Han River riverside, where there was a bench that looked perfect for lying down.

It was overgrown with waist-high grass, but still good enough to rest on.

“I’ll dive into a dream and review all the cycles I’ve been through, in reverse order—250th, 200th, 150th, and so on.”

“Huh? Why not just jump straight to the 4th cycle in one go?”

I sighed. “Infinite Void, imagine if I, a strange entity, suddenly appeared out of nowhere in the 4th cycle. What would you think of that monster?”

“Hm…”

“And if that were the case, who’s to say I didn’t also suddenly appear in the 266th cycle?”

“Hm?” Infinite Void blinked.

“Oh...? Oh.”

“If a regressor like me, or a monster who thinks he’s a regressor, can suddenly appear in the 4th cycle, the same could happen in any other cycle. I need to confirm that possibility.”

Infinite Void looked impressed. “Oh, wow, you're right! It's the same logic, huh? Like the Brain in a Vat theory? Or the Five Minutes Ago Hypothesis? Hmm.”[1]

“Looks like I dropped this as well.”

I handed over a piece of paper that read "intelligence." Infinite Void ripped it up and tossed the pieces at my face.

“Hey, you crazy bastard! You’re the one who stole my intelligence! My brain’s like a 64MB RAM now, okay?”

“Then you can run *Romance of the Three Kingdoms III* just fine.”

Isn’t that good enough? You’re asking for too much.

We both lay down on the bench.

Strictly speaking, it wasn’t together. I lay down on the bench, while Infinite Void offered me a lap pillow.

A white hand, wrapped in a black sleeve, tapped my forehead like a compass point.

“By the way, sunbae, you're hilarious. You say you treasure all the connections you’ve built over 267 cycles and how you’re so grateful to the Saintess, but at the same time, you're considering the possibility that all of it might be fake?”

“Move your hand.”

“Oh, sorry. Did it scratch you?”

I gripped the hilt of my cane sword.

A white sneer, shaped like a claw, fell from my forehead.

“So scary. I’ll dive into the dream now. Sunbae, please close your eyes.”

I did so.

And we entered the dream.

Our destination: the 250th cycle.

Infinite Void was the former master of the Baku, and I was the current master. Given that this dangerous combination had formed a temporary alliance, striking the exact dream we wanted was no problem.

The moment we entered the lucid dream, a man turned to look at us.

It was the Undertaker from the 250th cycle.

He was sitting on a bench near the Jamsu Bridge , reading a book—*The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Around this time, it was a book he used to read with the Saintess.

“Yo-hwa? And… me?” The Undertaker raised an eyebrow. “Is this a doppelganger?”

“No, Undertaker from the 250th cycle. This is a lucid dream, and you are merely a figure within it. The one with me isn’t Yo-hwa, but Infinite Void.”

“Hoh.”

The Undertaker’s lips curled into a smile.

His jet-black pupils had no shine whatsoever. No matter what angle the sunlight hit, they didn’t reflect even a glimmer. His eyes were like black holes, deep wells of darkness. Even now, those eyes gave

off an unsettling vibe.

It felt strange to stand face-to-face with the Undertaker. Like hearing a recording of your own voice and feeling weird about it. Meeting him directly created a peculiar disconnect.

“So, you claim I’m a figment of the dream? Interesting theory. Fine, if you're the real Undertaker, tell me the password.”

“Café au lait.”

“And?”

“Schopenhauer, that bastard.”

“And?”

Snap.

The Undertaker closed his book.

Before the sound even finished echoing, he pulled out Do-hwa and lunged at me.

In an instant, our dark auras collided.

————*!*

The surface of the Han River rippled beyond the Jamsu Bridge.

The wave was restrained. Despite the clash of our auras, the surrounding objects were relatively undisturbed.

It was because my aura had overwhelmed his, dramatically dampening its power.

“You’re real.” The Undertaker, whose blade I had caught in my hand, nodded.

A test of sorts.

If I truly was a regressor from a future cycle, I should naturally be

stronger.

His black, well-like eyes studied me. “What do you want?”

“First, tell me what cycle this is.”

“This is the 250th cycle. And you?”

“268th.”

“Not that far apart.”

“Right.” I nodded. “Now, kill yourself immediately.”

“My class isn’t Lancer, though.”

Despite the grumble escaping his lips, the dream-version of the Undertaker ended his life in an instant.

Without the slightest hesitation.

Beside me, Infinite Void chuckled. “You’re seriously nuts, sunbae.”

“It’s just a pre-established protocol.”

Thud.

As the Undertaker’s body crumpled, the entire world was swallowed in darkness.

It wasn’t just that the lights had gone out. The entire dream had come to an end, leaving behind absolute void.

“Infinite Void. For just one question, I’ll allow you to access the Bakus’ data. Can you sense anything here, other than the two of us?”

“Wait a sec… Hmm… Nope. Nothing. It’s empty. In the truest sense of the word—void. Nothingness.”

“Not even the presence of an Outer God?”

“Not at all. I can only feel you, sunbae.” Infinite Void furrowed its

brow. “By the way, what the hell are you keeping in your skull? You’re like a walking black hole.”

“I’ve never kept anything there. Next.”

We proceeded through the cycles: 200th, 150th, 100th, 50th.

The Undertakers from those cycles were far easier to subdue. Since we all shared the same protocol, the dream-version of the Undertakers willingly took their own lives.

There was no issue. At least, for me.

“—Bleeeegh.”

The problem was Infinite Void.

The deeper we delved into earlier cycles, the worse its expression grew, and by the 50th cycle, it collapsed to the ground and started throwing up.

“Bleeegh! Ughh... Bleeegh!”

As expected of an Outer God, even its vomit was rendered as rainbow-colored static noise. Thanks to that, we could rest assured that no matter the platform, this would pass censorship unscathed.

“...What the hell are you doing? Get a grip.”

“I’m... I’m dying, sunbae. I really can’t take it anymore... Bleeeeegh!”

For a long while, Infinite Void couldn’t stop spewing out its existence in the form of rainbow-colored vomit. It wasn’t a metaphor—its rainbow-colored vomit transformed into miniature versions of Infinite Void upon touching the ground, which then scurried away before disintegrating into nothing.

It was the kind of scene that could drive anyone mad if they watched for too long.

As for Infinite Void itself, it was shaking its head, looking like it was

about to lose its mind.

“What kind of dream is this? It’s just borrowing the form of a dream, but it’s totally different.”

“Hmm.”

Infinite Void was perceptive. Despite its goofy nature, as an Outer God, it could see what the Tutorial Fairy had completely missed—it had figured out what was really going on here.

“It doesn’t really harm anyone, unlike you, who tends to make a mess of things. Unless someone actively tries to break in, nobody gets hurt.”

“No way… Urgh… Breathing in here feels like it’s draining my HP and MP. Are you really saying this is normal?”

“Here, take this.”

I pulled out my notebook and scribbled down "HP and MP," then handed it to Infinite Void.

It looked at me as if I were crazy, but it didn’t reject the paper.

The moment our hands touched while passing the note, Infinite Void’s breathing began to stabilize.

After a while, it finally spoke up.

“Sunbae… can I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Is this really a dream?”

Wiping its mouth with the sleeve of its black uniform, Infinite Void glanced around.

The fabric itself was now infected with static noise, crackling as it moved.

“This… isn’t a dream. It’s just your domain. The Divine Realm you

set up at Baekhwa Girls' High before you obliterated me... It's the same, isn't it?"

"....."

"It looks a lot like a dream, but it's completely different. Just like that Void resembling a school. If my analysis is correct…"

Infinite Void looked up at me, still holding my hand.

Its red eyes reflected my face back at me—identical to the Undertakers I had killed across the dream cycles.

Footnotes:

1 - Both thought experiments deal with the idea that our beliefs or memories, respectively, are false and, thus, that our place in the world we live in is not at all what we perceive it to be.

Chapter 218

The Nameless One IV

Sinnoa

“Have you ever dreamed, even once?”

Infinite Void’s question got halfway there. For me, the Regressor Undertaker, what most people would call "dreams" never visited me. The only things that came to me were "dream-like anomalies" mimicking the appearance of dreams. In fact, I’ve even hinted at it a few times in my tales.

Take, for example, the Lucid Dream.

Lucid dreaming was something even ordinary people could attempt, but I went far beyond that level, walking through dreams as if they were reality itself.

Or, the Precognitive Dream.

Just before the Goddess of the Night, Nut, brought about the world's destruction, Kim Joo-chul visited my dream to warn me of the danger.

Sharp readers would have already sensed something was amiss here.

Why? Because the real Kim Joo-chul had no recollection of warning me about anything. Thus, it wasn’t Kim Joo-chul himself. The phenomenon known as a "precognitive dream," or rather an anomaly of some kind, merely spoiled the upcoming crisis for me.

Another example would be the Collective Unconscious of humanity.

In the academic world, this concept remained an unproven hypothesis. But here, it existed.

Through it, I met Go Yuri and the Sword Demon. I also encountered

Cheon Yo-hwa and Lee Ha-yul after the world's destruction. I even saw Kuro, who constantly rolled heads in Jeju Island, and the original owner of the Monkey's Paw.

In short—

“I do dream something similar to dreams. But my dreams are only one of two things: Either they are lucid dreams that perfectly reflect reality, or...” I stared at Infinite Void. “They are nightmares where anomalies appear. Actually, if we treat lucid dreams as anomalies too, you could say my dreams are nothing but anomalies.”

“Wow.” Infinite Void furrowed its brow as it muttered, “Is this because of your Complete Memory? Or a side effect of your regressions?”

I shrugged. “Either way, if anything different from reality appears in my dreams, it proves that an anomaly has invaded them.”

It was a sort of litmus test and the exact reason why when Kim Joo-chul appeared in my dream and made a fuss, I couldn’t ignore it. While other people might dismiss nightmares as nonsense, I, on the other hand, had to view those nightmares as quite possibly being linked to dangerous anomalies.

“That’s why I brought you, Infinite Void. If any anomalies are currently lurking in my dreams, you’ll be able to track them with your abilities. While we’re at it, we might as well clean house while searching for the original Undertaker, don’t you think?”

“Hey, don’t treat an Outer God like a vacuum cleaner, sunbae...”

“You’re an ex-Outer God. Now, if you’re done throwing up, get up and follow me. We still have more Undertakers to kill.”

“Oh, yeah. No complaints there—actually, I’m looking forward to it.”

Crossing over the corpses of my past selves, we finally reached the final boundary: the Undertaker from the 5th cycle. The last point where my Complete Memory fully preserved my memories from start to finish.

As we approached, the Undertaker—busy handling Samcheon World guild matters at a train station in Busan—turned to look at us.

Our eyes met.

His eyes were dark. The eyes of every Undertaker from any timeline had the same ominous look, but the eyes of the 5th cycle Undertaker were on another level.

Dead eyes.

Pupils charred, as though they had been burned to death.

“What are you two?”

The shadow spoke, its mouth just as pitch-black as its eyes.

I smirked wryly. The funny thing was that this was the result after becoming slightly more "human" post-Dang Seo-rin.

“I’m you, from the future, Undertaker.”

“What?”

“This is a dream, and you’re nothing but a figure within it.”

The Undertaker stared at me blankly.

At this point, I had yet to assign any "password" to myself. I hadn’t foreseen that I might one day recall the past through dreams. So, from the 5th cycle Undertaker’s perspective, it was only natural for him to be suspicious.

“I don’t want to fight. Just look at our Aura. You can tell from that alone—I’m far stronger than you could ever imagine.”

“And what does my future self seek? Do you plan to tell me how to hunt down the Ten Legs?”

“Heh!” Beside me, Infinite Void snickered.

I squeezed the finger interlaced with mine tight, and it quickly apologized, “Sorry! Sorry, sunbae!”

I turned back to the Undertaker. He frowned slightly.

“Undertaker of the 5th cycle. I want to ask you something. Do you remember when you first met Dang Seo-rin? That was during the 4th cycle, right?”

“Dang Seo-rin?”

“Yeah. For you, it wasn’t that long ago. You’ve also mastered the Complete Memory ability. So, logically, you should have that memory readily available.”

The Undertaker opened his mouth, then closed it again. It was like trying to open a drawer that should obviously contain something but finding it empty every time.

“...Why can’t I remember?”

For the first time, a faint trace of emotion appeared on the usually emotionless face of the 5th cycle Undertaker.

Confusion.

“I definitely met Dang Seo-rin. Just like you said, it wasn’t that long ago, but... my memory of it is strangely vague.”

“.....”

Just as I suspected. I sighed inwardly.

Up until now, I had chalked it up to the natural fading of memories after hundreds or even thousands of years. But it was strange that even the 5th cycle Undertaker couldn’t remember clearly.

“This is impossible. That day changed my entire life. There’s no way I could forget it so easily...”

Slash.

With a single stroke, I severed the Undertaker's head. The moment it rolled off, the dreamscape of the 5th cycle collapsed.

In the ensuing darkness, I asked, "Infinite Void. Even in this dream, you didn't detect any anomalies?"

"Nothing. I scanned everything from the 250th cycle to the 5th cycle, and I didn't sense a single one. The only overwhelming presence here is yours."

"So, the possibility that my memories were manipulated by an anomaly is highly unlikely."

"Yeah."

In that case, there was only one conclusion left.

"I've come up with a hypothesis as to why my memories before the 4th cycle are so hazy."

"Oh? What is it?"

"Time Seal." A long sigh escaped me. "I must have lost my memories of the people I erased using Time Seal."

As you all know, anyone affected by Time Seal completely vanishes from memory—as if their existence itself had been erased. Only one person, the one who used Time Seal—in this case, me—remains aware of them.

"But what if the reason I'm exempt from that erasure was a side effect of my Complete Memory?"

"Huh?" Infinite Void blinked. "What are you talking about, sunbae?"

"Everyone erased by Time Seal is wiped from existence, right? I wasn't an exception to that. But, coincidentally, when I was granted the Complete Memory ability, the two powers clashed."

"Aha!"

Time Seal, a skill that erases existence.

Complete Memory, a skill that remembers existence eternally.

The two abilities I possessed were in direct opposition.

“As a result of their clash, something strange happened. Even though everyone else forgot the people erased by Time Seal, I could still remember them.”

“That’s it!” Infinite Void’s eyes sparkled.

“And that’s how the Crystal Tombstones came to be.”

Until now, I had thought the tombstones were a byproduct of Time Seal. But in fact, it was the opposite.

Thinking back now, I continued, “I always found it odd that the tombstones took on the shape of crystals. It seemed too random. But if you think about it… ‘memory’ is the act of reflecting oneself. In other words, it’s a mirror.”

“So the tombstones weren’t crystals but mirrors, huh?”

“That’s right.”

Infinite Void couldn’t hide its reaction. “So, you couldn’t always see the Crystal Tombstones from the beginning, huh, sunbae? At first, you were like everyone else—you couldn’t remember the people erased by Time Seal.”

“Exactly.”

“But in the 5th cycle, ta-da! You gained Complete Memory, and from then on, you started seeing the Crystal Tombstones!”

I nodded. “This is my hypothesis. After the 5th cycle, I can remember everyone erased by Time Seal without issue.”

“Mhm.”

“But before the 5th cycle, I couldn’t remember those who were erased.” I raised a finger. “And… the Undertaker before the 5th cycle actively erased nearly all of his human connections.”

“Mhm.”

“Imagine someone who erased almost every relationship they had, including their family.”

What happens if you erase the memory of your mother using Time Seal?

You could still manage. As we saw with Kim Joo-chul and his son Kim Si-eun, losing one family member doesn’t cause someone’s mind to collapse. There would just be an inexplicable sense of emptiness.

But what if it wasn’t just one person but everyone? If not just family but friends were erased? And if not just friends, but every single acquaintance you ever had was erased by Time Seal?

What if that was what happened to me—the Undertaker before the 5th cycle?

“Memory loss…” Infinite Void murmured.

I nodded. “Yeah. My memories would be like a half-finished game of Jenga.”

“Of course. If all your family memories, your childhood friends, and every acquaintance from your life were erased, that’s bound to happen.”

“Exactly. The only memories left would be of the survivors I met at Busan Station during the Tutorial. And even those unimportant memories would’ve faded over the years before I gained Complete Memory.”

That was the truth I had deduced.

In short, I, the Undertaker, had become someone without any connections in this world—an "extra" who seemed to have just

fallen from the sky. And at the same time, a "memory amnesiac", unable to recall anything about my own past.

In other words, whether I wanted it or not, I had taken on traits that screamed "main character." It was no wonder the Admin of the Infinite Metagame, an Outer God, had taken an interest in me. Who wouldn't shove a person with such obvious "protagonist qualities" into the spotlight?

"Wait, sunbae. If the 5th-cycle Undertaker can't clearly remember Dang Seo-rin, why is that? You didn't use Time Seal on her, did you?"

"...There must have been someone nearby."

"Huh?"

I closed my eyes and thought back to my first meeting with Dang Seo-rin. The memory was nothing but a vague, glitchy image, distorted as if marred by bad TV reception.

"There's venom in those eyes."

After a moment, I opened my eyes again.

"Someone must have been standing beside me—or beside Dang Seo-rin—when we first met. Someone I can't remember anymore."

"Ah."

"Let's call that someone 'X' for now. X must've been incredibly important to me. So important that when X disappeared, it left a huge void in my memory. That's why the memory of my first meeting with Dang Seo-rin is partially damaged."

Who could X have been?

Was it someone who survived with me from the Busan Station Dungeon? Or someone Dang Seo-rin brought along when recruiting me?

I had no idea. I couldn't remember.

The Deleted Person X.

X must've been a key figure in shaping who I was before the 5th cycle. So when X was erased by Time Seal, my memory took a huge hit.

"Still..."

"Still?"

"I've sealed people even before the 4th cycle. For example, Kim Joo-chul."

My memory of Kim Joo-chul was blurry. Maybe X had been with me when I sealed him. Either way, even without Complete Memory, I could recall fragments of Kim Joo-chul from the 4th cycle. Despite not having Complete Memory at the time, I could still remember some parts.

"If my hypothesis is wrong, I should've completely forgotten about Kim Joo-chul since I didn't have Complete Memory when I sealed him. But I still remember him."

"Huh..."

"So why can I remember Kim Joo-chul but not myself, not my family, and not X? That's the part that remains unexplained."

We tried diving into the dreams of the 4th, 3rd, 2nd, and 1st cycles.

Of course, there were no significant findings.

[404 - Not Found]

[404 - Not Found]

[404 - Not Found]

Because some crazy regressor had erased all their human connections, there wasn't a single noteworthy memory left.

“……”

It left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Why had the past version of myself erased so many of the people important to me?

Though the mystery of whether the Undertaker had always been an anomaly or not was solved, another puzzle had arisen.

[404 - Not Found]

This was my starting point. My origin. My birthplace.

I might be able to conquer the Void in the outside world someday, but would I ever manage to conquer the void within me?

I silently gazed at my error-ridden origin for a long time.

There is an epilogue.

“Wait! Just a second, sunbae.”

As we were about to leave the dream, Infinite Void grabbed the edge of my coat.

I glanced at it with a suspicious look, wondering what trick it was about to pull. Infinite Void, mimicking Cheon Yo-hwa's laugh, chuckled.

“No, no. Don’t look at me like that! Look, I know I’m an Outer God and all, but you’ve been pretty kind to me, sunbae.”

“That’s only because you’re sharing a body with Yo-hwa. If not, I wouldn’t be so lenient.”

“Ah! Well, anyway! As someone who’s spent all this time being tortured in Yo-hwa’s mind, I have to say, sunbae’s attitude is surprisingly touching!”

I scowled. Touching, my ass. Sure, Infinite Void could feel

something like emotion, but it was more like a program. *“Now’s the time to feel moved, so simulate the appropriate reaction,”* or something like that.

I shook the thought from my mind and asked, “So?”

“Well, I’ve prepared a little gift for you.”

With a smug pose, Infinite Void—looking exactly like Cheon Yo-hwa—snapped its fingers. Suddenly, the error-filled [404] scenery around us shifted into the hallway of a hospital. It was a place I had visited briefly in the dream earlier.

“...This is the hospital where my mother supposedly worked, right?”

“Yup! You got it. While you were moving between dreams, I kept analyzing and synthesizing all the data from your memories.”

“Hm.”

I didn’t object.

After all, this entire "find-the-hidden-picture" project was a give-and-take between me and Infinite Void. We had made a mutual agreement to share what we gained.

“Thanks to that... I managed to restore something like this!”

Creeeak.

Infinite Void pushed open the door to a hospital room. Inside was the Obstetrics Ward, where my supposed mother worked. Unlike her son, who would later become known as the Undertaker, she had a job dedicated to bringing life into the world.

In the room, a woman whose entire body was covered in static noise—her face and clothes completely unrecognizable—lay reclining on the hospital bed.

And in her arms, a tiny newborn baby.

“That baby, sunbae, is you.”

“……”

“Probably.” Infinite Void chuckled. “I’m not 100% certain, of course. You’ve erased so many of your relationships, after all. But the chances are high that this woman is your mother, and the baby fits your age when this data was recorded.”

“…You restored this?”

“Yup! Not bad, huh?”

The woman—my supposed mother—didn’t move at all. She just held the baby in her arms.

It seemed impossible to restore any of her actions.

The newborn baby was the same. There wasn’t any sense of familiarity, no feeling that I was looking at myself. Even the baby’s face was partially obscured by the same static noise.

“……”

Yet despite this, for a long while, I couldn’t take my eyes off the mother and child.

“Now that I think about it…”

I thought back to Busan Station.

“No matter how much my memories were covered with [404] errors, that place couldn’t have been my true starting point.”

I realized something then.

Even if I had no memories of my origin, that didn’t change the fact that I was human. After all, no human remembers the moment they were born. Just because my memories had a gap at the beginning didn’t mean I wasn’t human.

This scene in front of me, the hidden image found in a regressor’s life, was proof of that.

“So? Do you like it?”

I glanced at Infinite Void.

It stood there in a proud pose, the kind of idle animation a character in a game would take when left alone for too long—every movement perfectly on beat. Even the way it tapped the floor with its toes, waiting for my response, was flawlessly in sync.

But for some reason, that same behavior didn’t bother me as much as it had before.

I said what I needed to say.

“Thank you.”

Infinite Void grinned from ear to ear. “So, sunbae, how about this? Since your precious junior has such a big heart, how about granting me control and authority over the Tutorial Fairies again?”

Instead of answering, I pulled a slip of paper from my coat.

On it, I had written “No.”

Infinite Void chewed on the paper with a pout before spitting it out.

Footnotes:

Chapter 219

The Slanderer I

Sinnoa

"These days, people's moral compasses seem... off, don't you think?"

One day, while enjoying a swim, Noh Do-hwa made this statement out of the blue.

"Hmm."

By the way, we were at a swimming pool located in the basement of the National Road Management Corps headquarters.

Now, you might find it off-putting that even during the apocalypse, the center of power still had a leisurely swimming pool. But it's not something to take too seriously. The Void merely randomly spawned a pool.

Noh Do-hwa hated all activities under the category of "exercise" but didn't particularly mind swimming. So, I periodically dragged her out of the office and threw her into the pool. After all, a person has to get at least a little exercise; otherwise, they won't live long. I couldn't allow the Zhuge Liang of the Peninsula to die young, now, could I?

Anyway.

I silently approached Do-hwa, squatted down, and placed my hand on her forehead as she floated at the edge of the pool.

"Strange. You don't feel like you have a temperature."

"Do you want to die...?"

"Oh, come now. This is a genuine concern. When the person with the most questionable character in the world suddenly starts talking about morality, of course I'm going to be worried."

"It’s more like you’re genuinely full of shit..." Do-hwa swatted my hand away, and the smell of chlorine hit my nose. "Have you not noticed? The way people have been reacting lately has been off.”

"In what way, exactly?"

"Let me tell you..."

Noh Do-hwa’s story went like this:

Talks about replenishing manpower were always ongoing at the National Road Management Corps. It was a natural consequence, really, of being part of the Corps, given that it meant half your life was basically in the hands of anomalies.

The recruits were required to possess high combat skills, unshakable loyalty even in the face of bribes and corruption from regional warlords, a strong sense of camaraderie, specialized knowledge, and mental resilience strong enough to withstand the Void's mental pollution. Above all, they had to retain hope for humanity despite enduring constant suffering.

In other words, it was one hell of a tough job.

"People are getting chewed up out there! We need more recruits!"

"Who the hell let this piece of trash through as a rookie? Stop hiring anyone and everyone!"

"More bodies! We need more bodies!"

"We need quality!"

These two eternal opinions within the Corps ran on parallel tracks, destined never to meet.

“But lately, people unrelated to the National Road Management Corps started poking their noses into this..."

"Huh?"

The trouble started with SG Net.

One of the caravans dispatched by the National Road Management Corps from Busan got wiped out by the Void (which, by the way, is a pretty common occurrence), and the SG Net users had a field day with it.

- Anonymous: Honestly, isn't it the Corps' fault for not beefing up their manpower in time?

Anonymous: The Corps basically shoulders all of Korea's logistics, so it’s a bit irresponsible, to be honest. Yeah...

OldManGoryeo: Hmm...

- Anonymous: Because of that accident, the market in Pohang’s been closed for over three months, lol.

- Anonymous: I have a friend in the Corps, and apparently, even internally, they're saying they deliberately don’t recruit enough people despite knowing how understaffed they are.

Anonymous: Why would they do that?

Anonymous: Because the more Corps members they have, the more they’ll have to share the "straws" they’ve stuck into guilds across the country. Corps officers don't care about logistics, they just want to siphon taxes from the guilds, lol.

Anonymous: For real??

Anonymous: Everyone in the know already knows about it.

dolLHoUse: ?? What kind of bullshit are you guys spewing?

- Anonymous: I didn’t think the Corps leader was like that. Fucking same as the old politicians.

Anonymous: Do you still trust people?? Lol.

Anonymous: I knew this would happen.

I blinked. "What... is this stream of bullshit?"

"Exactly that—a stream of bullshit. I heard about it from my subordinates, but apparently, posts like these have been popping up regularly."

"Suddenly?"

"About a week ago, actually..."

It was a vicious spread of false information. At this point, the National Road Management Corps was practically the lifeblood of the Korean Peninsula. Even the regional warlord guild leaders knew that, as did the common citizens. In these times, unity was more critical than ever. Spreading slander like this would only result in a loss for all of humanity.

Pointless rabble-rousing.

"We need to get Seo Gyu to track those IP addresses."

"We already did that..."

"Who are these bastards? Could it be a deliberate smear campaign by a specific guild? That's the only thing that makes sense to me."

If so, I would bring the hammer down on these small-minded fools chasing short-term gains.

But Do-hwa shook her head. "Well. I thought the same, so I asked Yongsan to look into their identities... but they were just ordinary Awakeners."

"Ordinary Awakeners?"

"Yes. They had no connections, no relationships, nothing. They were complete strangers who just happened to start trading comments online."

I blinked again.

So, was it just a coincidence?

I had no intention of over-regulating every little thing just because

of some random incident. After all, venting on the internet had been a daily occurrence even before civilization collapsed.

"But there's more. Ah... something just grabbed my ankle..."

"Just a Water Ghost, nothing serious. Keep talking."

"Right..."

We continued our conversation, completely ignoring the Water Ghost we had wordlessly dealt with.

"It’s not just the National Road Management Corps either. They’ve been trying to needle Samcheon World and Baekhwa Girls' High School too."

In other words, slander.

- Anonymous: The Witch of the Cursed Song, Dang Seo-rin, holds a dissection show at the end of every month in Busan. Honestly, it’s pretty brutal, lol.

- Anonymous: Two regular guild members from the Samcheon World were killed last time because they tried to forcibly catch an anomaly for her dissection show.

Anonymous: For real??

OldManGoryeo: Hmm...

- Anonymous: Yeah, I heard about it too. They could’ve just killed the anomaly without any casualties, but Dang Seo-rin insisted on capturing it for the show, and that’s why the incident happened.

Anonymous: Wow.

- Anonymous: If that’s true, isn’t it a real problem?

Anonymous: Dang Seo-rin practically rules Busan, so covering up two deaths wouldn’t be a big deal for her. She’s always been like that.

dolLHoUse: ?? What the hell are you people on about?

Anonymous: I knew this would happen.

Of course, these rumors were completely baseless. Dang Seo-rin almost always captured her prey personally. She never simply ordered her subordinates to bring in something while standing idly by. In fact, without her support through her Cursed Song Incantation, the Ten Legs extermination or the Meteor Shower hunts would have resulted in massive casualties among the awakeners.

Seo-rin had earned herself plenty of immunity with her contributions. And now these puny Awakeners were daring to criticize her? Had they collectively lost their minds?

"Hey, don't roll your eyes at me like that. They already look dead inside. Now you're making them look like they're related to a fish..."

"Hmm."

"Anyway, that's how things have been this week. It feels just like the old days before civilization collapsed..."

"Is it just SG Net?"

"Who knows..."

Do-hwa got out of the pool, and I wrapped a towel around her shoulders, which I had prepared in advance. Since I'd forced her into the exercise she despised, offering this level of service was only fair.

She took a sip of the coffee I handed her and looked back at me. Droplets of water from her black hair dripped to the floor.

"My gut tells me this is probably the work of an anomaly..."

My gut told me the same thing.

Receiving a quest directly from the Commander of the National

Road Management Corps was no small matter, so I couldn't just slack off. I decided to push back my original schedule and reached out to the Saintess.

[Yes, you're right. There’s been a noticeable increase in those kinds of conversations lately, even in reality.]

The Saintess's abilities were reliable as ever. She immediately provided the information I needed.

[The people involved don’t seem particularly aware that they were having such conversations.]

[They just say things like, "Oh, I happened to mention it," or "I didn’t mean anything by it," or "I was just agreeing with what someone else said." To them, it’s just small talk.]

[That seems to be the extent of their awareness.]

I rested my chin on my hand. "If these conversations are happening in reality, not just online, maybe the keyword we should focus on is something like 'witch hunt'. Could it be a sort of mental virus?"

[A virus... doesn’t quite seem right. There’s no specific source of infection that we can identify.]

[It’s been happening simultaneously across places like Sariwon and Busan.]

"Can you summarize the characteristics of these conversations?"

[Of course.]

The Saintess then gave me a concise summary of the anomaly she dubbed the "Witch Hunt":

Someone subtly spreads baseless accusations. Others, despite having doubts, still chime in and agree with the accusations. The accusations are then accepted as fact, with remarks questioning the character or integrity of the accused. The conversation always ends with the line, "I knew it all along."

[...That’s the gist of it.]

"Hmm." I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "It’s definitely a mental-type anomaly... It seems to be some kind of entity that parasitizes language itself."

[How do you plan to handle this?]

"First, let's see how it reacts."

I decided to test the waters by contacting Sim Ah-ryeon, who held authority over the Constellations Librarian of the Great Library and Collector of All Anomalies. Not only that, but she also had numerous anonymous accounts at her disposal.

Target: ON. Fire.

- Anonymous: I know who's been spreading those rumors about Dang Seo-rin capturing anomalies just for her dissection shows, lol.

- Anonymous: There’s this small guild in Yeongdo, Busan, called Cheonghae Guild, always causing trouble for Samcheon. Their guild leader got caught by Dang Seo-rin a while back, and ever since then, they’ve been spreading slander about her.

Anonymous: ?? What are you talking about? I’m just sharing something a friend told me.

Anonymous: Oh, your "friend"? You mean the one who cried like a baby begging for his life in front of the Great Witch in Busan?

Anonymous: I’m not even from Cheonghae Guild.

For the record, all of the “Anonymous” users in this exchange were Ah-ryeon herself, expertly playing different personas to stir the pot on the forum.

Once she had everyone's attention, she delivered the final blow.

- Anonymous: By the way, I’m one of the top five Awakeners under the Librarian of the Great Library. If you keep running your mouth, I can just ask the Constellation to dig up your personal info. So

maybe shut up? ^^

Anonymous: Pfft, as if. I'm not even part of Cheonghae Guild. Do whatever you want, lol.

Librarian of the Great Library: Park Sang-soon, 37 years old. Guild Master of Cheonghae Guild. Currently logged in from Yeongdo, Busan.

Anonymous: ?

Anonymous: What the fuck—

Anonymous: That's not me!

Naturally, the forum exploded. The tide of public opinion rapidly shifted, with commenters now siding with Samcheon and berating Cheonghae Guild.

I watched this all unfold with a cold expression.

'So, we've turned the slander around. Now let's see how the anomaly reacts.'

At that moment—

- Anonymous: I always knew Cheonghae Guild would cause trouble someday, lol.

- Anonymous: That guild has always been shady, using anonymous accounts to promote themselves while badmouthing rival guilds.

Anonymous: For real??

Anonymous: Apparently, the guild leader even assigned an SG Net officer to manipulate public opinion and instructed the guild members on how to do it.

Anonymous: I knew it.

Hmm.

I let out a small sigh.

Just moments ago, these users were questioning Seo-rin's integrity, yet now they had smoothly flipped their stance and were condemning Cheonghae Guild instead.

“It’s not going away, is it?”

[No... And more Awakeners who have no connection to the situation are jumping in and adding to the comments.]

Exactly.

This anomaly didn’t care about facts, logic, or reason. It just wanted to burn everything to the ground. Even if you managed to debunk one rumor, the entity would simply latch onto the next, continuing its cycle of destruction.

Footnotes:

Chapter 220

The Slanderer II

Sinnoa

At some point, the "Witch Hunt" anomaly began sweeping across the Korean Peninsula. If it had just been limited to a few stupid posts on the internet, it would have been fine. But the terrifying part of this anomaly was something else entirely.

“I knew this would happen.”

“What?”

“I said I knew this would happen.”

“What the hell? You agreed to enter the Void too, didn’t you? Who could’ve predicted such a bizarre anomaly would pop out from there...?”

“I knew it would happen! And yet, you just waltz into the Void without a plan. Tsk, tsk.”

“.....”

This kind of exchange started happening everywhere across the country, where those infected by this anomaly would, whenever something went wrong, pull the “I knew it all along” and act like they were some impartial and objective third party.

It was a truly strange phenomenon.

Ever since the world began to be consumed by the Void, wasn’t the range of things humanity could predict reduced to the size of a hand?

The attitude required of people living in our times was much simpler:

‘I didn’t see this coming.’

‘Since I don’t know, I’ll prepare as best as I can.’

‘If I don’t know, I’ll take the hit and learn as I go.’

Yet, this anomaly was boldly standing in opposition to such common sense.

“I knew it would happen.”

“And I knew you’d act like you knew it.”

“Well, guess what! I knew you’d pretend to act like you knew that I knew!”

“I’ve known since forever that you two would be doing that whole ‘knowing-it-all’ routine!”

Even when a brand-new Void emerged or when completely unheard-of news reached them, people inexplicably began to tout their foresight.

At this point, I had to admit that this anomaly was more formidable than I initially thought. But so what if I did?

I scratched my head and patted the shoulder of our internet’s strongest power source. “Ah-ryeon, good work.”

“Ah, y-yes.”

“I don’t think responding to every bit of slander is worth the effort anymore. You did great, now stop.”

“Ah... Yes, guild leader. Haa... I-I knew it would come to this...”

“……”

That day, a small bump appeared on the back of Ah-ryeon’s head. It would serve as a nice external conscience chip for Sim Ah-ryeon, who only nurtured triangles and squares in her mind.

In any case, the situation was becoming slightly, but steadily, more

serious. Inside the smaller guilds, which had been operating smoothly until recently, signs of division were starting to show. Verbal altercations between citizens were also frequently observed in the city.

It was still at a manageable level, though. This wasn't a Ten Legs-level anomaly that outright massacred people. However, it was obvious that if left unchecked, it could develop into a much more serious situation.

"Um, guild leader."

"Yes?"

"I think this is a little different from a 'Witch Hunt.' No, actually, I think it's completely different." Ah-ryeon rubbed the bump on her head.

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, it's happening not just on the internet, but in real life too. A witch hunt usually... works more sneakily. At least, it's done from behind the mask of anonymity."

"I don't know... Modern witch hunts can easily happen in real life too. Have you heard of the Dreyfus Affair?"

"D-Dreyfus...?"

"Yes, it's what made Émile Zola's *J'Accuse* famous."

"Oh, right... I know about that. The, uh, famous 100k subscriber YouTuber, Emile Zola..."

...Seriously?[1]

Ah-ryeon's lips twitched as she mumbled, "A-anyway, witch hunts usually involve blending into the crowd, the masses, hunting while hidden... right?"

"True, that's usually the case."

“Right. But this anomaly feels different. For starters, going after the Demon King of the National Road Management Corps or the Villainous Witch of Samcheon World feels… a little…”

“A little?”

“It just doesn’t have that underhanded vibe,” she muttered under her breath.

A question mark floated above my head, but Ah-ryeon ignored it and continued rambling.

“In SG Net, even when people hide behind the mask of anonymity, there’s always the risk of getting found out by the Constellations. So people don’t just go around crossing the line. That applies even more to real life. But here… defying the two most powerful figures on the Korean Peninsula? It’s oddly… too upright. There’s no stink of corruption…”

“Ah-ryeon, what are you even talking about?”

“Guild leader, you’re getting too hung up on the keyword ‘witch hunt’ just because the Great Witch of Samcheon World was attacked.”

What?

“Plus, even if you’re a villain on SG Net, you’re just a Three Kingdoms parrot. You’ve got no experience causing real havoc. This isn’t a witch hunt.”

“Then what kind of anomaly do you think it is?”

“Here.”

Ah-ryeon tapped her smartphone screen, pulling up a comment from SG Net.

- Anonymous: I knew this would happen.

It was the phrase that appeared most frequently when investigating this anomaly.

“This is the key,” Ah-ryeon said, pointing at the comment. “The whole ‘acting like they know everything.’ So this isn’t a witch hunt anomaly. It’s... arrogance or, perhaps... a know-it-all.”

“A know-it-all?”

“Yes. Maybe... we should call it a pseudo-intellectual anomaly. These guys are always looking for a chance to show off what they supposedly know. They aren’t hiding in the crowd. They’re trying to stand out and, whenever they get the chance, act like they know everything... It's closer to a ‘pseudo-intellectual anomaly.’”

That was Sim Ah-ryeon’s expert analysis, as a self-proclaimed and internet-renowned expert.

If there’s one advantage I, the Undertaker, had, it was that I knew how to listen to experts.

Even a broken clock is right twice a day, and just like that, even OldManGoryeo had moments where you could learn something from them.

Ah-ryeon was completely immersed in the idea of teaching me about anomalies.

“O-of course, guild leader, I understand why you’re confused. It kind of does have a witch hunt vibe at first glance... There’s some inciting and even a bit of avoiding responsibility. A-and guild leader, no matter how hard you try to act young, there’s a limit to...”

There was a brief moment where I considered adding another external conscience chip to her.

“It’s probably because the anomaly is evolving in real-time. Soon enough, it’ll likely expand into the much broader category of ‘internet culture.’”

“Yes, yes.”

Though she muttered, "I still don’t get why it’s spreading into the

real world, but..." under her breath.

“Anyway, if we leave this alone, I think humanity will eventually turn into something like... forest critters. Awakener supremacy and Awakener hate will grow much stronger than they already are...”

The thought alone was horrifying.

‘The Sim Ah-ryeon-ification of humanity!’

Chills ran down my spine. Humanity deserved a more dignified demise than that. We had to act swiftly and stamp it out early.

“How do we stop it? Please share your esteemed wisdom, wise OldManGoryeo.”

“Hehehe... Eh-heh-heh...”

Ah-ryeon fidgeted with her fingers, clearly pleased.

“W-well, the best way is... to crush those know-it-alls so thoroughly that they can’t say a word! Just wham! Flatten them so hard that they can’t even mutter, ‘I knew it would happen!’ Only you, guild leader, can pull off such a feat... Show them something so spectacular, so extraordinary that no one could possibly criticize it...!”

“Extraordinary?”

“It has to be something absolutely unexpected! Instead of ‘I knew it would happen,’ people should be left saying, ‘I really didn’t see that coming!’ A shocking, huge event that blows everyone’s minds...!”

“Shocking, huh.”

Hmm.

I opened the notepad in my head and carefully jotted down the advice from Professor OldManGoryeo.

While I was doing this, I heard a voice, slightly urgent, telepathically ringing in my head. It was the Saintess.

[Wait a moment, Mr. Undertaker... No matter how knowledgeable Sim Ah-ryeon might be about internet culture, isn't it risky to take her advice at face value...?]

At that moment, \Ah-ryeon drove the final nail in the coffin.

"If it weren't you, guild leader, I wouldn't be suggesting this strategy at all. After all, even when it comes to General Yi Sun-sin, people pull off their pseudo-intellectual garbage all the time. It's just how the world works..."

"Hmm."

"But guild leader, aside from me, you're the greatest person on this planet! So I'm sure you'll show us a solution so brilliant and unexpected that even this lousy anomaly couldn't have anticipated it!"

"Hmm."

"I believe in you, guild leader...!" Ah-ryeon clenched both her fists tightly in determination.

I nodded. "Alright. Just trust me, Ah-ryeon. This guild leader will create a scene so unprecedented, no one could've possibly seen it coming."

"Hehehe! Yes!"

Watching the same scene through my eyes, the Saintess sighed quietly.

[Why is it that you torment Sim Ah-ryeon every day, but when it comes to something important, you lose your composure and let her sway you like this...?]

First things first, I selected the most heavily infected by the pseudo-intellectual anomaly and had them rounded up.

A total of 360 people.

That number wasn't random—it was a deliberate choice. When Socrates was sentenced to death in ancient Athens, the vote tally for his execution was exactly 360. In short, 360 symbolized mob rule and mass psychology.[2]

Not stopping there, I went ahead and carved a Greek-style temple out of stone pillars using my Aura. Whether this anomaly was better defined as pseudo-intellectualism or witch hunting, this temple had now become the perfect altar to summon it.

"Undertaker, how dare you kidnap us and tie us up! I knew you'd end up like this!"

Murmurs and complaints started to rise. The people who had been kidnapped and bound by me were now making a racket.

"Even in this lawless age, this is too much! I knew it was coming!"

"This is an Awakener's tyranny! Abuse of power! Just as I expected!"

"I knew it from the moment you and the National Road Management Corps were conspiring to take over the Peninsula. Tsk."

"Was it Dang Seo-rin who ordered you to do this? I knew it! I knew there was something fishy going on between you two!"

"See? Put a war hero on a pedestal, and they'll just turn into a dictator. I knew it would happen!"

What is this? Since when did so many people awaken to Clairvoyance? As far as I knew, there were only two Prophets in existence.

'Clearly, this is abnormal.'

These people, after all, were survivors of the apocalypse. They had sharp instincts and outstanding judgment. If the Undertaker kidnapped them and tied them up in some suspicious Greek temple, they should've immediately sensed that something was off. And yet, instead of grasping the gravity of the situation, they were busy

complaining about my actions, proudly proclaiming they had predicted it all.

It was obvious that their minds had already been deeply corrupted by the anomaly.

“Everyone, please be quiet,” I announced using the paper megaphone I made.

“What?! You want us to be quiet in a situation like this?!”

“Are you trying to silence the people?!”

“Dictator! Dictator! Dictator!”

“Go ahead, kill us! See if you can!”

The people erupted in shouts. Skipping over the repetitive outbursts of “I knew it,” I continued.

“I’m not here to kill any of you. However...” I motioned toward the side, where the National Road Management Corps operations team leader, the silver-haired psychopath, stood silently. “If Team Leader Yu Ji-won here loses her temper and kills someone, there’s nothing I can do to stop it.”

“.....”

“.....”

The temple air instantly stilled.

Most psychopaths kept their tendencies in check, hiding their nature behind a facade. But Yu Ji-won was a different breed. Once she was assured that figures like Noh Do-hwa or the Regressor wouldn’t abandon her, she dropped all pretenses and unleashed her full psychopathic tendencies without hesitation. She would slash people apart without a second thought, as long as she had both justification and necessity.

It was for these reasons that, even in the apocalypse, the Korean Peninsula managed to maintain some semblance of law and order.

“Now, take a look at this Aura.”

I raised my sword, Do-hwa, and lifted it to the sky. Then, I poured every bit of aura I had into it.

———*!*

The dark aura swallowed all sound as it pierced the heavens.

The clouds torn asunder by the Aura were dyed black, turned to storm clouds. In that broad daylight, a patch of the night sky appeared, as if a hole had been ripped through the atmosphere.

This was the result of pouring every ounce of my power into my Aura.

“……”

“……”

Clap.

Clap, clap, clap.

Slow clapping broke the silence.

There was no need to turn around to check. It was Ji-won, clapping with a blank expression.

Ignoring her flattery, I turned to the 360 captives. “Well, what do you think?”

“Y-you’re just intimidating civilians with brute force!”

“Ha! That’s nothing more than a show of Aura. It’s no different from showing off your muscles!”

“Research shows that excessive Aura in combat can actually reduce efficiency…”

“I knew it. I knew exactly what kind of person you were.”

The anomaly paused for a moment but still continued to casually

wag its tongue. More precisely, the people corrupted by the anomaly kept wagging theirs.

I muttered to myself, “As expected, this isn’t enough.”

“Shall we execute them, Your Excellency?”

“How can I execute people who were just unlucky enough to be infected by the anomaly? No, let’s move on to the next plan.”

If an Aura showcase wasn’t enough, I had no choice but to use my trump card. The Korean Peninsula didn’t just have Ah-ryeon, the villain OldManGoryeo, as its top power source.

I uttered the name of the second ultimate weapon.

“Ji-won.”

“Yes.”

“Bring the Sword Marquess here.”

If an Aura showcase wasn’t enough, then fine.

From now on, I’ll being showing you the Sword Marquess’s incredible, jaw-dropping rebirth technique.

Footnotes:

1 - The Dreyfus affair was a political scandal in which treasonous acts were pinned on an innocent man with the help of higher-ups in the French military, who suppressed exonerating evidence and used evidence they forged to accuse him. Journalist Émile Zola’s open letter to the press *J’Accuse…!* played a significant role successfully pressuring the government to pardon the man.

2 - Socrates was convicted officially of impiety against the gods and

corrupting the minds of the Athenian youth. However, his trial was most likely organized for speaking out against prominent leaders of the Athenian government and encouraging his students to think critically of “truths” given to them.

Chapter 221

The Slanderer III

Sinnoa

Rejuvenation.

A phenomenon where an old master, upon reaching the peak of enlightenment, reverts back to their childhood or prime years.

It's also a state that every StarCraft gamer desperately dreams of when their Mutalisk control slips, resulting in a massacre at the hands of filthy marines.

From Gilgamesh, the Demon King of the West, to Qin Shi Huang, the Overlord of the Central Plains, very few did not yearn for this state.

Thus, the first individual to achieve this milestone on the Earth server was none other than...

"Hm? Why have you summoned me?"

The Marquess of the Yudolguk Duchy, the Sword Marquess.

You may recall, in a previous cycle where I used the Monkey's Paw, this old man succeeded in evolving into Rebirth-mon.

A true monster of possibilities.

Of course, I no longer rely on the Monkey's Paw.

However, having learned that the Sword Marquess had an upgrade available, why wouldn't I use this knowledge?

“Marquess, please listen closely. The boundary between night and day is merely a temporary distinction made by humans, nothing more than a fleeting glimmer in the ceaseless flow of time...”

And so on.

This passage came from the 590th run, when the Sword Marquess experienced rebirth. It was, in essence, his guide to enlightenment.

Unsurprisingly, as I recited the exact steps without a single mistake, the Sword Marquess's expression grew increasingly mystified.

"Now, Marquess-mon! Evolve!"

“What are you babbling about, Undertaker?”

It didn’t work.

Was it not enough?

Even the 360 captives observing us from the sidelines began to stir.

“Boo! Boo!”

“You kidnap people and use force to threaten them, now what kind of nonsense are you spouting?!”

“The world probably doesn’t know this about the Undertaker, but I had a hunch from the start!”

But I didn’t give up.

In Korean education, pre-study and repetition are key. I still had a long way to go with the regressor's lessons.

I glanced at Ji-won, and with a single look, I silenced the noisy crowd. Then, I immediately drew my sword.

“Sir, watch closely.”

“Hm?”

I began the Sword Dance.

This wasn't a dance I invented. Long ago, during a flower-viewing trip to Mount Hua, the Sword Marquess had performed this very dance at the peak. I was now faithfully recreating it.

The Sword Marquess was visibly taken aback.

“Th-that’s...?”

“Do you feel it?”

“I feel it! I can feel it! Oh! How is the essence of Mount Hua embedded in the tip of your blade?!”

“Now that you feel it, listen once more. The boundary between night and day is merely...”

I recited the Sword Marquess's enlightenment aloud while simultaneously demonstrating it with my body. You wouldn’t find a professor like this anywhere else.

In other words, from a third-party perspective, I must have looked like a lunatic swinging a sword and muttering incomprehensible gibberish. Even the captives were now staring at me as if I’d lost my mind.

“Ooooh...”

When the Sword Dance ended, the Sword Marquess clapped his hands, his beard quivering.

“Truly, a marvelous Sword Dance! It was like the plum blossoms blooming on Mount Hua, like the mist enveloping those blossoms, and like a lone ship cutting through that mist! How curious! Should I call this ship Sambo-taegam’s treasure boat or perhaps Admiral Yi’s Turtle Ship?”

“So, do you feel like you're about to rejuvenate?”

“Eh? Rejuvenate? That, I’m not so sure about...”

Still not enough.

Even more boos erupted from the captives in the audience, but I paid them no mind.

I snapped my fingers.

At my signal, Yu Ji-won, who had been on standby, began unloading dozens of televisions from the truck.

A total of 130 CRT TVs.

The TVs surrounded the Sword Marquess like a miniature Stonehenge.

“Ji-won, turn them on.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

Chiiiick!

Despite not being plugged in, the TVs flickered on, filled with static. As expected—they were all cursed televisions. Each screen replayed degraded footage of my Sword Dance, which I had recorded beforehand.

The boundary between night and day, ehehehe!

Merely a temporary, hehe, distinction!

The cycle of the endless ring... the principle...

Kukekekekekeck.

By the way, the dance being shown wasn’t actually me—it was ghosts mimicking my movements.

Getting those spirits out of the well to reenact my dance had been quite the hassle. If you looked closely, you could probably sense the sorrow and resentment on their faces, brought on by their forced eviction.

“Wh-what’s happening...?”

Sensing that something was amiss, even the Sword Marquess, who was notoriously eccentric, began to grow wary. The captives, who had been jeering from the sidelines, slowly quieted down.

“What in the world are you doing, Undertaker?”

“Do not question it. Feel it. Embrace the sensation and flow as it is, Marquess.”

“Embrace it?” The Sword Marquess looked around, bewildered. “What am I supposed to embrace in a scene where ghosts are twisting their joints backward and muttering curses?!”

“Here, use this.”

I handed him a pair of earphones. Connected to an MP3 player, of course, with a cursed audio file stored within.

As soon as the Sword Marquess put the earphones on, the Heart Sutra began playing in a robotic, monotone voice.

The boundary between night and day is but a fleeting human distinction, flowing through the endless stream of time.

“……”

“Oh, and don’t turn up the volume too much. Just think of it as listening to MC Square. You know MC Square, right?”

“Hm… Um…”

“So, how about it? Do you feel like you’re about to rejuvenate?”

“I can’t even comprehend half the words you’re saying, Undertaker…”

Still not enough.

The 360 captives muttered discontentedly, their faces beginning to droop.

“I knew it. I knew this would happen.”

“I knew from the moment he started with this rejuvenation nonsense…”

“You think bringing out cursed TVs to scare us will work? I’ve known this would happen all along…”

Even though their voices had lost some strength, the captives still clung to their refrain of “I knew this would happen.”

But I wasn’t discouraged at all.

“Ji-won.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Bring Ha-yul and Dok-seo.”

“At once.”

With Ji-won’s help, the two little sisters, Lee Ha-yul and Oh Dok-seo, were promptly brought in.

Ha-yul’s face was gaunt. She had been diligently practicing the choreography, more earnestly than a K-pop idol trainee.

“Ha-yul, have you mastered it?”

[Oppa, please die.]

“Well done. That’s the spirit.”

[……]

"Now, show this old man your dance skills as we discussed."

Ha-yul spun threads from her fingertips, attaching them to the joints of the Sword Marquess. These threads, sticky and elastic like spider silk, quickly connected to his limbs.

"Wh-what's going on? What is this?"

The Sword Marquess was flustered, but he couldn’t stop Ha-yul. Though she might appear fragile, there were very few Awakeners who could defeat her in a one-on-one fight.

“Ji-won, cue the music.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Dok-seo, go.”

“Okay.”

Dok-seo coolly flipped her hat backward. It was a fashion that only women over 190 cm with a certain level of physique could pull off, and the gleam of her gold necklace sparkled brightly against her shirt.

“Yeah, Alliance of the Regressors. Yo yo, here we go, fucking psychopaths. Freestyle, real quick. Esketit.”

As Ji-won provided a smooth beat, alternating between on-beat and syncopated rhythms, Dok-seo grasped the mic.

“The boundary between night and day, yo! It’s just a human’s fleeting division! Yo, tick, crackle, tick, yo, in the ceaseless flow of time, it flashes briefly, yo...”

Her rap was laced with static and distortion, a side effect of the cursed microphone. Electronic devices, after all, were not exempt from being haunted by ghosts. Yet, Dok-seo, the purist of this era’s rap scene, turned the wails of the specters into part of her performance.

Meanwhile, Ha-yul manipulated the puppet strings, forcing the Sword Marquess to move as she pleased.

"Guh... Guhhh?! My joints—?"

To be clear, Ha-yul had perfectly mastered the Sword Dance I had demonstrated earlier. So now, by controlling the Sword Marquess like a puppet, she could make him perform the Dance of Enlightenment against his will.

This was the ultimate strategy of a regressor: If you can't reach enlightenment on your own, then just force-feed it to them at 300% concentration!

"Hrrgh! Aaagh! My knees! My shoulders! My back feels like it’s going to snap!”

I called in Ah-ryeon. She crouched next to the Sword Marquess and healed his joints whenever they creaked under the strain.

“Ugh! Aaack!”

“If you scream... it’ll hurt more.”

Even when his spine cracked once, there was no problem at all. Ah-ryeon smiled innocently as she healed him, her expression almost childlike.

That’s right.

How much abuse had we suffered at the hands of this Sword Marquess in the past, all because he was the only one capable of alleviating the famine? My comrades, bearing deep grudges, happily cooperated in this operation.

(The only exception was the Saintess, who vetoed the use of Telepathy, forcing us to use the MP3 player instead.)

“Hrrrrgh!”

I watched the Sword Marquess’s agonized cries fade into the background and turned to face the 360 captives. They had gone pale, observing our actions in stunned silence.

In summary:

I knew this would happen...

Kugegegegek.

As cursed TVs displayed phantasmal figures reciting the Sutra of Enlightenment, dancing to my recorded Sword Dance, and ghosts flailed to the rhythm, the spectacle unfolded like an exorcism ritual gone wrong.

Meanwhile, Dok-seo was spitting her cursed rhymes.

“Yo, the duality of day and night! The day is still the day, the night’s still the night, tick crack, they shine with their own beauty,

yooo!”

The captives looked as if they were teetering on the edge of insanity. Ha-yul was continuing to manipulate the Sword Marquess, forcing him to dance.

The old man’s joints creaked under the strain, and whenever they did, Ah-ryeon would gleefully heal him.

“Argh! Aaaaaagh!”

The dance was filled with the deepest mysteries of Mount Hua’s Sect Leader's Sword Dance, and the dancer was none other than the Marquess of the Sirland Duchy.

Even the tiniest sliver of conscience would struggle to accept the absurdity of such a scenario.

- ……

- ……

For the grand finale:

After performing the Sword Dance for over 30 minutes, the Sword Marquess, drenched in sweat, suddenly widened his eyes.

“H-huh? This technique… I… I think I remember it… but also don’t…”

At that moment, a faint scent of plum blossoms began to waft from the Sword Marquess's body.

I clenched my fist triumphantly.

“It’s here!”

Though, it was slightly different from the 590th run’s pure plum blossom scent. Back then, it was 100% natural, a true plum blossom fragrance, whereas now, it felt like an artificially synthesized one, the kind that might harm your lungs after long exposure.

The energy he exuded now, once entirely righteous, had somehow developed a slightly Demonic Cult-like aura.

Still, it was only one step away from perfection.

The Sword Marquess, teetering on the edge of enlightenment, continued to dance (courtesy of Ha-yul's control).

I quickly pulled out my smartphone. "Sword Marquess."

"Hrrgh, wh-what is it...?"

"Take a look at this." I held up my smartphone screen, which was logged into SG Net and displaying a particular post.

Anonymous: [SYSTEM] Click this post to transport to《Another World》. (Views: 2)

It was the infamous Hero Syndrome!

And not just any Hero Syndrome post. It was a rare find, uncovered by the National Road Management Corps using death row prisoners, tagged with #MartialArts #MountHua #Regression.

The death row inmate who clicked on the post claimed to have been reincarnated as the second son of the Namgung Family, ascended to the rank of Sword God, and participated in the War of Orthodox Faction and the Demonic Cult. Though he lost his memories just 30 seconds after clicking, muttering "Why are my eyes tearing up?", the experience was genuine.

This was the final piece of the puzzle, carefully handpicked for this moment by yours truly, the Undertaker.

"Take hold, Sword Marquess."

"Hrrgh...?"

"Grasp the final piece that leads to your enlightenment!"

At that, Ha-yul manipulated the strings, guiding the Sword Marquess's hand to the screen.

Click.

The post opened, and—

—There was light.

Blossoms of plum trees burst forth around the fake Greek temple.

A scent unknown to modern humans—the scent of true plum blossoms, or something akin to the combined fragrance of roses and cherries—filled the air.

The light receded.

The wrinkled old man was gone.

In his place stood a gray-haired boy, his head bowed in silence.

“Hmm.”

I nodded with satisfaction.

Success!

Rejuvenation!

I turned to the 360 captives who had witnessed this entire event unfold. Then I asked softly, "Well? Is this your first time seeing rejuvenation?"

- .....

“Even now, do you still think you knew this would happen?”

- .....

The 360 captives trembled violently.

- I... I...

- I didn’t see this coming, you crazy bastard!

- Who the hell could predict something like this?!

“Aaaaaargh!”

- We know nothing! We cannot know anything! We are doomed to ignorance, bound by fate to never comprehend! Life is suffering, and we are nothing but cast-offs thrown into the world... I didn’t know!

- I can’t slander this... I can’t slander this!

- Hikyaaaaaaaah!

Shudder!

The 360 captives convulsed in unison, collapsing onto their sides. Faint souls, like exorcised spirits, fled from their bodies and vanished into the distant forest.

The Forest Friends had returned home.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

[Across the Korean Peninsula, ghostly apparitions have been seen fleeing from people's bodies and vanishing into thin air.]

I glanced back at my comrades who had participated in the operation and gave them a thumbs-up.

Among them, Ah-ryeon smiled the brightest and exclaimed, “You’re amazing, guild leader! The best!”

The expert on slanderous spirits, otherwise known as the Witch Hunt or Internet Specters, had been defeated.

Mission Complete!

There is a small epilogue.

“Congratulations on your great success, Sword Marquess.”

“Hm.”

“How do you feel now?”

“I feel good. My mind is clear, and the world seems different. At first, I couldn’t understand what in the world you were doing, Undertaker. But now, I see that all these hardships were for my sake. But now… Just now…”

“Now?”

“Now I just want to beat you up, Undertaker.”

“Oh.”

I knew this would happen.

Footnotes:

Chapter 222

The Explosive One I

Sinnoa

Long ago, Old Man Scho was prone to grumbling.

“No, Embalmer! Isn’t there anyone in this world with teleportation abilities? What the hell is on this Earth server, anyway?”

“Hmm… maybe the Tutorial Fairy?”

“Ptooey! We don’t need bastards like that!”

Before going on vacation, Old Man Scho had tried his best to find someone with teleportation powers, though his efforts were, as you know, in vain.

Yet even after he typed “I’m done with this shitty game. Good luck,” into the chat and logged out, I still didn’t give up.

‘There’s got to be a new ability user hiding somewhere. I just don’t know where.’

Unlike Old Man Scho, who pretended to be all-knowing, I, the Undertaker, was a true MZ youth who never lost humility in these times.

Thus, I wandered everywhere, traveling from Busan to Seoul, from Beijing to Tokyo, and occasionally even to Istanbul and Berlin.

“It’s a miracle to work on a masterpiece with the famous Undateikeo. I guess living long enough lets you see everything.”

Occasionally, I even found myself drinking with the leader of the Magical Girl Association, the Great Priestess.

“You don’t seem old enough to be making self-deprecating remarks about living a long life.”

“I don’t look it, but the spirit I’ve absorbed is modeled after Tamamo-no-Mae, a nine-tailed fox. Given that I’ve been living since 2000 B.C., it messes with my mental age.”

“Ah.”

“Oddly, when I look at you, it feels like I’m talking to someone my own age. How strange.” The Great Priestess squinted at me over her fan. “That’s why when I’m alone with you, I keep slipping into my old-fashioned way of speaking. It’s a bit troublesome.”

“Well, for someone who’s lived so long, you don’t speak any foreign languages, including English…”

“Silence. It’s not my fault that I’m a pure-blooded Japanese native. You’re just too fluent in foreign languages for your own good while I’m just average.”

“Thank you.”

Clink.

We toasted. The Great Priestess swirled her glass of whiskey, spreading the scent of alcohol through the air.

Mixing alcohol with the atmosphere creates a vibe. As I inhaled the vibe, not the oxygen, I said, “That’s how one becomes a Magical Girl, right? You find a spirit that’s friendly to humans among the Ya-o-yorozu no kami, and in a ceremony presided over by you, the Great Priestess, they make a contract.”

“Well, aren’t you knowledgeable?” The Great Priestess tapped her chin with her folded fan and laughed. She was probably drunk. “Of course, they don’t necessarily have to be friendly to humans. Even an evil spirit will do, as long as it’s friendly to a single Miko.”

“Ah, I see.”

“And it doesn’t have to be a Japanese spirit either. The rules are more flexible than you might think…”

She smiled slyly.

“So, Undateikeo, have you finally taken an interest in becoming a Magical Girl? If you want, I could promise to make you the strongest Magical Girl on Earth.”

“I’ll have to decline. But I am curious, Great Priestess, how did you end up meeting a nine-tailed fox? Hasn’t it always been the spirit you served?”

“Ah, that happened in the Tutorial Dungeon—”

Casual conversation flowed between us. The quickest way for Awakeners to bond is to exchange Tutorial Dungeon stories. It’s similar to sharing military or college stories, perfect for forming a sense of camaraderie.

“There was a guy called Seo Gyu in my tutorial dungeon.”

And then came this story.

“I call him SG Man, and the Tutorial Fairy tried to kill him as an example.”

“Oh?”

“Apparently, the fairies share a guide among themselves. Their seniors passed it down to them, and it outlines how to discipline humans. The most effective method is to blow someone’s head off as a demonstration—that’s their go-to.”

The Great Priestess flicked her fox ears in thought. It didn’t feel like she was responding to me, more like she was reminiscing about the past, absentmindedly gazing elsewhere.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing. Your story just reminded me of an incident.”

“An incident?”

“Hmm. It’s not something worth telling others about, just a strange little event that stuck with me...”

The Great Priestess hesitated, her lips slightly parted. But since we were drinking casually, I urged her to continue, and after some thought, she folded her fan.

“It’s really nothing significant. Like you and the other Magical Girls, I too was thrown into a Tutorial Dungeon. Naturally, there was a fairy there as well. But…”

“But?”

“There was an explosion.”

An explosion?

I tilted my head. “Do you mean someone’s head exploded?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, that’s not so surprising. The fairies pull that kind of stunt in other tutorial dungeons too…”

“No, Undateikeo. The fairy didn’t do it. The person’s head definitely exploded, but the fairy wasn’t involved.”

?

“Then who caused the explosion?”

“No one.”

???

“It was practically self-destruction.”

“What?”

“One person who was summoned into the Tutorial Dungeon with me, without being touched and without the fairy’s involvement… Suddenly, their head exploded on its own.”

The Great Priestess’s story went like this:

Around a hundred people were forcibly summoned to the Tutorial Dungeon.

The people were confused.

“Wh-where are we?”

“I was just on the subway...”

“Hoek! Hello everyone! I’m Fairy No. 1675, and I’ll be in charge of you! Nice to meet—”

The summoning of the people. The appearance of the fairy.

To that point, it wasn’t much different from the Busan Station Dungeon I had experienced.

The anomaly occurred right after the summoning.

“Aaaaahhhhhhhh!”

There came a horrifying scream.

Everyone turned their heads in shock. There, a woman clutched her head and screamed as she writhed in agony.

“Aaaaaaaah! Aaaaahhhh! Aaaaahhhhh!”

They all froze in place.

How many people have ever heard such screams in that modern age? But anyone could tell that the unknown woman’s cries were far from ordinary.

The Great Priestess gave her testimony.

“It was no ordinary cry.”

Excruciating pain laced her voice, the kind brought forth by the tearing off of flesh. The agony of muscles and sinew scorched alive by flames. The torment of thousands of razor blades flaying skin down to the nerves, scraping deep to the bone.

It was a scream of pain no one had ever heard before and a scream that none were likely to ever hear again.

The people were paralyzed by the sound.

“The scream was so horrifying that the very sound of it sent shivers down your spine.”

The fairy, who was supposed to be in charge of the tutorial, was so shocked that it too momentarily forgot its role of guiding people and started to panic.

“Ho-hoek? What’s going on? Why is she suddenly screaming?”

“*Aaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh*!”

Even the fairy’s flustered response was drowned out by the woman’s cries.

The anomaly didn’t stop there. Between the woman’s fingers, as she desperately clutched her head, a faint glow began to emerge.

Transformation.

The woman’s originally black hair was turning white, starting from the ends and spreading rapidly.

“...That’s a typical sign of Awakening.”

“Ah, yes. We call it spirit possession. I didn’t realize it then, but now, looking back, that mysterious woman was Awakening her abilities.”

To Awaken the moment they were thrown into the Tutorial Dungeon—her Awakening had been an incredibly fast process compared to others’. Normally, this would have marked the birth of a top-tier Awakener.

But then...

“Aaaaahhhh! Nooo, Awndataka! Noooo! Nooo! Stop! Please! Nooo, Awndataka! Nooo, nooo, nooo, nooo!”

For some reason, the woman just kept screaming, repeating the words “no” and “Awndataka” in rapid succession.

“Awndataka? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. I thought she might have mangled the word in her pain. But she repeated it so desperately, I can’t forget.”

The Great Priestess described how the woman looked to be in true suffering.

“And it wasn’t just her screaming. She was clutching her head so hard that her nails dug into her scalp, and blood was running down her face.”

“……”

“Now, if it were after the apocalypse, it might have been less shocking. But back then, I had never seen anything like it.”

It went on for about 30 seconds.

While everyone was panicked and the fairy was completely bewildered, the woman’s transformation had fully progressed. Her hair, from the ends now up to the roots, had completely changed color, turning her entire scalp a bright, radiant white.

And the moment the transformation, the Awakening, was complete...

BOOOOM!

There was an explosion.

At first, no one could understand what had just happened. But soon, something soft fell from the air and lightly brushed the Great Priestess’s cheek.

“It was a piece of her flesh. I think it was her tongue.”

“……”

“Do you understand now, Undateikeo? Thirty seconds after being summoned to the Tutorial Dungeon, the woman screamed bloody murder, finished her Awakening, and then her head exploded.”

“That’s...”

It was indeed bizarre, just as the Great Priestess had said.

“You’re sure the fairy didn’t do it?”

“I’m certain. Even before I accepted Tamamo-no-Mae, I was good at reading people’s expressions. The fairy was utterly confused when the woman died.”

“.....”

“Well, maybe the fairy was just a fantastic actor, skilled enough to fool me. But I already killed that fairy, so we’ll never know for sure.”

Since it wasn’t a pleasant topic, our conversation soon shifted to other matters.

The Great Priestess, except for her peculiar taste in Magical Girls, turned out to be an enjoyable conversational partner, and we drank well into the night. However, even as the first light of dawn began to filter through the window, the story of the mysterious “Explosive Death” lingered in my heart, like a shadow of the moon.

Why was I so fixated on a simple drinking story?

My heart pounded with an inexplicable sense of unease. It wasn’t something that happened often to a regressor like me.

In the end, I couldn’t take it anymore and summoned Fairy No.264. I relayed the story I’d heard from the Great Priestess.

“Do you know anything about it?”

“If it’s *that* incident, it must’ve happened to Fairy No. 1679, not Fairy No. 1675.”

Being a dream demon, with its interconnected consciousness, Fairy No. 264's response came immediately.

"But Fairy No. 1679 died in the line of duty before completing the tutorial, so its data is incomplete!"

"Even a rough estimate will do. Can you reproduce the final words of that mysterious woman?"

"If I use the power of Infinite Void a little, I might be able to recreate some of it!"

"I'll allow it."

"Please wait just a moment! Chzzzt, bzzzt. Zzzt."

Fairy No. 264 closed its eyes and started making static noises with its mouth. Then, in the next moment...

"Aaaahhhhhhh!"

A distorted voice came out of 264's mouth. The usual cheery tone of the fairy was gone, replaced by something unfamiliar and eerie.

The voice belonged to what I had called "the mysterious woman."

"Aaaahhhh! Nooo!"

"....."

I quietly listened to the fairy, who was doing its best to reproduce the woman's dying words.

Honestly, I found it strange. Why was I so obsessed with this trivial story? Was it really worth using Infinite Void's resources and a dream demon's efforts to investigate something overheard in a casual drinking conversation?

But around ten seconds into the playback...

"...Wait."

I suddenly realized.

I realized what had been bothering me all this time.

“Hoek?”

“Replay that last part again.”

“Understood.”

Fairy No. 264 blinked its eyes rapidly. A moment later, the distorted voice echoed again from the fairy’s mouth.

“Nooo, Awndataka! Nooo, nooo, nooo! P-p-please stop! Nooo, Awndataka!”

“There, that last part, isolate it and play it again.”

“Awndataka!”

“……”

So it *was* that.

The playback ended, and the room fell into silence. I swallowed quietly as the realization hit me.

The Great Priestess lacked Complete Memory. She wasn’t proficient in foreign languages either. Whether in English or Korean, her conversational skills had always been limited due to her isolationist policy.

It was only natural, then, that she misheard.

The mysterious word the woman screamed during her final moments…

It wasn’t “Awndataka,” but “Undateikeo.”

When spoken quickly, the sound was unmistakable.

Undertaker.

That’s right.

For some reason, immediately after the Void descended, in a Tutorial Dungeon far away in Japan, a complete stranger—a fellow Awakener—exploded while screaming my name.

Footnotes:

Chapter 223

The Explosive One II

Sinnoa

‘There was a person in Japan who called out the Undertaker's name and then self-destructed!’

What in the world had happened?

On the surface, it made no sense. The mysterious woman (who I'll refer to as "Y" from now on) and I were separated by an insurmountable physical distance. I had been pulled into the Tutorial Dungeon in Busan, while the stage where Great Priestess and Y were located was in Kyoto. Even if we took it as a straight line, we were 600 kilometers apart.

How could a complete stranger, a Japanese person I didn’t even know, call out the name of Undertaker as they self-destructed?

“Couldn’t they have been an acquaintance of yours?”

Surprisingly, Noh Do-hwa, who regularly forced me to attend swimming lessons, showed interest in this curious mystery.

“An acquaintance, huh? Well, I managed to obtain degraded data through the Tutorial Fairies, but I have no memory of this person as they describe them.”

“Just because you don’t remember doesn’t mean they weren’t an acquaintance. Didn’t you say your memory from ages 1 to 20 was completely erased? You have terrible memory, right?”

“Oh.”

“There are quite a few Koreans who have relatives or acquaintances in Japan. It wouldn’t be strange if you had one or two as well...”

It was an opinion I hadn’t considered.

As Noh Do-hwa said, my childhood was like Schrödinger's box. Until I opened it, anyone could have been an acquaintance.

But soon enough, I was shaking my head. "...No, I don't think that's likely."

The words "Why not?" appeared in Do-hwa's eyes as she floated in the pool.

"All the people close to me, whether family or friends, have been placed under Time Seal. That would leave only those weak connections, mere acquaintances. It'd be strange for someone like that to scream my name in their final moments."

"Ah. Hmm. That's true..."

Thus, I discarded the theory that it was someone from my past.

Do-hwa seemed to lose interest and began to swim gracefully like a dolphin across the pool. Her elegant backstroke made her look so relaxed.

She had no idea that once her stamina improved just a little more, I planned to convert these swimming lessons into personal training (PT) sessions as part of my five-year project to turn Do-hwa into a proper person.

"...? Undertaker. Just now, were you thinking of something really irritating?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, shit. You totally were. Hey, hey. What kind of crap are you scheming this time...?"

"I'm telling you, you're mistaken."

I feigned ignorance.

Anyway.

Compared to the [*Noh Do-hwa Five-Year Human Transformation

Project~], which would require every dirty trick in the book to succeed, the answer to Y's mystery appeared sooner and much more easily than expected.

"Huh? A person whose head exploded as soon as the Void arrival began in Japan?"

The person holding the key to this answer was Oh Dok-seo.

Do-hwa and I had told her about our swimming lessons, to which she'd responded with excitement, "What? Swimming? Private lessons? Is there some hidden spicy drama going on between you and the National Road Management Corps commander?"

But upon arriving and seeing it was just swimming, she sulked, complaining, "Ugh, is it seriously just regular swimming lessons...?"

However, her ears perked up once she overheard our conversation.

"It's them, from the prologue. The fake protagonist."

"……?"

"……?"

Prologue? Fake protagonist?

Once again, the eternal 7th-grader Dok-seo spoke in her own strange language, causing question marks to appear over both my and Do-hwa's heads.

Dok-seo's expression twisted in frustration like the problem was that we were being dense. "It's from my *Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint*. The same thing happens in the prologue, just like what you're describing."

This was turning out to be quite the odd coincidence. Someone who had fallen into the same Tutorial Dungeon as the Great Priestess had also appeared in Oh Dok-seo's *ORV*?

"Does it explain why their head exploded so suddenly in that novel?"

“Of course.” Dok-seo’s tone was casual as she said, “That person was a real Prophet.”

Until now, I hadn’t asked Dok-seo much about the contents of her *ORV*.

The reason was simple.

Unlike the autobiography that Dok-seo had written and edited about my life, *ORV* was originally written by the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. In other words, it was a cursed, corrupted artifact created by the Outer God.

‘If I read *Omniscient Regressor’s Viewpoint* and gain insight into myself from the 1st to the 4th cycle, it would be like handing over the power to define Undertaker to the Outer God.’

That was exactly the kind of twisted scheme the Admin of the Infinite Metagame would come up with.

Of course, it was possible that the Admin had written the truth out of the goodness of their heart. But my suspicion of anything related to the Outer Gods was as high as the fear the German army felt during World War II about the supposedly invincible French army. You always had to prepare for the worst.

If you need a reference on what happens when you don’t account for the worst-case scenario, consider the Monkey’s Paw story.

Still, from what Dok-seo told me, the part about the mysterious woman Y seemed relatively safe from the curse.

“So, in *Omniscient Regressor’s Viewpoint*, you don’t show up as the main character right away.”

“Really? That’s surprising.”

“Yeah. In the prologue, there’s someone completely different from you, tricking the readers into thinking they’re the protagonist.”

A fake protagonist.

It wasn't a trope that appeared often, but when it did, it surprised readers.

One famous example of this was the Three Kingdoms Masterpiece, where the legendary *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* told the story of Jia Xu.

"I don't care about *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Anyway, as soon as the prologue starts, people get summoned into the Tutorial Dungeon, including the fake protagonist."

"Hmm."

"But while everyone else is panicking, the fake protagonist immediately Awakens to the power of 'Prophecy.' Or more precisely, Foresight."

Foresight. Seeing the future.

For Y, it meant that events to come unfolded before her eyes like a VR video.

Just like Oh Dok-seo, Y was a person well-versed in subcultures. Prophets weren't rare characters in novels, whether in Korea or Japan, so Y quickly realized how incredibly fortunate she was and became overjoyed.

- I can see it! I know exactly how to clear this dungeon and escape!

- Over there, that person will one day be called the Great Priestess and lead all the Magical Girls of Japan. - I have to befriend her!

- Ah, yes! When the Ya-o-yorozu no kami descend and the islands fall into ruin...

- It's terribly sad... but!

- With this ability, with the power to foresee the future this vividly, I can save countless people! Yes! I must!

- I can do anything.

“At this point, it felt like the prologue of an ordinary overpowered character story.”

But then, immediately after, the twist came.

- Huh?

Y, who had been foreseeing how she could save the survivors in the Tutorial Dungeon, the citizens of Japan, and even the world, suddenly stopped. It wasn’t over.

- What?

The vision didn’t end. More importantly, the perspective had changed.

At first, the vision had centered around Y. But now, it began to focus on someone else. A man with pitch-black eyes, dark like the depths of a well.

He died. Over and over again.

Sometimes he died as soon as he was summoned to the Tutorial Dungeon. Other times, he wandered the world for hundreds of years, all alone.

- Huh? Huh? Huh?

Everyone the man cherished met horrible fates, whether it was death or something worse.

Some were torn limb from limb in a witch hunt by a mob possessed by anomalies. Others committed endless suicides. Some lost their human forms and became anomalies themselves, eventually killing the man.

It happened countless times.

- Huh? Huh? Huh? Huh? Huh?

And Y, the Prophet, saw every single one of these deaths, vividly foreseen.

It wasn't just seeing, though. Y heard it, smelled it, tasted it, felt it, sensed it. She foresensed and forefelt it all, as it flooded her brain.

Thousands, tens of thousands of years of the man's deaths and suffering condensed into Y's mind in an instant.

- Aaaaaaaaaaahhhh!

Y screamed. No, she didn't even realize she was screaming.

The process of Awakening to her prophetic abilities was happening in real-time. The fact that her hair was turning white from the ends to the roots was proof of that.

- I... I don't want this.

She didn't want to Awaken.

- Please stop, please, stop! Aaaaaaaaaaaah!

The whiter her hair became, the stronger the visions grew. The pain and torment she felt from the man's experiences were becoming more and more real, as if she were living them herself.

She couldn't Awaken any further. She shouldn't have. No human, born into a human body, should experience something like this. Not this much.

- Ah.

That's when Y foresaw.

For the rest of her life as an Awakener, until the moment she died, she would have to watch the man's story over and over, endlessly repeating.

- Ah, haha. Hahaha.

Her power was a curse.

Life was nothing but suffering.

And so, at the exact moment her hair turned completely white,

completing her Awakening, Y foresaw how to use Aura, something she had never learned or mastered.

And she used it—on her own head.

Crack!

Y died instantly.

“That day, at that exact same moment, all six people around the world who had Awakened to the power of Prophecy killed themselves… or so it’s described in *Omniscient Regressor’s Viewpoint*. Pop, pop, pop-pop-pop. Six heads exploded.”

Each of them could have saved the world.

And somewhere, in the middle of nowhere, a man quietly opened his eyes.

The Undertaker.

Every time he opened his eyes, he would bury six Prometheuses.[1]

“That’s how the prologue ends.”

“……”

“Isn’t it amazing? The scenes of the suffering and pain you’ll go through later just fly by in a breathtaking panorama during the prologue,” Dok-seo said excitedly. “Just from the prologue, I knew this was a masterpiece! The fake protagonist might have turned off other readers, but I loved it!”

I see.

So, at the starting point of my regression, it wasn’t only the tens of thousands of people placed under Time Seal who were removed from the world. The six prophets, including Y, were also erased from history.

That is, assuming *ORV* was written truthfully by the Admin of the Infinite Metagame.

“Amazing...”

Do-hwa, who had been listening with her head out of the water, snickered.

“In the end, you managed to wipe out six incredibly powerful Awakeners, each of whom could have saved a nation, without even lifting a finger. As expected of Undertaker. Even your seedlings are different from the rest of us anomalies-in-the-making.”

“That’s slander.” I shrugged. “Those six were probably candidates the Admin was evaluating for who to make their Miko. The Admin had been targeting me from the start. They must have carefully selected the top six candidates, each with the potential to Awaken prophetic abilities capable of opposing a regressor.”

But as an anomaly, the Admin didn’t account for human limitations. The Awakeners, overwhelmed by visions that were too vivid, chose death over becoming involved with me.

“And so, the Admin simplified the prophecy and showed it to Oh Dok-seo in a form her brain could handle, filtering out the overwhelming realism. The result was *Omniscient Regressor’s Viewpoint*, written as a novel.”

“Oh! That actually makes sense, Mister!”

“Hmph...”

Of course, this theory had its flaws, but escaping Do-hwa’s slander was more important at the moment.

Anyway, the ones at fault were the anomalies.

From the perspective of the six prophets who were tragically sacrificed, wasn’t it a more honorable death to be caught in the Outer God’s scheme than to die after countless failed attempts to save the world like I had?

There is an epilogue.

As I said earlier, I didn't trust the Outer Gods. So, when I entered the next cycle, I made sure to visit the Tutorial Dungeon in Kyoto, where the Great Priestess had said Y had perished. Even if *ORV* contained some truths, there would be parts the Admin deliberately twisted for their benefit.

For example—

'No matter how much pain Y felt from her prophecy, there were at least 30 seconds between the time she started to self-destruct and the moment she actually exploded.'

Thirty seconds.

That may seem short, but it's still quite a bit of time.

For an Awakener who successfully foresaw my destiny as a regressor, those 30 seconds would have felt even longer.

'Wouldn't she have left some kind of trace?'

A dying message, if you will.

Prophets, especially someone like Y, who had the determination to try to save the world, must have left some kind of message for me. Something like "stay strong" or "I'm sorry." If she was more spiteful, maybe "die." At the very least, even a curse would have sufficed.

'This must be the place.'

Sneaking past the Great Priestess, who still lacked the power she would later gain through her contract with the Nine-Tailed Fox, I arrived at the site of Y's death.

The scene was surprisingly well-preserved.

"Oh."

Even the corpse was intact. Aside from the upper half of her body being pixelated [Mosaic] [Mosaic].

Of course, witnessing someone's head explode would leave anyone traumatized, which explained why no one had approached the area. Back when Seo Gyu died in the Busan Station concourse, everyone had been too terrified to stick around.

"Let's see..."

Sure enough, it didn't take long to find what appeared to be a message left by Y. It was written in her own blood, which had likely come from her clawing at her scalp, and it read:

S U

I tilted my head in confusion.

'SU? Is that some kind of code?'

It was impossible to decipher.

Perhaps Y had intended to write more letters, but in the end, unable to endure the pain, she had died before finishing her message.

'SU... SU... Hmm. Let's assume it's a short word or phrase. What words start with SU...'

I tried to think from her perspective.

She would have known she had little time left. She would have known that the agony would soon claim her life. So the message she left for me would have had to be brief but deeply meaningful.

In other words...

'A prophecy about my fate.'

Would I, as a regressor, ultimately save the world or fail to do so? That was the core issue.

Even though I still didn't have the answer, the Prophet who had glimpsed the future could have provided it.

With that in mind, I came up with three possible interpretations for

“SU.”

① SUCCESS: You will succeed. Keep going.

② SUICIDE: You will fail. You should kill yourself immediately.

③ SUKI: I love you! I’m your fan!

④ SUCK YOU: Seo Gyu is the culprit.

I eliminated the last option—it was too absurd.

The third possibility was also unlikely. There was no reason to write it in the alphabet, as I could understand Japanese.

That left options one and two. There was no clear evidence for either.

“Hmm.”

So, the choice between 1 and 2 was a matter of personal taste.

I bit my finger lightly.

Using the blood from my fingertip as ink and my finger as a brush, I added to Y’s word—the “prophecy,” or “final message,” she had left behind.

S U C C E S S

I gave Y’s headless corpse a proper burial, holding a small funeral for her. And then, with a lighter heart, I left.

Ultimately, how we choose to interpret a prophecy is up to us, isn’t it?

Footnotes:

1 - Prometheus is the Greek god of forethought, best known for gifting fire to humanity.

Chapter 224

The Concealer I

Sinnoa

By now, you all know there are some topics I deliberately avoid discussing in these stories. For example, the exact moment when the world was destroyed. I'm always singing about how it all went to hell, but surprisingly, there are very few times when a "world_destruction_1_second_before.avi" file gets recorded on my camera.

There are two legitimate reasons for this, as I am the embodiment of rationality.

The first reason is quite altruistic. I do it to protect the honor and reputation of my comrades.

For example, in a few cycles, Lee Ha-yul killed me.

Of course, it wasn't actually Ha-yul. It only looked like her on the outside. In reality, she had been completely corrupted by the Void Poison and had turned into a full-fledged anomaly. It wasn't as if Ha-yul had an intense Oedipus complex and specifically tried to kill me in some father-figure execution ritual.

- Guild leader, please just die.

- Undertaker. I'm sorry, but could you die with me?

- Please go to hell, teacher.

- ……

Sim Ah-ryeon, Dang Seo-rin, Cheon Yo-hwa, the Saintess, and many others. No matter the cycle, those who survived with me until the end, more often than not, turned dark and delivered the finishing blow to me.

(Do-hwa, by the way, didn't need to fulfill that condition to randomly try to kill me whenever she felt like it.)

Just to clarify, I don't hold any grudges. There's no way my comrades would have done this by their own will. None of this was their fault. It was all the fault of the vile anomalies that manipulated and controlled them against their will.

But how would the rest of you—my dear readers—feel about it?

"They— They blew up the protagonist's head! How evil!"

"I can feel the rage building. Let's kill them before they join the group."

"Get them out! Get them out now!"

I could easily foresee such witch hunts and baseless slander lighting up the forums, given my understanding of subcultures. There would probably be something like, "Only Go Yuri, who killed the protagonist just once, is the true comrade!" What a terrible scene. As a regressor with both common sense and decency, I simply couldn't allow it.

So, from the perspective of national interest, I decided to erase most of the cycles where my comrades killed me. I'm sure this decision will sadden fans of grimdark novels, but I ask for your understanding.

Now, what's the second reason?

"Hyung."

"Oh, Seo Gyu."

"It's me—SG Man. I'm the mastermind behind everything."

The second reason is, well...

Sometimes, it's just fucking hilarious.

No matter how dire the situation, even if the world was about to

end, whenever SG Man Seo Gyu suddenly pulled a straight face and delivered lines like that, it made me wonder, “Is the end of the world really such a heavy topic?”

This was what I call Mastermind Syndrome. Whenever someone other than me survived until the end, they’d start acting weird, convinced that they were the one who orchestrated the world’s end, becoming the “mastermind.”

It just so happened that in the 243rd cycle, that person was Seo Gyu. It was also the first time in my life as Undertaker that Seo Gyu (aside from me) was the last survivor.

For someone like SG Man, who was usually the first to get his head blown off, to survive until the end of the world—it was truly awe-inspiring.

“Seo Gyu.”

“Yes, hyung.”

“If I weren’t here, the Tutorial Fairy would have blown your head off, right? I mean, come on, you can’t seriously think you’re the mastermind?”

Seo Gyu clicked his tongue and waved his finger left and right. “You just don’t get it. As always.”

“……”

For that brief moment, I almost killed him right then and there. The fact that he could break my tranquil, regressor’s composure with such a simple provocation—his trolling skills were truly formidable.

“As with all stories, the true mastermind always appears in the prologue, hyung. And your prologue was at the Busan Station Concourse, wasn’t it? Now, who was the very first character to leave a strong impression on the readers there?”

“Well... that would be you, right?”

“Exactly. So, naturally, I’m the most qualified to be the mastermind.

I've been hiding the truth all this time."

"No..."

You were destined to die there, you lunatic.

I tried to convey my thoughts to him by deliberately manipulating my facial muscles, but it didn't work on Seo Gyu, who had been completely consumed by Mastermind Syndrome.

"I was treated as nothing more than an errand boy for the SG Net. That was just part of my disguise. I appeared first, but my true importance was hidden... Isn't that the very definition of a mastermind?"

"Or maybe you just weren't that important."

"Hoh." Seo Gyu gave me a deadly smile. "What if I made you think that?"

I decided to return that deadliness to its owner. I squeezed my Aura into my fist and punched him.

"Fufu, how savage, hyung."—*cough*—"But it's too late."—*cough, cough*—"No matter how much violence you use, nothing will change... Hic, ack, hoo..."

It didn't do much good.

Mastermind Syndrome instilled its victim with limitless confidence, made them say "fufu" every time they laughed, reduced their pupils to 1% of their usual size, and instilled in them the false belief that everything was going according to their plan.

But it didn't give them any power.

I lifted Seo Gyu into the air.

"Fufu. Even if you get rid of me now, I will return one day..."

Then I threw him off the cliff.

This wasn't just any cliff. In the 243rd cycle, the Flat Earth Theory had become a reality, and the Earth was literally flat. I had thrown him off the edge of the world.

Laughing creepily with his "fufufu" laugh, Seo Gyu fell into the Void.

At least he didn't die alone. Not long after, I died too.

In that cycle, the edge of the world kept closing in, and eventually, all of Korea fell off. I couldn't escape the Falling-to-My-Death ending.

Normally, Mastermind Syndrome was just a minor nuisance that annoyed me during the final stages of certain cycles. That is, until something changed.

The anomaly occurred in the very next cycle, the 244th.

The moment I opened my eyes in the Busan Station Concourse, I immediately felt that something was horribly wrong.

'What the hell?'

It didn't happen often. The only other time I'd felt something similar was after the 135th cycle, when the world was destroyed by the Admin of the Infinite Metagame, and I found a laptop resting on my thigh.

But this time, the feeling was different. It wasn't that something had been "added" to my regression. It was the opposite.

"You fucking garbage! What the hell are you talking about?!"

Seo Gyu was yelling at the Tutorial Fairy again, just like always, but... something was missing from his head.

His hair was gone.

It might sound strange to say his hair was missing from his head, but basically, his hair was all gone.

In other words, his scalp was completely bald.

“Pfft—!”

“Huh? What’s going on?”

“That’s disgusting…”

I couldn’t help but spit out the Ceylon Tea I had just bought from the vending machine, and the people around me recoiled in disgust. But I didn’t even have time to wipe my mouth. Not only had tea come out, but my soul had almost slipped out as well.

What the hell was that?

“You bastard! If you’re going to drag us here, you should start by apologizing. Where do you get off running your mouth like that…?”

“Excuse me. Just a moment. Uh, pardon me. Can I have a word with you, Mr. Seo Gyu?”

“Huh?”

I pushed through the crowd and approached Seo Gyu. He was mid-tirade, angrily shouting at the Fairy, but when I called his name, he hesitated.

Confusion flashed across Seo Gyu’s eyes as he looked at me. Of course, since in this cycle, we were complete strangers to each other, that made sense.

“…Who are you, and why are you butting in?”

“Don’t you remember me? I took personal training (PT) lessons with you a while ago.”

“Oh?”

“Down in Nam-gu. At that 4th-floor PT center. Don’t you remember?”

Seo Gyu looked flustered. He had actually worked as a PT trainer at

a center. The address I gave was also where he used to work.

Naturally, the anger melted from his eyes, replaced by fear—the fear of a PT trainer who couldn't recognize his own client.

"Oh, right. Yes. It's been a while. I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you at first."

"No worries. You taught me so well back then that I actually became really interested in PT. I used to be a twig, but thanks to you, I became a new person."

Seo Gyu's eyes quickly scanned my upper and lower body, calling upon the natural ability of a PT trainer to assess someone's physique. Of course, the muscles I had developed through the [Resume] ability across various cycles were incredibly refined and optimized for combat.

Seo Gyu's face darkened. Was it possible that he had truly forgotten such an excellent trainee?

"Ah, well... thank you..."

"Instead of fighting with that strange fairy, why don't we go have a little chat?"

"Huh? Strange? What do you mean strange? These humans, accusing me out of nowhere... The unfairness of it all is truly terrifying..."

For the record, this was the fastest and most effective way to prevent SG Man Seo Gyu from having his head blown off and stop Fairy No.264 from getting him killed. Despite being reckless, Seo Gyu had a surprisingly strong sense of responsibility for the roles he took on.

Anyway, I pulled Seo Gyu aside, and using the most roundabout, polite, and non-offensive language possible, I asked him:

Q: When did you go bald?

A: Huh? I've always been bald.

What the hell?

Before his expression could shift to one of suspicion—wondering if I really had been his PT client—I quickly moved on.

Finally, I had a moment to look at the other people in the concourse, the ones who were, in MZ-generation terms, bound together by this shared fate.

And soon enough, I realized that it wasn't just Seo Gyu who had been altered.

"I don't want to join Lee Baek's group!"

"Whaaaat?"

"No matter how much you glare at me, threatening won't change my mind. I said no, and I mean it!"

Ah-ryeon no longer stuttered. If I hadn't intervened, she would have been dragged off by Lee Baek, but in this 244th cycle, she clearly voiced her own convictions.

Could this be the work of an anomaly?

"Hmm, interesting..."

And Go Yuri no longer had a shadow.

No one else had noticed yet, but I could see it clearly. Her clothes cast a shadow, but her hair, limbs, and the rest of her body did not.

Definitely the work of an anomaly.

'What the hell is going on? This is way too early in the cycle for the Butterfly Effect to have kicked in.'

I was completely bewildered. Had the timeline somehow changed in this 244th cycle?

But the Busan Station Concourse was just the tutorial. The real shock came after I left the station.

“Hello. My name is Dang Seo-rin.”

“……”

“I’m gathering people to try and survive in this messed-up world. Undertaker, would you like to join me?”

Seo-rin extended her hand, inviting me to join her in co-founding something together—but there was no witch’s hat.

There was no broomstick either.

With a trembling voice, I asked her, “Excuse me, this may sound odd, but… didn’t you use to like Harry Potter and trains?”

“Huh? What are you talking about? I like Pokémon and cars.”

“……”

ANOMALY ALERT!

Footnotes:

Chapter 225

The Concealer II

Sinnoa

Seo Gyu hiding his hair and Dang Seo-rin hiding her nerdy interests left me reeling from mental exhaustion.

Especially the latter—Dang Seo-rin giving up her witch cosplay and train obsession? How could that possibly be Dang Seo-rin?

The Great Witch of the Samcheon World was someone who led with both witchcraft and steam locomotives. She held symbols of the medieval and modern eras in either hand, and by doing so, she became a transcendent figure that embodied human history.

In other words, Dang Seo-rin of the 244th cycle had lost her very soul and become a soulless being. We decided to call that a Yu Ji-won.

“Is there no one normal this cycle? Seriously, not a single one?”

Of course, when I say “normal,” I mean it by my standards: a person who was the same as in other cycles.

Leaving behind my comrades who had lost pieces of themselves, I desperately searched for someone normal.

“Your Excellency, why are you so anxious?”

“Ji-won, you were always hiding your morality and humanity, so stay out of this.”

“I don’t know what you mean, but I’ll take your word for it. I’ll consult you about my concerns later.”

Once again leaving behind Ji-won, the ever-constant psychopath, I continued my search, but the results were disappointing.

“Commander Noh Do-hwa, why are you being kind to both old and young patients alike? Where did your MZ-generation disdain go? Why aren’t you discriminating based on age?”

“Huh…? What kind of bastard would discriminate against patients based on age?”

“Right, you’re not Noh Do-hwa.”

“Wanna die?”

Do-hwa—OUT.

“Saintess, why haven’t you set up any aquariums in your home? Don’t you plan on keeping fish?”

“Fish…? I’ve heard that aquariums are too hard to maintain, so I’m not really interested. Lizards are cuter, you know.”

“Ah, so you’re fake too…”

“Sorry, what?”

Saintess—OUT.

“Yo-hwa, why do you keep calling me ‘sunbae’ instead of ‘teacher’ after I handed you your diploma?”

“Huh? Haha. Well, you don’t look that much older than me, sunbae! At least not on the outside. It’d be weird to start calling you ‘teacher’ now, wouldn’t it?”

“…I see. Then why don’t you wear your white sailor uniform after graduating?”

“Come on, sunbae. Who wears a sailor uniform after graduation? That’d be crazy, not to mention super tacky.”

“Infinite Void! You brat, you dare defy me!”

“Eh?”

Cheon Yo-hwa—OUT.

“Manyo Neko! Why aren’t you ending every sentence with ‘nya’ or ‘meow’? Are those cat ears just for show?!”

“Are you picking a fight, Undertaker?”

Even the Magical Girls from the Islands were all OUT.

It was a small detail, but even the coffee left behind by Old Man Scho in this cycle was hazelnut Americano instead of café au lait.

A German! (German!) Barista with incredible pride! (An old man!) Drinking Americano! (Americano!)

The shock echoed like an a cappella choir in my head.

I despaired. Something had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

I retreated to the Inunaki Tunnel, muttering in anguish.

“...Something’s off. This isn’t right. How could there be such big differences right after regressing? This is before the Butterfly Effect even has a chance to kick in. Could I have fallen into a dream without realizing it? Oh, the horror... Am I just a brain in a jar, with my consciousness trapped in a dream...”

“Your Excellency, are you alright?”

“Ji-won, stay out of it. I may be cornered, but I haven’t fallen so low that I’d seek empathy from you.”

“I still don’t understand, but if Your Excellency says so, I will remain silent.”

How was I supposed to fix this unprecedented disaster?

Looking back now, I was still relatively inexperienced in the 244th cycle. I had yet to defeat the Goddess of Night, Nut, and I hadn’t even taken down the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. At that point, I hadn’t fully realized that if something was powerful enough to interfere with my regression, it had to be an Outer God-level anomaly.

(The Saintess sealing herself to place an impenetrable barrier around my regression was something that would happen much later.)

“Alright... Yes. I’ll help them recover what they’ve lost. If I can restore what’s been hidden, it should counter the anomaly's tricks.”

“Even if Your Excellency mutters incomprehensible things to yourself, it won’t diminish my admiration for you in the slightest. Feel free to command me.”

“Go get a wig, Ji-won.”

I got the wig and placed it on Seo Gyu’s bald head. I styled it carefully, making sure it matched his usual hair from previous cycles to 99.99% accuracy.

“How does it feel, Seo Gyu? Do you feel like you’ve regained something you lost, like you’re finally returning to your true self?”

“.....”

“Come on, remember your true identity! You can do it, Seo Gyu!”

“...Hyung, I’m really sorry, but... are you asking to get hit?”

It failed.

In other stories, when a regressor caused this kind of commotion, their comrades would murmur things like, “Huh? Why do I have memories of something I’ve never experienced...?” and recover their memories of past cycles.

But not in my particular brand of regression. In fact, Seo Gyu was one of the better ones.

When I ran up to Noh Do-hwa and said, “Commander! You should start cursing out young people right away! Yell at them! Start throwing all kinds of insults like you used to!” I ended up getting beaten like a dog and thrown out.

With Dang Seo-rin, I personally brought her a witch’s hat, witch’s

robe, and broomstick, saying, “Dang Seo-rin! Isn’t this stirring your passion for fashion again?” and her response was, “Hmm, are you asking me to strip you in a very sophisticated way?” She almost ate me alive.

As for Cheon Yo-hwa, I couldn’t bring myself to wear a school uniform and visit her. As the Undertaker, I hadn’t completely abandoned my humanity. Besides, while her titles and fashion had changed, Cheon Yo-hwa was still as unpredictable as ever.

I failed. I failed. I failed. I failed.

My regressor mentality, once steeled against the suffering of time, was cracking with a resounding creak. To my surprise, I discovered that I was more shocked by my comrades' changing hobbies than by the world getting destroyed by anomalies.

“Well, even if Your Excellency is right, there’s no way for us to confirm it. As you’ve mentioned, we’re only aware of the 244th cycle.”

“...Yeah.”

Ironically, I could only have these kinds of discussions comfortably with Ji-won for the simple reason that she didn’t care about my mental state at all, so we could talk without any regard to sensitivity or tact.

“Have you considered the possibility that your mind is the one that’s changed?”

“...So you’re saying Seo Gyu was bald in every cycle, but my memory was warped to see him as having a full head of hair?”

“Yes. That’s much more reasonable,” Ji-won said while carving a chess piece with a sharp knife. “It’s practically Occam’s razor.[1] If you assume everyone but you has changed, then the anomaly responsible for this would need to be incredibly powerful, capable of reaching across cycles to tamper with things.”

“Hmm.”

“On the other hand, if only your mind has been tampered with, it’s a much simpler explanation. The anomaly would only need powers related to mind control or perception distortion. It wouldn’t even need to cross cycles.”

“……”

Right.

As much as I didn’t want to admit it, Ji-won’s analysis was correct. Chances were high that I was currently under some form of mental manipulation, that at some point, my Complete Memory had been hacked, causing my perception to become distorted. Everything wrapped up in one, neat explanation.

Not to mention, everyone else had some trait of theirs hidden away, so why was I the only one left untouched? This would answer that question as well.

It was just that I was the one who had become strange.

“Of course, Your Excellency is flawless and never makes mistakes. But sometimes, it’s worth flipping the board and considering the opposite.”

“……”

Actually, I wasn’t the only one who remained unchanged.

Ji-won. The silver-haired psychopath in front of me was as consistent as she always was. Her speech, hobbies, fashion sense, and way of thinking—not a single part of Ji-won’s personality had been hidden. She was the same ace of the Samcheon World and operations commander of the National Road Management Corps that I remembered.

She was the exact same, if not for the fact that her ability had been altered ever so slightly.

That’s why I was suspicious. What if the mysterious anomaly, which I had labeled “X hides Y,” had actually attached itself to Ji-won?

“Waiting until the next cycle might not be a bad strategy.” Ji-won placed the newly finished chess piece on the map.

“Wait until the next cycle? Why?”

“If this anomaly really has the power to hide something from people, then by the next cycle, more things will be hidden.”

“……”

“I imagine it will start small, hiding things like hair or fashion. That way, it can stay under your radar for as long as possible.”

“My mental state is already on the verge of collapse.”

“That part, the anomaly probably didn’t predict. I think from the next cycle onward, it will start hiding people’s abilities, personalities, or even their core behaviors.”

“…Then it really will be dangerous.”

“Yes. It’s an effective strategy, lulling the target into complacency before striking.”

Then something strange happened with the map.

Ssssk—

The chess piece Ji-won had placed on the map moved toward another chess piece, as if drawn by a magnet.

The one Ji-won had just carved moved to the upper part of the map, while another, invisible piece pulled toward the lower part.

It formed an image, taking a shape similar to a Taegeuk symbol.

The paper map, pinched by the chess pieces, began to float in mid-air.

It was an unusual sight, but this was part of the subtle changes in Ji-won's ability in the 244th cycle. Aside from the map floating a little, the Mini Map ability still worked fine. Ji-won's chess pieces continued to track people's locations perfectly.

Just a minor error.

"This is still strange..." I muttered to myself. Dang Seo-rin and the others seemed like they had a trait "missing," but Ji-won felt more like something was "off."

The difference kept nagging at me. Why was Ji-won so different from everyone else?

"Perhaps what Your Excellency calls my psychopathic tendencies are what's been hidden. In this cycle, I've regained the ability to deeply empathize with others."

“Why don’t you try showing some emotions in your eyes while you say that?”

“My eyes are already full of respect for you, Your Excellency. There’s no room for any other emotion. I ask for your understanding.”

“There’s nothing to understand. You’ve had that same dead-eyed look ever since we met in the 5th cycle—”

I stopped mid-sentence.

“Wait a second.”

I didn’t mean to do it. My instincts—my sixth sense—forced me to stop.

My vision was still filled with the image of the chess pieces pinching the map, forming a Taegeuk shape.

“Space? Space…?”

If Ji-won’s ability wasn’t malfunctioning…

If the chess pieces were showing the precise locations of people on the map…

Then what did it mean?

I shot to my feet. “Ji-won.”

“Yes?”

“Grab the map and the trunk and follow me. I want to test something.”

Ji-won glanced at her analog wristwatch. 11 p.m. Back when human civilization still thrived, some people might have thought of it as morning, but now it was a time considered far too late for going outside.

“Understood.”

Without asking any questions, Ji-won followed me out of the Inunaki Tunnel.

I led us to a clearing far from the coast and grabbed a shovel instead of a sword. “We’re going to dig down.”

“Dig… down, Your Excellency?”

“Yes. It sounds ridiculous, but I have a hunch. We’re going to dig through the ground until we reach the bottom. You watch the map and track our progress.”

“Understood, Your Excellency.”

And so, I carried out my plan.

Thwack!

The shovel sank into the ground like pudding. It was an impressive feat, thanks to my liberal use of Aura.

Down. Further down. Even deeper—

This was no ordinary digging operation. As the ground grew harder, any other Awakener would have ruined their shovel by now.

‘This is way too solid.’

Despite using Aura, the ground was unusually dense, and progress slowed.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

Still, I continued digging without hesitation. At this moment, I wasn’t a regressor—I was nothing more than a human drill.

After digging for so long I lost track of time, I had gone so deep that I wouldn’t have been surprised to hit upon magma. Sweat had begun to pour down my forehead.

“Your Excellency, please hydrate yourself.”

“Ah, thanks.”

Ji-won pulled out a bottle of water from the trunk and brought it to my lips.

For the record, while I was digging, Ji-won stood by, illuminating the area with Aura. If it weren't for her lack of humanity, she would've been the perfect assistant.

Spent on words, I continued silently breaking through the earth until finally—

"Phew, phew... Huh?"

Fsss!

There was a strange sound as the shovel pierced through something. It seemed I had finally broken through to a hollow space after digging through what felt like an endless layer of rock.

"Is this another layer of bedrock?"

"I'm not sure, Your Excellency."

"Could be a cave. Let's widen the hole and take a look."

As I expanded the hole, a faint light began to seep through.

The larger the hole grew, the stronger the light became, and by the time it was big enough for a person to pass through, we no longer needed Ji-won's illumination.

Then, like sticking your head out of a Mario pipe, I poked my head through the hole and looked outside.

"....."

"....."

I fell silent.

Ji-won poked her head through the hole beside me, then froze as well in a rare display of "shock" and "astonishment."

We were both silent for a long time. The sheer visual impact of

what we saw left us speechless.

“Ji-won. Is that...?”

“...Yes.”

Deep beneath the ground.

No, beyond the hole.

“By any measure... that’s the sun.”

There was a sun.

A massive underground space stretched out before us, on a scale beyond comprehension. It wasn’t just as large as Korea. No, the space defied imagination.

In the middle of this vast, empty space, there was a small sun illuminating the underground world.

In other words—

“No way...”

‘The Earth is hiding a sun.’

“This is insane... That’s not something you hide.”

It was the Hollow Earth Theory.

This was the anomaly that had descended in this cycle.

Footnotes:

1 - Occam’s razor is a philosophical principle that essentially boils down to the simplest explanation is usually the most accurate.

2 - The Taeguek symbol is the symbol found on the South Korean

flag, similar to a yin-yang symbol.

Chapter 226

The Concealer III

Sinnoa

The Hollow Earth Theory claims the inside of the Earth is hollow in the form of a massive cavern. It follows the lines of similar conspiracy theories like "Nazis on the Moon" or the "Underwater City of Atlantis."

In short, conspiracies with zero academic value. Nothing more than gossip.

Unfortunately, after the Void Descent, physicists turned into conspiracy theorists. There really was a secret Nazi base on the dark side of the moon, and Atlantis still existed in the Atlantic Ocean. In the same vein, the Earth's interior was, of course, hollow. It was embarrassing as an intellectual to have been unaware of such a simple geological truth.

"Your Excellency."

"Hmm."

"There's a village down here, in the underground."

"...Hmm."

"There are people living here too. Should we call them 'subterraneans'? They look like *Homo sapiens* at first glance."

The so-called *Homo sapiens* that Ji-won mentioned, however, looked quite different from modern humans.

- Euw? Aaa, euw!

- Euwooahh! Ooooho!

The subterraneans spotted the two of us peering in from the ground,

and they swarmed us with crude, wooden spears drawn. They stomped their feet and stretched their necks as they let out a barbaric chorus of “ohohoho.”

What could I say? Their civilization was clearly stuck at the primitive tribal stage. They didn’t even bother covering the lower half of their bodies.

- Euwooo! Wahoooo!

One of the subterraneans, who appeared to be their leader, pointed his spear at us, shouting in a language I couldn’t understand. Even with my multilingual abilities, I couldn’t fully translate what he was saying, but judging by the tone, it seemed to be something like, “Get out of there, you monsters!”

But unfortunately, they had chosen the wrong person to threaten.

“Excuse me for a moment, Your Excellency.”

Thwack!

Before I could stop her, Ji-won darted out, drew her dagger, and plunged it straight into the leader’s throat.

- Ugh... Uho...!

- Oooooh! Ugh! Ughhh!

A few brave subterraneans attempted to fight back, but it was pointless. Ji-won drew another dagger and threw it, and the blade landed squarely between their eyes. In a matter of seconds, four of them had been killed. The rest, terrified, ran for their lives, fleeing from the psycho invader from the surface.

The entire ordeal lasted no more than 30 seconds—a clean, efficient operation befitting the National Road Management Corps’ operation commander.

“Hmph.” Ji-won brushed the dust off her uniform. “They were nothing but rabble. Not even worth Your Excellency’s effort.”

"...Ji-won, I've told you countless times—stop revealing your psycho tendencies so casually."

"They were the ones who threatened us first. Now, let me check the body."

Shing!

Once again, before I could stop her, Ji-won sliced open the leader's skull. The sight was gruesome enough to warrant an R-rating on any platform, but fortunately, we didn't have to worry about censors.

Inside the subterranean's body, there wasn't a drop of blood or even organs.

"They're empty inside."

"An anomaly, then?"

"Yes, it's confirmed. Just as this land is hollow, they're hollow inside as well."

It wasn't restricted to the head either. The torso, too, was completely empty. It would have been stranger if these weren't anomalies.

"But Your Excellency. If you look closely, doesn't this primitive look a lot like you?"

"What?"

"I'm not joking, Your Excellency. Look carefully."

"....."

It was true.

The leader Ji-won had killed first, the one who seemed to be their chief, had a face eerily similar to mine. The difference in the level of civilization between us was the only reason I hadn't noticed it earlier.

“...Wait. The one lying over there looks a lot like you, Ji-won.”

“Oh.” Ji-won blinked, looking down at the corpse. “You’re right. I’ve always wondered what it would feel like to kill myself, but I didn’t expect my curiosity to be satisfied this way.”

“Not something to brag about.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

The rest of the subterraneans Ji-won had killed also looked strangely familiar. That’s when it hit me.

“Take out the map.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

I had Ji-won place the chess piece marked “Undertaker” onto the map, and sure enough—

The chess piece stood upright on the map without issue. The strange phenomenon of another chess piece being drawn to it from the opposite side was gone.

“...As I thought.”

“What’s going on, Your Excellency?”

“It seems these subterraneans were copies of us. Your Mini Map ability was treating me and these copies as the same person.”

“Ah, I see. So, it displayed both the ‘surface person’ and the ‘underground person’ together on the map.” Ji-won’s blue eyes scanned the corpses. Her gaze was unsettling. To the untrained eye, it might seem like her usual expressionless face, but I could tell. Ji-won had a slight twitch in her left eyebrow whenever she was plotting something nefarious.

“Hey. What are you thinking?”

“Oh, nothing. Just that... if your theory is correct, there must be an anomaly counterpart for every surface human down here.”

“Most likely.”

“Which means there are primitive versions of Dang Seo-rin, the Great Witch of the Samcheon World, and Cheon Yo-hwa, the president of Baekhwa High’s student council.”

“...So what?”

“I cannot stand for these anomalies to impersonate Your Excellency’s dear comrades. Please allow me to exterminate them.”

This lunatic.

“Wait. You’re not excited about the idea of killing copies of Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa without any risk, are you?”

“Of course not, Your Excellency. It’s purely out of loyalty to you.”

“You psycho!”

But Ji-won wasn’t going to miss her chance. She launched into a massacre of the subterraneans.

- Uuuugh! Euwhooook?

- Ooooooooh! Hoh! Euwhoooo!

Like she had been bottling up her bloodlust all this time, she rampaged through the underground, hunting down the likes of “Subterranean Dang Seo-rin” and “Subterranean Cheon Yo-hwa.” The underground civilization, which had only just begun to form, was almost entirely wiped out that day. And when Ji-won finally skinned the hide off “Subterranean Dang Seo-rin,” a surprise item appeared.

“...A witch’s hat?”

“It’s a pointed hat. And there’s a model of a train further inside.”

“Why is this stuff inside their bodies?”

Indeed, hidden inside the body of the Dang Seo-rin mimic were a witch’s hat and a toy train. No normal human would have such things inside their body.

“Ah. There’s a school uniform inside the body of Subterranean Cheon Yo-hwa. It’s the Baekhwa High uniform.”

“...I have no idea how this works.”

I didn’t understand how the subterraneans had gotten hold of these items, but everything people had lost—their personalities, hobbies—was all hidden here.

“There’s a pile of hair in Seo Gyu’s body.”

“.....”

“In Sim Ah-ryeon’s body... Oh, it’s a sketchbook with a short tongue drawn inside. If we burn or destroy these, the surface people should return to normal.”

In some cases, rather than symbolic items, there were simple objects like a notebook hidden inside the bodies. For example, in Subterranean Noh Do-hwa’s body was a piece of paper with “Hatred for Humans” written on it. Even after losing her Hatred for Humans, Noh Do-hwa had continued to glare at me with utter disdain. At this point, her consistency was more frightening than anything.

After going through several stomachs, Ji-won seemed satisfied. She cleaned her dagger and returned to my side.

“Your Excellency, I’ve been thinking... wouldn’t this anomaly be useful to us?”

“Useful? How?”

“This place is the opposite of the Earth. Without your powerful Aura, no Awakener would have been able to find it.”

In short, Ji-won continued, “This is the perfect place for the perfect crime.”

A sense of foreboding crept over me.

“You don’t need to look so concerned,” Ji-won reassured. “All I’m suggesting is that we could use this anomaly to correct the many flaws in human nature.”

“Flaws in human nature, you say...?”

“For example, if we put a notebook inside Sim Ah-ryeon’s copy that says ‘Narcissism,’ then wouldn’t we be able to easily solve one of the issues that’s been tormenting her?”

“Hmm.”

“Your Excellency could use this place as a sort of editor. You could correct and modify the personality flaws of your comrades, making them more functional, perfect versions of themselves.”

“...No. That’s the fastest way to become an anomaly. A being that manipulates the personalities of those around them at will? You’re trying to make me into a dictator!”

“I still think it’s highly practical.”

“No. Absolutely not.” I waved her off with a firm hand. Ji-won’s suggestion was eerily similar to something Dang Seo-rin had attempted in a previous round. The result had been the birth of a Corrupted.

“Hmm. Is that so…?”

Though she looked disappointed (a face only I could read), Ji-won scanned the area around us. The only scenery left to observe was the aftermath of the massacre she had unleashed upon the subterraneans.

“If that is your wish, Your Excellency, I’ll be content with simply exterminating these anomalies,” she concluded.

“Right. We should be thankful we caught them before they stole anything crucial, like our hearts or minds.”

“Understood.” Ji-won obediently packed up and we returned to the surface through the hole we had dug.

She gave up on her suggestion so quickly that, for a moment, I almost let my guard down and followed her back to the surface without thinking twice.

But then something felt off.

Trusting my instincts, I walked over to the corpse of the “Subterranean Undertaker” and pried open its mouth. And there, tucked inside, was a note written in Ji-won’s handwriting.

Suspicions about Ji-won

Doubts about Ji-won’s loyalty

Complete mistrust of Ji-won’s character, personality, and words

“……”

“…Ah.”

As I held the note, my eyes locked onto Ji-won, who had half-crawled into the hole.

Our gazes met.

And then, like a mole, she scurried deeper into the hole,

disappearing from sight. The only sound that followed was the faint *tap-tap-tap* of her running at full speed.

If I were to describe that scene in a single phrase, it would be:

『Ji-won hid her conscience.』

I couldn't help but shout after her.

"Ji-won! Stop right there, you little brat!"

There is a short epilogue.

"Hyunnnng! Thank you so muuuuuch!"

"Uh, yeah."

With his hair restored, Seo Gyu clung to my waist, sobbing.

Not only had his hair grown back, but his sense of identity—his once-proud self—had returned as well.

It wasn't just Seo Gyu. Others also benefited from the "normalization." Dang Seo-rin had reverted back to her rail enthusiast ways and even held a public burning ceremony of scrapped trains in the station square.

"Well, I, uh... I think I would've been fine if you just left me alone..."

Only Ah-ryeon, who had been enjoying her newfound extroverted life, felt a bit regretful. Most people, however, treated the whole incident as an embarrassing part of their past.

Just when I thought the strange story about our underground counterparts had come to an end and we had all returned to normalcy—

A sudden question crossed my mind.

'Wait. If the underground world was stealing things from the

surface, then... what about the sun?'

There had been a sun in the subterranean world, yet the sun in the sky above us was still shining brightly.

In other words, there were now two suns coexisting on Earth—one that had been stolen and another that was still in place.

One sun that had lost something.

Another sun that had stolen something.

"....."

As I sipped my café au lait, I gazed up at the clear sky, focusing on the bright sun.

What had been stolen from our sun by the anomaly?

Footnotes:

Chapter 227

The Winter Soldier I

Sinnoa

What's your favorite season?

Summer? Fall? Spring? Winter?

For the record, I myself am not particularly fond of any season.

Once upon a time, people in Korea used to take pride in the country's distinct four seasons, but that was long ago. After the collapse of civilization, the four seasons truly became well-defined again.

But, as with everything, there were pros and cons. Just because the seasons had become more distinct didn't mean we could rejoice.

First, let's talk about spring.

"Your Excellency, we've observed a large, yellow cloud approaching from the west and the north."

"A yellow dust storm? Send a cooperation request to Samcheon World to monitor the movement of the cloud immediately. Order all citizens to wear masks."

"Is it really that serious? As far as I know, breathing in a little fine dust won't kill you."

"It's not just ordinary yellow dust. Each fine dust particle has been transformed into a deadly toxin by the anomaly. Without a mask, you'll be dead in three minutes."

"Ah."

Then there's summer.

“Undertaker! A typhoon is heading straight for us!”

“Calm down. Let’s start building an ark.”

Next is fall.

“G-Guild leader, why does it smell like blood, instead of leaves, when the autumn foliage falls?”

“Just ignore it.”

“But lately, when I walk down the street and the leaves brush past me, I keep hearing faint whispers, like ‘Save me…’ And the ginkgo trees, when their fruits drop, there’s this awful stench, like human innards—”

“I said ignore it.”

“…Yes, sir.”

Ah! The wonderful Korean Peninsula!

Not that this hellish landscape was limited to Korea alone. The more appropriate thing for us to say would be, "The wonderful planet Earth!"

But no matter how harsh spring, summer, or fall became with these extreme weather phenomena, they could never claim the title of the ultimate boss. That honor belonged to winter.

The cruel, white tyrant.

From the dawn of civilization to its end, humanity’s greatest enemy had always been winter.

One day, Cheon Yo-hwa and I were walking down the hallway of Baekhwa High when a student stepped in front of us.

“Huh? What’s going on? I told you not to interrupt when I’m with Teacher… Oh, wait. It’s So-yeon.” Yo-hwa’s eyes momentarily turned cold, but upon recognizing the student, her expression

softened. “What’s the matter?”

“……”

The short-haired student, Joo So-yeon, bowed her head slightly in greeting. She was one of the original members of Baekhwa High. Had I not intervened to defeat Infinite Void, she would have been one of the many who died.

Remember, out of the 750 students at Baekhwa High, only 19 survived, and 2 of them eventually died by suicide. The student standing before us, Joo So-yeon, was one of the ones who took her own life.

Of course, in the rounds where Infinite Void was defeated, that tragedy was averted.

Now, So-yeon was just a quiet, shy underclassman suffering from mutism. Her special status lay in the fact that she was one of the few who could speak candidly to the student council president.

“……”

“Take your time. It’s okay, you can speak slowly.”

“……”

Unlike Lee Ha-yul, who also struggled with speech but excelled in controlling Aura, So-yeon lacked such abilities. She didn’t have any overpowered skills, like controlling threads to make puppets speak on her behalf. Thus, she resorted to using a different method.

Slowly, painstakingly, So-yeon scratched letters into Yo-hwa’s palm with her nails, one by one.

The letters read:

W I N T E R

As soon as Yo-hwa saw the word, her face stiffened. I glanced at her palm from the side and found my expression matching hers.

Yo-hwa asked, her tone serious, “Winter? Are you sure? But it’s only June.”

Joo So-yeon nodded.

“That can’t be right. Wait... So-yeon, could you show us?”

So-yeon nodded again, then clasped her hands together in a prayer-like gesture. Yo-hwa and I stood on either side of her, forming a protective barrier.

A few seconds passed.

Crack! Crackle!

Suddenly, the sound of ice breaking echoed through the halls of Baekhwa High. Frost began forming around us, spreading out in a three-meter radius, with So-yeon at the center.

“Yo-hwa.”

“Yes, teacher.”

We both released Aura to protect ourselves from the cold. The temperature was dropping rapidly, to the point that it would be unbearable for So-yeon alone.

But the temperature wasn’t the only concern.

Crack! Crackle!

The windows lining the hall instantly froze over before shattering into pieces. Snow piled up rapidly in the three-meter radius around us.

Yo-hwa, So-yeon, and I stood in a small, safe zone. However, everywhere else—to our legs, then waist, then shoulders—snow rose higher and higher. Eventually, the snow towered over even our heads.

It was freezing.

“……”

“……”

Huff.

When Yo-hwa exhaled, her breath looked like dry ice in the frigid air.

Out of curiosity, I briefly released the Aura protecting my forearm. The surrounding cold bit into my skin with ferocity. It was easily -120˚C.

“So-yeon. Are we done?”

She shook her head. We weren’t finished yet.

“Alright, then. Can you stop?”

With a small nod, So-yeon released her ability.

The bitter cold vanished. The broken window fragments crumbled to dust, and the snow that had piled up around us began to melt away.

Baekhwa High’s Awakener, Joo So-yeon.

Her ability was called Weather Forecast. She could predict and summon the season and weather that would occur up to one month in advance.

Her accuracy? Just 50%.

As you can imagine, it wasn’t the most useful ability in everyday situations. Telling someone, “It will either rain tomorrow or it won’t,” would only get you a response like, “And how exactly does that help?”

But in emergencies, her ability was invaluable.

“...Teacher.”

“Yes. It looks like we need to prepare.”

Winter was coming.

In a month's time, there was a 50% chance that a -120˚C winter would descend upon the Korean Peninsula.

As expected, the National Road Management Corps was thrown into chaos.

"A temperature of -120˚C? In the middle of summer? Can we even survive a winter like that...?"

"Of course not. That's why they call it 'killer weather,' Commander Noh Do-hwa. You've seen 100-meter-high tsunamis in summer, didn't you? Was that normal?"

"Goddamn. Living on Earth really sucks..." Do-hwa grumbled and swore, but had the Russians heard her, they'd have scoffed. The average yearly temperature there hovered around -100˚C.

Still, expecting Do-hwa to sympathize with the Russians when she had no empathy for her fellow Koreans was a bit of a stretch. She was probably already planning to sacrifice half the city's population.

"So, anyone got any brilliant ideas? This city's mostly shantytowns. If a -120˚C blizzard hits, everyone here, including you and me, will freeze to death."

"First, we need to remain calm. This is just another phenomenon caused by the Void. There's no reason to sit here in Busan waiting for winter to arrive."

"And?"

"We head north, past Pyongyang. We face the winter head-on."

"Wait... we?"

Literally.

We issued a telepathic command through the constellation, The

Morning Star of the Second Coming, telling the citizens of Dongbang Singuk to stay indoors. Thanks to the overwhelming authority of the Star, the evacuation went smoothly.

As for us, a party of 50—including Noh Do-hwa, Yu Ji-won, the Saintess, and the National Road Management Corps' operations team—headed north in a two-week expedition.

"Haaa."

Wearing fur hats and gloves, the Saintess exhaled deeply, her breath hanging in the air like a balloon before dispersing into white mist.

"It's chilly here already, and it's only July. The air here feels different from Seoul."

Do-hwa stood silently beside her, arms crossed, glaring at me. She had led her team all the way to Sinuiju, where I had arrived earlier.

Spreading my arms wide, I welcomed them. "Welcome, O King of Korea. Thank you for bringing your people all this way."

"Forget that. What the hell is that?"

"Oh, that? Don't worry about it. It's just a sort of totem."

"What the hell?! How am I supposed to ignore that?!"

Do-hwa was pointing at the Statue of Liberty, standing tall and proud, holding her torch high.

Yes, I had built a replica of the Statue of Liberty in Sinuiju.

While Do-hwa had been leading her party north, I had arrived ahead of them and busied myself building the monument. Of course, it wasn't made of the same expensive copper and steel as the original. I had scavenged stone from around Sinuiju. But the sculpture was well-made, a near-perfect replica, standing at the original height of 93.5 meters.

Confronted by this overwhelming structure, Do-hwa stared at me like an Irish immigrant arriving in America for the first time, her

face a mix of awe, anxiety, and hope.

“For fuck’s sake. Why the hell did you build the Statue of Liberty in Sinuiju?!”

For the record, I’ve never been great at reading Do-hwa’s expressions.

“You just don’t understand, Commander.”

“Huh?”

“The Statue of Liberty, no matter the medium, is always the first monument to be attacked. More specifically, wherever the Statue of Liberty stands, disaster always strikes first.”

“What kind of nonsense is that…?”

“If you’re skeptical, take a quick trip across the Tumen River. It’s colder here than it is there.”

Do-hwa lowered her head, muttering something under her breath. Probably cursing my brilliant foresight.

The Saintess, who had been listening, nodded thoughtfully. “It’s like a lightning rod, isn’t it?”

“Exactly. Especially when it comes to weather-related disasters, like climate change or eco-apocalypses. The Statue of Liberty is always the first thing to get destroyed.”

“I remember seeing that in a few movies.”

“Which leads us to the hypothesis: all climate disasters target the Statue of Liberty.” I pointed dramatically at the towering statue. “In other words, as long as we protect the Statue of Liberty, any climate disaster will be nothing but a fleeting nuisance.”

“……”

“All the residents of Sinuiju and our soldiers have already been relocated to Pyongyang. Now, the only things left here are us and

the Statue of Liberty."

Thus, the strategy for countering this anomaly, known as "Blizzard" or "Winter General," was simple.

On our side, we just needed to protect the Statue of Liberty.

On the Anomaly's side, they had to destroy it. Because as long as the Statue of Liberty stood intact, it was the same as the climate disaster not having arrived yet.

In short—

"From now on, this place isn't Sinuiju anymore—it's New York. Commander Noh Do-hwa, here's your official appointment as Mayor of New York."

"Wha—"

I handed her a prepared certificate and a nameplate.

The first Korean to become the mayor of New York. Of course, being the mayor of New York came with its perks. Even though Do-hwa didn't speak much English, it didn't matter. In our New New York, she could do her job as mayor without getting caught up in silly prejudices about nationality or language.

Thus, the place evolved into a country that boasted not only "The Jerusalem of the East" but also "The New York of the East." A region that had once been the poorest in Asia had now flourished.

Clearly, this world was an alternate history, and Dongbang Singuk was the true protagonist of the story.

"Look at the Amnok River. Doesn't it resemble Manhattan? With its islands and everything. It's basically New York."

"....."

"You all will be appointed as police chiefs, federal judges, and other important officials. Your task is to protect the Statue of Liberty at all costs, understood?"

Whack!

Do-hwa picked up the nameplate that read “Mayor of New York, Noh Do-hwa” and smacked me in the back of the head.

Let the defense game begin.

Footnotes:

Chapter 228

The Winter Soldier II

Sinnoa

「Once, I was just a regular Grade 7 civil servant working at a rehabilitation hospital. Now, after the collapse of the world, I'm the Ruler of Busan, Master of the National Road Management Corps, De facto ruler of the Korean Peninsula, and now, the Mayor of New York? For some reason, the one who looks like the savior of the world is obsessed with me. What is this?」

Leaving Noh Do-hwa to continue her light novel lifestyle, it was time to start the real defense game.

"Listen up, everyone. Here's the situation. When the blizzard from the north hits, it's predicted to bring a winter of -120°C that could last a while."

I tapped on the chalkboard, which had a map of Sinuiju pinned to it while addressing about thirty members of the National Road Management Corps.

"No one knows how long this winter will last. It could be over in a day, or it could continue for a year. In the worst-case scenario, we might be cut off from all outside communication, except for SG Net, and we'll need to endure this severe weather."

"....."

"For this operation, the Corps has selected elite members with large amounts of Aura. Each of you is essentially a human furnace. You'll need to take turns keeping the temperature of the living quarters stable, so treat fuel like it's precious."

Faint laughter rippled through the group. Despite the harsh conditions, no one openly complained. After all, the difficulty of this mission wasn't necessarily about surviving the cold. The true

challenge lay in enduring the -120˚C blizzard as Awakeners.

“Tomorrow, we’ll start the operation, but let’s take some questions before we proceed.”

A few members of the Corps raised their hands.

“Yes, Lee Ha-seong.”

“Sir, we have about three months' worth of food rations stored. What should we do if the winter lasts longer than that?”

“I’ll temporarily leave Sinuiju and fetch Sword Marquess. I’ve already secured land to build a greenhouse farm. In the meantime, we’ll organize hunting teams to secure more food.”

I called on another member.

“Next, Cha Jae-hee.”

“Thank you. What should we do if the anomaly known as Winter General expands beyond Sinuiju or starts to move?”

“If it turns out there’s a core or source to the anomaly, I’ll take care of it myself. Next question.”

The briefing continued smoothly.

The members of the Corps asked only practical questions, focusing on what they needed to know for the mission. Of course, the 30 people here had unknowingly become my disciples—they had been indirectly trained through the constellations and learned my ways.

(Though they themselves were largely unaware of that fact.)

“Alright. That’s it for today. Get some rest, and we’ll start the operation tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir!”

The next day, the temperature noticeably dropped after just one night. Yesterday’s weather was like early winter, but by dawn, the

air was sharply cold.

Do-hwa finally had to let go of her hopeful optimism.

“Damn. That Weather Forecast ability might be unreliable with normal weather predictions, but it’s always accurate with weird ones like this.”

“Oh, it’s actually 100% accurate.”

“Wait, what? How?”

“Think about it. Predicting normal weather like rain or snow is something anyone can guess without needing Weather Forecast. It’s nothing special. But if someone predicts a -120°C blizzard, that’s unusual in itself, isn’t it?”

“Ohhh…”

Do-hwa finally accepted the explanation, taking a sip of her warm coffee.

By 8 a.m., the operations team had gathered in the command center, located inside the Statue of Liberty. Everyone was bundled up in thick winter clothes.

One of the most fashion-conscious celebrities in Busan, Ji-won, was wearing her signature white uniform with a fur cloak. She looked over at me.

“Your Excellency, everything is ready.”

I nodded. “Deploy the prisoners.”

“Yes, sir.”

Some of you may have noticed a gap in the headcount. There were 50 people who came up to Sinuiju, but only 30 of them were members of the National Road Management Corps. The remaining 20 were prisoners I had brought up from places like Busan. Our good ol’ prisoners, who had been useful during the Inunaki Tunnel mission, were about to be put to work again today.

“Prisoners, listen up. Pay attention to His Excellency’s orders,” Ji-won addressed the 20 prisoners in front of her.

“Ah, fuck...”

“What kind of bullshit is this at this time of day...”

Their attitude was, to put it mildly, terrible. They stared at Ji-won with half-lidded, irritated eyes.

Within ten seconds, blood splattered.

Without batting an eye, Ji-won slit one of the prisoners’ throats with her dagger. She shook the blood off her blade and repeated her earlier words in the same monotone voice and expressionless face.

“Prisoners, pay attention to His Excellency’s orders.”

Now down to 19, the prisoners straightened up like model citizens, their eyes wide and alert like little kids at a school assembly.

...I sometimes wondered if Yu Ji-won swore loyalty to me just so she could legally kill people without consequences.

Anyway, with the tension rising, I opened my mouth and said, “From now on, each of you will be assigned a number from 1 to 19. As your numbers are called, you’ll go outside.”

I tapped on the map to point out the designated path. “The task is simple. Cross the Amnokgang Bridge and keep walking north.”

“The Amnokgang Bridge?”

“Yes. As you walk, you’ll receive instructions via radio. All you need to do is follow those instructions and keep responding. That’s it.”

“.....”

“Just so you know, I wouldn’t recommend trying to escape. You all know what Ji-won’s ability is. She’ll track you to the ends of hell, and you’ll experience a hell far worse than death.”

Ji-won twirled her dagger in her hand from where she stood beside me, and the prisoners' faces paled. I could practically see their thoughts written across their faces. Why the hell are we treated like dirt while this silver-haired psycho enjoys a high-ranking position? I had been wondering the same thing for quite some time myself.

To ease their concerns, I added, "But don't worry. There's a reward for you as well. See this river here? It's called the Aiha River, about 30 kilometers north of the Amnokgang Bridge."

"....."

"If you make it there and return, I'll reduce your sentence by 250 years. And, depending on your behavior, you might receive further reductions."

"....!"

For the first time, a spark lit in their eyes.

The prisoners I had brought here were all serving sentences of over 500 years. The chance to shave off half of that was a tempting offer they couldn't pass up. They were Awakeners before they became criminals, and walking a mere 30 kilometers to earn their freedom sounded like a good deal.

"Are you really going to reduce our sentences?"

"I promise in the name of Team Leader Yu Ji-won."

Their faces instantly soured again.

I cleared my throat and quickly amended my statement. "...I promise in the name of Commander Noh Do-hwa."

"Yeah! Hell yeah!"

"Awesome! Sixty-kilometer round trip? Easy!"

The prisoners, now fully motivated, started gearing up like students who had just binge-watched motivational videos on YouTube.

And so, from prisoner number 1 to 19, they were each sent out, spaced 50 meters apart, into the cold wilderness.

For the record, we supplied them with radios and U.S. military uniforms. If you've ever watched an apocalypse movie, you know these poor guys are the ones who usually get the short end of the stick.

"Saintess, I leave it to you."

"Okay."

In the corner of the command center, away from the rest of the group, sat the Saintess, bundled up in fur hats, blankets, and sleeping bags. She clasped her hands together in prayer.

What she was doing could be described like this:

[Scout 1, come in. Scout 1, do you copy?]

[Proceed directly north. We've received reports that an ally is stranded 6 kilometers ahead with no communication. Locate them and assist if possible.]

The Saintess was using her telepathy to make the prisoners believe they were hearing this message through their radios. The idea of "an ally stranded" came as a surprise to the prisoners, but...

- Shit, what kind of bullshit is this now?

[Scout 1, do you copy? Please continue reporting as you proceed.]

- Uh, yeah. Nothing much to report yet. Just a flimsy-looking bridge. Is this the Amnokgang Bridge?

[That's correct. It was partially destroyed, but our previous scouting confirmed that it's still safe to cross. Proceed with caution.]

- Tch. Got it.

Meanwhile, I continued laying down "artifacts" at the Saintess's feet.

A small model of the Statue of Liberty. A model of the Eiffel Tower. A model of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. A model of Big Ben. A model of the Taj Mahal. A model of Tokyo Tower...

Like a shaman laying out cursed totems, or kids playing with an Ouija board, I carefully arranged each landmark onto the world map at her feet.

"....."

Do-hwa, sitting comfortably in an armchair beside us, wrapped in layers of winter gear, watched me in silence.

- Huh?

[Scout 1, is something wrong?]

- No, I crossed the bridge, but I'm starting to see snow. Weird...

The world map was hand-drawn by Ji-won, so its accuracy wasn't perfect. However, the map carried a portion of her power.

After positioning all the landmarks, I casually flicked the Eiffel Tower, knocking it over.

[That's an expected anomaly. We suspect the Void in that area is causing a sudden onset of the Ice Age.]

- What the fuck. So that's why it's this cold.

[The longer you remain in the Void, the more dangerous it becomes. After locating the ally, return as quickly as possible.]

- Alright, fine. But this feels kinda—

I toppled St. Peter's Basilica.

I knocked over Big Ben.

- Huh?

[What's wrong?]

- The wind's picking up! There's a snowstorm! I can't see shit!

[Our radar still shows your position as stable. Keep moving forward.]

- Fine, I'll keep moving, but this is insane! I can't see a thing!

Finally, I knocked over the Taj Mahal.

- Shit! I can't see anything! I'm freezing to death out here! This isn't a joke! I'm serious! I think I'm really going to die—

Static crackled over the radio.

The Saintess looked down at me. I caught her gaze and nodded in acknowledgment.

"It's here."

The radios we had given to the prisoners were just for show. The real communication was happening telepathically through the Saintess.

And, of course, there was no reason for any static interference. That meant the source of the interference wasn't us but something else.

Whatever was causing the static was the Anomaly.

- I can't see... I can't feel...

Fzzt.

Scout 1's signal went dark.

The Saintess remained calm and continued working with a neutral expression.

[Scout 2, come in. Scout 1's transmission is unstable. Do you have a visual on them 50 meters ahead?]

- No. The snowstorm's too thick to see anything.

Scout 2, lost.

Scout 3, lost.

Scout 4, lost.

On Yu Ji-won's Mini Map, the chess pieces representing the prisoners fell one after the other like dominoes.

Finally, when I knocked over Tokyo Tower...

Only the Statue of Liberty remained standing on the world map.

At that moment, the Saintess opened her mouth.

"Scout 19, lost."

"....."

"It's here."

Where? No one asked that foolish question.

The sound of something scratching echoed from the world map. The paper, which had been blank except for the chess pieces, suddenly started to freeze over, a layer of frost rapidly forming around the remaining landmarks. The ice moved, creeping toward the Statue of Liberty.

"Undertaker."

"Yes." I picked up the Statue of Liberty and placed it over Sinuiju.

Immediately, the frost that had been spreading across the map shifted course, converging on Sinuiju, as if drawn to the sacrifice we had placed on the map. It was ravenous, consuming everything in its path.

Crack! Crackle!

The radio, which should have been dead silent, began to buzz with loud static.

The thermometer, specially made for this operation, showed the temperature plummeting rapidly.

-10˚C.

-20˚C.

-40˚C.

-80˚C.

“National Road Management Corps! Release your Aura!”

“Yes, sir!”

-120˚C.

At that exact moment, a heavy impact reverberated through the base. The door, which had been securely locked after we sent the prisoners outside, groaned under the pressure.

It sounded like something was clawing at it, as if a giant’s nails were scraping at the surface, demanding to be let inside.

We all knew what it meant.

Winter had come.

Footnotes:

Chapter 229

The Winter Soldier III

Sinnoa

If you were to ask me to name the most frequent cause of mass human death, excluding those killed by Anomalies, I could answer without hesitation:

Hypothermia.

Literal death by freezing.

Even if we disregard the Ice Age Anomaly that descended upon the new New York of the Korean Peninsula, winter alone—even in its vanilla form—has always been deadly enough.

And what about a winter with an added Anomaly?

Even in this round, where the National Road Management Corps had achieved a uniformly high level of Aura proficiency, withstanding the biting cold was no easy feat.

“It’s fucking cold...”

Do-hwa, who hadn’t invested any levels into Aura skills on her Awakener path, shivered even more than the others.

It had been 60 minutes since the Ice Age descended. With a blanket draped over her, Do-hwa exhaled a puff of breath, white as chimney smoke was black. She was shivering so much that it made me feel a little sorry for her.

“Commander, come a bit closer.”

“...Seriously, if this was how things were going to be, you should’ve brought the Great Witch of the Samcheon World. I don’t understand why you dragged someone who was working peacefully in Busan all the way up here. At least if she were here, she could sing us a song

and improve the atmosphere.”

“This operation specifically required you, Commander Noh Do-hwa. Bringing Dang Seo-rin would have been disastrous.”

“I don’t know what the hell this mission is about, but it’s cold as hell...”

I took hold of Do-hwa’s left hand under the blanket. Her fingers were ice-cold. She twitched, her eyebrows furrowing slightly, but didn’t pull her hand away. Gradually, my Aura flowed through our joined hands, sending warmth into Do-hwa’s body.

She shivered as if it tickled, unfamiliar with the sensation of Aura. Her lips parted, shaping around words she meant to let escape, but then she pressed them shut, likely aware that I wouldn’t stop regardless.

Under the blanket, warmth quickly enveloped her. I made sure to keep the Aura swirling only beneath the cover, ensuring no one noticed.

“.....”

“...You could just say thank you.”

“Fuck off.”

“.....”

She sighed. “ This feels oddly familiar... Ah. It’s like when you turn on the floor heater while under the blanket but keep the air conditioner on. That’s exactly how it feels.”

“Are you serious? You lived with such extravagance? How could you waste resources like that?”

“Heh. Of course, you wouldn’t understand, with your boomer mindset. You can’t even remember when civilization was still intact. But in Korea, everyone tried it at least once... By the way, Undertaker, I have a question.” Do-hwa pointed with her right hand toward a specific direction. “What’s with all those cameras...?”

She was gesturing toward a line of recording devices set up inside the Statue of Liberty. Most of the equipment was haunted artifacts contaminated by Anomalies, but they were whirring away smoothly, recording everything.

“As you can see, they’re cameras,” I stated matter of factly.

“I know they’re cameras. I’m asking why you’re using such valuable equipment to film us shivering in the cold...”

“Oh, but of course. It’s all part of the ultimate strategy to defeat the Ice Age Anomaly. You don’t need to worry about a thing, Commander. Just sit tight.”

“Ugh. This feels... unsettling...”

And then it happened.

“We’re all doomed!”

A scream pierced the air from among the gathered National Road Management Corps members. The source of the cry had lost focus in his eyes.

“There’s no contact with the outside, and we’re running out of food! If we stay here, we’re all going to die! Every single one of us!”

“H-hey. Jae-hee, what’s gotten into you?”

The person causing the commotion had just been doing fine, releasing Aura like a living furnace. But now, they’d gone into a frenzy, ripping off their blanket and winter gear.

“If we’re all going to die anyway, I’ll make the sacrifice. Yes. If I can reduce the number of mouths to feed by even one, then maybe the others can survive a little longer. Ah, I’ll go outside...”

“Shit! He’s been Void-poisoned! Stop Cha Jae-hee!”

As expected of well-trained elites, the other Corps members quickly subdued the rogue agent.

I didn't even need to step in. The situation resolved itself, although Do-hwa, whose hand was still in mine, looked at me suspiciously.

"Undertaker."

"Yes."

"Why aren't you helping your subordinates but instead recording the chaos on your phone...?"

That's right. I was calmly sitting there, filming the scene unfolding before me with my phone.

That wasn't the only time I'd do so either. When the Void-poison spread further and more Corps members began showing signs of madness, I didn't intervene then just the same.

"We're all going to die if we stay here! We have to form a strike team and request aid from outside!"

"No, we have plenty of supplies—"

"They're right! Even if we fail to call for help, at least some of us should survive!"

"Let us out!"

They had lost their minds.

Outside, a -120°C blizzard was raging. With visibility near zero, any attempt to leave the bunker would mean certain death, even for the elite members of the National Road Management Corps.

Clearly, they had been robbed of their judgment by the Anomaly. Normally, this would have been the perfect time for the Drill Sergeant, Yu Ji-won, to step in and restore order, but...

A sidelong glance at Yu Ji-won showed that she was waiting for my cue, maintaining a disciplined stance.

Naturally, her primary motive was always to "ingratiate herself with me to maintain her power." Her duties as the operations team

leader were far down her list of priorities. If I decided that intervention wasn't necessary, then Ji-won wouldn't step in either. She simply glanced down at her phone, browsing SG Net.

"Ugh... Damn it..." Do-hwa clocked our nonchalant attitude and sighed, apparently coming to some realization. She must have understood that this, too, was part of my plan.

"Let's break through the snow and head south for help! If we reach the base, we can return with reinforcements!"

"Fear not death! If we don't make the sacrifice, who will?"

The Void-poison spread uncontrollably.

Of the 20 National Road Management Corps members, 10 suddenly turned into "escape advocates."

Even considering that Ji-won, Do-hwa, and I had all chosen to ignore the situation, the speed of the spread was unnaturally fast, and the depth of the brainwashing was sinking deeper.

"Team Leader! Undertaker! They're seriously trying to leave!"

"Let them go."

This was precisely why I had brought Ji-won and Do-hwa into this operation: resistance to brainwashing. These two had mental fortitude that surpassed anyone else I knew.

Ji-won was famous for ignoring the nameless pink-haired Voldemort, a feat unmatched in human history. To any Anomaly that specialized in brainwashing, she was an unyielding wall.

Do-hwa was no less remarkable. She had resisted countless Anomalies associated with politicians, such as "All Power Corrupts" or "Dictators Inevitably Fall," without ever succumbing to their influence.

I hadn't appointed these two to lead the National Road Management Corps in spite of their questionable personalities for no reason. When it came to dealing with Anomalies, they were the

answer.

And over there, lounging in an armchair, the Saintess was equally beyond rival in mental fortitude.

In short, within the Statue of Liberty bunker, I had assembled the strongest-willed Awakeners in all of Korea.

“Let’s go! For our comrades!”

“Let’s save humanity!”

“Yeaaah!”

In contrast, the ten brainwashed members threw open the bunker doors themselves.

As soon as the door creaked open, a massive blizzard swept inside. The brainwashed ones, facing the storm without any face coverings, laughed madly in the biting cold and before long, they had vanished into the frozen wilderness, their laughter swallowed by the howling wind.

The remaining survivors turned to me, their expressions stricken with fear.

“Y-Your Excellency...”

“Hmm.” It looked like I had enough footage. I stopped recording on my smartphone. “Ji-won, I’ll head out for a bit, so take care of keeping the Commander warm.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll handle it.”

Passing on the role of “living furnace” to Yu Ji-won, I dashed out of the bunker to pursue the brainwashed ones.

Outside was a pure white snowfield. But unlike the picturesque scenes from Yasunari Kawabata’s Snow Country, the snow in this mysterious New York was unsettling.

All around, white noise flickered like static. It wasn’t the kind of

flickering like a lighthouse guiding people. It was more like a barrage of camera flashes at a red-carpet event, pushing away any sense of humanity.

This snowfield had been ruined by a tyrant.

Sssssshhhhh.

Beyond the distant white noise, flashes of red shirts occasionally appeared, stark against the snow.

They were half-buried in the snow, like floating debris in a white river.

I followed their trail, stepping on the scattered clothing like stepping stones.

“Hahahahahaha!”

“It’s getting warmer. Look over there, the sun! We’re heading south!”

“It’s not cold. See? It’s really not cold!”

“The sun is protecting us!”

The voices of the Void-poisoned wove in strange harmony with the hum of the white noise.

The ten brainwashed Corps members continued their march through the snow, stripping down to their underwear as they went. Their clothes disappeared into the snow like they had sunk into a swamp, while the near-naked humans gradually submerged deeper and deeper into the snowdrifts.

“Good job.”

Thud.

I knocked the ten of them out with a quick blow to the head using Aura. They fell without so much as a scream.

I then stacked the unconscious Corps members like a pile of hamburgers, lifted them with one hand, and sprinted south.

“Ah! It’s the boss!”

“G-Guild Leader! Over here...!”

After running for a few minutes, I crossed the boundary of New New York and the blizzard abruptly ceased. Turning back, I saw the snowstorm looming like a dome over New New York, encapsulating the entire city.

Waiting near the border were Ah-ryeon, Dok-seo, and the rest of the backup team.

“Ugh, seriously! What’s with this, Mister? Why are they all naked? Are they out of their minds?”

“The Ice Age Anomaly has a brainwashing ability. They got caught up in it. If their Aura levels were even slightly lower, they’d have frozen to death by now.”

“That's messed up...”

“Ah-ryeon. Start healing them, please.”

“O-okay!”

“Even if they regain consciousness, they might try to run back into the snowstorm. Keep a close watch on them until the Anomaly is completely neutralized. And make sure they can’t access SG Net. Understood, Dok-seo?”

“Ugh, damn it! I know, I know! Stop nagging!”

“I’m counting on you.”

“Make sure you film everything!”

Leaving the recovering members in the hands of the backup team, I returned to the snowy storm. As I made my way back, I carefully gathered the clothes the brainwashed members had discarded.

Thud.

I pushed open the door to the Statue of Liberty bunker, and all eyes turned toward me.

Do-hwa, Ji-won, the Saintess, and the remaining ten Corps members —13 people in total—watched me.

One of the Corps members spoke up.

“Y-Your Excellency? What... What you’re holding...”

I glanced around the room. The recording devices were still running.

Good. No problems here.

“These are the missing members’ clothes. I found them outside.”

“Wh-what? So... So our comrades...”

“I’m sorry. I followed their trail as far as I could, but there was nothing but an endless expanse of snow.”

“.....”

“Everyone, it appears that the Ice Age Anomaly is more dangerous than I initially anticipated. Remain vigilant.”

Fear began to settle on the faces of the Corps members. They didn’t seem to doubt me at all, accepting my explanation with convincing sincerity. Even professional actors couldn’t have delivered such genuine expressions.

Yeah.

By now, you’ve probably realized it too.

If you want to deceive your enemy, you have to fool your allies first.

I intended to trick the Ice Age Anomaly that had taken hold of this city.

Footnotes:

Chapter 230

The Winter Soldier IV

Sinnoa

You can probably guess by now, but Anomalies have an inherent trait that's similar to severe otaku tendencies: They can't distinguish between 'reality' and 'fiction.'

To be more precise, for Anomalies, everything is the same as reality —another similarity to otaku. Just as otaku believe in the true 2D world beyond their monitors, Anomalies perceive everything they see as being of equal or greater value than reality.

‘Of course, each Anomaly has things they like or dislike more.’

I used this ‘otaku test’ on the Ice Age Anomaly.

When did I start doing that? From the very beginning, when I first encountered it.

"Saintess, use Telepathy on the prisoners, but please act like you're communicating through a real radio."

"Pardon? Why is that?"

"I have my reasons. Also, it would be great if you could add static noise like a real radio."

The radios the prisoners carried out had no real function, and the Saintess had never actually used a radio either. Yet the Ice Age Anomaly still perceived the radio communication with the prisoners as 'real.'

The Anomaly corrupted the radio transmission without hesitation and even added noise that the Saintess never pretended to make.

At this point, I was sure.

‘Sure enough, this bastard isn't the type of Anomaly that insists on the physical, real world.’

I had actually felt this way since the moment the Anomaly was lured to New York by the replica of the Statue of Liberty. The more sensory-deficient the Anomaly—think those lacking sight or smell—the more it relied on concepts rather than the physical world. It was similar to how in ancient rituals meant to appease malevolent spirits, instead of real money, people burned a single paper talisman that read "one million dollars."

"...Undertaker, what exactly are you doing right now?"

"Can't you see? I'm editing videos."

A real tragedy unfolding in reality.

A fictional tragedy happening in media.

The Ice Age Anomaly could hardly differentiate between the two.

"Videos? What videos...?"

"Movies."

Click. Click-click-click. Click.

I moused over the screen, still editing. My editing skills weren't on the level of a seasoned expert, but they were good enough for someone who's experienced hundreds of regressions.

The video source material, of course, was all footage we had just filmed inside the Statue of Liberty.

「Forward! For our comrades!」

「Let’s go! Rescue humanity!」

「Oooooh!」

At that moment, the scene of the ten brainwashed individuals leaving the bunker, ignoring their comrades' protests, was playing.

I reassembled the footage filmed from various angles and added sound effects. It certainly wasn't an example of professional cinematography, but I didn't care about that at all.

「Forward! For our comrades!」

「Hehehe, heehee, heeheehee!」

「Let's go! Rescue humanity!」

I didn't even need to try. The Anomaly took over the video, inserting horror elements in between to heighten the atmosphere.

The edited video was completely different from 'reality.'

Behind the ten brainwashed people in the video, corpses frozen in ice clung to their bodies. The brainwashed weren't moving of their own accord. The frozen ghosts were dragging them out of the gates by their wrists and ankles.

"....."

Do-hwa, who had been watching the laptop next to me, looked as if she were about to faint.

It wasn't just the brainwashed. The ghosts clung to all the survivors who hadn't fully succumbed to the Anomaly.

There was a ghost clinging to someone's shoulder, wrapping its hands around their head, another ghost gnawing at Do-hwa's leg, and yet another banging its head against the bunker door repeatedly.

"...What is all this?"

"It's the real reason we feel 'cold.' These ghosts are making us feel cold by attaching themselves to us."

"...The fuck?"

"Even if you try to get rid of them now, it won't work, Commander Noh Do-hwa. The filters are different, so you can't interfere with

them."

For the record, I wasn't filming our surroundings at that moment. All the management officers except for the top brass were asleep, anyway. I seized the chance and used our break time to jump into editing the footage I collected.

By the time I finished for the day and played the video back, the Anomaly had automatically started the post-production process. In it, 'Undertaker' and 'Noh Do-hwa' were suddenly spouting lines they'd never said.

「Undertaker.」

「Yes.」

「Now that we're alone, I have something I've been curious about for a while. Do you... like me?」

Beside me, I heard an outraged, "What the fuck?" It wasn't the Noh Do-hwa in the video, but the real one, her voice fresh like squeezed fruit juice.

The fruit in question was probably durian.

"I've never said anything like that in my fucking life."

"Neither have I." It was a fascinating phenomenon to me. "This is probably the Anomaly's perception of reality. From our perspective, it's a distortion."

"Of all the ways to distort things, why the fuck would it choose this?"

"Because it's an Anomaly. Hmm. If I had to guess, maybe it interpreted us holding hands under the blanket as being in a romantic relationship or something."

"Shit. I knew I should've let go back then, even if it meant freezing to death..."

"Why are you overreacting? It's just a harmless distortion by the

Anomaly, anyway."

The video continued, with the credits reading, “Script: Ice Age, Editing: Ice Age, Sound: Ice Age.”

「Of course I like you. I can't start my day without seeing your rotten eyes, Commander Noh Do-hwa.」

「Hmph. You know that's not what I was asking...」

「.....」

「You know the Guild Leader of Samcheon World likes you, right? You’re not oblivious. So why do you keep testing them?」

「Hmm. I didn’t expect this kind of conversation...」

"....."

"....."

A strange quiet descended over us, the two of us settled side by side, as we stared at the laptop screen.

I’ll say it again—those weren’t the real Undertaker and Noh Do-hwa in the video. In the *real* featured moment, we were just having meaningless small talk.

But—

「Unexpected as this may seem, Undertaker, I do find your stories about other cycles somewhat interesting...」

「I thought you weren’t interested?」

「For the realism of it, no. But the story where you said I strangled you to death—that one was quite amusing. The important thing, too, is they’re pretty decent getting to understand who you are...」

Between Do-hwa and me, our conversations weren’t just vocal. There was always an unspoken Telepathy of sorts, like a silent signal in the background. Just as the letter ‘G’ in the word sign is

never pronounced, our unvoiced signal, this Morse code of our minds, always hummed beneath the surface of our exchanges.

Human relationships are defined not just by what can be said, but also by what is left unsaid. By that measure, Do-hwa and I were particularly strong in our shared silence, like comrades attending a concert, quietly appreciating the faint bass together.

So—

「But there is one thing about your stories I just can't get out of my head...」

「Only one? That's a bit disappointing.」

「You never talk about romance...」

In reality, we never had this conversation.

Not ever.

Although neither of us had formally agreed to it, we had an unspoken rule to never cross a certain 'line.'

Do-hwa strangling me to death? That wasn't a violation of our unspoken rules. It was just another joke we could laugh off as part of our bizarre shared history.

If anything—

「Huh. I didn't think Commander Noh Do-hwa would be interested in romantic stories. I'll keep it in mind for next time.」

「Stop pretending. You know full well that's not what I mean. Alright, I'll spell it out so even you can understand. Undertaker, I'm interested in the fact that you never bring up romance.」

「That's because I'm impotent.」

「Oh. That's one theory. But since you seem fine to me, I'll dismiss it.」

That kind of conversation was way beyond the boundary of our usual interactions.

In the video, Do-hwa turned her head to look up at the Undertaker. They were so close that you could almost feel their breath.

「Shall I share my theory then...?」

「.....」

「In another cycle, did you ever—」

Click.

Without prompting, both of us reached for the mouse at the same time.

Since I was faster, I clicked on my left hand, and on top of the back of my left hand rested Do-hwa's palm.

The silence lingered.

Oddly enough, the real Do-hwa was now looking up at me from an angle, just like in the paused frame on the screen.

Maybe that's why it felt like time in reality had also stopped.

Even though she was an Awakener, Do-hwa's hair remained a dark black, like mine. Her eyes, too, were the same untouched black. Just like mine.

Black gazing into black.

With both of us locking eyes, it was as though, without words, a silent Morse code was being transmitted.

'Shall we pretend none of this happened?'

'.....'

'Or?'

The silence stretched on.

Then, Do-hwa parted her lips.

“I…”

“……”

“No matter how many cycles pass, the way you look at Dang Seo-rin as Dang Seo-rin, or Yu Ji-won as Yu Ji-won, or Lee Ha-yul as Lee Ha-yul… Sometimes, I fucking hate it, but I don’t think it’s a bad thing. It’s what makes you the same person in every cycle, whether it’s your 10th or your 100th run.”

“Yes. I’m aware.”

“The reason it’s fucking annoying is that while you remember everything, I don’t.”

“I know.”

“So, if I can’t know everything, I’d rather hear nothing at all. For you, with your Complete Memory, any story I tell you is just a rerun of something you’ve already seen. That pisses me off. How do others feel about this? Do they always find it fun? Do they always think it’s fresh?”

“I know.”

“You’re such a fucking bastard.”

She grabbed my tie. It wasn’t a yank so much as a clawing motion.

At that moment—

「Do you want to hear my voice?」

Click.

Though neither of us pressed the mouse, the video resumed playing on its own.

「Then save this godforsaken world first. Or, heh. Lose your regression ability. Learn to forget.」

Even so, I couldn't look away from her. Do-hwa, standing right in front of me, demanded my attention.

And besides, I didn't need to look.

「Shall I be completely honest with you?」

Whether it was the Noh Do-hwa in the video or the one in front of me, they were both in the exact same position.

「I don't expect you to save the world. In fact, I expect the opposite.

「Undertaker. I'm the only one who is hoping for your 'failure.' Because that seems far more likely. I'm not the type to bet my life on false hope...」

Do-hwa smiled faintly.

「So the day you stand on the same level as me will be the day you give up regression. When you live your final life. That'll be hell for you. In that final hell, I'll gladly join you, all the way to the bottom...

「I'm really looking forward to that day. What about you? Don't you look forward to the moment when your only funeral will also be your only true life, your own personal hell? You can thank me then.

「It's a pity, you know, that today isn't the day you'll fall into that hell.」

Her hand covered my eyes.

Because of that, I couldn't tell if the final words came from her lips or from the laptop's speakers.

"Don't forget..."

The cold touch of her hand, as black as midnight.

Like a snowstorm swallowing the desolate tundra at night, casting a

shadow over everything. A faint echo, like the last note of a fading melody, whispered as it disappeared.

“I’ll be waiting for you at your true Bad Ending.”

The next day.

We began the full-fledged process of hunting down the Anomaly.

Footnotes:

Chapter 231

The Winter Soldier V

Sinnoa

Let's briefly shift focus to the warm haven for Awakeners: SG Net.

As befitting its title as the 'only community in the country,' SG Net always radiated a cozy warmth.

- Anonymous: This guy's probably a loser who can't even get past 200 meters in the tunnel lol

Anonymous: What's a wannabe Awakener who's only ever had Americanos talking about? haha

Anonymous: Lol, I'll be having a cafe latte at 600 meters tomorrow. Feel free to join if you've got the guts^^

Maybe a little too warm at times.

The main issue was that title it had, the 'only community in the country.' Back when civilization still stood, the internet addicts had each of them staked out their own turf online, yet now, they were all forced into this one big, messy quarantine zone.

Community identity? That didn't exist.

The members ranged from kids under 10 to elderly over 90, from Inuanki Tunnel newbies at 100 meters deep to veterans at 1,000 meters. Everyone was jumbled together.

There was an old saying from the martial arts world: Beware of the elderly, children, and women. In SG Net, you had to be wary of everyone. The only exception was the administrator, Seo Gyu.

It was truly an age of chaos, with countless factions vying for power.

In this hellish reality, one misstep could send you plummeting into ruin.

(There was still a huge mystery surrounding OldManGoryeo, who had lost both legs but somehow managed to survive with his neck intact. Some even seriously debated whether OldManGoryeo was the strongest entity in Korea.)

Today, as always, everyone was fully engrossed in community activities. Not a single person raised a reasonable question about why anyone would be so dedicated to it.

And then, the post appeared.

- Anonymous: **[Live Broadcast]** Surviving the Ice Age - Day 1: Current Status of the National Road Management Corps' Northern Expedition.avi

It was a video I, the Undertaker, had posted anonymously.

The reason I didn't upload it under my usual nickname, ZERO_SUGAR, was simple: I was meticulous about managing my posts.

Even in the apocalypse, my posts were packed with high-quality educational content.

Views? Likes? I didn't care about those at all. Did Nietzsche whine about poor sales after writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*?

A sage's words being ignored was just the fate of humanity. And I accepted humanity, foolishness and all.

- Anonymous: ?? What is this?

- Anonymous: I see Noh Do-hwa and Yu Ji-won?

- SergeantNerd: Wow, so Team Leader Yu disappeared from Busan because she got sent on a long-term expedition to the Void? sigh

- Anonymous: Even Undertaker is there lol

- [Baekwha] SixthGrader: Hoeee >_<);;

On the other hand, the video I uploaded quickly gained views.

My editing skills, honed over countless regressions, combined with the Anomaly's distortion, created a terrifyingly immersive atmosphere. Despite not having a professional crew, it had the gritty vibe of found footage, much like a documentary horror film, in the vein of *The Blair Witch Project*.

- Anonymous: Where the hell is this? Why's the assault team packed with all-stars? Has the Commander of the Road Corps ever gone on an expedition to the Void herself?

[Samcheon] IceIsMagic: Without Dang Seo-rin or that Baekwha Girls' High cosplayer, it's not really all-stars.

- Anonymous: Still, it's the first time I've seen the Commander on a live stream.

Anonymous: ?? That person is the Commander? Where's my shadowy tall, mustached figure hiding?

dolLHOuse: As I've said many times, the Commander of the National Road Management Corps is a petite woman who always wears black gloves and a monocle.

Anonymous: Why is that actually true???

[Baekwha] JournalismClub2: Wow, no offense, but she looks completely different from how I imagined.

The Noh Do-hwa making a personal appearance shocked many of the members.

Surprisingly, what she looked like wasn't well-known. In fact, over on the Busan side of things, most people wouldn't recognize her at all.

I mean, who could identify a workaholic who spent 365 days a year holed up in a dark office at NRMC headquarters, buried in paperwork?

Unlike Seo-rin, who occasionally uploaded photos (usually to show off), or Yo-hwa, who would post pictures of people tied up in front of a campfire while flashing a peace sign, Do-hwa didn't even log into SG Net.

Those who had only ever heard rumors about her but never seen her in person were glued to the video, half-convinced she might not even be real.

- Anonymous: Noh Do-hwa aside, this Ice Age Anomaly? This looks pretty dangerous.

- ZhaoYong-soo: Judging by the Statue of Liberty that appeared in the video, the location is definitely Sinuiju. We've received reports that strange statues have been popping up there recently.

- Anonymous: If it's -120 deg with wide-area freezing and brainwashing abilities, isn't that basically a mobile Great Void? I heard the Commander is basically powerless. Is she even supposed to be there?

OldManGoryeo: If it's Sinuiju, the Saintess of the North should be nearby, so as long as they don't die, they'll be fine lol

Anonymous: I'm saying they might die...

- Anonymous: Damn, they just took out all the prisoners in one shot. Nice.

For three days, I uploaded one part of my "docu-series." It amounted to 120 minutes of dense content. Both in length and substance, it had the potential to dominate all discussions on SG Net.

- Anonymous: Holy shit; half the Corps members just got wiped out in one blow!

[NationalRoad] ForbiddenBookDepartment17: I heard Cha Jae-hee was one of the top aces among her peers...

- Anonymous: Fuck, seeing them get dragged away by ghosts is bringing back trauma. One of our guild members got dragged away like that and came back with just his wrist lol

□Anonymous: Same here...

- [Baekwha] JournalismClub2: Baekwha Girls, please don't reply to posts using your nickname. Log in as guests only; this is Directive 004. And don't respond to this either.

- LiteraryGirl: KYAAAAAA Noh Do-hwa and Undertaker are trending as a couple!!!

□Anonymous: ?

□LiteraryGirl: Everyone, you have to see this black-haired chemistry! I've lived just to witness this moment! I suddenly feel like my life hasn't been wasted, and it's all so moving. 😭😭😭

□Anonymous: ?

□OldManGoryeo: ?

□Anonymous: ??

□Anonymous: What's wrong with this chick all of a sudden?

□dolLHOuse: □□

□[Samcheon] WitchJudge: Hm...

- Anonymous: Who's that blue-haired Awakener over there? Is that a Road Corps member?

□[NationalRoad] ForbiddenBookDepartment17: No? Probably a local collaborator.

As the video progressed, the number of survivors rapidly dwindled.

On Day 1, there were still ten members of the Corps, but as time went on, they grew increasingly mentally unstable. Grabbed by the apparent ghosts, some began self-harming while others destroyed the bunker's supplies.

- Anonymous: Now I get why the National Road Corps elites suddenly went to Sinuiju. If a monster like that showed up, of

course they'd have to go.

[Samcheon] IceIsMagic: Agreed.

Anonymous: I thought it was an all-star team, but now I'm getting worried...

On SG Net, posts like [**Analyzing the Objective Danger of the Ice Age Anomaly**] and [**Why the Ice Age Assault Team Is Fucked**] began flooding in.

By the time the video showed the evening of Day 2, only four survivors remained: Noh Do-hwa, Yu Ji-won, the Saintess, and me.

Just as unease began spreading among the viewers, worrying that the mission would fail, what were we, the flesh-and-blood members in question, actually doing inside the Statue of Liberty?

"It's ready. Let's call Dokseo and Ah-ryeon and get out of here."

"Yes."

We had already leisurely prepared for our escape.

As I said before, the Ice Age Anomaly was an otaku type. It didn't distinguish between 'imagination' and 'reality' and instead treated them as one and the same.

That's why the video I uploaded to SG Net—the **Surviving the Ice Age** series—wasn't just some made-up tall tale to the Anomaly. To it, the video was a legitimate truth. The Ice Age Anomaly truly believed it had killed the members of the National Road Management Corps.

In reality, after turning off the camera, I had personally carried all the wounded out of New York, one by one.

But from the Anomaly's perspective, there were now two truths:

A. The National Road Management Corps members weren't dead. They had simply been transported beyond the snowstorm's

boundary.

B. The National Road Management Corps members were all wiped out, and the remaining survivors would soon be brainwashed and die.

With these two truths coexisting, I edited the live broadcast and uploaded it to SG Net.

Almost immediately, the perception that 'Truth B is real' skyrocketed. No one intervened from the Corps' side to claim the video was fake, and the distortion added by the Anomaly made it feel all too real. Though there were some skeptics, they were a minority. The people who believed in Truth A could be counted on one hand, while those who believed in Truth B numbered well over a thousand.

"With this, we can control the Anomaly's perception," I explained to the remaining team, keeping the camera off. "SG Net works well here, in the Void where the Ice Age Anomaly resides. In other words, the Anomaly sees SG Net as part of reality."

"...So whichever truth the SG Net users believe, that becomes the truth for the Anomaly, right?"

"Exactly, Saintess." I smiled. "The Ice Age Anomaly must be thrilled right now. Well, I'm speaking metaphorically, since it doesn't actually feel emotions. But it thinks it has cornered Noh Do-hwa, the real power behind the peninsula, as well as the Constellations and even me, the Undertaker."

"Right."

"So from the Anomaly's perspective, the best possible ending is playing out. If we all die, it will believe it has reached a perfect ending and will remain forever trapped in the video instead of in reality."

"...I see."

That was why I edited and uploaded the video. This strategy would let us defeat an Anomaly capable of summoning -120°C weather in

the middle of summer, all in just three days. The plan was to lull the Anomaly into a sweet dream and seal it away, making it live in that dream forever.

"All that's left is to upload the final ending video. Before that, though, I'll need two of you to take on the roles of attempting an escape and going missing, while the last one will stay with me until the end, freezing to death."

"Ah. In that case, I—"

"I'll do it, " Do-hwa cut off the Saintess. "I'll stay until the end."

"You, Ms. Do-hwa?" the Saintess asked, slightly surprised.

"Yes. If the Saintess of Yongsan is the last one standing, SG Net viewers will think it's strange. No one knows her true identity... Besides, if I leave someone behind to die while I escape, it'll hurt my image as the Commander of the National Road Management Corps."

"Ah. That makes sense."

"I'm not particularly interested in managing my image, but it would be good for people to see that a high-ranking officer of the Corps stays in the most dangerous place until the very end." Do-hwa glanced at me through her monocle. "Isn't that right, Undertaker?"

"Hmm."

Even though we'd had an intense conversation the other night, neither of us brought up that topic again. As if nothing had happened.

It made sense. After all, both Do-hwa and I already knew everything we had discussed. We had merely voiced what we already understood that night.

I nodded. "That makes sense. When the camera starts rolling, Team Leader Yu Ji-won and the Saintess will head out."

"Understood."

"You should pretend to go searching for the missing people, as if you've been hypnotized by the Anomaly."

That left only Do-hwa and me alone in the Statue of Liberty's bunker.

Making it through the raging snowstorm would be no easy feat, but for the Saintess and Ji-won, it was definitely possible.

I filmed their silhouettes as they opened the door and walked out, editing it to be as dramatic as possible. Now, all that was left was to shoot the final ending.

"....."

"....."

Silence fell.

With just the two of us remaining in the bunker, which had once been filled with over 20 people, the frozen air felt even colder.

"So, how are you planning to film the final scene...?"

"Oh, I'm thinking of destroying the Statue of Liberty. The two of us will get trapped under the debris and slowly freeze to death."

"Hmm. And how do you plan to film the freezing part?"

"I'll control my Aura. I'll keep the warmth circulating through my internal organs while letting frost form on the surface of our skin."

"Well, as always, I'll leave it to you to handle the Anomaly..."

"Yes. But I'll need you to handle the filming with your smartphone. My hands will be full."

After distributing our roles, I gently knocked over the miniature Statue of Liberty model that had been placed on the world map.

It tumbled to join the pile of rubble, along with the Eiffel Tower and Big Ben from Paris and London.

Rumble, rumble, rumble...

As expected, the Ice Age Anomaly, which had perceived the Statue of Liberty as the "real deal," began to rage.

The snowstorm intensified, and the entire statue, where the bunker was located, started to shake violently like in an earthquake. In less than ten seconds, the outer walls of the statue began to tear apart, crashing to the ground with a deafening *thud-thud-thud*.

"Don't leave the range of my Aura under any circumstances."

I pulled Do-hwa close with one arm, shielding her from the falling debris with my Aura.

Thud! Crash! Thud!

The shattered pieces of the statue piled up around us, deflected by the Aura.

Rumble, rumble...

The Statue of Liberty had completely collapsed. We were now trapped between the wreckage, like survivors of a collapsed building. The narrow, dark crevice was filled with dust.

Do-hwa's face was mere inches from mine. Thankfully, she didn't seem hurt.

"Is it recording?"

"Seems to be. Well enough, at least. Not that I have any experience with this kind of thing..."

"As long as it's recording. The editing will take care of itself later. Let me know if you feel any pain or cold."

"Sure."

Do-hwa looked down at her hand and observed the thin layer of frost that had formed on her skin. "This is interesting. It really does look like frost, but I don't feel that cold. Seeing something like this

makes me want to learn Aura myself..."

"This is a trick only I can pull off. You don't have the talent for it, so you're better off giving up."

"Hah." She half-closed her eyes. "If you stop controlling your Aura even for a moment, the cold will penetrate my skin and kill me, won't it?"

"....."

Do-hwa placed her hand over my heart, and the outer edges of my chest felt cold.

From that moment on, she said nothing more. She simply rested her hand over my heart, feeling the rhythm of my heartbeat, and gazed into my eyes.

Sssshhhh...

Snowflakes gently fell through the cracks in the rubble.

When I looked into her eyes, reflected in mine, my skin appeared frozen. Both Do-hwa and I were encased in a layer of fabricated cold, using it like armor to keep the warmth inside.

"Not bad."

After filming for what felt like hours, Do-hwa finally murmured her thoughts.

"It's not bad at all."

There's a short epilogue.

Later that day, I edited the scene of Noh Do-hwa and the Undertaker freezing to death and uploaded it to SG Net. By then, the debris had long been cleared away, and we were sitting on the rubble as if it were a bench.

While sipping warm coffee beside me, Do-hwa commented, "Well, it

looks like people will think the two of us are dead for a while. Is that okay?"

"I've already told Seo-rin and Yo-hwa, so if there's any chaos, it'll just be a storm in a teacup. In two days, the Constellations will announce that it was all staged, and that will be the end of it."

I checked my phone and saw SG Net was in absolute chaos, with members going wild over the final video. The apocalypse seemed to have arrived, with people screaming about the fall of Korea, the collapse of Busan, and the doom of the National Road Management Corps.

A perfect success at baiting them!

"I'll let the view count rise for a while, then lock all the videos as private."

"Ohhh..."

"Once that's done, the Anomaly will be trapped inside those private videos, living out its existence only within them, like an urban legend."

"The internet as a prison for Anomalies... How fascinating."

Of course, I had deleted all copies of the videos outside of the SG Net posts.

How would I describe it?

The Ice Age Anomaly had been, quite literally, 'immortalized on the internet.'

No one would ever see it again, but still.

"All we need to do now is wait for more people to click the videos."

"Hm." Do-hwa took another sip of coffee. "So, for the next two days, we'll officially be dead..."

"Yes. Consider it a long-overdue vacation. Any place you'd like to

visit?"

"Well..."

She stretched her arms overhead, the winter thawing somewhere in the stretch of her fingertips. Then, she glanced at my hand.

"For now, since the hunt is over, could you turn off your phone? It's distracting."

I shrugged and powered off my phone.

From this point on, everything was off the record. I'll just add that the two busiest people on the Korean peninsula, Do-hwa and I, enjoyed a rare, blissful vacation.

"Hello, Undertaker. Long time no see."

"Oh, hey, Seo-rin. Thanks for taking care of Busan while the Ice Age Anomaly stirred things up."

"Don't mention it. But, about that video..."

"The **Surviving the Ice Age** series?"

"Yeah. In the last part, you and the Commander shared a kiss just before you died. Care to explain what that was about? I'm just curious, that's all."

"Oh."

...Let's just say that explaining to her that the kiss was not part of reality, but merely a 'fictional scene' distorted by the Anomaly's editing, turned out to be quite the challenge.

Footnotes:

Chapter 232

The One Who Ignites I

Sinnoa

As I mentioned briefly before, SG Net was the only internet community in the country. It wasn't the only one in the world, though.

Was it because there were other Ubiquitous ability users like Seo Gyu on other continents? Not really. It was just that the world Seo Gyu had built wasn't exactly vast.

"Hmm. No matter what I try, the internet speed doesn't improve in remote areas, hyung..."

"Yeah, I know."

Although Ubiquitous originally meant 'existing everywhere at once,' the truth was that Seo Gyu wasn't that omnipotent. His coverage extended across the length of the Korean peninsula.

That's it. Wi-Fi worked perfectly within that range.

You could get decent internet speeds in Shandong Peninsula in China and Kyushu in Japan, but beyond that, it slowed down drastically.

Sure, you could technically connect from the other side of the planet. Theoretically. But if you wanted to load a single post from the Uyuni Salt Flats, you'd be staring at a loading screen for over a year.

Though I had lost my memory, I, the Undertaker, was still a Korean at heart. And no one took internet speed more seriously than Koreans.

Over the course of countless regressions, I had repeatedly modified Seo Gyu's abilities, trying to install a 5G network across the globe.

The result?

“I’m sorry, hyung. The Saintess can extend her Aura range just by training, but no matter what I do, I’m stuck in place...”

All of it failed. A complete disaster.

From the start, Seo Gyu’s growth was on a different track than the Saintess’s.

“No need to apologize. Instead of expanding internet range, you’ve been improving the community’s system capabilities.”

“Hmm. Still, it’s frustrating...”

Yeah. To use an analogy, as Seo Gyu leveled up, he unlocked features like Improved UI Design, Image Uploads, Video Uploads, and Opening Chat Rooms.

He wasn’t about quantity. He was all about quality.

I patted Seo Gyu on the shoulder. “Wisdom is finding balance between ambition and contentment. You and the Saintess may be on different paths, but both of you have incredible abilities. Don’t beat yourself up.”

“Well... Alright.”

“Now, stop digging and come do some leg training with me.”

“Ah, sounds good! I’ll drag Ah-ryeon along with us!”

That day, Ah-ryeon lost 10 mL of tears in exchange for 1 gram of muscle.

This guild leader doesn’t tolerate those modern Awakeners who rely solely on Aura without developing their physical abilities.

To sum up, it was difficult to spread the grace of Ubiquitous to all of humanity, and as such, no foreign members ever appeared whenever SG Net. It was the reason I never mentioned them.

We had made a stopgap page to fill the gap.

[※Emergency Global Rescue Request※]

[Notice: You are seeing this page because you are accessing SG Net from outside the Korean peninsula.]

Report your situation.

When creating a post, avoid attaching images or videos. The smaller the file size, the better.

Do not turn off your phone until the loading screen disappears. If your device loses power during loading, your post will not be uploaded.

If you need to request help, be as specific as possible about the location and time.

We may not be able to respond to rescue requests from the Pacific Island Nations, Small Island Developing States, Oceania, North America, South America, or the British Isles. We apologize in advance.

Even if it seems too late, please describe your situation. It could serve as data for future generations.

This was the global emergency rescue page. In short, a 119 service for the planet.[1]

It was translated into every language I knew—English, French, Spanish, Chinese, and more.

Awakeners casually enjoying SG Net from within Korea couldn't access this page. In fact, only a handful of people even knew it existed.

Maybe that's why the posts were so sparse.

- Mongolia: If a person is smaller than a car wheel, they all die.

(Posted 1 year ago)

- Italy: The plague is severe. (Posted 2 years ago)

- France: Shadows come whenever the church bells ring. They kill people. Their clothes look strange. (Posted 4 years ago)

- England: There's been unending smoke in the sky for 5 years. The entire sky is black. Is it clear anywhere else? Atlantis has risen in the Atlantic Ocean. (Posted 4 years ago)

- Nepal: Too much snow is falling. (Posted 5 years ago)

- Palau: Kyaaa! I survived! My house is the only one left! (Posted 5 years ago)

New posts on the emergency page were extremely rare. Sometimes, it went silent for over a year.

There wasn't much anyone could do. To access SG Net, you had to be an Awakener. On top of that, you had to somehow hear rumors about this mysterious website. You had to endure endless loading screens and also own a smartphone, but smartphones and other electronic devices were considered dangerous, tainted by Anomalies —practically ticking time bombs.

'No wonder people can't access it.'

Survivor groups around the world tended to react violently whenever they saw electronics, resembling modern-day Luddite movements.

Even if they learned about SG Net, they were likely to dismiss it with, "Isn't that just a cursed site?"

It left a bitter taste in my mouth.

'What a shame. If only the prophets didn't blow up as soon as I regressed. They could have been natural allies for matters like this...'

Well, what could I do? Even in a ruined game, where my teammates

bailed at the start, I had to carry the team.

Then one day, during my 669th cycle, something happened.

- Russia: I know a method for long-distance communication. (Posted 1 year ago) (NEW!)

A post unlike anything I'd ever seen before appeared on the emergency page.

A regressor needs patience. Even if it feels like the world isn't changing and everything is repeating, a subtle wind of change will eventually blow.

That is, as long as you don't give up.

- Russia: I know a method for long-distance communication. (Posted 1 year ago) (NEW!)

This post was one such wind of change.

It came after I had successfully sealed away the Ice Age Anomaly completely. It led to the following conclusion:

'In previous cycles, this person must have died during the Ice Age. But this time, they survived and were able to access SG Net.'

This was why a regressor had to meddle everywhere, spreading their influence like a professional busybody. If I hadn't meddled to save SG Man during the tutorial, SG Net wouldn't exist. If I hadn't interfered to track down the troll villain on the forums, the Saintess of the North wouldn't exist either.

That's the life of a regressor. Even if 99% of your meddling leads to nothing, the remaining 1% will someday bring an abundant harvest.

And the new post on the emergency page was more than enough to ignite my professional meddling spirit.

Russia: I know a method for long-distance communication. (Posted 1 year ago)

A Chinese friend told me about this site. However, since it may be run by monsters, I will not disclose the specifics of the ‘long-distance communication method.’

If you truly offer ‘emergency rescue,’ come to Naryan-Mar (Нарьян-Мáр).

When you see the city from afar, look for the most noticeable pillar.

If you cannot come, please remember that there were people living here.

From,

The Frozen City

As soon as I read it, my regressor instincts whispered.

‘This is probably real.’

There was no unnecessary self-explanation, no exaggeration—just the message they needed to convey. The tone was that of a typical survivor who had given up on hope but wasn’t too lazy to cast out a line just in case.

I immediately contacted the administrator.

“Seo Gyu, can you trace where this post was uploaded from? Is it really from Russia?”

“Oh, yes. Just a moment... Oh, it’s legit! Posted from way up north. Took 11 months to upload just one post, hyung.”

Eleven months.

In that time, the author could have easily perished, swallowed up by the Void. But I didn’t hesitate to pack my gear. Even if the author had died in those 11 months, I could always act faster in the next cycle.

“I’m heading to Russia for a bit.”

"...You're the only person in the world who talks about casually 'heading to Russia' like that, hyung..."

And so, I set off for the north.

The name Naryan-Mar meant 'Red City.' As you might guess from the name, it was a planned city built during the Soviet era, initially as a coal mining settlement. Later, oil was discovered in the region, and it became quite the wealthy region.

Incidentally, Naryan-Mar was the 44th stop on the torch relay for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.

Even back then, I suspected that the curse of the number four had already taken root.

"Oh."

After traversing the Void and approaching the far north, I immediately understood what the Russian survivor's post meant.

- When you see the city from afar, look for the most noticeable pillar.

In the middle of the vast, snow-covered plain, where the horizon and sky blended into an endless white expanse, a dark column of smoke rose.

It was the "most noticeable pillar" mentioned in the post.

There were no signs of human life anywhere, but that column of smoke demanded attention, the only mark of civilization in the wasteland.

'I can see it from so far away. Could the author still be alive after 11 months?'

I picked up the pace.

Surprisingly, it would take another 1,000 kilometers to reach the source of the smoke in the 'Red City.' For the smoke to be visible from this far away, it was likely that the column itself was part of

the author's ability.

As I approached the smoke, I saw a middle-aged man feeding reindeer nearby.

"Hmm?"

Sensing my presence, the man turned around. Surprise flickered across his snow-covered eyebrows.

The man quickly put down his feed bucket and pulled out a crossbow. He didn't point it at me, though—just held it.

"Who's there? Are you human?"

"I'm human," I answered in Russian.

The man didn't lower his guard. The reindeer continued to shuffle through the snow around us.

"Only things that aren't human claim they are. There's no one alive in the direction you came from."

"Don't jump to conclusions. The Earth is round, after all. Unless, of course, you believe in the Flat Earth theory."

"Flat Earth... What?"

"You posted on SG Net, didn't you?"

The man's hand, holding the crossbow, froze. "SG Net? You mean the internet site?"

"Yes. Your post began uploading a year ago and finished four days ago. I saw it and came here from the Korean peninsula."

"Dear God... That site was real?" the man muttered in disbelief. "Wait a minute... You're saying the post went up four days ago, and you came all the way from Korea in just four days?"

"That's right."

"No way. Do you expect me to believe that? It makes more sense to

think that SG Net is cursed by monsters and that you're one of their agents."

"Hmm."

I turned my back to him, showing him that I had no hostile intentions. Then, I drew my sword Do-hwa and slashed at the endless white landscape.

Rumble, rumble, rumble...!

The snowy ground split open. The long-buried earth beneath, hidden from the sun for years, was suddenly exposed to the light.

A clean, precise cut. A ten-centimeter-wide canyon stretched all the way to the horizon.

I sheathed Do-hwa, resting upon it like a staff, and turned back to face him.

The man had dropped his crossbow. Even the reindeer had scattered in panic.

"As you can see, I'm the strongest human alive."

"....."

"I haven't slept for four days to get here, so I'm a bit tired. May I come in?"

The man's lips twitched, then he looked down at the crossbow half-buried in the snow. He picked it up and slung it over his back.

"...It seems I have an honored guest. Follow me."

Once again, Aura solved everything.

If a problem still exists, maybe you're just not using enough Aura.

Footnotes:

1 - The number to dial for emergency services in South Korea, like 911 in the US.

Chapter 233

The One Who Ignites II

Sinnoa

"Call me Nenet."

"I'm Undertaker. A pleasure to meet you."

The man who introduced himself as Nenet lived in a shabby tent whose walls were reinforced with reindeer hide to improve insulation. It was far too crude a structure to survive the apocalypse.

Probably not his main base, I decided, but rather a temporary shelter.

‘He doesn’t trust me enough to reveal his real home.’

The man was cautious. I had sensed it ever since reading his post.

"Your name is just as unique as mine. Nenet means 'person' in the Nenet language, doesn’t it?"

"...You know about the Nenets?" He looked surprised, almost as shocked as when I had split the glacier with my Aura.

Though most Koreans wouldn’t recognize the Nenets, they’d feel a sense of familiarity if you mentioned their traditional clothing. The parka we wear in winter comes from the Nenets culture. The man in front of me was also wearing a parka made of reindeer fur.

"Of course. They’ve lived around here for a long time, a minority group known for their nomadic lifestyle, right?"

"That’s right. I am a Nenet."

At that moment, he became much more welcoming. He brought in

firewood and lit the stove, then personally brewed tea and served it to me. He even brought out biscuits to go with the tea, along with pieces of Hershey's chocolate. It was probably the finest hospitality one could offer a stranger in the middle of an apocalypse.

I couldn’t be outdone, so I pulled four bottles of distilled liquor from my backpack and offered them as gifts.

The man immediately began treating me like a long-lost relative.

"I have another name." His face flushed red from the alcohol as he spoke. "But after the city was destroyed and I was the only one left alive, I changed my name to Nenet. I didn’t think anyone would ever call me by that name again... Who would have thought that website was real?"

"Was there a particular reason you chose the name Nenet?"

"Like I said, I was the last one left." A sigh escaped him, causing his beard to quiver. "I used to be just a regular person. Or at least, that’s how I saw myself. My parents were Nenets, but I never thought of myself as having any special connection to their bloodline."

But when the Void descended and wiped out the people of his city, one of his surviving relatives said this:

“Hey. We might be the last remaining Nenets on Earth. If we die, who will know that we ever existed?”

The man took another swig of liquor.

"That was my uncle. He was always a bit eccentric. He worked at a bank, but he also ran a small reindeer farm and always wore traditional Nenet clothing... Oh, did you see the reindeer outside? They originally belonged to him."

"I see."

"He was always serious about preserving native culture, but after the world went to hell, he became even more obsessed with tradition. It was kind of ironic—he didn’t even speak Nenet as well

as I did."

Amusingly, both the man in front of me and his uncle were ordinary city dwellers. Their attempt to live like nomads after all this time was inevitably bumbling.

"And your uncle...?"

"He died two years ago. One of the reindeer he raised turned into a monster. It grew to nearly 10 meters in size, with massive antlers that were absolutely majestic." The man’s mouth opened slightly, his gaze distant as he recalled the memory. "Those antlers were magnificent. My uncle was skewered by one of them."

"What happened to the reindeer?"

"I don’t know. I couldn’t defeat it. I just hid until it wandered off into the snow. Then I rushed over to my uncle, but he was already dead."

"My condolences."

"Don’t be. He was killed by the animal he loved so much—it’s almost a good death. He was a troublesome guy."

Nenet set the bottle down.

"That’s why I’m clumsily trying to preserve the Nenet traditions. Raising reindeer. Living in a tent..."

"I think it’s admirable."

"Not really. I’m not proud of my bloodline. But like my uncle said, if I die, the Nenets will be extinct. No one will be left to speak our language..."

"....."

"It’s just something I’m doing."

We spent the rest of the night warming the air near the stove with our breath, drinking liquor, nibbling on biscuits, and munching on

cheap chocolate.

The next day, after only a few hours of sleep, Nenet guided me to another location.

"Sorry to have kept you in the cold all night. Follow me."

I instinctively sensed that Nenet was finally inviting me to his real home, not just a temporary shelter.

The city once known as the Red City had turned completely white. Even the tops of four- and five-story concrete buildings were mostly buried in snow.

"Looks like the White Army won the second civil war."

"Hm? Ha! Undertaker, your Russian is good, and you know my people well."

Nenet seemed pleased with my dark humor.

The place he led me to was the regional hospital. It used to be a five-story building, but now only the top floor remained above the snow.

Nenet climbed a ladder to the roof of the hospital. A few corpses were frozen there, their foreheads pierced by crossbow bolts, but he paid them no mind.

"Take a look at this," he said, pointing to a structure in the corner of the roof. It looked like a chimney, or maybe a small lighthouse, constantly emitting smoke.

It was the source of the “smoke pillar” I had spotted 1,000 kilometers away.

"This is the ‘long-distance communication method’ I discovered."

"It’s... a beacon?"

"That’s right."

A beacon. An ancient long-distance communication method used by humans for centuries. Though criticized during the Imjin War for its limitations, it had always been useful. Most modern people probably recognized it from the movie *The Lord of the Rings*.

The earliest recorded use of beacons in literature dates back to 458 BCE, in the prologue of *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus. In the play, the guards spot a beacon and raise an alarm. The scene likely served as inspiration for the *LOTR* beacon sequence.

In any case—

"Do you mean to say that this primitive method can work for long-distance communication? Wouldn't the Void distort perception across the land?"

"Void? You mean that hell where monsters roam?"

"Exactly."

"Don't worry. The beacon I've lit crosses over that hell without issue. You saw the smoke pillar from a great distance away, didn't you?"

I had.

"It may look like fire, but it's something else." Nenet tossed firewood into the furnace beneath the brick structure. "Take a look inside. You can see the firewood is still intact, can't you?"

"Oh."

"You need to add firewood to make the flame rise, but it doesn't actually burn the wood. Just the act of adding wood is enough to light the fire."

"Even if it snows or rains?"

"It still burns just fine."

My eyes widened. "Wait. I saw the smoke pillar from 1,000 kilometers away. Does that mean that no matter the weather, this

beacon can be seen from 1,000 kilometers away?"

"Hm. That's right. Though I'm not sure of the exact distance, it's visible from very far away."

This was incredible!

I excitedly circled the beacon. It looked like an ordinary brick structure, nothing remarkable at first glance. "This is fascinating—truly fascinating, Nenet. What are the specific conditions for your ability to work?"

"First, you need to build a proper beacon. I experimented with torches, but you can't carry the fire while moving. It has to be a stationary structure that anyone would recognize as a beacon. You could stack firewood, but the effect would be weaker."

"Is that all?"

Nenet shook his head. "No, here's the crucial part. Just lighting an ordinary fire won't work. The beacon flame must come from a fire I've lit. Only then does this strange, magical fire appear."

I quickly pieced it together. "So if I were to take a flame from this beacon and use it to light a fire elsewhere..."

"Another pillar of smoke would rise, just like this one. As long as you build the beacon properly."

"Ah."

I immediately put it to the test. I left Naryan-Mar, built a makeshift beacon, and transferred a flame from Nenet's beacon using a torch.

Whoosh...

After adding firewood to the furnace and lighting the flame, it didn't take long for the fire to bloom like a flower. Soon, smoke was rising through the chimney.

"Oh!"

The smoke shot straight up, rising into the sky as if there were no wind at all, stretching endlessly upward like a space elevator.

‘...This might be a small revolution for my regressor project.’

A simple ability.

‘Light a beacon, and it will be visible from afar.’

It didn’t directly aid in survival or enhance combat capabilities.

But this ability carried potential. I felt the same excitement I had when I first discovered Seo Gyu’s Ubiquitous.

‘If I could build beacons like this every 1,000 kilometers across the world...’

We wouldn’t be able to exchange detailed information like we did on the community.

‘But at the very least, we’d know instantly which regions are in danger.’

I stayed with Nenet for a few more days, testing the beacons. Just as he had promised, the beacons remained lit even in blizzards.

It was an extraordinary discovery.

"Nenet, I think Sacred Fire would be a fitting name for this ability."

"Sacred Fire? Like the Olympic flame?"

"Exactly."

Legend has it that in ancient Greece, the fire from the temple at Delphi was carried to other city-states.

To the Greeks, Delphi was the center of the world. The fire, which originated from the heart of the earth, was passed from city to city and eventually found its way into the hearths of ordinary citizens’ homes. Thus, the fire in each household was linked to every other household, and as the world breathed, so too did the fire in the

heart of the earth.

The world was made of fire. Sacred Fire was, in essence, the reality of Ubiquitous—‘existing everywhere at once’.

"That name seems a bit grandiose..."

"Not at all. Nenet, I will carry your flame and spread it across the world."

Nenet scratched his cheek. He hadn’t expected me to be this enthusiastic.

"Well, if you say so. Make good use of it."

There’s a short epilogue.

When it was time for us to part, I asked Nenet, "Would you consider moving to Busan?"

"Busan?"

"Yes. I wouldn’t call it a great place to live, but it functions well enough as a city."

Nenet pondered for a moment. "No, I think I’ll stay. I don’t want to leave my homeland at this point."

"I understand."

"I don’t have much attachment to life. Posting that message on SG Net was more for fun. Meeting someone like you at the end feels like a blessing."

Nenet stroked the neck of a nearby reindeer.

"I can’t abandon the reindeer my uncle left behind... If you’re really grateful, why don’t you teach me some of that Aura or whatever?"

"Sure. I’ll give you a crash course."

In the end, Nenet chose to live out his days in the White City.

During my 669th cycle, I was extremely busy traveling the world, testing the effectiveness of the Sacred Fire. Perhaps someday I'll get a chance to talk about the global beacon-building project.

After several years, when all the work was done, I returned to Naryan-Mar with a bottle of the finest liquor.

"Nenet?"

But Nenet was nowhere to be found.

He wasn't in the tent where he had served me biscuits and chocolate, nor was he at his hideout on the hospital roof.

Only the ever-burning beacon remained.

I eventually found Nenet's body far away in the snow.

The last Nenet had died, impaled by the antlers of a reindeer that had grown to 15 meters in size. It was a mutual kill.

"....."

The reindeer had grown so enormous that neither Nenet's body nor the reindeer's corpse was fully submerged in the snow.

As I buried the man who had clung to the traditions of his ancestors, even though they were no longer relevant, I had a thought:

It's said that people begin to reflect on their past as death approaches. If so, might something similar happen when an entire race faces extinction?

Perhaps the fires and smoke rising gently across the world were Nenet's final legacy.

Footnotes:

Chapter 234

The Performer I

Sinnoa

Talking about remnants of the past suddenly reminded me of another person. But before we dive into that, let me ask you this first:

Have you ever heard of cover song culture?

A cover song is when someone takes a song originally created by someone else and sings it in their own voice. There’s no need to look far for an example. If you've ever gone to a karaoke bar and sung a song, that’s a cover.

And in Busan, there's a very famous cover artist.

“Hey? Ah-ryeon, where are you going?”

“Oh, uh, I have a concert today. I saved up some rations to buy the ticket...”

“A concert? Dang Seo-rin?”

“Eek! N-no, not that strange Latin chant concert... I’m going to Cecelia's concert!”

The Masked Song Queen.

Stage name: セシリア.

Given that her name is written in Japanese (セシリア) and not English (Cecilia), you could probably guess that she was Japanese. However, that wasn't common knowledge. In fact, fewer than ten people in all of Korea knew that. Even I only found out later from the Saintess.

This secrecy led to endless speculation on SG Net.

- Anonymous: Does anyone know who Cecelia really is?

[Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: I tried digging into it with some friends, but there's barely any information.

- Anonymous: I don't get why people worship that girl as if she's a music queen. I've heard that she even has private encore performances for VIPs after concerts. I bet there's a backstage deal...

OldManGoryeo: Idiot. I've bought VIP tickets more than ten times, and that never happened.

Anonymous: If there's no proof, then it's fake, right?

- CookingQueen: I think her voice is just so beautiful! It's amazing that someone can soothe the hearts of people in such despair with their singing.

- Anonymous: So, is she selling the blue pills now?

Her appearance, origin, age, gender, hobbies—nothing was known about the Masked Singer. She only performed at certain times, in certain places.

How was that possible? Was it because the apocalypse had erased everyone's personal data?

That certainly played a role. But the real reason was something else entirely.

"These days, SG Net is all about Cecelia. Doesn't it get boring, hearing about the same unremarkable singer all the time?"

"Unremarkable? Guild Leader, how could you say that? Cecelia isn't unremarkable—she embodies every single quality there is!"

Cecelia was a cover singer like no other. She had the ability to perfectly imitate any song.

On stage, when she sang Michael Jackson, she became Heavenly Demon Michael. When she belted out Celine Dion, she turned into Celine Empress.

Her ability was one of Endless Transformation. Cecelia could freely change her voice and tone to deliver a 100% accurate rendition of any song.

In short, it was impossible to identify who she really was from her performances. Her voice changed with every song.

“Guild Leader, would you like to come with me? You’ve saved up so many rations, you could easily buy a ticket from a reseller.”

“I’m not much fun at concerts.”

“Huh? Why not? I always go alone to these shows, anyway...”

“.....”

I ended up going with her.

As expected from one of the most famous singers in Korea after Dang Seo-rin, Cecelia’s concert tickets were expensive. Even the concert venue was unusual. While most of the businesses in Busan reused old buildings from the past, Cecelia’s performance hall had been completely rebuilt by architects.

A beautifully constructed wooden building. In the center was the stage, with around 50 tables arranged in front of it. You couldn’t just buy a ticket either. You had to order a meal to attend.

“If Dang Seo-rin is an idol for the masses, this seems like a more exclusive club...”

“Wow, Guild Leader! This is my first time in the VIP section!”

Ah-ryeon was bouncing with excitement.

VIP guests sat in partitioned balcony seats on the second floor. You could enjoy an expensive meal in private while watching the concert below. It was so luxurious, you’d forget the apocalypse ever happened.

“This is your first time? You make a lot of money. Don’t tell me you blew it all gambling again?”

“Hehehe. Well, whenever I win, I get a lot of attention from the people at the table. It’s just too satisfying to stop.”

“Didn’t you get stabbed in an alley because of that last time? You never learn.”

“But getting stabbed doesn’t matter since I heal with Self-Regeneration, right?”

“……”

Just then, the lights went out.

Staff members moved around with torches, lighting various spots, bringing the atmosphere to life.

Next to me, Ah-ryeon, who had been cutting into her steak, cheered so excitedly that she sprayed spit everywhere. Truly an embarrassment, wherever she went.

- *Aaah, aaaaah…*

In the middle of the now-dark stage, Cecelia stood holding a microphone.

It wasn’t a functioning microphone. Electronics were always at risk of being corrupted by Anomalies.

But for a singer, a microphone was like armor for the soul. No performer would step onto the battlefield of a stage without their armor, even if it didn’t work.

- *Aaah, aaaaaah* ♪

With her face fully covered by a mask and not an inch of skin showing, Cecelia looked like a character from a Venetian carnival as she began to sing.

“Kyaaaah!”

“Ceceliaaa!”

The audience, who had paid a fortune for their tickets, erupted in cheers.

Tonight's concert was dedicated to a legendary British rock band. Every song was from their repertoire.

With most electronics too dangerous to use, Cecelia had become almost the only way to hear beloved music at the original quality. For the fans, it was a dream come true.

- *Aaah, aaaaaah ♪*

And for Cecelia, it was like winning the lottery.

Think about it. Every day, she could pick a different famous musician from history, perform their songs, and make tons of money. By posting her six-month concert schedule in advance on SG Net, fans of each artist would flock to pay whatever it took for a seat. There was no need to stress about creating new songs or worry that fans might get bored with her setlists. Cecelia's concerts were always sold out.

A win-win for both the fans and the singer.

"Hmm."

But I...

I couldn't get excited about Cecelia's performance. Specifically, I couldn't bring myself to feel any attachment to it.

Even if I set aside my bias as a die-hard Dang Seo-rin fan and the fact that I was Witch Unit No. 0, it was just...

'In the end, isn't she just a highly advanced recorder?'

Granted, it was impressive that this "recorder" performed live on stage. But still, I preferred performances where the singer's true voice came through. Even among cover artists, I liked those who sang with their own voices.

But you should take my harsh judgment with a grain of salt,

considering my unique circumstances.

‘Whenever I want, I can play any song in my head perfectly using my Complete Memory.’

To me, Cecelia’s live performance had almost no value. In fact, the true spectacle that night was Ah-ryeon next to me, squealing with excitement, “Cecelia is the best! I’m so glad I’m alive!” while bawling her eyes out.

After the main concert and the encore, there was a private fan-signing event for VIPs.

Wearing her Venetian mask, Cecelia, Busan’s Song Queen, greeted us.

“Hello.”

Even her voice was tuned to match the lead vocalist of the British rock band.

“Thank you so much for coming to the concert. Would you like me to sign something for you both?”

“No, just sign for her.”

“Alright.” Cecelia smoothly autographed Ah-ryeon’s poster. “Here you go...”

As she handed over the signed poster and looked up, our eyes met.

For some reason, Cecelia froze for a moment.

Specifically, she hesitated for about half a second. It wasn’t a long time, and her expression was hidden by the mask, but I could sense a brief moment of shock.

It wasn’t too surprising. My face was well-known. The Hero of the Ten Legs Battle appearing as a VIP would certainly be a surprise.

“...Are you sure you don’t want my autograph?”

“Yes, I’m just here to accompany a fan of yours. But your performance was excellent.”

“...Thank you.”

Her reaction was odd, but honestly, I didn’t think much of it. I was too busy calming Ah-ryeon, who was over the moon about getting the autograph.

I barely managed to pull Ah-ryeon away from the fan-signing event.

“Did you enjoy it that much?”

“Yes! Thanks to you, Guild Leader, I got a personal autograph! You’re the best, Guild Leader! I’ll never forget this concert!”

“Well, I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“Hehe... Oh, wait! I need to go back to the VIP section and take some photos!”

“Huh? Why?”

“I need to post proof on SG Net!”

“.....”

Later that night, SG Net was graced with a photo of Ah-ryeon flipping the camera off, alongside a post titled: **[Can’t afford Cecelia concert? Where’s your VIP status now, you broke bastards? LOL]** .

Truly, she was an embarrassment wherever she went.

I glanced at the framed autograph Ah-ryeon proudly displayed like a treasure.

- *To Sim Ah-ryeon. I hope it was a wonderful night.*

Oddly, there was no “Cecelia” signature anywhere on the poster. I couldn’t get it out of my mind, how strange that was.

So, what kind of music do I, Undertaker, prefer?

Setting Dang Seo-rin aside, since she's a unique case, I usually prefer listening to underground musicians while eating lunch or dinner at a local restaurant.

"Hello, I'm Calypso. I'll be singing a song I wrote and composed myself. It's called... Ruins."

Take that musician, Calypso, for example. She'd perform tirelessly at every local restaurant, whether it was a soup place or a BBQ joint, armed with only an acoustic guitar.

"Is that a half-moon breaking, or is it your teary eyes...?"

To be kind, she was an unimpressive talent.

In these times, musicians like her didn't get paid by restaurant owners. They just borrowed the space and survived on whatever tips the customers threw their way.

Comparing her to Song Queen Cecelia wouldn't even be fair. Cecelia performed at one of the most luxurious venues in Busan, while Calypso sang at half-ruined restaurants with signs that simply read "Open for Business."

Naturally, the customers' generosity was on a different level too. Most underwhelming musicians left the restaurant empty-handed after filling the place with sound.

"Thanks for the performance."

"Oh...! Thank you, Undertaker!"

And I liked musicians like her.

Calypso's Korean was clumsy. I suspected she wasn't from here—probably from Japan. It couldn't have been easy adapting to life in a foreign land, yet she showed up at nine out of ten restaurants I visited. That meant she was hustling hard, begging restaurant owners for performance opportunities.

In other words?

It’s not like I had some creepy hobby of hoarding little-known performers all for myself.

Unlike Noh Do-hwa, who had a disdain for the younger generation, I always felt the urge to help young people who were struggling and fighting to make it. I didn’t tip too much or too little—just enough for them to survive. I wanted to extend their fight, giving them a bit more time in this broken world so they could hold on and maybe find their way.

“Thank you for the performance.”

“Oh, yes! Thank you!”

Calypso bowed her head.

But something felt different this time. Normally, we would have parted ways there, but Calypso lifted her head with a determined expression.

“Um, excuse me...!”

“Hmm.” I gave a warm smile. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Huh...? What?”

“There’s no need to thank me. You don’t even need to remember my name. I’m just an anonymous fan supporting you from afar.”

“Uh...”

“Keep going.”

I gave her a thumbs-up and walked out of the restaurant. I could sense her confusion, but I cut off any hesitation in my mind.

‘Perfect.’

My footsteps echoed with pride. Wasn’t this the ideal model of how a fan should behave?

Feeling so pleased with myself, I turned into a deserted alley and

started talking to the Saintess.

“Isn’t that the right way to do things, Saintess?”

[Hmm...]

“Seeing someone work so hard, regardless of their background, always fills my heart.”

[Yes... I suppose.]

“And that fancy restaurant from last time... Ugh, don’t get me started. Limiting your audience to just 50 rich people in a world that could collapse any day? Ridiculous.”

[.....]

“Someday, I’ll build a system where everyone can enjoy entertainment.”

But the Saintess seemed strangely unresponsive. As someone who spent her days trapped in an aquarium, I was probably the only person she could talk to like this. We should have been bantering more, but today something was off.

[Um, Mr. Undertaker?]

“Yes?”

[I’ve been debating whether to tell you, but I’ve decided that keeping this a secret from you would be wrong.]

“What is it?”

The Saintess took a deep breath and said, [The musician you’ve been supporting, Calypso...]

“Yes?”

[She’s actually the same person as Cecelia.]

Blink.

“What?”

[In other words, the unknown artist you’ve been praising and the famous Song Queen of Busan are the exact same person.]

“……”

[Sorry. I knew how much you enjoyed playing the anonymous patron, so I thought it was better to keep quiet. But in hindsight, I should have told you from the start.]

“…So, Calypso, or rather Cecelia… she recognized me?”

[Of course. She probably wanted to reveal her identity to you just now. She was probably trying to muster the courage.]

“……”

[……]

“……”

[Did I make a mistake by telling you? Should I have kept quiet?]

This is all Ah-ryeon’s fault!

Footnotes:

Chapter 235

The Performer II

Sinnoa

What do you think is the most overwhelming advantage of being a regressor?

It's the ability to "correct" embarrassing mistakes in the next cycle.

History is written by the victor. And in the apocalypse, survival is victory.

Now, the mistakes from the previous cycle officially no longer existed.

The embarrassing incident with my favorite street musician? Wiped from history.

In this new cycle, I—along with Ah-ryeon—became a passionate fan of the Masked Song Queen, Cecelia.

“Guild Leader...! I-I can’t believe I get to fangirl with you! This feels like a dream!”

Every time there was a concert, regardless of the set, I spent a fortune buying VIP seats. During the show, I’d order the most expensive dishes and buy all the merchandise.

“I’m so happy! Meeting you at Busan Station was the luckiest moment of my life!”

“Because now you get to boast non-stop on SG Net?”

“Yes!”

Ah-ryeon’s admiration for me skyrocketed to unprecedented levels.

On the flip side, Seo-rin's gaze toward me grew colder.

Her nickname was the Divine Songstress, while Cecelia was known as the Song Queen. It was a dichotomy ripe for stirring up conflict.

Although my true loyalty as a fan would forever lie with the Divine Songstress, in this cycle, she no longer sang for me when we were alone.

It pained me, but there was no helping it. The purpose of all this was singular: to correct the embarrassing history related to Cecelia = Calypso.

“Oh, you're here again! Undertaker and Ah-ryeon! You’d like an autograph, right?”

“Yes, please.”

“The pleasure is all mine! I’m always so grateful!”

In this cycle, Cecelia now clearly saw me as one of her devoted fans.

Not just that. As in previous cycles, I continued to attend Calypso’s performances during lunch, day after day. Whether she wore a mask or not, whether she sang covers or originals, I was always there as Cecelia = Calypso’s fan.

Naturally, it started to weigh on her mind.

“W-wait, Undertaker!”

One day, after tipping her generously at a live performance in a restaurant, I left. That’s when Calypso came running after me.

“Yes? What is it?” I asked.

“*Huff*... I-I... *Huff*...”

“Take your time.”

Calypso was panting heavily from chasing after me, her acoustic

guitar still in hand. When she finally caught her breath, she looked up at me with a resolute expression, as if she had made a difficult decision.

“I-I’ve been wanting to tell you something for a while, but I never had the chance. The truth is... I’m...”

“I already know.”

“Wh-what?”

“You’re Cecelia, aren’t you?”

Calypso froze, her entire body trembling like she had been struck by lightning. Her blue eyes, wide with disbelief, stared at me.

That was Strike One.

Calm and composed, I smiled warmly yet meaningfully.

Over my countless lives as a regressor, I had mastered the art of facial expressions to the point where I could act with method precision for 24 hours straight. I had honed the ability to convey anything with just my expressions.

I had Dormammu'd my way through cycles for this very moment, and failure was not an option.

“H-how...? Even the restaurant owner doesn’t know my identity. I haven’t told anyone...”

“A true fan recognizes their singer, no matter what stage they’re on.”

“.....!”

Strike Two.

Artists are often deeply attached to their fans, harboring fantasies of that one fan who truly understands their art.

This dream, deeply ingrained in the psyche of many artists, gave

rise to terms like 知音 (지음)—meaning a soulmate who truly understands one's music—dating back to ancient times. It was a sentiment rooted in their very souls.[2]

For someone like Cecelia = Calypso, who had spent her entire life proving herself by mimicking other musicians' songs, my words were nothing short of intoxicating. And the fact that the one person who recognized her was none other than the Hero of the Ten Legs Battle? That was a surefire dopamine overdose.

"B-but..." In halting, awkward Korean, she said, "I... As Calypso, I cannot sing at all. My voice, my tone—they are completely different. How could you possibly recognize me...?"

"Even if the voice you use on the surface is different, the soul behind it remains unchanged. Your songs as Calypso have always brought me comfort."

"But... if you knew, why didn't you ever say anything?"

"I'm just a fan, nothing more. Even if others fail to recognize Calypso, I was content simply to listen just as you were content to keep singing at the restaurants. That's all."

"……!"

Strike Three. Out.

On that day, both the unknown musician Calypso and the Masked Song Queen Cecelia found salvation.

We parted after promising to meet again later. On my way back, the Saintess contacted me through Constellation Telepathy.

[I'm impressed, Mr. Undertaker. Cecelia's singing is so indistinguishable from the original artists that I thought recognizing her true identity would be impossible. But your keen regressor's insight truly shines. I'm in awe.]

"You flatter me."

[I've spent my days observing people with my Clairvoyance, and

along the way, I've grown lazy when it comes to reading their hearts. I'll take this as inspiration to re-examine my habits.]

"You'll do wonderfully, Saintess. I'm sure of it."

At no point did I feel any guilt about what I had done.

Manipulative, you might say?

Well, that was fitting for a Guild Leader like Ah-ryeon's, don't you think?

Like guild member, like Guild Leader? Utter nonsense. Beauty only exists when it's perceived, and ugliness, too, ceases to exist if it goes unnoticed. My so-called "ugliness" was no exception. If no one knew, how could they accuse me of it?

"Mission success! History altered!"

However...

At the time, I had no idea.

That one day, a certain brat named Oh Dok-seo would publish a detailed record of my life for all to see...

"At first, I lived in Fukuoka. But everyone around me died, and I just couldn't stand it anymore. I couldn't stay there any longer, so I came to Busan."

"I see."

"Yes. I had some basic knowledge of Korean, and I'd heard rumors here and there that Busan was still relatively safe..."

Cecelia's story = Calypso's story—and I learned that it wasn't particularly unique given the times.

Everyone had lost someone. And as a result, people flocked together, trying to replace the family they had lost.

In apocalyptic fiction, you often hear about how disasters cause

bonds to break, leaving everyone to fend for themselves. Sure, such cases existed. But in reality, the opposite was more common.

Survivors banded together. When they had no reason to unite, they created new terms like 空緣 (공연) meaning “fate with no ties” to justify staying together.

“If there’s anything unusual about Cecelia = Calypso, it’s that she deliberately chose to be an outsider.”

In short, she had no clear sense of identity.

Any ties she had to the Korean Peninsula? None.

Any connections in Japan? Dead.

Her acquaintances in the neighborhood? She left them behind.

And to top it all off, her Awakening ability dealt the final blow:

The Masked Song Queen. A skill that allowed her to perfectly mimic other singers’ voices.

It was the ideal power for someone who wandered without a place to call home.

“That makes sense. So you threw yourself into performing as Calypso in the hope of building real relationships with those who recognized your true voice.”

“Uh... yes. It’s a bit embarrassing, but you’re right.”

“I see.”

“Someday, I want to hone my skills, gather fans, and perform as Calypso in the same venues where Cecelia sings! Only then will my true talent shine!”

I rested my chin in my hand, contemplating how best to respond.

It would have been easy to suggest, "You’re already making tons of money, so why not just be satisfied?" But the woman before me

wasn't content with that.

Calypso was chasing something deeper, looking for a place where she could truly belong, somewhere her voice would be recognized. So, what could I, as a fan, offer her in this situation?

"Must you only perform live?"

She flinched. "Huh?"

"You're ignoring your talent as Cecelia. You think, 'I'm just a recording of other people's voices. That's not my true self.' Right?"

"....."

"I don't mind, but Cecelia's fans would be disappointed."

"...But aren't those fans only interested in the original singers' voices I imitate?"

"No. There are definitely fans of Cecelia as well."

Like Ah-ryeon or OldManGoryeo.

Though I was a bit embarrassed to include them as fellow fans, fans were fans, after all.

"From my perspective... it seems like you're worried that Cecelia's reputation has grown too big compared to your original talent."

"....."

"You want to reveal your true self, sing your own songs. But you're afraid that if you do, your fans will be disappointed."

Calypso bit her lip in silence. Her silence wasn't a rejection, but rather an agreement.

"This dilemma comes from the fact that you don't have your own space. But it's surprisingly easy to solve."

"Are you suggesting I buy a venue and create my own stage? I've thought about that, but..."

“No, that’s not it.” I sipped my coffee before placing it down. “The ability you possess has incredible value. If you shift your perspective just a bit, you can see how even the songs you cover could become part of who you are.”

“Wait... how?” She looked at me with wide eyes.

I smiled. “Have you ever considered becoming a radio DJ?”

Music radio programs.

If I had to pick the most famous one in Korea, it would undoubtedly be Bae Chul-soo’s Music Camp.

A DJ’s ability to curate songs and lead the show could make or break programs like that. For example, in classical music shows, the DJ’s expertise in selecting not only which symphony to play but also which orchestra’s recording to use—combined with their commentary—defined their standing as a DJ.

With the rise of internet streaming, radio’s golden age had passed into twilight. But in the post-apocalyptic world, the opposite was true.

Radio, Internet, and the Reverse World had reversed roles.

“These days, it’s hard to keep broadcast equipment running. Even if you find working gear, Anomalies tend to corrupt it whenever they get the chance.”

Whether it was vinyl records or albums, they often contained strange Anomalies like "Satan’s Song" or "Music That Puts Holes in Your Brain."

“But Calypso, you’re different. You don’t need any equipment—you can recreate countless albums using only your voice.”

“Ah...”

“You might not be able to completely block Anomalies, but Calypso’s music program would be the safest channel in the world.”

“Me, hosting a music show...”

“Yes. If you limit yourself to being just a live performer, you’ll always feel insecure about being nothing more than a mimic. But if you became a DJ who shares the ‘original voices’ of these singers...?”

“.....”

“That would be an incredible strength as a DJ. Listeners would tune in to your show with joy.”

“A DJ’s talent...”

“That’s right. And you could even slip in your own original songs from time to time. Your channel would be irreplaceable.”

Calypso stared blankly into space for a long while. Her coffee had cooled by the time she finally spoke.

“...I’ll give it a try. Radio.”

“Good decision.”

“Yes. I wouldn’t have to show my face, and reading listeners’ stories sounds like it could be fun.”

It turned out that she was naturally suited to it.

I had already helped set up a radio channel called Ravenclaw Busan Branch. So gathering the necessary equipment and assisting with tests wasn’t hard.

Once Calypso reached a level of hosting that satisfied her, she came to me with this question:

“Benefactor.”

At this point, Calypso had started calling me “Benefactor.” I had asked her to avoid using my name, Undertaker, when sharing any stories related to me on air, since it would make me too much of a public figure. Hence, she chose a more ambiguous nickname.

It was an awkward title, but since her Korean wasn't perfect, I let it slide.

"I think it's time to choose a name for the show. What do you think would be good?"

"Oh. You still haven't decided?"

"Haha, no. I kept putting it off, thinking I'd do it tomorrow..."

Despite her hardworking nature, this was surprising.

"Hmm." I tapped my pencil on a notepad. After some thought, I wrote down a name that suddenly came to mind. "How about this?"

"Oh! Did you think of something already? Let me see!"

On the notepad, I had written Nymphocalypse (님프칼립스).

Calypso tilted her head.

"Nymph... Calypse? What does it mean?"

"It hides both Cecelia and Calypso in the name."

Someone like Calypso, who enjoyed hiding her true identity, leaped with joy upon hearing my explanation.

And thus, the music radio show Nymphocalypse was born.

There's a short epilogue.

Attracting listeners to Nymphocalypse didn't require any grand promotion.

Simply posting, "Hey, there's a new music show—tune in if you're bored," on SG Net was enough.

- Anonymous: I tuned in to the frequency from that post. What the hell is this?

- Anonymous: The sound quality is insane.

[Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: What are you talking about?

Anonymous: I turned on the radio channel advertised on the board earlier. The sound quality is crazy good, and the DJ's voice is amazing.

[Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: Could it be an Anomaly?

Anonymous: Maybe, but it seems safe for now. Check it out yourself.

With Ah-ryeon controlling 12 different anonymous accounts, creating buzz was a piece of cake.

If Calypso had lacked skill, the hype would have died out quickly. But like many hardworking young people, she had the tenacity to seize the opportunity.

- [Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: ? Whoa, this is actually really good.

Within a year, Nymphocalypse, broadcast every evening at 7 PM, became a must-listen for not just Awakeners but regular people as well.

- Hello. This is Nymphocalypse bringing you a beautiful evening. Our first song today is...

- If you'd like to send in a story, please contact your Constellation. They'll pass your message along to me...

- Hello. This is Nymphocalypse. The weather's gotten quite chilly lately, hasn't it?

Even as the world crumbled, Nymphocalypse never missed its 7 PM broadcast.

Whether you were an Awakener fighting Anomalies on the frontlines or a civilian supporting from the rear, people tuned in to the radio to hear the stories and songs of others.

“Hm.”

Naturally, I, the Undertaker, was no exception.

One day, I did something unusual. Without telling Calypso, I rented the entire venue where Cecelia had once performed. It cost a fortune, but that didn’t matter.

In the middle of the stage, where Cecelia had once stood with a microphone, I placed a wooden chair.

And on that chair, I set a radio. A vintage Zenith K731, made of wood.

- Hello. This is Nymphocalypse, bringing you a beautiful evening.

An empty audience.

A silent stage, save for the radio.

I sat at a table, two rows away from the stage, and waited.

In a place once filled with eager fans, I quietly listened to the “live performance on stage.”

- And today’s request is...

There was a slight pause.

- ...A song by an artist named Calypso. They were once an unknown singer, wandering from restaurant to restaurant in Busan.

- Haha.

- ...I wonder if anyone remembers them.

- Since it’s a request, I’ll sing it.

I heard a rustle of someone shifting around. Then, through the radio, the delicate strumming of a classical guitar filled the air.

- Calypso. Ruins.

And the song began.

I sipped my coffee. And as I listened to the voice of a now-renowned DJ, I nodded to myself.

After all, this was still my favorite voice.

Footnotes:

1 - In the *Marvel* universe, Dr. Strange locks the inter-dimensional entity Dormammu in an infinite time loop and repeatedly tries to subdue it using various methods until it nearly goes insane and admits defeat, begging to be released from the confines of endless time.

2 - The origin of the term comes from a famous story during the Spring and Autumn period in China. The musician Yu Boya had a friend, Zhong Ziqi, who could understand and appreciate his music deeply. After Ziqi's death, Boya broke his instrument, feeling that no one else could truly understand his music, thus symbolizing the depth of their friendship.

3 - Calypso is a nymph from Greek mythology. Her name means “to conceal” and she is known for being cursed to live alone on an island without true recognition or love.

Chapter 236

The Transplanter I

Sinnoa

I've had many jobs in my lifetime.

In the last episode, I found work as a DJ Producer, and over my various cycles, I've taken on roles like convenience store owner, Oh Dokseo's editor, Dang Seo-rin's personal secretary, academy teacher, and even a café barista.

Making ends meet was never easy on a single job, so juggling two, three, or even more jobs at once was common—whether in the past or in this apocalyptic world. Even I, a regressor, could not avoid the flow of this reality. Yet despite all that, my main occupation never changed.

I was, and always would be, an Undertaker—the one who buries the dead.

Today, let's talk about my primary job for the first time in a while.

[Mr. Undertaker, there's an Anomaly detected.]

One day, the Saintess told me this.

True to her nature, she always sensed strange phenomena faster than the likes of a certain "eternally young detective" or a "youth with infinite grandfatherly wisdom."

"What is it?"

[Please head to the National Road Management Corps headquarters. Someone there will explain the details.]

So I went.

In front of the Corps' headquarters lay a wide open square known as

Babel Tower Plaza. The nickname for the headquarters was “Babel Tower.”

As soon as I arrived, I spotted the Anomaly.

“...A green village bus?”

There, parked right in the middle of the square, was a village bus that had never been there before. It was mostly intact except for a slight dent on one side. Otherwise, it was the exact image of an ordinary village bus, green color and all.[1]

“Oh! Your Excellency, Sir Undertaker—you’ve arrived.”

A crowd of Corps members had already gathered around the bus. Ji-won was the first to spot me and salute.

“So, what’s going on?”

“We’re not entirely sure. One of the Corps members found it early this morning on their way to work.”

“It wasn’t there last night?”

“No, sir. The last person to leave headquarters was out at 4 AM, and they said the plaza was empty. The bus must have appeared sometime between 4 AM and 6 AM.”

I looked up into the air.

[Ji-won is correct.]

That meant the bus had suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

To move a vehicle of that size, you’d either need fuel or the strength of an Awakener. If it was fuel-powered, someone would have noticed the noise, and if an Awakener had carried it, the Saintess’s Clairvoyance would have detected it since she shared her sight with the Corps 24/7.

The conclusion was simple.

“It’s definitely an Anomaly.”

“Yes, sir. We tried applying external force to it, and it took damage.”

So, you were the ones who dented the bus.

“What about the inside? Have you checked it out?” I asked.

“No, sir. No one has entered it yet. I only just received the report myself.”

“Well, that’s fortunate. It might be a trap that looks intact on the outside.”

“A wise and prudent judgment, as always. If you give the order, I’ll destroy it immediately.”

I stroked my chin and pondered for a moment. “No, I’m not comfortable with destroying it outright. Bring me a death row inmate.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll have one brought at once.”

Soon enough, a groggy prisoner, who had been fast asleep, was dragged in. At first, the prisoner wore a face that screamed, *“Just five more minutes, Mom…”* but as soon as he saw me and Ji-won, his drowsiness disappeared.

“Aaaaaah! Please! Spare me! Spare me!”

“Toss him into the bus.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please! I beg you! I was wrong! I know I messed up! Please, just spare my life— *Aaaaaah!*”

With a clean three-pointer from Ji-won, the inmate, a convicted murderer who had targeted elderly patients, was tossed into the bus.

Pssshhhh...

As soon as the inmate boarded, the automatic doors closed. The prisoner desperately banged on the glass, pounding with both fists.

“Please! Let me out! Please, let me...!”

But his pleading didn’t last long.

Splurt!

The convict’s body exploded, splattering blood all over the bus's glass doors and windows, painting them a deep crimson. It happened so fast that most of the onlookers probably didn’t even register what had occurred.

“Whoa. What just happened? Did you see that?”

“No, not at all.”

The Corps members around the bus were just as shocked.

I shrugged. “It’s definitely a trap.”

“As expected, Your Excellency. Thanks to your insightful command, we’ve managed to preserve our manpower efficiently.”

“Spread the word. Make it clear that no one is to enter anything resembling a village bus. Post the warning on SG Net too.”

“Your concern for the public and commitment to post-incident management will surely be praised for generations to come...”

“If you don’t want to get hit in front of the men, stop it.”

“Did I go too far?”

“Yes.”

“Understood. I’ll keep it simpler next time.”

I left the Anomaly, now dubbed Village Bus No. 44, to the Corps and headed off to handle other matters.

The next day, I was leisurely browsing SG Net at my hideout café when I came across a heartwarming post.

[iJoinedToday] : My father has recovered and is healthy now haha

He's been suffering from heart problems, but today, he's feeling better than ever. He hasn't been this healthy since the Saintess of the North treated him a while back.

He mentioned how grateful he was for the support and encouragement he received from SG Net members. I just signed up today to share my thanks with everyone!

Life's tough right now, but let's get through it together. Thanks, everyone! We can do it!

I hummed, nodding. What a nice story.

By the way, the user iJoinedToday was Lee Ju-ho. He was the young man who had accompanied me when I first dealt with OldManGoryeo. It seemed he was doing well, taking good care of his father, which was comforting to know.

Just as I was feeling all warm and fuzzy, the Saintess spoke to me through Constellation Telepathy.

[Mr. Undertaker, I hate to interrupt your rest.]

"Not at all. What's going on?"

[Village Bus No. 44 has disappeared.]

"What?" I frowned. "It disappeared? I told them to park it near the National Road Management Corps headquarters. Did they mess up?"

[No, they followed your instructions. The bus was parked where you told them, and Corps members kept a close watch, taking turns to guard it.]

[But it vanished.]

I furrowed my brow. “Did it disappear while they were changing shifts? Was it a momentary lapse?”

[No, it was even shorter than that.]

[The guard looked away for a brief moment when he heard children laughing in the distance. When he turned back, the bus had vanished.]

“……”

In other words, it had “vanished into thin air.”

The guard was a diligent Corps member, strict about following procedure. Even though the Anomaly had been neutralized, he had stayed vigilant in front of it. He never left his seat in front of the bus, only glancing away when the sound of children’s laughter briefly distracted him. When he turned back, the bus was gone.

[And no one saw it disappear. No Awakeners or civilians.]

“That’s strange.” I rubbed my chin. “Anything unusual besides its disappearance? Any casualties?”

[No, no incidents have been reported so far.]

“Well… It’s unsettling, but it should be safe to leave it be for now.”

[Really?]

“Yes. The bus is essentially a stationary trap. Traps are most dangerous when they haven’t been sprung.

Once people are aware of them, they pose less of a threat. Just make sure to warn everyone to stay away from any village buses they see.”

[Got it.]

And with that, the case seemed to be closed.

However, from then on, Village Bus No. 44 kept reappearing in various locations across the country.

It would show up in places like the small community in Yeongwol or at a bus stop in Incheon, even making another appearance in Busan.

Each time it showed up, we couldn't always prevent the casualties.

If it was Awakeners, we could at least warn them in the name of their Constellations, but when civilians encountered the bus first, they were often helpless. Curious bystanders, hoping to salvage some scrap or supplies from the bus, would open the doors only to be crushed or mutilated in seconds.

The bus would vanish again within a day, leaving few clues that anyone had died.

Why did this Anomaly take the form of a village bus? I wondered.

At first, hearing "bus" made me think of the Knight Bus from Harry Potter.[2] But there wasn't much similarity between that and Village Bus No. 44. It didn't fit.

Then I considered the word itself. In Korean, the word "bus" sounds like "verse," which could connect to terms like universe, multiverse, or metaverse. But once again, there seemed to be no direct relation to the nature of this particular Anomaly.

Could it be that passengers who boarded Village Bus No. 44 were transported to another world?

It was just a guess, and I couldn't be sure.

I set that idea aside for now.

Another thought came to mind—an old, tragic incident in which a bus plunged from the Seongsu Bridge when it collapsed. Many passengers, including the driver, died in the accident. If this Anomaly was related to such a tragedy, it should have appeared near a bridge, not randomly in various places.

Again, I dismissed the theory as it seemed unrelated.

‘How frustrating. I really can’t figure it out.’

No matter how much I wracked my brain, I couldn’t pinpoint the origin of the Village Bus No. 44 Anomaly.

If I wanted to solve the mystery by firsthand experience, I could board the bus myself, ready to face whatever came next. But truth be told, it didn’t seem worth risking my life for.

At most, the Anomaly only claimed one or two victims each time it appeared. It was a minor nuisance compared to the many other high-risk Anomalies I still had to deal with.

Thus, for the time being, I decided to set aside my unease and leave the bus be.

‘Looks like I’ll just have to watch and wait.’

With a sigh, I cleared my head and opened SG Net to relax.

Before writing a new educational post about *The Three Kingdoms*, I browsed the site to check out the day’s top recommended posts.

- Anonymous: A miracle happened to my family! My younger sibling was diagnosed with an incurable disease, and we thought there was no hope. But yesterday, they woke up and said they felt fine.

- Anonymous: Bro, you won’t believe this. My mom, who went blind five years ago because of some Anomaly, suddenly says she can see again. The first thing she did was ask why I look so thin. She cried right after seeing my face, lol. But hey, I have a question... When my dog died, I secretly replaced it with a similar one. If Mom notices, am I screwed?

- [iJoinedToday]: Update on my father! We went for a walk and jogged together today. He’s in perfect health!!!

“Hm.”

As I scrolled through the recommended posts, I noticed an unusually high number of heartwarming stories on SG Net. People were sharing tales of miraculous recoveries and restored health.

‘This didn’t happen in previous cycles. Maybe some new Anomaly is affecting people?’

I was about to move on, but then—

“Wait.”

A strange thought struck me.

Quickly, I grabbed a red shirt from my wardrobe and waved it in the air—my signal for emergency contact with the Saintess.

[What is it, Mr. Undertaker?]

“Saintess, could you tell me how many people have died due to Village Bus No. 44?”

[I don’t have exact numbers, but so far, we’ve confirmed five deaths. If we assume the bus has appeared every three days, we can estimate there are between two to four more victims.]

“Thank you.”

So, roughly seven to eleven victims in total.

I then searched SG Net for any posts I might have missed.

Sure enough, I found four additional posts describing miraculous recoveries of people who had been suffering from life-threatening conditions. The illnesses ranged from heart problems to lung disease, corneal blindness, and pancreatic failure.

All of the posters were Awakeners, but I realized that if civilians had also experienced similar recoveries, they might not have even posted about it.

[Why do you ask all of a sudden?]

“...Saintess, I think I might have figured out what Village Bus No. 44 really is.”

The Anomaly wasn’t just causing deaths.

It was harvesting organs.

More specifically...

“It is extracting organs from its victims and transplanting them into others, healing their conditions in the process.”

Footnotes:

1 - Village buses are short auxiliary routes that feed local subway stations and other larger lines around major South Korean cities.

2 - A form of public transportation that allows underage wizards, who can’t use magic in the human world, to travel discreetly.

Chapter 237

The Transplanter II

Sinnoa

“Hmm. So, you’re saying organs are being transplanted automatically? If used well, this seems quite useful...”

That was Do-hwa’s initial response after hearing the report on Village Bus No. 44.

As expected of the woman who kept Korea’s top psychopath directly under her command. Even after learning that people’s organs were being extracted, she reacted as if it were no big deal. What a messed-up world we lived in.

“You were the one who threw a death row convict onto that bus, weren’t you?”

She retaliated by hitting me with facts.

In a previous cycle, I had secretly tested Do-hwa’s MBTI. She came out as ISTJ. No wonder it was always difficult to deal with people like her.

For anyone curious, Yu Ji-won was an ESTJ. If you think those two share an uncanny likeness, you’re not wrong.

“But I still don’t get it,” Do-hwa said begrudgingly. “What does a bus have to do with organ extraction? How does an Anomaly like this even exist?”

Ah. On that point, I, as a regressor and expert in Anomalous studies, had a theory.

“There was a vehicle used during World War II called a Gaswagen. It was essentially a mobile gas execution chamber. Jews were killed by carbon monoxide emitted from the engine. Once the bus reached its destination, all the passengers were dead.”

“Fuck… Something like that actually existed?”

“Yes. Truly inhuman. The Nazi regime was just that brutal.”

(Side note: Old Man Scho’s ancestors were die-hard supporters of the Socialist Party, so he came from a long line of communists.)

“The Gaswagen was eventually discontinued because the process of cleaning the vehicles was too demanding.”

“But what does this have to do with organ extraction? It’s not like they harvested organs from bodies that died from gas poisoning…”

“Well, let me tell you about the Execution Bus.”

Execution Bus.

It was a real vehicle used in China. Instead of constructing fixed execution chambers, they simply modified a bus for the purpose. Unlike the primitive methods of World War II, executions here were carried out using lethal injections. Since the bodies were in better condition after death, the organs remained intact and suitable for harvesting and distribution.

“Fuck… That’s real too?”

“Yes.”

Do-hwa’s face darkened, as if thinking that maybe humanity deserves to disappear after all.

I quickly changed the subject. “Also, buses frequently appear in urban legends. You’ve probably heard stories where people wake up to find themselves in a battle royale on a deserted island with explosive collars around their necks. Seen any movies like that?”

“I think I’ve heard of one…”

“Put all those images together, and you have the Anomaly that is Village Bus No. 44.”

To test the theory, we conducted an experiment.

“Okay. Prisoner No. 37, take this book and walk toward the bus.”

“What book is it...?”

“Just a regular piece of classic literature. Don’t worry about it.”

The book in question was a German bestseller titled *The Communist Manifesto*. I had imported it directly in its original German version, not a translation.

“Now, take the book and start shouting when you’re near the bus. Got it?”

“Sure? Uh... So, if I do this, my death sentence will be commuted to life imprisonment, right?”

“Of course! You’re talking to the Undertaker here. Best friends with the head of the National Road Management Corps and the mentor of the operations team leader. My word is law! If you want, you can turn back and get your throat cut instead.”

“No! I’ll do it! I’ll do it!”

The death row inmate hesitantly approached Village Bus No. 44 and shouted, “W-workers of the world, unite—!”

He never finished his sentence.

The bus, which had been calmly parked up until that moment, suddenly accelerated and shot forward at a clean 300 kilometers per hour.

Screeeeech—! BOOOOM!

Before the prisoner could react, he was obliterated, his body smashed into a pulp.

Among the remains, his right arm, still holding *The Communist Manifesto*, flew through the air and landed perfectly between Do-hwa and me. It was a hole-in-one.

The experiment was a success.

“As I suspected, it’s influenced by the Nazi Gaswagen. After all, the Nazis hated communists just as much as they hated Jews.”

“But… you said China’s execution bus was part of it. Wouldn’t that contradict the hatred for communists?”

“Well, who knows? Don’t expect Anomalies to have logical consistency. Or maybe it’s so meticulous that it distinguishes between the Soviet Union and China.”

“Damn it…”

We moved on to the next experiment.

“Uh… Guild Leader.” Ah-ryeon glanced around nervously, clearly anxious. “If we get caught doing this, we’re in serious trouble…”

We were inside the Mo Gwang-seo Christ Cathedral, one of the most sacred sites in Pyongyang. Essentially, it was the heart of the Eastern Holy Nation. Much like the Emperor’s Golden Throne in Warhammer 40K, the Eastern Holy Nation also had its own divine seat.

Next to us sat Mo Gwang-seo, the living god, Christ reborn, firmly rooted on his throne.

“If we get caught messing with Mo Gwang-seo, no matter how much power I hold as the Saintess of the North, I’ll be executed for treason!”

“Aren’t you supposed to trust your guild leader?”

“N-no! I don’t trust you!”

“……”

“……”

“Fine. I’ll arrange a one-on-one fan meeting with Nymphocalypse’s DJ.”

“I’ve always trusted you, Guild Leader! Even in my previous life, for

a million years! Let's get this done!"

With that, we kidnapped Mo Gwang-seo.

I had already parked Village Bus No. 44 in an underground garage somewhere in Pyongyang. To prevent any noise from leaking out, we had completely sealed off the surrounding area.

"Wow, Guild Leader. When did you set up such a hideout?"

"Long before the founding of the Eastern Holy Nation. Pyongyang has always had underground bunkers like this."

"Whoooa! You've got to teach me more about this! Recently, I've been dealing with a lot of nonbelievers. It'd be so convenient if I could just bury them in a place like this! Oh, but, Guild Leader..."

"What now?"

"I think Mo Gwang-seo has been mumbling something at you for a while now. Doesn't it sound like he's trying to speak?"

"It's just your imagination. He's an Anomaly in a catatonic state, and without Hayul, he can't speak human languages."

"Oh... I see! I was mistaken, ehehe."

"Now, on the count of three, open the bus doors. One, two, three... Heave!"

Together, we tossed Mo Gwang-seo into the Village Bus No. 44.

Flash!

There came a bright light.

Village Bus No. 44 splattered Mo Gwang-seo's body across the windows, staining them a vivid red. However, even the blood-soaked glass couldn't dim the holy glow of Mo Gwang-seo's divine aura.

"Oooh."

“Aaah! My eyes! My eyes...!”

Ah-ryeon flailed around, shouting, “Glasses! Glasses!” like a character in a retro anime.

But Mo Gwang-seo’s holiness didn’t end there.

Flash! Flash! Flash!

Every three seconds, a burst of light emanated from inside the bus. Each time, blood splattered, painting the windows like a canvas of red ink.

The Village Bus No. 44 was repeatedly killing Mo Gwang-seo, and each time, he was resurrecting instantly. It was a fierce battle between two Anomalies.

While their struggle might have been entertaining to watch, I had a more pressing matter to address.

“Saintess. How’s it looking?”

[...It seems the healing is happening as expected.]

We were monitoring whether patients with incurable diseases were being cured. The Saintess had dispatched several Awakeners to observe the condition of various patients across the region.

[The blind patients are recovering the fastest. One, two, three... The process is accelerating.]

Even though Korea’s healthcare system was generally poor, its high-end capacity was world-class thanks to Do-hwa, who could make prosthetics, and Ah-ryeon, who absorbed negative energy. The only issue was that Do-hwa took too long to craft each prosthetic due to her workload. Even with a 72-hour day, it still wouldn’t be enough time for her. And Ah-ryeon couldn’t absorb all negativity without risk. She had a limit, beyond which she’d transform into a corrupted being, a Fallen One. While I had avoided causing her to fall in any past cycles, the potential danger still loomed.

‘If we can confirm that Village Bus No. 44 and Mo Gwang-seo can

heal patients with incurable diseases without any side effects...'

If this could be proven, it would revolutionize Korea's medical system. In fact, I would even consider abandoning the concept of the Eastern Holy Nation entirely. It would be far more efficient to place Mo Gwang-seo in the bus rather than on the golden throne.

[The patients are continuing to recover... Wait.]

[Hold on, Mr. Undertaker... Something's wrong.]

Of course, that ideal future was not meant to be.

"What happened?"

[Some of the patients... specifically six of them, are showing strange symptoms.]

[They have halos above their heads.]

Halos. Like the rings that typically depict angels.

[And not just halos... six of the patients are sprouting wings.]

[The six patients are starting to move. Undertaker, stop the Village Bus No. 44 immediately!]

I drew my sword Do-hwa and slashed through the air. My Aura swept over the Village Bus No. 44, turning it into a heap of twisted metal. The Anomaly was instantly destroyed.

The ground was left cratered, as if a bunker-busting missile had detonated, and one, final flash of light indicated Mo Gwang-seo's subsequent resurrection.

[The patients... The winged individuals are flying at an incredible speed.]

[Direction: Pyongyang.]

[They're flying at 300 kilometers per hour... no, 500... and accelerating. They're already nearing Pyongyang airspace.]

[Mr. Undertaker, their destination is likely...]

Here.

“Ah-ryeon,” I called.

“Y-yes?”

“Come here.”

“O-okay...”

Ah-ryeon hesitated for a second but quickly ran over to me. I wrapped her in my Aura, forming a protective barrier around us both.

Booooom!

At that exact moment, the ceiling split open. Dust and debris fell onto the barrier, scattering harmlessly away. I swung Do-hwa to clear the dust cloud, revealing what had caused the damage.

Hovering in the sky above us was an Anomaly.

“Aaaah, aaaah.”

An angel.

Earlier, the Saintess had described the phenomenon as patients growing wings. While that description wasn’t wrong, it didn’t fully capture what we were seeing now.

The Anomaly before us was made entirely of wings. In the center of this massive cluster of wings was a gigantic, writhing eyeball, surrounded by countless smaller eyes, and each of them was framed by wings that flapped in continuous beats.

The creature resembled the biblical description of an angel.

“Aaaah, aaaah.”

The sound echoed as the wings fluttered, and from between the wings, thousands of laser beams shot towards us.

“Hm.”

A tremendous roar filled the air.

Even though the underground bunker had been designed to withstand high-intensity attacks, the force of the lasers gouged out an even deeper crater. It was as if a mountain peak had been obliterated by a meteor shower.

‘If there are six of these things, each with this kind of power, their attacks would be as deadly as a meteor strike.’

After confirming that I had survived the barrage, the "angel" flapped its wings again, preparing for another round of attacks. There was no cooldown—it could fire the lasers repeatedly without rest.

I swung Do-hwa again.

A single, clam slash of dark energy cut diagonally through the sky, intercepting the incoming lasers and continuing toward the angel.

In complete silence, the slash sliced through dozens of the angel's wings, cutting them off cleanly. Unlike the chaos caused by the angel’s attacks, my strike made no sound at all.

With that one quiet move, the angel was bisected.

“Aaaah, aaaaah.”

The feathers from its wings floated to the ground, one by one, like a gentle rain of magnolia petals in late spring. When the last of the white feathers fell, the angel dissolved without leaving a trace behind. Only scattered feathers remained, drifting through the silent air.

During the entire battle, Ah-ryeon hadn’t said a word. She stood there, staring up at me with wide eyes.

I smiled gently and patted her on the head. Only then did she relax, her face breaking into a relieved grin.

“Sorry about that,” I consoled. “Things got a little out of hand.”

“I-it's okay! We can just clean it all up!”

“Seems like Pyongyang is cursed...”

“Are you sure you don't want to use Village Bus No. 44 again?”

“I’m sure. Never using that thing again.”

“Ehehe...”

Even after that, five more angels attacked in succession.

While defeating them was simple enough, the aftermath was messy.

Every citizen in Pyongyang had witnessed the bizarre creatures with wings descending from the sky. But thankfully, Ah-ryeon was able to calm the citizens down. Her presence was regarded as divine by the people of the Eastern Holy Nation, and they treated her like their savior.

After I returned Mo Gwang-seo to the Golden Throne, I made contact with the command tower in Yongsan.

“Saintess. Do the six patients who turned into angels have anything in common?”

[Yes. As you probably suspected, all six had suffered fatal injuries from the Void and were on the brink of death.]

“I see.” I sighed, then said, “It seems that once too many organs are replaced by Mo Gwang-seo’s body, the patient turns into an Anomaly.”

[That’s my theory as well. While one or two transplanted organs appear to be harmless, a certain threshold results in a complete transformation into a Mo Gwang-seo clone, or rather, an angel.]

The bus was a vehicle, after all, and its purpose had been to transport something or someone from one place to another.

In the case of Village Bus No. 44, it had been transporting organs—the passengers were the internal organs themselves.

In other words, the true name of this Anomaly was the Organ Transfer Bus.

Footnotes:

Chapter 238

The Transplanter III

Sinnoa

As I mentioned before, I, the Undertaker, never dreamed in the conventional sense. In other words, if I ever did dream, it meant that at least one *Anomaly* had intervened.

The dream I had the day after barely stopping the Angel Descending incident in Pyongyang was no different.

“Hello, Guild Leader.”

“……”

“Oh my, looking at me like that will hurt my feelings, you know?”

There she was, the pink-haired Lord Voldemort, smiling brightly right in front of me.

I barely managed to suppress a scream.

“...Go Yuri. Please, next time, can you at least change your appearance when you show up? I'm starting to develop a phobia of pink hair.”

“Haha, sorry about that. That's beyond my control... The form you’re most fond of is *this*. Perhaps you should try changing first.”

“Don’t lie. I’ve never met anyone with your face, and I’ve never had any particular fetish for pink hair.”

“True. It really is strange, isn’t it? Maybe we were connected in a past life?”

“Ha, as if. If this life is already such a mess, I can’t imagine how bad the last one was,” I scoffed, then looked around.

Dreams usually lacked meaning, but this space felt strangely significant. I was sitting in an old village bus, whose air smelled faintly of rubber. Across from me was Go Yuri, sitting primly in her seat. We were about a meter apart, staring at each other.

“So,” I began, “what’s this about? You rarely pop up in my dreams out of the blue like this.”

“Oh my, you say ‘pop up’ like I'm some kind of vermin. That choice of words really cuts deep, you know...”

Go Yuri put her hand to her cheek and sighed softly.

“When Miss Ah-ryeon calls you ‘Guild Leader,’ you treat her so gently. But I was the first guild member to call you that, remember?”

“We’re long past that. Get to the point.”

“I didn’t ‘pop up’ on my own, Guild Leader. You called me here.”

I swallowed hard. “...Bus No. 44. Was that Anomaly related to you?”

“That’s a funny nickname. You always like giving Anomalies names, don’t you, Guild Leader?”

Go Yuri covered her mouth and chuckled. It was the kind of laugh you’d describe as chittering, yet it didn’t seem to come from her direction. Instead, the laugh came from the speakers installed inside the bus, sparked with static.

Chh—kuk. Ahahaha—chhh, kuk.

“You know, I think you should actually thank me. If I hadn’t shown up in your dream tonight, you would have met me in reality instead. Would you have preferred that?”

“...No, I appreciate the warning.”

“You’re welcome!”

A streak of red paint appeared on the window behind Go Yuri, forming a crescent moon shape that dripped down like blood.

“Do you know what it means to give something a name? It can mean that you're trapping the existence within the word. However, it can also mean giving something a name like a parent does for a child.”

“……”

“There are very few words in the world that haven't passed over your tongue, Guild Leader. Have you realized you’re becoming something akin to the Father of All Things, or perhaps the Mother of All Anomalies?”

“...Not at all.”

To be honest, I hadn’t even considered that. But after hearing Go Yuri—no, after hearing the reflection of Go Yuri from my subconscious—say it, it hit me.

It actually made sense. When I stared into the Void, the Void stared back at me. An unchanging truth.

“The Anomalies don’t always appear at the exact moment you return, Guild Leader. In fact, the vast majority go unnoticed by anyone. But even before they appear, they’ve already been named in your mind.”

“...It’s like their moment of birth.”

“Yes. You recognize the Anomalies earlier than anyone else, and you give them names.” Go Yuri put a finger to her lips. “Just saying their names aloud, that alone begins a sort of ritual. Each time you regress, you're calling out to the universe, summoning all the Anomalies by name.”

Chzzzzzt!

The speaker spat out noise again.

- Come, Ten Legs, Administrator of the Infinite Metagame. Come,

Village Bus No. 44. Come.

I listened silently.

“That’s why the Anomalies are drawn to you, Guild Leader. It’s like... Well, if I were to put it cutely, it’s as if they’re little children looking around for their parents. Whether they like their parents or not depends on the Anomaly, though.”

“Thanks for the advice. I’ll be more careful.”

- Ahahahahaha!

I pursed my lips. Instinctively, I understood what that mocking laugh from the speaker meant.

As long as I had Complete Memory, I couldn’t forget an Anomaly I had already recognized. The names had already been given. How could I “be careful” now?

“Have you ever felt like this?”

Go Yuri covered her mouth as she spoke.

We were definitely sitting a meter apart, but her voice felt like it was whispering right into my ear.

“Like you're taking a step forward, but the ground gives way beneath you like a swamp, and the deeper you go, the more you sink...”

With her mouth covered, I couldn't tell if Go Yuri’s lips were even moving. Yet her voice slid into my ears like molten candy melted under the sun—sticky and sickening.

“Like you’re not resetting the world with each regression, but rather, scraping at the edges with your nails, dragging it down bit by bit.”

“.....”

“There’s a way out, Guild Leader. One way to see the ending.”

I blinked.

In the next instant, the bus, once occupied by only the two of us, was suddenly packed. The seats were filled with people who all had my face—everyone on the bus looked like an Undertaker. With blank expressions, each 'Undertaker' sat in their seats, paying no attention to Go Yuri or me.

"When you wake up from this dream—"

Whisper.

"Ride Village Bus No. 44, Guild Leader."

"....."

"I don't mean right away. Only after you've fully prepared Miss Ahryeon, please. Once you've Stopped Time, ask her if she can briefly wound everyone's internal organs."

Whisper, whisper.

"Then, once time resumes, hop on the bus immediately. Miss Ahryeon can keep healing you from the outside while you're on board."

Ta-da...

Go Yuri whispered softly.

"Wow, then everyone in the world will become just like you! A regressor's paradise! After Superhuman Slayer, we'd have a new race: the Race of Regressors."

"....."

"Haha, if the world feels too large, you could start with just one or two people. You often long for Schopenhauer, but who knows? Making companions might be simpler than you think."

Becoming one.

That’s what Go Yuri called it.

“What do you think, Guild Leader?”

“Well, it’s certainly a strategy I hadn’t considered. I’ll think about it.”

“That’s a lie.”

“……”

Thud.

The bus began to move. The engine rattled, and it started heading somewhere.

Outside the windows, the scenery blurred by too quickly. Night and day switched without pause, casting fleeting shadows across Go Yuri’s face.

“No matter where you go, no matter what your final stop is, Guild Leader, I’ll always support you. But you’ve already passed by quite a few stops.”

“……”

“Don’t forget that.”

Thud, thud, thud.

The sound of the village bus's vibrations shifted into the rumble of a subway, and the interior stretched out into a long train car. The lights flickered. The Undertakers seated around us began to stretch and split apart, bursting as their bodies tore open.

And then, I woke up.

“H-huh.”

Before me stood Ah-ryeon, looking at me with wide eyes.

“You're... You're awake...”

“The Saintess’s duties?”

“I-I just finished! As you instructed, I used the Blessing of Christ Mo Gwang-seo to cover the traces of the descending angels and turned the area into a sanctuary.”

“Good. Our Ah-ryeon has worked hard.”

“Hehe, please... P-praise me more.”

Ah-ryeon beamed.

Her smile oddly reminded me of Go Yuri’s.

It wasn’t that I was confusing the two of them. It was just that Go Yuri’s warning from the dream kept echoing in my head.

"You give Anomalies their names earlier than anyone else."

Go Yuri had warned me that this would reduce me to the role of ‘the parent of Anomalies.’

But was that really true?

The first thoughts that came to mind after my regression weren’t just about Anomalies. I thought of the people I couldn’t save in previous runs, of Seo Gyu with his head about to be severed, of Ah-ryeon trembling in a corner.

‘Do I value human smiles over the extinction of Anomalies?’

The answer was yes. In the early days of my regressions, perhaps I wouldn’t have been so sure. But now, the answer was clear.

Like a sail that filled with wind whenever I faced the breeze, this answer wrapped around my heart. As long as that answer remained, I would never lose my way, no matter which seas I crossed.

“Our Ah-ryeon is the best.”

“Hehe...”

In the midst of this boundless sea, I patted the head of the woman

who had become the wind in my sails.

There is an epilogue. "Let’s draw a bus route map."

Back in Busan, I proposed this during a meeting. Do-hwa, seated at the round table, tilted her head in confusion.

"A bus route map...?"

"Yes. The organs of passengers on Village Bus No. 44 are transferred randomly, without any clear destination. This is likely because the bus doesn’t have a defined route."

I drew a quick map on the chalkboard.

◎ Hwang Seo-young’s pancreas (54, Busan)

◎ Kim Jin-cheol’s cornea (11, Sejong)

◎ Namgung Hee-young’s lungs (37, Pohang)

◎ Park Da-ram’s kidney (21, Busan)...

The result was a typical bus route map, except that the "stops" were people's names and organs.

"We’ll prepare a list of patients in need of transplants and organize them in order. Then, for volunteers, they can freely choose which 'stops'—people—they’d like to donate their organs to."

"Oh..."

"Friends, family, acquaintances, or even someone they’ve just encountered by chance. It’s a way for people to select who they want to give their organs to after they pass."

In the apocalypse, suicide rates had skyrocketed. There were more reasons to leave this world than to stay in it. Even so, many would be willing to donate their organs if it meant helping those left behind.

When people boarded Bus No. 44, they usually died instantly without time to feel any pain. The process of organ donation could become quick, easy, and precise.

"Not just suicides, but even elderly individuals might choose to donate their organs. Since the Village Bus can appear anywhere, it's accessible to everyone."

"Hmm..."

While the term "donation" might evoke the idea of a noble, voluntary act, I saw it as simply the efficient distribution of resources.

The apocalypse was brutal. Even human bodies had to be used efficiently.

Despite the critical flaw of Village Bus No. 44, as long as we were cautious of Anomalies like Mo Gwang-seo's Christ, it was still worth utilizing.

After listening to my entire presentation, Do-hwa sneered an answer.

"Well, it sounds... effective."

Soon after, "bus route maps" and "stop lists" were distributed across the country. Whenever there was a need to update the route, revised versions were uploaded to SG Net first, and guilds all over the country would make the necessary changes so that the public could access the updated stop names.

Occasionally, incidents of innocent people being forcibly pushed onto the bus arose, but the Saintess usually managed to detect and prevent such tragedies in advance.

From that day onward, I sometimes saw elderly people sitting under bus stop signs, a crumpled piece of paper in hand.

Those old men and women would sit there, squinting up and down the street, waiting for the bus to come, with notes listing the names of the stops where they wanted to leave a trace of themselves.

They'd unfold those notes from time to time, reading them over.

Then, at some point, the Village Bus No. 44 would appear, as if out of thin air, in front of the stop.

The elderly person would grip their note tightly in one hand and use the other to support themselves with a cane as they boarded the bus.

And into thin air, the green village bus would vanish, leaving behind only the smell of exhaust.

"....."

Choosing to leave something behind for someone, even as you leave this life.

Perhaps, in the delicate weight of those old people pressing their canes into the ground as they boarded the bus, lay the reason I always chose humans over Anomalies.

Wasn't humanity clinging to the tip of that cane?

'Go Yuri, the day I accept your offer will never come.'

In the end, the terminus for one person might just be a brief stop for another to rest.

That's why I hoped—

That when my journey ended, I wouldn't rule over the final stop for all mankind, but rather, be just another stop along the way for the children who followed.

Footnotes:

Chapter 239

The Monad I

Sinnoa

Today’s story is a rare one-it’s going to list multiple mysteries in sequence.

Well, to be fair, that’s how my stories usually unfold, as if laid out like pieces of a puzzle. Not a perfect omnibus, but at least a half-omnibus kind of format.

In that sense, this episode can be likened to an "omnibus within an omnibus," a story within a story-like a Monad reflected in another Monad.

I hope you enjoy the mysteries as they unfold.

First Monad.

First, I’d like to tell you a ghost story related to the Ice Age.

As you may know, the Ice Age Anomaly has been isolated on the internet. After capturing footage of the Ice Age, we sealed it away in a hidden post on SG Net.

However, with Anomalies, you can never afford to rest easy and say, "It’s sealed! Done and dusted!" Classic anime like *Ghost Stories* taught us this lesson well—exorcists had to deal with consequences across generations because they didn’t know this.

But I, the Undertaker, who claims to be the world’s top Anomaly expert, was always well aware of this.

It’s crucial to maintain sustainable isolation after the initial seal.

“Hey, boss.”

That’s why I had already given Seo Gyu the command to keep monitoring the hidden post related to the Ice Age.

One day, Seo Gyu came to me, looking a bit troubled.

“Hm? What’s the matter?”

“Well, you know how you locked up the Ice Age Anomaly on SG Net the other day, right? That one with the... uh, romance?”

“For the last time, there was no romance between me and the Commander. That was just the Anomaly's distorted and edited footage. But yeah, we sealed it. So?”

“Uh, yeah. About that... I think you need to see it for yourself.”

So I went to check.

Now that I think about it, I’ve never really described Seo Gyu’s workspace, have I? Let me give you a quick rundown.

To put it simply, Seo Gyu’s office looked exactly like a "Chinese mobile game factory." Hundreds of smartphones were spread out on the table, all logged into SG Net. Each phone displayed a "hidden post isolation" scene, where Anomalies were being held, and was set to a low volume, just soft enough that only someone with heightened perception could hear the Anomalies screaming in their final moments.

- Aaaaaahhhhh...

- Hero, if you’re reading this, it means you’ve returned home safely, right? Even if you’ve lost all your memories, your noble will to return to your original world has moved us...

- This is a picture of a cat lying on a white bed.

- Anyone want to talk about *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* with me?

What can I say?

This tiny office was, in fact, a cyber Anomaly prison.

The Anomalies that required physical sealing were transferred to the underground prison at the National Road Management Corps headquarters. Meanwhile, the Anomalies that couldn't distinguish between reality and the virtual world were all confined in SG Net.

In a way, the nickname "Special Warden" suited Seo Gyu much better than "Such A Fucking Dumbass." As the Commander of SG Net, Seo Gyu was essentially the world's biggest Anomaly warden.

(There was a good reason he rarely left the base and stayed put like a totem.)

"Hm."

I quietly observed the cyber prison. Each smartphone was practically a solitary cell for the Anomalies.

"So, this is how a scientist must feel when they look at brains in vats."

"Pardon?"

"Just talking to myself. So, what's wrong with the Ice Age?"

"Oh, well, take a look at this..." Seo Gyu held up one of the phones. The tag on the screen read 668-711, and it was playing the familiar *Surviving the Ice Age* documentary.

Right at the part where the Commander and I kissed.

It was an embarrassing scene, but I didn't care since the footage was heavily distorted by the Anomaly. It wasn't real anyway.

I simply ignored it.

"So what?"

"Well, don't just glance at it, take a closer look, boss."

"...?"

I was slightly taken aback. Was he asking me to focus on the kiss scene with Noh Do-hwa? Had Seo Gyu lost his mind?

“Not the content, the length of the video. Don’t you think something’s off?”

Fortunately, Seo Gyu hadn’t gone crazy yet. He was making a valid point.

The video on SG Net’s hidden post was indeed... a little odd.

“Huh?”

I frowned.

‘Was this kiss scene always this long?’

Time seemed off.

Originally, *Surviving the Ice Age* was a three-part series—Day 1, Day 2, and Day 3—with each episode lasting about 20 minutes. In total, the entire video was roughly an hour long. The Commander and my kiss was supposed to be in the final part, and it should have lasted less than 30 seconds.

But for some reason, in *Surviving the Ice Age: Anomaly Edition*, no matter how long we waited, the kiss scene didn’t end.

“...Is the video longer than usual?”

“Yes. I checked multiple times. The displayed time says 20 minutes, right?” Seo Gyu pointed to the screen. “But when you actually play it, it runs for 24 hours.”

“What? 24 hours?”

“Yep. The video loops continuously for a full day. I confirmed it twice before coming to you, boss.”

I rubbed my chin.

‘24 hours... That's 1,440 minutes. A video that was originally 20

minutes had expanded 72 times its length?'

I didn't understand.

"...You said you checked it twice. Is there anything else that's changed?"

"Well, since the video got longer, some of the content has changed too. Hang on, let me turn up the sound. Ah, here. If you rewind a bit, you'll see..."

Seo Gyu rewound the video.

In this part, Yu Ji-won had cornered the Commander against a wall in a classic "kabedon" stance.[1] Surprisingly, Ji-won was much taller than her counterpart, so it looked quite intimidating on screen.

"Commander, even though I acted on my own in that operation, the sacrifice was necessary."

In the video, Ji-won-played by the Anomaly in the Ice Age spoke.

"If you had given the order, the survivors' command structure would have collapsed. That's why I took on the role of the bad cop. There were no personal feelings involved."

"Heh. For a woman full of personal feelings, you sure know how to talk. If that's how you feel, perhaps you should lead the next operation yourself?"

"I am an irreplaceable asset."

"I don't see it that way..."

"....."

An unsettling tension was building between the two characters.

I blinked. "...This scene wasn't in the original."

"Nope." Seo Gyu nodded, looking exhausted. "For the record, there's also a scene where the Saintess and the Commander fight. I

didn’t show you that because the atmosphere was so intense it made me feel sick. I haven’t been feeling well the past two days.”

“What the hell... This isn’t just edited footage anymore. It’s like the video has been remade with CGI from scratch.”

“Yeah, it feels like they’ve extended the timeline. Instead of just three days, it looks like they’ve been trapped in the Ice Age for weeks.”

I rubbed my forehead.

‘The video’s length has been randomly extended. And to match that, the content has been automatically edited to feel “natural.”’

Why?

I couldn’t figure out the cause.

Was it simply because we had locked the video in the "virtual reality" of SG Net?

“...Aside from the increased length and content changes, there are no negative effects in the real world, right?”

“None. It’s completely isolated.”

“Then let’s leave it for now.”

It left me feeling uneasy, but emotions didn’t matter. What mattered was the real world, not some video stuck in a hidden post on SG Net.

But the strange incidents related to the documentary didn’t stop.

“Boss.”

“What now?”

“Well... the video has changed again.”

Some time later, *Surviving the Ice Age: Anomaly Edition* evolved into *Surviving the Ice Age: Anomaly Director's Cut*.

“This time… the video is 72 days long. Each episode. If you add up all three, it’s over 200 days.”

“……”

“The video quality has also worsened a bit. Look here, boss. The smartphone’s screen is now showing two layers.”

As the video continued to expand, it seemed the total runtime was growing by 72 times each time.

“…As I said before, as long as it doesn’t affect the real world, we don’t need to check the video anymore, Seo Gyu.”

“Got it…”

Seo Gyu seemed uncomfortable.

“But the video now includes Dok-seo and Sim Ah-ryeon. The footage implies that the isolation in Liberty Island has gone on for so long that external support had to come in.”

“Hmm.”

“I didn’t watch the whole thing, just bits and pieces, but apparently, the Ice Age has spread beyond Sinŭiju, wiping out the entire Korean Peninsula. Other regions are starting to freeze too.”

“……”

“It feels so real that it’s unsettling. Well, like you said, I won’t watch it anymore.”

Though I didn’t know the exact mechanism behind it, the Ice Age Anomaly was indeed conquering the world within the video.

The Ice Age’s timeline was expanding rapidly-from 60 minutes to three days, and from three days to 216 days.

So, what would happen if there was just one more *Extended Edition*?

‘…More than 15,000 days.’

About 42 years.

In a world covered by the Ice Age, my team, including the Commander and me, would have to survive for over 40 years.

And even if we made it through that, what would come next?

Only an even more inflated period of 3,000 years awaited us. It was nothing short of despair.

'I don't know the cause...'

But I could guess the outcome.

'That Ice Age Anomaly... it won't be satisfied with just a "60-minute world."'

The virtual reality was drawing closer to real reality. At a terrifying pace.

'...3,000 years, multiplied by 72 again. And then 72 more. Eventually, it'll reach a point where it can claim to be an entire world of its own.'

Sure enough, the next time I secretly visited the Anomaly prison and looked at the smartphone isolating the Ice Age...

Whoooosh.

There were no longer any voices on the screen.

Buried under the snow was the decaying Statue of Liberty.

My frozen corpse, with its eyes wide open, lay next to Noh Do-hwa's, both of us holding hands, silently captured on camera.

Whoooosh.

The camera didn't move anymore. It was simply recording the two of us, long dead, while the speakers emitted nothing but the white noise of a blizzard.

That was the scene of the world's end.

“...So, even though we isolated it for mistaking the virtual world for reality, it ended up conquering the virtual world instead.”

Whoooosh.

My mutterings were drowned out by the snowstorm.

The white noise sounded strangely like the Anomaly was laughing.

- Human, I am satisfied with this.

This was the first piece of the puzzle.

Footnotes:

1 - Kabedon or kabe-don refers to the action of slapping a wall fiercely, which produces the sound "don". One meaning is the action of slapping the wall as a protest which occurs in collective housing like condominiums when the next room makes noise.

Chapter 240

The Monad II

Sinnoa

The second Monad.

“Hyung.”

“Oh, Seo Gyu.”

“I— am this SG Man, fufufu. The mastermind behind everything.”

“……”

And so we begin another story linked to Mastermind Syndrome.

‘Here we go again with this pattern.’

I sighed.

To remind anyone who might have forgotten: Mastermind Syndrome refers to the phenomenon wherein a person becomes convinced beyond all doubt that they are secretly orchestrating every tragedy from behind the scenes to bring about the end of the world.

So, when and how does one catch Mastermind Syndrome?

The condition was deceptively simple. All you had to do was survive to the end with me, the Undertaker, and cheerfully shout “Chicken for dinner tonight!” in unison.

Naturally, the more sociable a person, the lower their survival rate.

Awakeners who spent their days roaming around and fighting against Anomalies, like Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa, had an extremely low chance of contracting Mastermind Syndrome. After

all, survival is the prerequisite to contamination, isn't it?

On the other hand, our guild's proud anti-social union members got selected as masterminds like regulars whenever things got a little boring.

Sim Ah-ryeon, who didn't choose the Saintess of the North route. Lee Ha-yul, who wasn't led by the restless spirit. Oh Dok-seo, who dedicated decades to seclusion training after her serialization stopped...

Seo Gyu, though not exactly anti-social, was also a strong candidate. The guy spent all his time holed up at the base, living his 24-hour routine of **sleep**, **eat**, **lift**, **eat**, **manage the Cyber Anomaly Prison**, **eat**.

"Right, Seo Gyu. Even though your head would've been lopped off by a fairy and you'd be dead if I hadn't saved you at Busan Station, somehow, you're the mastermind that orchestrated every tragedy and massacre on Earth."

"Fufu. You know me well, hyung."

Normally, I would've just smacked Seo Gyu over the head and moved on to the next run.

But this day, precisely as the 682nd cycle was set to end, I felt an odd spark of curiosity.

It was already a lost cause of a run. I figured, why not humor Seo Gyu, who'd always been a certified babbler, a little longer?

Without any serious thought, intent, or purpose, I casually asked him a question.

"Just tell me one thing. You would've been eliminated in the beginning if it weren't for me, so how exactly do you claim you controlled everything behind the scenes? Wouldn't it all end if you died?"

"A foolish question, hyung."

But to my surprise, Seo Gyu answered with full confidence, “Of course, even my own death was part of my calculations.”

“What?”

“Think about it, fufu. If I died, it would only mean that you lacked the ‘force to defeat the Tutorial Fairy in an instant’ or that you possessed the kind of morals that would passively watch a fairy massacre civilians.”

“……”

“In such a world, I could never succeed as a mastermind. For me to flourish in this role, I need to latch onto the world you created—a world that requires a protector strong enough to overpower Anomalies and a soft-hearted fool who would willingly share his warmth with those around him. That fool being you, hyung.”

Seo Gyu wagged his finger, giving me a disapproving click of his tongue.

“Why would I bother striving for glory in a world that doesn’t meet these conditions?”

“What?”

“Hyung. Right after the Anomalies appeared and I was dropped into the Tutorial Dungeon, I quickly made up my mind. I would either become the mastermind controlling all evil, or I would die right then and there and escape from all suffering.”

I stared, dumbfounded. Why did this nonsense sound almost… convincing?

“Wait… Isn’t it difficult for you to Awaken to your power without my help, let alone pull off an omnipresent scheme? Let’s say you did survive and join my guild. How could you be so sure you’d succeed as the mastermind, Seo Gyu?”

“Fufu.” He flashed me a sly smile, an expression that a beefy man of his build would normally never be able to pull off.

A part of me wanted to punch the daylights out of him, while another part was curious to see just how far he could twist this absurd story. The latter won, for now, since I could satisfy the former desire anytime.

“Do you really think I didn’t know?”

“Come again?”

“I Awakened my power early on. However, you had no way of confirming whether or not I had Awakened... The longer I delayed my Awakening, the more you let your guard down around me.”

“Huh?”

“All I had to do was manipulate the timing of my Awakening to my advantage. After all, it was obvious you’d eventually come to rely on me. Securing a critical position without raising the ruler’s suspicion... it’s a tactic straight out of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, akin to the scheming of Jia Xu, wouldn’t you say?”

“……?”

It sounded... convincing!

Adding a comparison to *Three Kingdoms*, the greatest classic of all, made Seo Gyu’s story unexpectedly persuasive. I couldn’t help but listen to his eloquent speech, captivated.

“I subtly encouraged Anomalies without you or the Saintess noticing. For example, you ordered me to keep *Three Kingdoms* content playing on a smartphone around the clock for ‘narrative support Anomalies’...”

“Don’t tell me—”

“Yes. I would intentionally turn off the smartphone for a moment or slightly alter the recordings, subtly encouraging the arrival of the ‘Savior Narrative Anomaly.’ Fufu, even if it wasn’t complete, I surely influenced you and those around you a bit...”

“……!”

“I’ve set up many such subtle schemes behind the scenes. Hyung, I was the one who brought about the world’s end.”

Seo Gyu’s grand lecture on his mastermind exploits lasted roughly three hours.

“I see. That was quite entertaining, Seo Gyu.”

“Fufufu. So you finally acknowledge how impressive I am—”

“See you next time.”

Slash!

Seo Gyu split in two.

With the world nearing its end, I couldn’t help but regret that no one was left to criticize me for this murder.

‘Could it be real?’

I put a temporary pause on my death.

Dodging the endless Monster Wave, I searched for any traces of the crimes Seo Gyu (mastermind ver.) had so boastfully confessed. And to my surprise, I discovered an incredible fact.

‘...There’s a chance it could be true?’

For one, I had no way of proving or disproving the theory that Seo Gyu had lied to me about when he had Awakened.

Another example, however, was the claim that Seo Gyu deliberately triggered the Savior Narrative Syndrome. I had actually sensed that my allies held a sense of devotion and reverence toward me that was slightly stronger in the 682nd cycle than in other runs.

It wasn’t enough to conclusively say it was all because of Savior Narrative Syndrome but... On the flip side, I also couldn’t entirely dismiss the notion that Savior Narrative Syndrome hadn’t affected this cycle at all.

I muttered to myself, “It’s like the devil’s proof.”[1]

Whether Seo Gyu actually committed the crimes he claimed to his name, and whether he committed them with malicious intent—proving either was now impossible. No one could perceive those actions or intentions except for Seo Gyu himself.

A crime that no one could ever prove.

This empty void was known as the Void itself. Mastermind Syndrome, surprisingly, was an Anomaly devoted to this Void.

In contrast to how I once dismissed it as mere nonsense.

“……”

It was worth testing.

Thus, in the next cycle, I made a special request to the Saintess.

[So, you want me to focus on observing Seo Gyu, Mr. Undertaker?]

“Yes. There is something I need to verify at the end of this cycle. Please inform me of any suspicious behavior you notice, even if it seems to be just a trivial detail.”

[Understood. I’ll increase the surveillance level on Seo Gyu to 10-second intervals.]

The Saintess classified the surveillance level for each Awakener from ‘24 hours’ to ‘10 seconds.’ A 24-hour surveillance level meant she would observe an individual only once per day with her Clairvoyance. On the other hand, the 10-second level meant continuous observation every 10 seconds or even more frequently.

Naturally, the number of Awakeners placed on the 10-second surveillance level was extremely limited.

Seo Gyu, originally under a 10-minute surveillance level, was temporarily raised to the highest risk level for this cycle.

“Any suspicious activity yet?”

[None at all. He hasn't once released Anomalies from the Cyber Prison intentionally. As far as I can tell, Seo Gyu is a loyal ally to you, Mr. Undertaker.]

"....."

[I'm not sure why you've suddenly grown suspicious of him, but for now, I have no choice but to give you that answer. I'll keep observing.]

That surveillance level continued until the end of the 683rd cycle.

The last surviving humans were me, the Saintess, and Seo Gyu, just the three of us.

Looking down upon the world, ravaged by the relentless Monster Wave, Seo Gyu clicked his tongue.

"Wow. That thing's a total mess once it gets going. How did Ah-ryeon manage to hold it off for years all by herself...?"

"Seo Gyu. Doesn't something strike you as amusing? Like, oh, I don't know, the thought of 'Fufu, I was behind every incident that happened so far?'"

"...I have no idea what you're talking about, hyung."

"Hmm."

Failure. Maybe Mastermind Syndrome wasn't as troubling an Anomaly as I had thought.

Just as I dismissed the notion, a thin crack appeared on Seo Gyu's neck.

"Huh?"

Seo Gyu reached up with his thick hand to feel his neck.

Blink.

His gaze shifted toward me.

“Hyung—”

Thud. Roll...

His head rolled onto the floor as his neck slipped at an angle.

“.....”

“Fufu. My apologies, Mr. Undertaker.”

The Saintess, bloody ax in hand, smiled sweetly. An uncharacteristic expression for someone who was usually so stoic.

“Did I startle you?”

“...In a way.”

“To you, Mr. Undertaker, it’s been around 20 years, I suppose. I was a little surprised back then, too, when you first told me to monitor Seo Gyu as if he were a mastermind. It seemed you’d grown quite wary of those around you.”

I rubbed my forehead. “It’s the Saintess’s turn to be the mastermind this time, isn’t it?”

“Mastermind, huh? That’s rather hurtful, Mr. Undertaker. I orchestrated every bit of destruction, watching over you from the start as...”

In an instant, her body burst into flames and vanished—my Aura had incinerated her. Watching Mastermind Syndrome toy with the Saintess’s personality was too much to bear.

‘Anyway, if she set her mind to it, the Saintess could easily pull off the mastermind role.’

Manipulating Awakeners through her Constellations, subtly distorting reports to me, freezing time for the perfect crime, and more.

Only now did I grasp the ruthless nature of Mastermind Syndrome.

‘...Is there really no way out of this?’

[Option 1]

Whoever survives until the end, whether it’s Seo Gyu, Sim Ah-ryeon, or anyone else, is automatically designated as the “Mastermind.”

This Mastermind will claim to have orchestrated all their crimes during moments I, the Undertaker, failed to observe them.

Since I can’t monitor those moments, I will have no way of confirming whether the claim is true or false.

[Option 2]

If I rely on the Saintess’s Clairvoyance to observe every moment, it is the Saintess herself who ends up designated as the “Mastermind.”

Since the Saintess can freeze time and commit acts outside my purview, I won’t be able to disprove the Saintess Mastermind Theory.

[Option 3]

I suppress my allies’ growth to ensure that none of them ever rise to claim the “Mastermind” title. I forbid them from acting heroically, restrict their judgment, and prevent them from exercising free will.

I abandon my comrades before they can be designated as Masterminds. I stand by and allow them to die.

Efficiency is sacrificed for control.

Then, when the world inevitably falls to ruin, the true cause of its destruction becomes my tyranny, my distrust, my arrogance. And at last, I am the one designated as the Mastermind.

Only this fact would stand proven.

‘...Whichever option I choose, the Mastermind Syndrome remains unavoidable.’

Take this current cycle, for instance.

Ah-ryeon had been successfully holding back the Monster Wave as the Saintess of the North when it suddenly surged, overrunning New Shinuiju and causing the Eastern Holy State to fall. The Armies of Annihilation engulfed Busan soon after.

‘What if the Saintess froze time and traveled across the globe, wiping out city after city, causing the sudden increase in the Monster Wave’s strength?’

Could such a hypothesis be proven or disproven?

No.

No matter how many times I looped, it was impossible to witness every event.

Whether Seo Gyu, the Saintess, Lee Ha-yul, Sim Ah-ryeon, or even Oh Dok-seo, might have hastened the world’s end in different cycles —

I could never entirely deny the possibility.

And I never would be able to either.

“.....”

I looked down at the earth, now fully blanketed by the Monster Wave, leaving no place for life.

The Anomalies stared back up at me, the last human left on this planet.

The twisted limbs of monstrous beings mocked me with grotesque smiles.

- Hyung, I brought about the end of the world.

- Mr. Undertaker. I orchestrated every bit of destruction.

This was the second piece of the puzzle.

Footnotes:

1 - The devil's proof is a logical dilemma that describes how the presence of evidence can prove something exists or is true but a lack of evidence fails to disprove it.

Chapter 241

The Monad III

Sinnoa

The third and final fragment of the Monad.

[Mr. Undertaker. I apologize for contacting you so late. Yu Ji-won just passed away.]

Thunk.

My steps through the night froze. It was a day when the full moon, tainted red by the Void, spilled crimson vapor across the sky.

Now, even my breath was mingling with that vapor.

“What was the cause of death?”

[It’s hard to say for sure. She was resting in her personal quarters when there was a sudden sound of glass shattering.]

[It was the full-length mirror you referred to as the Magic Mirror.]

[The mirror broke on its own, without any apparent cause. Ji-won tilted her head in confusion, then at that moment, someone knocked on her door.]

[She asked for the passphrase. The person outside responded correctly. But the instant she opened the door, her vision went dark.]

[I immediately sent a message through the Constellation system, instructing a nearby Awakener to check on Yu Ji-won.]

[That’s when they found her dead, with the door still open.]

There was a moment of silence.

[Mr. Undertaker, do you have any idea what kind of Anomaly this could be?]

I didn't.

This sort of thing had been happening more frequently lately.

"There's no telling right now. Did it happen at the National Road Management Corps' headquarters?"

[Yes.]

"Inform Captain Noh Do-hwa as well. I will go and prepare Ji-won's body."

[Understood.]

Yu Ji-won had died a sudden death.

Hers wasn't the first. Though she was the person who had just informed me, the Saintess wasn't aware that she too had also been experiencing a sudden increase in fatalities lately.

'Again. Ji-won died in another absurd manner.'

It all started from the 669th cycle. That was when I met Nenet at Naryanmar, received the Sacred Fire from him, and began constructing signal towers across the world. Ever since then, the death toll of Yu Ji-won and the Saintess had inexplicably started to rise.

670th cycle.

While walking across the Seongsu Bridge, the Saintess slipped and fell, plummeting to her death in the Han River.

Considering the Saintess's abilities, it was an absurd way to die. Most of all, she normally used the Jamsu Bridge for her walks, never the Seongsu Bridge.

Even so, at that time, I dismissed it as an unfortunate coincidence.

‘The Saintess shares her vision with Awakeners, so she encounters Anomalies far more frequently than others. Her chances of taking mental damage are higher as well. Maybe she was bewitched by an Anomaly associated with bridges.’

But as if mocking my judgment, suspiciously frequent and unusual deaths continued to occur around both Yu Ji-won and the Saintess.

Accidental falls. Freezing to death in the middle of summer. Heatstroke in winter. Friendly fire. Ridiculous deaths, like getting hit by a stray arrow on the battlefield—

Beginning in the 683rd cycle, when I first launched my proper investigation into Mastermind Syndrome, these incidents hit a peak. Almost as if...

‘Almost as if the world itself held a grudge against Ji-won and the Saintess.’

Why?

Why the two of them, in particular?

The thought consumed me, even during Ji-won’s funeral.

Instead of a photo, a portrait painted by Ah-ryeon was hung as the memorial image. In the portrait, Ji-won looked straight at me with an expression that said, *“We both know there’s always the next cycle, don’t we?”*

‘The signal towers built across the world. And this Mastermind Syndrome. My actions must have triggered something dormant, something that had been asleep until now.’

What was it? Why?

I couldn’t find the answer.

‘So, conversely... If I don’t build the signal towers, will this phenomenon cease?’

A plausible hypothesis.

I put it to the test in the next cycle.

I didn't seek out Nenet, nor did I accept the Sacred Fire from him. Naturally, I didn't construct any signal towers around the world.

"Saintess."

[Yes.]

"Has there been any sign of abnormalities near Ji-won?"

[No, everything is normal.]

And just like that, the sudden deaths that had been plaguing Yu Ji-won and the Saintess disappeared, almost as if by magic.

Near the very end of that cycle, both of them experienced understandable deaths, not the absurdities they had before.

I rubbed my face with a dry hand.

'...Alright. At least the trigger is identified.'

The identity of the Anomaly remained elusive. It could be an Outer God-class Anomaly, or perhaps even something absurdly weak but that activated only under specific conditions.

For reasons still unknown, as long as I didn't build signal towers across the world, the mysterious Anomaly didn't seem to have any intention of erasing Ji-won and the Saintess.

It felt like I'd finally grabbed a loose end.

I decided to challenge this mystery head-on.

'Fine. I won't dare to spread it across the world, but how about the entire Korean Peninsula? Can we agree on that?'

In the next cycle, I received the Sacred Fire from Nenet and constructed signal towers all over the Korean Peninsula. I referenced locations of signal towers from the Joseon era, taking every precaution to avoid suspicion.

"We're just restoring history," was the pretext I used to mask my intentions from the Anomaly.

To my surprise, even in this cycle, both Ji-won and the Saintess met normal, legitimate ends. The absurd hand of death did not touch either of them.

'So, the Korean Peninsula is acceptable. Fine. What about East Asia? The Japanese archipelago, Taiwan, mainland China, and the Mongolian plains? Is that acceptable too?'

It was.

Signal towers were constructed at key points throughout East Asia.

Whenever reinforcements were needed, the towers would urgently send up signals. If I saw columns of smoke rising high into the sky from afar, I would rush to rescue the survivors.

'So, East Asia is alright. It's surprisingly lenient, I appreciate that. Then, for the last attempt, how about the Indian subcontinent and Eastern Europe—?'

The Saintess died.

A magnitude 9 earthquake struck Seoul overnight. It wasn't just a magnitude 9—a massive chasm, like the gaping maw of hell, tore through the ground and swallowed everything.

[I'm sorry, Mr. Undertaker.]

[I've used Time Stop, and I'm still using it, but it's impossible to escape the earthquake's grasp.]

[Until next time.]

That was the message the Saintess wrote, in less than a second, before her communication was cut off.

With the disappearance of her Clairvoyance and Telepathy, the Constellations under her care also perished. Even before the disaster, however, the failure to predict the Seoul Earthquake had

already shattered the unshakeable trust the Awakeners held in the Constellations.

The social safety network I had meticulously built across the Korean Peninsula was on the brink of collapse, and it wouldn't take more than a few days for it to fall apart.

After accepting the Saintess' death, I immediately went to find Ji-won.

Busan was still intact. Ji-won wasn't.

That day, on her way to the café base, she mistook the safe path through the Inunaki Tunnel and ended up with her limbs torn apart, scattered across the Japanese archipelago.

The one who had the Mini-Map ability, **the one who could read maps better than anyone**, **that Yu Ji-won**, **lost her way and died**.

Ji-won's head was rolling at the entrance of the café base. Even in death, her face remained unnaturally serene.

I gritted my teeth.

"So... the signal towers are allowed only up to East Asia. Anything beyond the Indian subcontinent is out of the question, is it?"

Both the Saintess and Ji-won died. The National Road Management Corps was barely able to monitor the areas around Busan. This cycle was rapidly approaching its end.

And yet, I still had tasks to complete.

There was still a counselor in this world with whom I could discuss matters like these.

"Why don't you just give up, sunbae?"

A girl with an orange ponytail giggled as she spoke.

Infinite Void. An Outer God sealed within Cheon Yo-hwa's soul,

lingering on as a split personality or a turned ally. Most of its former power had been lost, but it still had the keen insight of an ex-Outer God.

I had asked Cheon Yo-hwa to summon Infinite Void, and the moment it heard my story, it burst into laughter.

“It’s obviously an Outer God-class Anomaly.”

“So that’s how it is...”

“Yep. To put it in your terms, sunbae, it seems the Korean Peninsula to East Asia has been somewhat recognized as *your* domain.”

“.....”

“That means the other Outer God has no intention of recklessly invading your territory. It doesn’t want to, or rather, it’s become incapable of doing so. After all, you’ve laid such solid groundwork.”

But then, Infinite Void grinned slyly.

“If, however, you’re genuinely planning to save the entire world, not just the people around you, then the other side will get desperate. So don’t worry too much, sunbae. ‘They’ were just offering a diplomatic deal of sorts.”

“A deal?”

“Yep. A deal. Like, ‘Let’s stop this, Undertaker. We’ll concede East Asia and other regions, so be content with that. But anything south of the Himalayas and west of the Urals is mine. I’ve already called dibs. Deal?’”

“.....”

Infinite Void cackled. “Hahaha! To be honest, I think it’s something to be proud of. I mean, after looping hundreds of times, you finally managed it, right? Wow— I don’t know which Outer God it is, but getting them to acknowledge boundaries up to the Urals and the Himalayas is like a feat not seen since Genghis Khan, isn’t it?”

“You don’t have any guesses as to why it’s targeting Yu Ji-won and the Saintess, do you?”

Infinite Void shrugged, its lips curving into a pout. “Hmm, who knows?”

“……”

“There was a time, you know. When I commanded all the nightmares and opened tutorial dungeons worldwide. I began the invasion of the Void earlier than any other Anomaly, faster and ahead of everyone else. Ah, those were the days! The nights of the Hundred Tales! Back then, I shined like a star. Little me declared herself the Akashic Record of all existence… But alas. Then certain someone had to come at me with a time-looping cheat, determined to take me down first. What choice did I have? I became a pitiful Anomaly trapped in a mere monkey’s body, and here I am…”

I kept my mouth shut. There was no need to respond to its provocations.

Sensing my indifference, Infinite Void chuckled to itself. Its crimson eyes narrowed, gleaming mischievously.

“I’m just a shadow of my former self. I can’t give you any big secrets. But if you’re willing to pay the proper ‘consultation fee,’ I could support you in your quest to hunt down this Outer God.”

“State your terms.”

“Call me by my name. Cheon Yo-hwa.”

“……”

The air around us stilled.

The sunlight streaming through the window dimmed abruptly, as if the day had instantly turned to night.

“Please, sunbae. Just once. Just call me Cheon Yo-hwa, even if it’s only this one time… Please, just say it. With your voice. Yo-hwa, my dear. Just once, won’t you call me that?”

Infinite Void tilted its head like a snake, leaning in close as it softly pleaded, looking up at me with an innocent gaze.

“If you do, I’ll gladly cooperate. Use me however you like, sunbae.”

“Not that damned name.”

A distorted, mechanical sound came from Infinite Void’s lips.

“Why are you pretending not to understand? Sunbae. Cheon Yo-hwa. Cheon Yo-hwa. The human who dared to declare she would sing a thousand songs to seal a being of a hundred tales. She became my vessel long ago, a part of me, my possession. Give her back. Give her back, give her back, give her back.”

It seemed unaware of how twisted its voice had become. The next moment, it spoke as if nothing had happened.

“Just once is enough. You can loop infinitely, can’t you, sunbae? Calling me that just once in this cycle won’t affect the next version of me. Think of it as one step back for two steps forward. Doesn’t it fit nicely into your grand strategy?”

“That makes sense.”

I pushed Infinite Void away.

“If I weren’t a Complete Memory user, that is.”

“……”

“The moment I call you Cheon Yo-hwa, even if only once, that memory will be embedded in me like a nail, regardless of the cycle. Ultimately, the seal on you would weaken. I can’t allow that.”

“Huh. So?” Infinite Void smirked. “You’re really going to mess with that Outer God hiding beyond the mountain ranges? Without my advice, all on your own, from scratch? Hah. Maybe if you loop 2,000 more times, you’ll have a chance. But can your sanity hold out until then?”

"....."

"Oh, that's right! Isn't it thanks to that Saintess that you keep your sanity intact? She's lived just as long as you, right? But *ooooh*, sunbae, if you go up against this Outer God, she'll just keep dying over and over again. What happens if your mind can't handle it...?"

"That's none of your concern."

"Why not? I always have your best interests at heart, sunbae."

I allowed a faint smile to curl my lips. "But there was one thing among your blabbering that was worth considering."

"Oh, really? What is it?"

"That I should use you."

I took hold of its hand. Infinite Void's eyes lit up, a bright expression spreading across its face as it assumed I had finally given in.

What a predictable misunderstanding. Of course, there was no way a regressor would fall for the tricks spun by an Outer God's tongue.

I softly spoke to the true owner of the hand I was holding.

"Yo-hwa."

"____"

Blink.

The red light flickered, and in its place were eyes full of trust, as usual.

"Yes, teacher?"

The girl whose name I had granted. My disciple.

"I have a favor to ask. I'm sorry, but could you entrust this life to me?"

"……"

"Seoul is falling, the Constellation system is collapsing, and soon even the northern regions will be swallowed by the tide of Anomalies. But there's still something I need to confirm here."

"You need my help, don't you?"

"It must be you. No one else."

"Yes."

Cheon Yo-hwa smiled brightly.

"Of course I'll help! Oh, but I am a bit worried about my friends. If possible, could you make sure they don't suffer when they die?"

"Alright. I truly appreciate it."

"So do I."

Yo-hwa placed her hands over my left hand. Gently, passing to me a slight pressure and warmth.

"Always, and forever—thank you, teacher."

There was a moment of silence.

The next time the crimson eyes flickered, her hands abruptly pulled away from mine.

"What are you scheming, you?"

The gaze now carried an edge of caution, wary of the unknown. It was Infinite Void. The entity had been called forth from within Cheon Yo-hwa's consciousness once more.

"Not even calling me sunbae anymore?"

"Answer me. What kind of ridiculous plan are you hatching now?"

"Like I said, I intend to use you." I stood up. "Soon, the world will end. Up until that very moment, I will survive, and so will you."

“What?”

“We’ll be the last two standing.”

Infinite Void looked confused. But the moment it grasped my intention, its expression morphed into one of horror.

“The last one standing. Whoever is next to me will inevitably be infected by Mastermind Syndrome.”

“……!”

“If, as I suspect, this Outer God controls the Mastermind Syndrome, Infinite Void, then its influence will reach out to you this time.”

“You, you—! How dare you…?”

I smiled. “While human minds may be easily ensnared by an Outer God, do you really think the mind of an Anomaly that was once an Outer God itself can be corrupted so easily by Mastermind Syndrome?”

No.

A collision was inevitable.

Of course, there was a vast difference in power between the unknown adversary and Infinite Void. But even the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs was insignificant compared to the Earth.

The fact that a collision would occur—that alone was vital. Even a weakened Infinite Void wouldn’t fall helplessly to another Outer God. There would be a gap, however slight.

And that gap would be more than enough for me.

“Infinite Void. While you resist the Outer God with all your strength, I will seize its tail.”

To subdue one beyond your reach, you used another outside your bounds.[2]

Be it Infinite Void or the mysterious Outer God, from humanity's perspective, they were nothing but troublesome outsiders.

"The lands west of the Urals? South of the Himalayas? And you expect me to agree to that?"

"....."

"Don't make me laugh. Not a single blade of grass, a speck of dust, or a breath of air from this land will be handed over to you."

Thus, as previously mentioned, this story serves as an epilogue to the epilogue, so there's no additional epilogue to add here.

The puzzle pieces are in place.

Now, it's time to hunt the enemies of humanity.

Footnotes:

1 - Back in chapter 97, Cheon Yo-hwa's name is revealed to have multiple possible meanings. Infinite Void is restricted to the hanja definition of 天寥化, meaning serene heavens both boundless and formless, infinite and void. Cheon Yo-hwa, Undertaker's comrade, takes the name of 千謠話, which literally means a thousand folk tales but can be interpreted as an endless abundance of stories passed along through human connection.

2 - Literally, "to subdue a barbarian, use another barbarian." A saying meant to advise letting outsiders do the dirty work and fight it out amongst themselves.

Chapter 242

The Experimenter I

Sinnoa

“Nooo! No way! I’m not fighting an Outer God with a weak body like this! At the very least, let me regain control over the nightmares! Otherwise, I’ll never cooperate—never!”

“To put it plainly, no matter how much you throw a tantrum, it won’t change a thing.”

“You bastard! You regressor! Devil!”

“My ears aren’t bleeding.”

687th cycle.

The world was already falling apart at full speed. Amid this chaos, I chose not to exit early and instead kept Infinite Void as my partner.

Perhaps it’s time to share the strategy I, the Undertaker, employ when the end of the world draws near.

“Ah-ryeon, abandon the Saintess work and then retreat.”

“Uh, excuse me? But, Guild Leader, if we do that, the Manchurian Defense Line will collapse, and New York will fall soon after, leading to the downfall of the Eastern Holy State…?”

“Yes, precisely. Soon, the Monster Wave will grow out of control. Let’s retreat to Busan with only your devoted fanatics.”

“Aha! Got it!”

With that, the Eastern Holy State was effectively closed for business.

Without Seoul’s true Saintess, who had already died, it was

impossible to continue the brainwashing operations that involved sending fanatics messages under the alias [Morning Star of the Second Coming].

- Oh, my Lord Mo Gwang-seo Christ!

- Are you truly abandoning us?

- The end has come upon us!

Mo Gwang-seo was still very much alive. Even so, the mere cessation of the Constellation's messages convinced many fanatics that their apparent "connection to God" had been severed, leading them to fall into hysteria.

I didn't blame them. For those who had lost family, friends, homelands, countries, and ethnic ties, the so-called "heavenly voice" that always responded to their prayers had been their last pillar of support.

Collapse was inevitable.

Not long ago, the Eastern Holy State Crusaders had been a well-organized force, repelling Anomalies as one, and yet they were dismantled in an instant.

"How many are following us?"

"Hehe. I scraped together the strongest Awakeners. If I bring too many, it'll be hard for grandpa Sword Marquess to feed them all... Around, uh, six hundred...!"

Not all fanatics worshiped Mo Gwang-seo.

In her role as the Saintess of the North and the Healing Angel, Sim Ah-ryeon was able to save most of the wounded on the battlefield, so long as the injuries weren't fatal. Naturally, the combat units frequently engaged with Anomalies had immense faith in her, as she had saved their lives countless times.

These units were called the "Saintess's Guard."

The name sounded silly, but they were the elite forces of northern Korea. If their mistress commanded them to die, they would obey. If she asked them to survive, they would return even from hell itself as the fierce revenants of Ah-ryeon.

With the northern front withdrawn, the next step was...

“Yo-hwa. Baekhwa Girls’ High School is now officially a branch campus in Sejong, with its main campus in Busan.”

“Oh, well... I’m a bit sad to leave behind all the kids buried on the school grounds here, but it can’t be helped!”

Even Cheon Yo-hwa, as herself rather than as Infinite Void, received her orders.

With New York and Pyongyang about to fall, there was no longer any reason to defend Sejong.

Northern Seoul? As mentioned in the previous story, a massive earthquake had struck, reducing it to rubble. Incheon also suffered devastating damage.

The central front was withdrawn.

Retreat, retreat. Endless retreat.

Until the Nakdong River became the final defense line.

The Librarian of the Great Library: Announcing on SG Net.

An Outer God-class Anomaly has appeared, severing the voices of the constellations. Until we eliminate this Anomaly, it will be impossible for the Constellations to assist you.

Awakeners residing on the Korean Peninsula are requested to retreat southward and form the final line of defense.

The current status of the refugee zones, centered around Busan, is as follows...

The retreat wasn't easy.

As you well know, no matter how often the National Road Management Corps sent caravans to clear paths, the world was fundamentally tainted by the Void. If one misstepped while walking on a road under broad daylight, they might stumble into a 'strange place.'

Answering the wrong voice or looking at forbidden objects yielded the same effect.

- Lee_Hyun-su: We're stranded halfway between Iksan and Jeonju. There are 16 of us. We'll offer 50% of our supplies in exchange for rescue. Please, save us.

- Parl_Ha-byul: We were moving along the coast from Gangneung, but now we're on a snowy mountain. Location unknown. We're marking our position with regular Aura signals. We'll definitely repay you if you help us. Here's our supply list...

- Anonymous: I think I'm the only one left alive.

Casualties were mounting everywhere.

The National Road Management Corps was going all out to send rescue teams in every direction, and both Samcheon World and Baekhwa Girls' High School offered their support. I too did my utmost. Yet countless people were left behind.

There was no other choice.

'The Saintess's death was a severe blow.'

If Ji-won had survived, she could've tracked the stranded individuals using Mini-Map. But in this cycle, Ji-won had died in the Inunaki Tunnel.

Both the right and left eyes that had once observed the Korean Peninsula on my behalf had essentially gone blind.

Even so, would I give up?

“Captain Noh Do-hwa. How’s the refugee intake going?”

“Somehow, it’s holding up. At this point, just reaching us alive is enough to put these folks in the top 1% of humanity...”

In Busan, we had always prepared for such endgame scenarios.

The shantytowns had rapidly expanded, but each village was organized with strict planning and zoning.

Samcheon World’s witches, capable of aerial movement, patrolled the skies to maintain security. The rights to judge and enforce laws were exclusively held by Samcheon World.

Naturally, there were frequent conflicts between the original residents and the refugees, but—

“Yo-hwa, if you would.”

“Yes.”

In case it’s slipped your mind, Cheon Yo-hwa’s original profession was a necromancer. She had a brainwashing skill called NPC Creation. This forbidden technique controlled people’s thought patterns and behavior, turning them into zombies who could only think and act according to set instructions.

“Oh, huh? What are you doing to me—?”

“Shush.”

“—For the survival of humanity, everyone must unite! Yes, indeed! Naturally!”

Yo-hwa purified the few troublemakers, turning them docile. To avoid being reassembled into an NPC, those who caused problems would have to keep a low profile. Fortunately, this level of tact was already present in most survivors of the apocalypse.

Through blood and sweat, we imposed order.

In the areas surrounding Busan, fortifications went up quickly and

efficiently.

“Pyongyang refugees have been accepted.”

“Refugees from Nampo, Sariwon, Kaesong, and Wonsan—all who made it have arrived!”

“There’s no one left to come from Sejong.”

“From Iksan, Jeonju, Gwangju, Mokpo, Haenam, and Suncheon—those who wanted to stay did, and the rest have crossed over.”

“There are still two guilds from Gangneung we haven’t heard from.”

“We estimate that the first line of defense along the Nakdong River will be complete within a week!”

The National Road Management Corps worked through countless all-nighters, spearheading the coordination of every operation.

“Hmm...”

At headquarters, Noh Do-hwa was practically always present, making it doubtful if she ever slept. Same face as always, same exhausted look in her eyes, sipping coffee with a deadpan expression.

“I’d say we’ve saved all those we could. It’s a relief that the Sword Marquess rejuvenated, otherwise, he’d have collapsed while stomping through fields...”

“The Magical Girls also promised to send reinforcements if necessary.”

“Huh. I used to wonder why you always mingled with that bunch, but now I see they’re proving quite useful...”

I nodded. Then, I turned to a member of the National Road Management Corps and asked, “Still no response from Daejeon?”

“Oh, no, sir. They only said they would manage their refugees independently and asked us not to worry.”

Go Yuri.

In this cycle, as in others, Daejeon had remained outside the flow of refugees. The Anomalies likely wouldn't touch Daejeon either.

I nodded slowly. "Alright. Moving on to the next phase of the operation."

That day, SG Net was hacked.

Author: Collector of All Anomalies

Greetings to all human Awakeners active on the Korean Peninsula. Hehe.

The website turned a deep shade of red, cracks running across it like shattered glass.

An unprecedented event.

The Awakeners were all shocked.

Author: Collector of All Anomalies

Watching you all struggle to survive warms some desolate corner of my heart.

How does it feel to have your days of leeching off the kindness of other constellations abruptly cut off?

The constellations you adored and revered are now all in my grasp. While there are still a few I haven't captured, they can no longer interfere with you in any way.

Can you survive even through this hardship?

Announcements like these appeared everywhere, and general Awakeners couldn't post or comment.

Naturally, this was our handiwork.

The one behind the Collector of All Anomalies notice was Ah-ryeon. As expected, it immediately captured everyone's attention and drew countless people's resentment her way.

"...I'm sorry, Ah-ryeon. I'm always forcing you into the villain's role."

"Hmm? Haha, no, no! I'm totally fine with it! Actually, I'm thrilled to be such a big target!"

The problem was that she was drawing too much attention. If a situation like this dragged on for too long, Ah-ryeon would undoubtedly become a Corrupted. That's why the tactic of painting Ah-ryeon as the source of all the world's evils was only used right before humanity was truly on the brink of extinction.

Just like now.

"Oh, mister!"

Bang.

Oh Dok-seo burst through my door. Being the youngest in our guild, along with Lee Ha-yul, she seemed to have completely forgotten the concept of knocking.

Since I had just gotten out of the shower, Dok-seo ended up staring right at my bare torso. She froze for a second.

"Oh. Wow. Those abs are insane..."

"Is this harassment?"

"You should walk around shirtless more often. Normally, I can't stand the muscle-man type, but for you, I'd make an exception and let you wear a tank top. Oh, but not too often, or it wouldn't fit your image."

“Definitely harassment.”

“In this messed-up world, who cares about manners… Ah! Anyway! Mister! Come out to the terrace!”

I sighed.

‘Usually, the Saintess would telepathically tell Dok-seo, [Wait a bit, Undertaker just got out of the shower,] to tip her off.’

Even in these small, everyday moments, the Saintess’ absence was painfully clear.

I donned my barista attire and stepped outside. I wasn’t in the Inunaki Tunnel anymore—my current lodging was at the National Road Management Corps headquarters.

Stepping out onto the communal terrace, I took in the view beyond Busan.

Already on the terrace were Dok-seo, Ha-yul, Yo-hwa, Ah-ryeon, Seo-rin, and Do-hwa, all waiting for me.

“You’re here…” Noh Do-hwa murmured, sipping her coffee.

Following her gaze, I looked up at the sky.

“……”

Smoke signals.

Dark pillars of smoke were rising in the distance. Those vertical smoke columns were the very triggers that had incited the ‘mysterious Outer God.’

The columns rose, reaching straight for the sky. This wasn’t ordinary smoke. It was a Sacred Fire, designed to be visible from up to a 1,000-kilometer radius.

And now that Sacred Fire was blazing.

From the horizon—

One, two, three, four.

Five, six, seven, eight.

Nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen.

Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen.

From the horizon—

Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty, forty-one, forty-two, forty-three, forty-four.

The witches monitoring the skies, the refugees working tirelessly to establish settlements, and the citizens faithfully carrying out their tasks—all of them stopped to gaze at the sky.

Silently. Unendingly.

From every direction, columns of smoke rose, one after another, into the heavens.

“……”

“……”

The entire leadership team gathered on the terrace held their tongues.

The only sounds were of Do-hwa sipping her coffee, and Ha-yul clutching my sleeve tightly.

This was the scene that marked the end of our era.

Footnotes:

Chapter 243

The Experimenter II

Sinnoa

The smoke pillars stretched across the sky for half a day before they began to disappear. One by one, they faded, starting with those farthest in the distance. It signified that the cities or strongholds where signal towers had been set were now completely destroyed.

One, two, three...

They extinguished quietly, like candles going out.

When only five columns of smoke remained in the sky,

“Great Witch!”

One of Samcheon World’s guild members, riding a broom to scout overhead, approached us. Our leadership gathered on the terrace of the National Road Management Corps headquarters to receive the scout’s report.

“Yes. What is it?”

“A Monster Wave has been detected! It appears that Sejong and Daejeon have already fallen!”

“I see. Well done. Recon squads one through five, return immediately.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The guild member flew back beyond Busan. With the Saintess’s Telepathy gone, all these reports had to be delivered manually. We still had radios, but they were single-use items—using them even once risked contamination by an Anomaly. It was wise to reserve them only for the most critical battles.

Soon, the smoke columns in the sky dwindled to four. That meant Jeonju had also fallen.

“Everyone, take a final break. Once the fighting starts, you won’t get a chance to rest your eyes.”

There was little response. Most of them were far, far too tense to muster anything to say.

For me, a regressor, this was merely the 687th time facing the world’s end, but for my comrades, it was their first and final apocalypse.

Seoul had been razed in seconds, families and friends killed, human life trampled like a plaything... Somehow, they’d clung to survival and rebuilt a semblance of a city. Yet, deep down, they had all wondered it.

“How much longer can we hold out?”

“Isn’t all this just a futile struggle?”

And now, the answer to that question was descending from the heavens. The smoke pillars marking humanity’s survival ticked down from four to three, three to two, and from two to one. When it finally fell from one to zero,

Dooooong!

a bell’s toll rang out from the sky.

Doooooooong! Doooong!

It wasn’t a melody conjured by Seo-rin’s magic, nor a sound produced by some skilled Awakener.

The sound of the bell itself was an Anomaly.

Whenever humanity’s strongholds were annihilated and only one place remained to make a final stand, when the Monster Wave’s forces loomed just before them, without fail, the “bell” appeared and resounded ominously across the sky.

Doooooooong! Doooooong!

With each toll of the invisible bell, bright red streaks spread across the sky, as if spilled paint were being smeared over it. The sky succumbed not to the barren space beyond its atmosphere but instead to its final form, transforming into a canvas. Before the bell had cried its twelfth toll, the heavens were thoroughly painted in crimson.

Doooooooong!

The bell tolled precisely thirteen times, then fell silent.

But what it left behind wasn't merely a painted red sky.

Another witch who had been scouting from high above hurriedly descended.

"Great Witch! Th-the Earth has flattened!"

In the span of just thirteen tolls, the Earth's geography—or rather, the very laws of the solar system—had been altered. It was proof that humanity no longer had any authority to assert reason or order over the world.

I took a deep breath and roared out in a commanding voice.

"Do not look at the sky!"

My voice rang out.

"Don't let the sun, the moon, or the stars into your sight! They're no longer celestial bodies—they're simply parts of an Anomaly, only a Void! Don't look at them!"

Although it was something every survivor already knew, I emphasized it anyway.

Humanity had trained relentlessly up to this point, in the dream-space simulation known as Project Kingdom, a collaborative creation of tutorial fairies and writers. This was how, even after the Saintess's death, humanity could still muster its final stand.

Unlike the confused and scattered efforts in the early Ten Legs Extermination War or the Meteor Shower Suppression Battle, every member here had died countless times in simulation and was a pseudo-regressor in their own right.

My army.

The essence of regression.

“They’re here!”

The faction in charge of sensory organs and blood flow in the army, the witches of Samcheon World, launched screaming flares into the sky, which burst like fireworks.

“It’s the Monster Wave!”

The army of Anomalies spilled across the horizon.

-Woo, Ø, Hu, Ü, Ü, Woo, Hü, Ü, Ø, Ø.

Until now, I hadn’t described the Monster Wave in much detail.

This was because the Monster Wave was simply the gathering and surging forward of every Anomaly, a mixture of all aberrations.

But even amidst this black mass of tactical horror, the most distinct Anomaly was something I could describe.

-Wi, Ø, Woo, Ü, Ü, Hu, Ü, Hoo, Ü, Ü.

The Hollow.

In this world, corpses left without proper burials would transform into Anomalies.

The bodies of children abandoned in the rush to evacuate, elderly people killed to reduce the number of mouths to feed and then discarded unceremoniously.

Every corpse left unburied returned without exception. And they

clawed at the world that had forsaken them.

The Anomaly that reached Busan's final line of defense first was one of those Hollow.

It was a mountainous figure. Towering like a seventy-story building, this massive Anomaly was a body overgrown with limbs and lips sprouting like dense fur. Its lips and teeth muttered incessantly, producing a chaotic noise incomprehensible to the human ear.

But if you broke down that noise, it would sound something like this:

- Oh, Mr. Sang-gyu, look at the baby!

- MomDadMomDadMomDad.

- The child has grown up so beautifully.

- Aaaaahhhhhh.

- Oh, don't even get me started. The kid's been acting out lately, and it's such a worry. I thought I'd feel more secure once they turned four...

The head of a newborn, a mother's fingers, a father's calf muscles, a relative's hair—all of them were fused together, dragging intestines as they advanced, this seventy-story monstrosity composed of flesh and bones fused into a single abomination.

And yet, they didn't hurl curses at "us," the humans. They didn't explicitly express murderous intent. It was as if they were merely saying hello.

Look upon us—are we not human?

As though this, indeed, was what humanity had been, these Anomalies, like innocent children, were replicating "human society."

And the Hollow Anomaly wasn't alone. Countless others were approaching from beyond the horizon—at a rough estimate,

thousands. Considering the distant shadows drawing nearer, this was an army of Hollow formed from billions of corpses.

To be honest, even the Ten Legs that I once mistook for the final boss at the beginning of my regression belonged to the category of Hollow.

In other words, the Monster Wave contained tens of thousands Anomalies who were at the same level of the Ten Legs, and even that was only a fraction of its total force.

“Urgh...”

“.....”

No matter how much they had trained, the Awakeners froze before the tangible reality of a world-ending force bearing down on them.

And as always in such moments,

“————*Ah*————”

a witch’s song resounded.

Seo-rin stepped onto the terrace, taking a position where everyone could see her, and began to sing the Primary Melody.

The meaningless noise emitted by the Anomalies was drowned out by the sound of a single witch’s song, reduced to nothing more than white noise.

But that wasn’t all.

“G-Guild Leader.”

“.....”

“I’ll... I’ll pray too.”

Ah-ryeon wore clothes she normally didn’t, at least not in front of me.

The Saintess’s robes. A black and white dress.

It was the outfit Ah-ryeon wore when she acted as the Saintess of the Eastern Holy State. It didn't hold profound religious meaning, but it exuded an aura of sanctity.

Ah-ryeon's personal attire covered every inch of her skin, its generous folds concealing her entirely.

It's often said that clothing defines a person's aura, and dressed as a Saintess, Sim Ah-ryeon looked worlds apart from her usual ditzy self, her face lighting up with an "ehehe" as she encouraged me.

"Guild Leader... B-best of luck!"

She assumed a prayerful stance.

Suddenly, green grass and flowers began to sprout from the cracks in the concrete terrace floor in a dazzling array of blossoms. The vines quickly climbed up the tower of the National Road Management Corps' headquarters and spread through the alleyways of Busan, pulsing like a network of veins.

Waves of flowers and grass washed over the final defense line.

"What... is this?"

"My legs... My legs are moving again!"

Flowers bloomed over the wounds of the injured lying in the shantytown's clinics.

Thin leaves and petals bound their wounds, closing scars, and then fell away in silence.

It was as if spring had descended over all of Busan, scattering petals in every direction.

The petals over amputees' wounds were red; over organ-damaged areas, they were yellow; for brain injuries, blue petals; and over the sorrowful ones mourning loved ones, white.

A Hundred Blooming Blossoms.

The power of Sim Ah-ryeon, Saintess of the Eastern Holy State.

A wide-ranging skill that endlessly healed any ally recognized within her reach.

A garden flourishing on malice as its nourishment.

Wherever Ah-ryeon summoned her true power on the battlefield, a wave of petals would bloom, painting the sky.

“Wah-wah-whooooa!”

“The Saintess is watching over us!”

“The Saintess has cleared our path, blessing us with the glory of her love! All will be saved by her merciful grace!”

It was only natural that people would be captivated by such a spectacular sight.

“In the name of Mo Gwang-seo Christ!”

With a wild roar, the Saintess’s Guard of six hundred charged at the Hollow.

The sight of a paladin squad attacking a seventy-story Anomaly resembled something out of *Don Quixote*, except that these warriors were far more competent.[1]

Boom!

The Saintess’s Guard’s coordinated assault demolished the closest Hollow completely.

They hacked away at the monstrous flesh, causing the enormous Anomaly to lose balance and topple forward, shaking the entire city of Busan as it fell.

“Kill it! Kill it all!”

“Let’s go too! Let’s join in!”

“Uwoooo!”

Then, guild members who had fled from across the Korean Peninsula joined in.

Blood splattered everywhere. The fallen Anomaly, massive as it was, was no match for the skilled Awakeners, who sliced through it with ease.

- AAAAAAAAAAAAH.

- Please, don't hurt my child!

- MomDadMomDadMomDad.

- It hurts! It hurts! Please, save me!

- Why are you doing this? Why kill us? And you still call yourselves human?

As they died, the Hollow mimicked human expressions, voices, and gestures, clinging to the Awakeners. Each voice carried the weight of a curse. Even seasoned warriors who had undergone rigorous training flinched in response.

"Ah——Ah——"

But Seo-rin's song, now entering the Third Melody, spread mental fortitude across the entire battlefield.

This song of empowerment, which I developed in collaboration with her, was a remnant of the countless struggles we had waged against Go Yuri. Its primary effect was simple: to reinforce the warriors with constant feedback of a singular memory and emotion.

A surge of conviction overwhelmed the fighters: "I will defeat these monsters" and "I will show the final resolve of humanity."

"Fucking Anomalies...!"

"Don't you dare imitate humans!"

Their hesitation vanished, and they butchered the Hollow as they had been trained to do.

The Anomaly didn't go down without a fight. The Hollow, formed from thousands of corpses, clawed, bit, and exploded its entrails like bombs.

Casualties were inevitable. Blood from both the dead and the living stained the ground red.

But Ah-ryeon was there.

Silently, she prayed. Repenting for every hurt she had caused, humbling herself for all her sins, and healing others in proportion to the pain she had once inflicted.

Even if the Anomalies tore into human flesh, vines would wrap around the wounds, flowers blooming and withering within seconds.

And when the giant Hollow was finally annihilated—

Under the crimson sky, a million petals scattered over the area where the battle had taken place.

Injuries: 0. Deaths: 0.

The opening battle had ended in humanity's overwhelming victory.

"Uwoooo!"

"Bring on those goddamn monsters! Let 'em all come!"

"Long live Samcheon World! Long live the Great Witch!"

Cheering erupted from every corner.

But with my vision enhanced by aura, I could see the unending wave of Anomalies advancing from beyond the horizon.

The Hollow we had just defeated was merely a fragment of the Monster Wave's force—roughly one ten-billionth.

One out of ten billion.

"....."

I looked at Seo-rin, who was singing and burning through her lifespan, and at Ah-ryeon, who was gradually edging toward corruption in real time. I tightened my grip on Do-hwa's sword hilt.

This was just the beginning.

Footnotes:

1 - In the comedic novel *Don Quixote*, the protagonist and his one man team up to fight against a ferocious giant, which is actually just a windmill.

Chapter 244

The Experimenter III

Sinnoa

In the Final Defense War, my role was always as the “firefighter” on the front lines.

And that was precisely what I intended to demonstrate.

- Woo, Hoo, U, Hoo, O, Woo, O, O.

The thrill of our opening victory was short-lived.

In no time, a tsunami of Anomalies began to surge from every direction, hitting us in one fell swoop.

These towering Hollow Anomalies varied from 30 stories to 80 stories tall. Each step they took sent tremors rippling across the horizon. As they collided, they crumbled, intermingled, and fell again, shifting the terrain in real time, with layers of bedrock rippling beneath them as if merely oil.

Without formation or order, relying solely on overwhelming mass, these Anomalies relentlessly pushed against the Final Defense Line.

“Hold the line! Don’t back down!”

“Didn’t I say not to look up at the sky during training? Is no one listening—”

“Fire!”

The red wave surged forward at the moment of impact—a crimson tide whose true identity was a spray of blood from the Awakeners standing on the defense line.

Just then, the flower petals from Ah-ryeon’s prayer scattered over the Awakeners like confetti, wrapping around them. An Awakener

crushed under the foot of a 40-story Hollow Anomaly was instantly healed as the petals swirled around him. Ah-ryeon's petals gently encased their wounds, healing them completely—even pierced abdomens, severed limbs, torn flesh.

"We can win! We can hold them off!"

"Raaaah!"

"It doesn't hurt...! Hah! I'm really not dying! This is even easier than the simulation!"

The front line trembled like it would collapse, but the Awakeners held their ground to the very end. In fact, on some fronts, they even managed to push back, hacking down the Hollow Anomalies until they toppled.

Was this what it meant to be evenly matched?

Their mass seemed infinite, but our health points were also effectively boundless.

"Hyaaaa! Charge! Keep charging!"

"Hail the Saintess! All hail the Saintess!"

"Damn it, did the Holy State hoard such an amazing ability all this time?"

It was an immortal army. An ocean of blackness, made up of billions of Anomalies, was being driven back by the wave of humanity.

Watching from the terrace, a wide-eyed Dok-seo muttered, "Incredible... So this is Ah-ryeon unnie's true Awakening..."

This sort of scene was routine in the Eastern Holy State, but even there, it had never reached such a massive scale. Ah-ryeon was now channeling her life force directly—essentially tapping into her innate qi, as martial artists would put it.

As I looked down at her, kneeling on the terrace floor with her eyes

closed, silently praying, a thought crossed my mind.

‘Now that she’s activated that mode, there’s no going back.’

The countdown had begun. Ah-ryeon was already past the point of no return as a human.

The impressive performance humanity was putting on at the Final Defense Line relied solely on her sacrifice.

‘I’m sorry, Ah-ryeon. I’ll work quickly to stabilize the front while you hold on.’

Static crackled from my radio. We had refrained from using radios earlier due to contamination concerns, but now that the battle was in full swing, we had activated the comms.

-This is Point C3! Grkk… this is Point C3! The Hollow is massive! We can’t hold out much longer!

It was one of the areas I had been monitoring closely.

I turned to Do-hwa. “While I’m away, I’ll leave you in charge, Commander. Anomalies could emerge from the shoreline at any moment, so keep at least one trump card in reserve.”

“Have you told me that a hundred times already? Just go already…”

“Understood. If things go south, fall back on the Sword Marquess. I’m off.”

Exchanging quick glances with Seo-rin, Yo-hwa, Ha-yul, and Dok-seo, I pushed off the terrace and leaped into the fray.

Whoooosh.

The sticky, lukewarm air clung to my face. Though we were in the beginnings of winter, the air was disgustingly humid outside, and even carried a faintly sweet, sickening scent and an altered texture ever since the sky had turned red.

Tap, tap, tap.

I darted through the city, stepping along the tops of streetlamps set up along the alleyways. There was no need to waste Aura by hovering pointlessly in mid air.

In no time, I reached the area where our allies had called for reinforcements.

“This damn Anomaly is too tough!”

“Don’t charge it! Maintain distance! It’s slow, so focus on clearing the minions around it and fall back!”

- Grù Ø Hoò Gú Ú Gú Roò Ø Gú Goò Hò 1

The Anomaly assaulting this front could be described in one phrase: a medieval knight. And yet, it was enormous. Towering at 100 meters, with a width of nearly 300 meters, it was like a moving fortress.

- Grò Où Là Cú A Hù Hoò Ø 1

This medieval knight was covered head to toe in thick, overlapping plates of metal.

Thick, endlessly squirming blood oozed from between the plates, while tangled blood vessels and muscles stretched across the gaps.

Embedded in a dense array into the waist of this massive, mobile fortress were numerous flags, each one bearing an incomprehensible symbol. Except on closer inspection, these flags were actually tongues, alive and writhing.

The tongues flapped violently in the wind, producing an endless chorus of uncanny wails.

Pheeuuuuw…

A sound like the whistle of a steam engine or perhaps mocking laughter—the “chanting” of these flags reverberated across the front line. The Awakeners directly exposed to it immediately began bleeding from their ears.

“Ahhhhhh!”

“Ugh, my... my ears! Ahhh!”

It wasn’t just their ears—eyeballs rolled out of sockets, teeth crumbled, and blood spewed from every orifice of their faces.

Screams echoed all around.

Had it not been for the Saintess’s AOE healing, that single blast of noise from the medieval knight would have obliterated this entire section of the front line.

But humanity still had Ah-ryeon.

And it also had me, the Undertaker.

“A-aha! That thing! It’s that thing, Your Excellency the Undertaker!”

The leader of a minor guild defending the front saw me approach, his mouth agape. One of his eyes had just been healed, thanks to Ah-ryeon’s power.

“Stand back.” I brushed past the guild leader and stepped forward.

“Oh, um, please, be care—”

One step, two steps, three steps.

The guild leader’s voice faded behind me.

On my last step, I launched off the ground.

A weightless sensation filled me.

In an instant, the massive front face of the “medieval knight,” a towering steel fortress, was in full view.

- O Goo Cro Gro Hu -!

It noticed me, too.

Spiked lances sprouted from the gaps between its armor plates,

sharp and deadly. They resembled the lances wielded by mounted knights. Oddly, these spikes had horse legs attached to them and produced a clopping sound as they moved. They neighed like horses too.

- Neeeiiigh!

Roughly 3,000 spiked lances.

A single defensive maneuver from the Anomaly was like 3,000 knights charging at once.

"_____"

I drew Do-hwa from its sheath and focused all my Aura into the blade. Wisps of dark Aura streamed from my body, coalescing into a wave around the sword.

I sent the wave surging forward.

A dark surge swept out in front of me.

Bam! Bam-bam-bam!

The spiked lances charging at me shattered like toothpicks under the wave's impact.

My strike didn't dissipate there.

The gust charged forward, slicing cleanly through the flags embedded like porcupine quills into the "medieval knight's" back.

- ᘐ'ᘐ'ᘐ'ᘐ'ᘐ'ᘐ'ᘐ'ᘐ'ᘐ'ᘐ'ᘐ'ᘐ'ᘐ!

The Anomaly shrieked.

Thousands of tongues twitched in agony, letting out dying gasps. Severed from the poles, the tongues writhed helplessly.

Using my full strength, I kicked at the massive creature's body.

Boom!

The shockwave reverberated across the field.

Those flags were the core of the medieval knight. As long as the flags remained intact, this armored monster was essentially invulnerable.

‘Unless all the flags are taken down in a single blow, they’ll keep regenerating. It’s an incredibly tricky condition.’

However, once the requirement was met, the creature’s armor could be broken with a single strike.

Crack! Craaack!

The armor plating of the medieval knight shattered like an eggshell.

Soon after, the severed tongues gave their final death rattles before disintegrating.

The monster burst, releasing a torrent of blood. It splattered across me, causing its iron stench to fill my nose as it clung to my lips.

I turned back to the Awakeners.

“Reform your lines!”

At that moment, the Awakeners’ senses returned. They looked up at me, dazed.

I could read a multitude of emotions in their eyes: fear, awe, relief, admiration, excitement, and elation.

Their reaction made sense. In all the battles we had fought together, I had never fully revealed my strength—not even once. I only used my full power in the final battle, and for this cycle, that time had arrived.

“Do not lose hope!”

“Ah———”

As I issued my command, Seo-rin’s song resounded from the distant

Babel Tower.

“The Primary Melody.” The Fourth Movement, *“Transmission.”*

The effect was straightforward. Seo-rin could designate a specific individual to project onto a hologram, broadcasting their image live across the battlefield.

“The Great Witch of Samcheon World is singing for us! The Saintess of the Eastern Holy State is praying for us!”

-The Great Witch of Samcheon World is singing for us! The Saintess of the Eastern Holy State is praying for us!

My voice echoed across the entire Final Defense Line.

In the hologram projected throughout the battlefield, the Undertaker—an exact replica of myself in both stance and voice—was shouting the same words.

When fighting in the trenches, a warrior’s field of vision narrows drastically. Likewise, facing the relentless onslaught of the Anomaly army, time and senses both began to break down.

So, what did the fighters need in this moment?

[You’re not fighting alone.]

[Allied forces are triumphing on other fronts.]

[Comrades are fighting and sacrificing themselves in just as fierce a battle.]

They needed faith in their comrades. The certainty that humanity was united.

As long as they felt this assurance, the warriors never let go of their weapons.

This was why we sacrificed one of the precious movements of *The Primary Melody* just to project this “transmission” across the field.

‘Though the distraction of the hologram could risk breaking their combat focus—’

Ah-ryeon’s AOE healing was there to compensate for that. With her support, we minimized the impact of any momentary lapse in focus, while at the same time maximizing the morale across the battlefield.

I raised my voice again.

“We are humanity!”

-As long as you do not fall, humanity will not perish!

“Stand up and fight to the last moment of extinction! Comrades! Allies! Brothers and sisters in arms!”

-Stand up and fight to the last moment of extinction! Comrades! Allies! Brothers and sisters in arms...

Seo-rin’s voice rang out, standing alone, bright and beautiful. Flower petals filled the sky over the battlefield.

The Great Witch, the Saintess, and the Undertaker—all were here, side by side with everyone on the field.

“We are humanity!”

Without hesitation, the Awakeners echoed the cry.

“We are humanity!”

I quickly dashed toward the next front.

Overwhelming numbers. Every part of the defense line was gradually being pushed back by the tide of Anomalies. No casualties or injuries had been reported yet, but sheer numbers alone threatened to overwhelm us.

There were simply too many, an endless barrage.

“We are humanity!”

But each time I arrived at a section of the front, the United Front Forces pushed back the Anomalies just a little, driving them off bit by bit.

One front, then the next, then the one beyond that, and then back again.

Before long, a day had passed. Then two days.

Thanks to Ah-ryeon, the Awakeners were able to keep fighting, almost forgetting fatigue. But the mental strain remained, so the Final Defense Line continued rotating its forward and rear ranks without rest.

Despite everything, I didn't stop.

I rushed to the most critical fronts, cutting down the most vicious leaders of the Anomalies. The remaining minions were then slaughtered by the Awakeners.

Overall, it was a stalemate. Although we couldn't fully push the Anomalies back, neither could the Monster Wave breach the Final Defense Line.

A deadlock.

The waltz of carnage seemed as though it could go on forever.

- Mister!

Then again... There's no such thing as an endless ball.

- By the sea! Battleships!

Dok-seo's urgent voice came through the radio.

Hearing her words, I immediately climbed a partially ruined building, looking out toward the coast. Sure enough, just as Dok-seo had said, the battleships were approaching. But not from the sea, no.

They were descending from the sky.

Parting the clouds like waves, hundreds of thousands of enormous “aerial warships” were heading straight for the city.

They resembled massive leviathans, soaring across the heavens.

They were angels of death, descending to obliterate humanity’s last sanctuary.

Footnotes:

Chapter 245

The Experimenter IV

Sinnoa

The aerial battleships cast their shadows across the skies above the waters off Busan. Like most Anomalies, their forms were deeply alien.

Clank.

Screeee!

Clink, clank! Clank.

Countless gears and steam engines churned noisily across the hulls of the warships, each one devoid of any crew. This absence of life rendered distinctions like “exoskeleton” or “endoskeleton” irrelevant. Exposed here and there along the keels—essentially their backbones—were vertebrae encased in metal, with gears turning endlessly between the ribs, filling the air with a cacophony of grinding sounds.

A true fleet of iron.

Even if Admiral Yi Sun-sin[1] himself had returned to lead a defense, he would have likely remarked with chilling honesty, “This is beyond the capabilities of a mere twelve ships.”

“Hey, mister!”

Upon returning to the National Road Management Corps headquarters, I found only three people on the terrace: Do-hwa, Ah-ryeon, and Dok-seo. Do-hwa was busy giving orders to the units on the front line via radio and didn’t even glance in my direction. And Ah-ryeon...

For a different reason entirely, Ah-ryeon couldn’t look at me. The veil of her Saintess robes hung down like a curtain, completely

obscuring her face. She didn't move a muscle.

"Ugh, you're totally drenched in blood!" Dok-seo grimaced, tossing me a towel. It was already used—grimy, in fact—but at least it was cleaner than my own skin.

I wiped my face with it, then asked, "Where are the others?"

"They're all at the front line! Yo-hwa unnie is out there too, but don't worry, we sent her to the safer areas since she has to survive until the very end." Dok-seo sent a fleeting glance toward Ah-ryeon, who was kneeling in the middle of the terrace. "Well, not that she looks like she'd die even if we threw her somewhere dangerous—"

"Nya! Undateikeo!"

Just then, a blonde Magical Girl landed gracefully nearby. It was Manyo Neko, an Awakener cursed to end every sentence with "nya" or "nyang." She was also a prominent pro-Undateikeo faction member in the Magical Girl Association.

"Wha-what in the world is going on here-nya?! I came because Undateikeo called for reinforcements, and the world's ending!"

"Exactly what it looks like. End of the world. The Japanese archipelago has probably already been blown to smithereens by those aerial battleships, so don't even think about going back."

"Ahhhhh! *Shi-ba-ru*! We're so screwed-nya...!"

Oddly, the only curse she spat out was *shibal*, pronounced with a near-perfect Korean accent, courtesy of her time spent around Koreans.[1]

"W-wait! Did you know this would happen and call for us as reinforcements on purpose, Undertaker?"

"Hardly. Pure coincidence. Do you think I could have known that the finale of the world's end would happen this week?"

"Nya. That sounds suspicious-nya..."

I was lying, of course.

Most Magical Girls had a few screws loose, but they did have a deep-seated sense of loyalty to their homelands. If I had sent a letter saying, *"It seems the world will soon end, so why not gather in Busan, the best-defended city, for a final stand?"* the Magical Girl Association would have never accepted. In fact, they would likely have chosen to die defending their own lands.

So I changed tactics.

Busan is at risk of falling. Forgive me for asking, but could you send us reinforcements?

Requests like that prompted the loyal Magical Girls to mobilize their forces and come to our aid. Typically, Manyo Neko or Phantom Blade would lead these reinforcements. It might have been just a few dozen fighters, but even a small squad of Magical Girls could hold down an entire front.

"So, what exactly are those things up there-nya?"

"They're airborne warships, as you can see. You could also call them the remnants of civilization."

"Remnants of civilization?"

I glared up at the sky. "Just looking at them might make you worry about environmental destruction, but surprisingly, those things are all made from recycled materials."

"Nyanya?"

"New York, London, La Défense in Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo... The construction materials that once formed the skyscrapers and factories of the world's great cities are now the raw materials for those aerial warships."

"...!"

Remnants of civilization. The Fleet of the Void. City-devouring ships.

If the Hollow Anomalies were created from corpses of human beings, then the millions of aerial warships hovering above us were built from the corpses of their cities.

I raised my finger and pointed to the sky. “See that sharp spire on the bow of that one? That’s Tokyo Tower.”

“Wha— What the heck?! *Shibaru*! Who the hell let them just steal Tokyo Tower like that-nya?!” Manyo Neko’s tail puffed up, and she hissed indignantly—her Korean cursing impressively fluent. “I’ll lead my unit and tear those rusty heaps apart for recycling-nya!”

“No. Wait.” I placed a hand on her shoulder. “You won’t be able to take them down by normal means. You can’t see it from here, but those things number over a million.”

“Wh-what…?”

“Dok-seo, did you call Seo-rin?”

“Oh, yeah! I called her before you even got here, so she should be on her way. I think she’s wrapping things up on the front line. Should I call her again?”

“No need. She’ll come. You join us soon, too.”

“O-okay!”

I took a deep breath. A faint wave of fatigue washed over me.

Not surprising—I’d been fighting non-stop on the battlefield for nearly 60 hours. On top of that, I had only been intervening at the most critical front lines. One could say the burden I bore was somewhat heavier than that of the other Awakeners. But compared to the fight that lay ahead, this was nothing.

‘All right, come at me, city-devourers.’

The regressor was ready to face them.

Oooooo.

Oooooooo.

As if answering my silent challenge, the aerial battleships began to radiate a blood-red, ominous light. The scarlet glow spread like an electric current or a bloody fluid along the spines of the lead ships.

One, two, three, four...

Five of the ships at the forefront of the grand fleet lit up in crimson as the gears ground and squealed.

Weeeeeooooooo.

And then came the beams of annihilation.

The moment I saw the beams charging from the warships' bows, I dashed in their direction. I timed it perfectly, moving as fast as possible. Just as the five beams converged, about to crash down on Yeongdo in Busan, I reached them.

BOOM!

Channeling all my strength, I swung Do-hwa, deflecting the beams. A weighty tremor reverberated through my hand.

'The first time I encountered these things, all I felt was utter despair.'

I took a step forward.

'Now, they feel unbelievably light.'

With all my strength, I redirected the beams. The deadly rays of red light veered off course and plunged into the sea, sending a towering column of water into the air, shrouding all of Yeongdo in a mist of steam.

Drip, drip, drip.

Rain poured down around me, though my body was already drenched in sweat. The downpour washed over me, bringing with it a brief, welcome coolness.

I raised my sword toward the aerial battleships above.

“That’s one strike dealt.”

-.....

The attack those warships had just unleashed would have easily obliterated an entire city district. In fact, they had already reduced countless cities to ruins with similar attacks.

But look—the Final Defense Line remained intact.

A small tsunami swept over the harbor, but we had evacuated all civilians from the coastal areas. The aerial battleships’ attack had been utterly neutralized.

For this Anomaly, it was a first.

Oooooo.

Clank! Clank! Clank!

Oooooo.

The gaze of the “beast” turned sharply toward me.

Its appearance might have been that of an inert mass of junk, but the fleet of over a million warships was a single Anomaly. This was the first time any human had survived an assault from it, let alone deflected one with ease.

Those countless, machine-like eyes focused on me.

Weeooo-weeooo.

Weeeeeooooo.

A strange wail filled the air, screeching like the blare of an air raid siren as the metal spine of the aerial battleships twisted.

Long, loud, and unrelenting, the sirens rang out over Haeundae’s sandy shore.

“Hm.”

I had their attention.

This time, not just five, but a thousand times that number—five thousand aerial battleships—all began to glow crimson, charging their beams.

I landed on Haeundae beach. Countless gun barrels on the fleet turned to face me.

Standing alone on the shore beneath the mass of Anomalies, I took a deep breath. Just as I exhaled, five thousand beams of scarlet light shot toward me.

SHOOM!

I swung Do-hwa to intercept.

The combined weight of five thousand beams could have wiped out all of Haeundae Beach, not to mention everything within miles. To match that, I flared my Aura out wide from my sword, creating a massive shield in front of me.

“Haaah!”

The muscles in my arms burned, threatening to tear. Even though only a fraction of the millions-strong fleet had attacked, the sheer force pressing into my hands was almost unbearable.

Tsss! Tsst-tssst!

The muscles of my arm were fraying. The nerves and joints screamed in agony, and tiny capillaries burst in my eyes.

But I didn’t falter.

Every Awakener across the battlefield was watching me live on the hologram, each one relying on my strength to keep going.

“Aaaaagh!”

With a final shout, I swung my sword to deflect the entire onslaught of five thousand beams.

KABOOM!

The redirected beams skidded across the sea, brushing the water's surface before continuing out beyond the horizon.

Once again, the Grand Fleet's attack had been deflected.

"Haa... Haa... Haaa..."

My breathing grew labored.

My once seemingly limitless Aura had been severely depleted after sixty hours of continuous fighting and this latest confrontation.

But I wasn't alone.

Shhhhh.

From the torn muscles in my arms, green leaves sprouted, wrapping around the wounds. Vines as delicate as veins coiled up my arm—a gentle touch from Ah-ryeon mending my injuries. Flowers bloomed briefly on the vines and then drifted away. In that quiet fall of petals, I felt as if I could hear Ah-ryeon's whisper.

Are... Are you alright?

'Yes, Guild Leader is still holding strong.'

A faint smile crossed my lips.

Feeling my strength return, I lifted my arm and aimed my sword once more at the aerial warships in the sky.

"That's two strikes."

-.....

The red sky burned even brighter.

Five thousand beams, then ten thousand, then thirty thousand, fifty

thousand.

The aerial fleet continued its relentless barrage, one beam after the other. Though I couldn't completely block every attack, each time a wave hit the coast, it crashed harmlessly, thanks to the strength of the Final Defense Line.

But my own body couldn't withstand it forever.

My right arm, my legs, my side, and even my right eye had all suffered. With each blast of red light laser-focused on me, another piece of my flesh was torn away.

Yet I continued forward, swinging my sword with unwavering determination.

Humanity's final city stood behind me. I knew every pair of eyes on the battlefield was watching me.

One step forward.

-.....

I refused to cry out in pain.

For those who had survived this apocalyptic cycle and others, those who had managed to remain human even in a time when humanity was trampled underfoot, I would show them that I, too, was still standing.

One more step.

-.....

Even though I knew that this cycle, like all others, would end in failure, it didn't matter. After all, humanity has always known its days were numbered and yet chose to live.

With each step I took on the sand, blood pooled at my feet. But a certain someone scattered flower petals in its wake, reminding me that life was still worth cherishing.

My grief could wait an eternity.

One more step.

-....., ...!

-.....

My ears rang, almost as if I'd gone deaf, yet I could still feel the Awakeners' cheers echoing through me from that distant battlefield. Even though they were miles away, each of us fighting on separate fronts, my stride and their cheers resonated as one unified heartbeat.

-.....

In contrast, the monstrous fleet in the sky seemed to grow more discordant. At last, it appeared they realized that weaker attacks could never bring me down.

The entire armada—three million ships in total—began to glow, each one emitting a piercing, ominous siren.

The city-devourers. The very ships that had destroyed countless cities across the world were now gathering their full power, preparing to deliver a final, decisive blow.

"Haa... haa..."

My breath came heavy, nearly ragged.

Ah-ryeon's plants wrapped around my body, healing me as best they could, but they couldn't keep up with the damage. Blood trickled down the vines.

I was already on the brink.

'There's no way I can block this next attack.'

Honestly, the fact that I'd lasted this long was a miracle.

'This next blow... won't just obliterate Busan. It could wipe out

what little remains of humanity itself.'

My vision blurred. Briefly, everything blinked in and out as if my brain was running out of oxygen.

But before I could fall, something kept me standing.

Someone grasped my left arm in a firm grip, and someone else took hold of my right, each one bracing me up.

A flash of red hair on one side, dark hair on the other. Two people held me, keeping me upright.

It was Oh Dok-seo and Dang Seo-rin.

"Sorry we're late," Dang Seo-rin said first.

"Things got dicey when you left, so I had to rush through my part. Still, we weren't too late, right?" Oh Dok-seo added, grinning. "From here on, leave it to us, mister! Wow, I've always wanted to say that line! Bucket list, checked!"

I managed a faint smile.

The attention of the monstrous fleet was focused solely on me, the lone regressor. They were preparing to unleash their entire arsenal.

This was exactly the moment we'd been waiting for.

Weeeooooo...

The aerial battleships disregarded the city of Busan and the defense line entirely, zeroing in on me alone as they fired millions of beams.

The sky and the sea reflected each other in crimson light as a deadly brilliance raced toward us.

"Dok-seo."

"Got it."

Dok-seo took off her cap. With a determined stride, she stepped forward, placing herself in front of me, spreading her arms wide to

shield me.

“Absolute Defense.”

A barrier, redder than the beams of annihilation, unfolded around her like wings.

Absolute Defense. The so-called “AT Field.”

Dok-seo’s unique Awakener ability.

According to the Infinite Metagame, the very Outer God that had chosen her as his priestess, the power of her ability was simple:

AT Field (S-Rank): A power that rejects any external interference.

It grants an absolute barrier against all physical forces attempting to harm or impact you. However, it can only be used once per day, with a one-minute time limit.

No matter how powerful the attack, the AT Field would nullify anything it deemed an “inferior existence.”

Dok-seo’s translucent shield spread across the entirety of Haeundae, like wings unfurling in preparation for humanity’s final stand. And then...

KABOOM!

The deadly red beams clashed against her shield, a wall of annihilation colliding with her field of absolute defense.

Footnotes:

1 - *Shibal* is the Korean word for “fuck” or “shit.”

Chapter 246

The Experimenter V

Sinnoa

The Awakeners battling on the last line of defense—and even the survivors still living in Busan—were all gazing blankly in this direction.

Wooooooong!

On one side was the Spear of Death. The red beam of destruction launched by the Anomaly that had devoured every city on the planet except for Busan.

“Hahaha! It doesn’t even tickle!”

On the other side was the Absolute Shield. While its mental fortitude was mediocre, its physical defense would block anything—the last shield humanity possessed.

“Look at this! The Anomaly is nothing but trash!”

Was she intoxicated by the thrill of single-handedly enduring an attack capable of destroying the world? Today again, Dok-seo’s chuunibyou was at its peak, perhaps even touching a new realm of delusion.

But that wasn’t all.

“Seo-rin.”

“Yes, I know.”

With a loud *“Ahhh—,”* Seo-rin began to sing.

As the relentless attacks from the aerial warships pounded on the shield, her voice broke through the noise. It was a melody everyone knew well.

The Fifth Melody, Mirror of All Creation.

An exceptional composition, combining **Focus**, **Absorb**, **Reflect**, and **Amplify** into one.

If you're wondering when such a song was added to her playlist, it happened during the Meteor Shower Extermination Operation.

Yes.

In the Meteor Shower Operation, 700 Awakeners each gathered and compressed their Aura, forging it into the first and last ultimate strike. I, the Undertaker, took the final baton and unleashed the beam at Meteor Shower.

"Aaah—aaaah—ahhh——"

That Cursed Song Incantation descended once more upon this battlefield, stained in crimson. But there was a distinct difference from the operation against Meteor Shower.

Back then, hundreds of Awakeners painstakingly pooled together their Aura, layer by layer, to gather enough power. This time, that wasn't necessary.

Wooooooong!

Thankfully, we had someone else up there gathering the beam on behalf of humanity.

"Dok-seo! Spread your wings!"

"Aye aye, sir!"

Dok-seo stretched out her fingers on both hands. With her gestures, the shield bent. The beams from the aerial warships refracted off its surface, redirecting them. Where the beam was directed, it struck the mirrors conjured by Seo-rin's incantation.

Chaaang!

Although the beam was powerful enough to shatter the mirrors

quickly, it didn't matter.

Before breaking, each mirror reflected the beam to another, and again, from mirror to mirror, the red light continued to bounce.

"Ah——"

Long ago, in the 42nd cycle, Seo-rin could only manifest about 700 mirrors. She couldn't summon more due to her limitations, which also limited the number of allied forces.

"AH——aah——aah——"

Now, in the 687th cycle, Seo-rin and I had refined her incantation through extensive trials and training, hiring dream-writers early on and practicing simulations repeatedly.

Now, the number of mirrors she conjured in Samcheon World reached no less than 12,000.

Chaaang—chaaang—chaang, chaaang!

The refracted beams split into countless fragments, reflecting endlessly off the mirrors, each of their paths precisely calculated. The vivid red lasers traced innumerable routes across the sky, forming a spiderweb over Busan.

Chaaang!

Starting from Haeundae, the beams soon spread across the entire sky, as if the heavens themselves were a shattered glass pane.

The sky, painted red by the Anomaly's intrusion, was now overlaid with humanity's fireworks, streaking across as red lines. At the beam's origin, Dok-seo shouted, "Hey, mister! Time's almost up!"

Her shield could only hold for 60 seconds. We had to finish this within that time—and so we did.

Eight seconds, seven seconds, six seconds, five, four.

"Seo-rin!"

Relying on my precise sense of time, I gave the signal. In a world where every clock, whether digital or mechanical, could be corrupted by the Anomaly, only my internal time remained sharp.

“Blow them away!”

The Great Witch sang.

All 12,000 mirrors shifted their angles in perfect alignment. Their target was obvious: the sky.

The aerial warships numbering in the millions.

The beam of death, unleashed by the Anomaly to annihilate the world.

Reversed, stolen by humanity, and redirected skyward to deliver death back to the Anomaly!

Ruuuuumble!

12,000 beams, fired by Seo-rin, swept over the warships. Red lines carved into the bodies of the ships, slicing them into two, three, four pieces. And then, they began to fall apart.

Whirr, clank, clang.

The warships, desperate to stay afloat, frantically turned their gears. Only now did they cease firing and switch to self-repair.

But the attack the Anomaly unleashed to engulf every city on Earth had indeed been deadly. The retaliatory strike by Seo-rin left countless ships split with hairline fractures. The Anomaly that had always scoffed at humanity’s feeble attacks could not escape death from its own ultimate weapon.

Clank, whirr, whirr, whirr.

In the end, scrap metal rained down.

The spire of Tokyo Tower, the tip of Burj Khalifa, the iron framework of the Eiffel Tower, the hands of Big Ben, the antenna of

the Empire State Building, countless factory chimneys, concrete—

Humanity's monuments, once gleaming achievements, now peeled away from the ships like the outer wall of a building—and fell.

Clank, clank, whirr.

Waves splashed.

These were waves from the remains of civilization crashing down. Just as life had once originated in the sea, humanity's landmark creations now returned to the ocean. The grandest burial at sea.

But the scraps weren't alone, the Anomaly that dared to consume them was also sinking.

Wooooooong.

One last remaining warship staggered in the sky, stripped of its skin, skeleton, outer shell, and inner frame. Its true form was nothing but a Paper Airplane. It bore scorch marks from Seo-rin's attack, charred edges on its once-white paper.

The plane tottered before falling into the sea, hovering briefly on the water's surface before sinking forever beneath the waves.

"...Ah."

As the waves rocked her from the debris of civilization, Seo-rin's body wavered. I reached out and steadied her by the shoulder. Wrapping her in my Aura to prevent her from being swept away by the waves. I included Dok-seo as well.

"...Undertaker."

Leaning her weight on me, Seo-rin turned her head my way, revealing a face marked with deep fatigue, as was to be expected. She had fought tirelessly alongside me these past days, moving ceaselessly across battlefields.

A faint smile graced her face. "We... really... did it. We killed such an impossible Anomaly... we did it."

“Yes.”

“All that training in the Kingdom Project… all that practice in the simulated dream… it wasn’t for nothing. Hahaha. This isn’t a dream, right?”

I held her hands and shoulders tightly instead of replying. She closed her eyes as though she’d received enough of an answer.

Waaaahhh!

In the distance, cheers rang out.

- Seo-rin! Seo-rin! Seo-rin!

- Long live the Undertaker!

- Literary Girl! We believed in you!

The battle’s mood shifted from grim determination to dragging another Anomaly into hell if necessary.

We could do this. We might actually win.

They defeated the Hollow, the city-devourer, and the rest of the Anomalies. They were still fighting and winning.

Meanwhile, humanity’s final stronghold remained steadfast.

Though exhausted, not a single Awakened warrior had perished. Not one was injured! The civilians in the rear continued supplying materials. So—

Tick.

At exactly 61 hours, 11 minutes, and 32 seconds since the Final Defense War began, people came to realize.

The miracles and comebacks that had unfolded like a dream had all stemmed, from the start, from the sacrifice of a single girl.

The countdown reached its end.

Footnotes:

Chapter 247

The Experimenter VI

Sinnoa

Humanity's dream had ended.

"....."

As mentioned, those who harbored intense disdain for Sim Ah-ryeon as the Collector of All Anomalies were the ones who fully, swiftly transformed into trees and flowers.

The Collector of All Anomalies had always claimed responsibility for nearly every event in the world—when and where an Anomaly would appear, how much suffering people would endure.

I foresaw the future based on my regressor knowledge. And when standing in for me, the Collector of All Anomalies performed the duties of a prophet.

A prophet widely reviled as the mastermind behind world-ending plots, hiding in the shadows.

Naturally, the more they despised "the one who ruined the world," the more they "loved humanity," the less they resigned themselves to civilization's collapse, and the stronger their hope that the world could change—the deeper the hatred ran for Ah-ryeon, the Collector of All Anomalies.

Dang Seo-rin loved humanity. Since she wasn't part of the Regressor's Alliance, she didn't know the true nature of the Constellations. Thus, she hated what was meant to be hated.

So when the Hundred Blooming Blossoms spread across Busan—it took less than 0.1 seconds for Seo-rin to become a tree in full flower.

A violet bloomed before me.

“…Seo-rin.”

The violet quivered.

A rich, dark purple flower, almost black, hung down from its branch like wisteria.[1]

Swish.

The sea breeze stirred the flowers.

As if answering my call, the violet’s purple petals released a faint lilac scent.

Violets were typically ground flowers, yet she had transformed into a tree. Just as she had leaned on me, putting her weight in my hands. I released Seo-rin’s fingers, now vines, and leaned close to the violet. Quietly, I kissed its petals.

“It was just a bad dream. And it won’t last too long. Let’s meet again, tomorrow.”

“……”

Across from the wisteria, Dok-seo stood, looking over with uncertainty. Unlike the others, her body hadn’t turned into flowers.

“Hey, mister…”

“Yes. Let’s go together.”

“…Alright.”

Leaving behind the violet wisteria on the beach of humanity’s last city, we headed for the Tower of Babel. The city had been transformed entirely into a garden of flowers.

Waaaah!

Some people sobbed, some just moaned, but in this “vegetative” city, the cries of newborns rang out, the last truly human sound.

Beyond that was only chaotic noise.

“No, why! Why aren’t my wounds—”

“Damn it, where the hell is the Saintess?!”

“Stop it! Don’t pull on that! It’s my arm, not a branch! It’s my arm!”

Yes.

When no one died and no one was hurt, people could be noble. They could sing of hope. But when they began to suffer injuries, only a few retained their purity.

In the end, “humanity’s final line of defense” was not just the territory of “Busan” as a geological site. It was the strategy pieced together by the regressor after endless attempts, the social infrastructure established by the Regressor’s Alliance, and the illusion Ah-ryeon had conjured of a world “where no one gets hurt.”

This was humanity’s last line of defense.

“……”

These scenes passed by quickly as we ran through the blurred cityscape. Dok-seo’s gaze wavered as she watched the final sanctuary crumble before her.

“I’m sorry.”

“Huh?” she stuttered. “Wh-what? Sorry for what?”

“This is where I’ve reached my limit.”

She pursed her lips.

The final line of defense had lasted a mere 61 hours, 11 minutes, and 32 seconds, a sweet dream that ended with a chilling gust of emptiness.

- This is F11!Grkk-this is F11! There are too many of the Hollow! Can’t hold the front! Requesting support! ReGrkk-tatrkk-

- Ahahaharkk-harkk-hahakk-haha.

-[illegible]2 has no issues. Ah! The world's so bright. The red sunlight's as sweet as fresh tomato juice...

Crunch!

I crushed the radio. The radios, which had barely held our wide frontlines together, could no longer withstand the Void Poison and had been corrupted. By now, the radio operators at each front were probably receiving phantom orders like, *"Hold your position. Reinforcements are on the way."*

I carried Dok-seo up the Tower of Babel. When we reached the terrace, I set her down.

"Well now, welcome..."

Do-hwa greeted us first. She still looked relatively intact, although tiny buds of *Dicentra* flowers had formed on her cheeks. They looked like tear tracks running from her eyes to her jawline.

"Good to see you again, Regressor Undertaker. Honestly, when I saw the Monster Wave, I had no idea how the hell we'd fight such godforsaken things, but you... Well, you've lived up to your reputation as some 'Regressor'..."

"....."

"So, is it over now...?"

I looked around.

Noh Do-hwa. Oh Dok-seo. Cheon Yo-hwa. Yu Ji-won. And Sim Ah-ryeon, silently praying.

"Where's Ha-yul?" I asked.

"Oh. She radioed that she'd try to hold them off, but no word since. Not even sure if that was really the Puppeteer kid's voice..."

"Lee Ha-yul is presumed dead," said Ji-won. "The Mini-Map shows her marker toppled, Your Excellency. All fronts are collapsing simultaneously."

Yo-hwa gave a bittersweet laugh. “Heh. Normally, I’d be dying on the front with my squad right now—but you insisted I survive, Teacher, so here I am. I slipped away while they held the line.”

“Thank you.” I nodded. “And among us, there’s an Anomaly.”

“Excuse me?”

I swung my sword toward the confused Ji-won. Her body split in two perfectly.

Everyone’s eyes widened.

“Mister? Even if Ji-won was a crazy psychopath, always plotting a power grab, killing her like that is...”

“Ji-won is already dead, Dok-seo.”

I sheathed my sword.

“Did you forget? We chose to fall back because the Saintess and Yu Ji-won were killed.”

“Huh...?”

“The body here is not Ji-won’s.”

Dok-seo and the others looked down at the terrace floor.

Ji-won’s bisected corpse had vanished completely. In its place was the carcass of an Anomaly with the head of a mouse and the body of a raccoon.

Dok-seo gaped as I murmured, “The Void Poison has already started seeping in here.”

“.....”

“To answer your question, Commander Noh Do-hwa, yes. This is our end.”

I approached Ah-ryeon. She wore her Saintess’s gown, her face veiled beneath a cloth thicker than a bridal veil. I lightly lifted the

veil.

- ……

And beneath it did not lay Ah-ryeon's smile, which had once been directed at me.

Calendulas. Baby's breath. Daisies. Campsis. Zinnias. Daffodils. Azaleas. Carnations. Moonflowers. Poppies. Canola flowers.

A vast array of flowers and vines wove together across Ah-ryeon's eyebrows, forehead, brow, nose, eyelids, eyes, cheeks, earlobes, philtrum, lips, and jawline. Bearing the language of every flower in the world, the shy girl who once called me Guild Leader, blossomed here without a word.

…Guild Leader…

I didn't want to look below her face.

In the center of the terrace, where she knelt, innumerable trunks grew, entwining the Tower of Babel and spreading to all of Busan.

…A-are you alright?…

The roots kept growing. Considering the now "flattened" world wasn't so vast, her roots would soon cover everything.

I opened my arms and embraced the Sacrifice.

With a flutter, the flowers in my embrace wilted, permeating the air with the fragrance of a million blooms.

A conversation from a past cycle came back to me.

"Ah-ryeon. This is your end."

Sketchbook held in hand, Ah-ryeon lifted her head slightly and blinked up at me. "Huh, what?"

"This cherry tree. This monstrous flower sprouting from the bodies

of a mother and child is your final seed, full grown.”

“……”

The Udumbara originated in an old inn in Onyang, Asan, Chungcheong Province.

At civilization’s end, even before the world fell apart, a mother and child died of starvation in each other’s arms.

The Udumbara bloomed in Room 202 on the inn’s second floor. Its branches reached out, climbing over crumbling bricks, through window gaps, a cherry tree draped over it.

I often brought Ah-ryeon along to Onyang to eradicate the Udumbara. Today was no different.

“Ah-ryeon, your Awakening power and Udumbara’s are probably the same type. Healing people, suspending death.”

“……”

“Plants don’t feel pain. If there’s no pain, there’s no wound. If there’s no wound, death itself can be surpassed. A rejection of suffering. That’s your ability, Ah-ryeon.”

Ah-ryeon’s wide eyes looked at me, her usual faint smile disappearing into an almost emotionless expression.

I told her many things.

How to draw aggro. Strategies using the Collector of All Anomalies Constellation. Plans to establish a puppet state, the Eastern Holy State, using Mo Gwang-seo. Stories of becoming a living line of defense under the alias Saintess of the North to face the Monster Wave.

“If you don’t want this, you can erase it all.”

“……”

“I mean it. You don’t have to decide here. If you try it and it doesn’t

feel right, just let me know."

She hummed, chewing on the end of a rounded brush. "But if I don't evolve into that 'Bird that Drinks Poison,' eventually, we... c-can't stop the Anomalies... uh, the Monster Wave, coming from the continent?"

"Yes." I hesitated for a moment. "If I come up with a better solution, we might manage, but so far, my solution involves you—and it's only a shaky stopgap."

"But if I'm not there, won't... everyone die? Everyone?"

"Yes."

Ah-ryeon tilted her head. "Mmm... Guild Leader, I'm just asking out of curiosity. Does... Does my decision even matter?"

I nodded.

Ah-ryeon didn't nod back.

"Why does it matter?"

"Having the power to save the world doesn't mean you must save it, Ah-ryeon."

"……?"

"I think every person in this world holds the power to destroy it. Each person is a world on their own. People think they're just living their lives, but they're all keeping their world alive."

"……"

I knelt down and met Ah-ryeon's gaze over the sketchbook.

"So, if someone takes their own life, it's not just saying their life is worthless. It's saying, 'This world is worthless,' too."

"……"

Why did the world end so suddenly?

Why did Anomalies appear, annihilating humanity with no warning?

I'd pondered this for a long time but never found a definitive answer. But I had one guess.

Because too many people thought the world was worthless, and in response, the world simply emptied out.

Perhaps the Anomalies believed, *"Since we fulfilled humanity's wish, they should thank us."*

This nightmare, it was a dream humanity had desired for so long. The Anomalies were likely sneering at us.

"You have the power to decide this world's fate, Ah-ryeon. The world repeats endlessly, and even if you don't remember it, your actions, your words will always circle back to you."

"I... I don't understand."

Ah-ryeon looked down at her sketchbook, and then, she met my eyes once more and almost seemed to be carefully reading what she saw there in my gaze. Hesitantly, she said, "But... I feel so comfortable with you, Guild Leader."

"....."

"When we talk, my heart doesn't ache. Even if we're not talking, I don't feel any pressure in my chest. Even when I stutter, I'm not embarrassed. The o-others you introduced me to are fun too... and th-that café mocha from last time... Wow, it was delicious! Amazing. I still don't get how coffee can taste like that."

She set down her brush and sketchbook. Slowly, clumsily, she wrapped her arms around me.

"S-so..."

...Please don't cry, Guild Leader...

I held the Sacrifice's shoulders lightly.

Fighting against the corpses of humans and cities had drained almost all my Aura, but I had enough left to perform one last ritual —for the girl who had smiled at me even as she crossed from the Outer Gods' Realm.

Clink.

A silver bell jingled on my wrist.

My Aura flowed from my body to the Sacrifice's petals, stems, and roots—a dark, flowing power.

The next moment, humanity's final city burned.

Footnotes:

Chapter 248

The Experimenter VII

Sinnoa

The roots resembled human veins, stretching from the Victim in Busan—across the entire earth—like blood vessels. Starting from *this being,* who still faintly held Ah-ryeon's form, the branching veins spread out like a spiderweb.

Now that the world had shrunk down to almost nothing, it wouldn't be wrong to call the being before me the Heart of the World Tree.

"Ah..."

Behind me, Dok-seo let out a small breath. It might have been awe, or perhaps despair. After all, there had to be some difference in "resolution" between the concept of world annihilation that she had only ever encountered through "words" and the reality now unfolding before her.

"The whole world... It's burning."

It was exactly as Dok-seo muttered.

While I held the Victim, I spread my Aura. The dark tendrils spread from the Tower of Babel, flowing swiftly through all of Busan, through the narrowest alleys, the slums, and even past the last line of defense.

- Ah...

All over, those who had been injured by the Victim and whose limbs had turned to vines lost their balance and fell.

The vegetative humans, whose bodies had fully transformed into trees and flowers, began burning to black and gray without exception, their petals scattering like flames.

The violet wisteria of Dang Seo-rin, once blooming alone in Haeundae, also burst into flames, scattering purple.

There was no pain.

"....."

Even though my Aura had reached an extraordinary level, it wasn't easy to create such a grand sea of flames at the end of a war.

Yes. If the Corrupted being before me had rejected my Aura even slightly, this would have been impossible.

But the Victim had not resisted. Despite having the perfect opportunity to overtake the city and paint it in her own color a step ahead of the Monster Wave, she only quietly accepted my Aura and burned.

She, who had postponed world annihilation for 61 hours, 11 minutes, and 32 seconds, now erased the threat of annihilation herself.

Fwoosh...

When all the vegetative humans turned to ash along with the final line of defense, the Heart of the World Tree too crumbled to ashes and collapsed on the spot. Even the outline of Ah-ryeon dispersed like dust into the wind from the terrace.

A moment of silence ensued.

"Hm."

Do-hwa was the first to break the silence.

Glancing down, she looked at the Monster Wave, which was now rushing freely toward the Tower of Babel with the last line of defense destroyed.

"What's your next move...?"

"Our paths diverge here." I stood up, brushing off none of the ashes

on my face or clothes. “If you want to keep resisting, even just to extend humanity’s survival by a single second, you should retreat to the Inunaki Tunnel and join up with Seo Gyu. If that gets taken, every Anomaly imprisoned in SG Net will be unleashed at once.”

“Ohhh.”

“With the Monster Wave and the SG Net escapees mixed in, we’ll have a complete pandemonium on our hands. The Inunaki Tunnel is well suited for a siege. If you’re determined, you could hold out for over a hundred days.”

“Aha... I see. So that’s why you chose such a narrow tunnel as a base—because it was intended for this kind of crisis in the first place?”

“Precisely.”

Do-hwa adjusted her monocle. “But since the goal of this run is to capture the Outer God tied to Mastermind Syndrome... Keeping the SG Net Admin alive doesn’t hold much value now, does it?”

“No.”

“Right...”

Do-hwa picked up a radio. Originally, 31 radios were prepared on the operations table in front of her. Of those, 30 had been destroyed.

Strangely, the last one hadn’t been used once throughout the entire battle.

Holding the final radio, she said, “The time is now. Kill him...”

Bang!

Through the radio came a burst of static and the sound of a gunshot.

All of us on the terrace stared wide-eyed at Do-hwa. She chuckled.

“Oh... There’s no need to thank me. Given everything we’ve been through, I figured it was on me to handle this...”

Before I could fully grasp the meaning,

Boom!

a deafening noise rang out from the waters off Busan. It was in the direction of the shared entrance to Inunaki Tunnel, Dream Casino, and Café hideout. A sudden blizzard swept across, instantly freezing the sea’s surface. From beneath the ice burst forth Anomalies in all manner of bizarre forms, marking the collapse of the cyber-prison, SG Net.

In other words, Seo Gyu’s death.

“You... You killed him!”

Dok-seo came to her senses and grabbed Do-hwa by the collar.

“You killed Seo Gyu? Using the National Road Management Corps? How could you? He was our ally!”

“I was never particularly close to him...”

“What does that matter?! We’ve been working together, trying to prevent humanity’s extinction! This is insane! Are you stupid? How could you betray—”

Bang!

Dok-seo fell silent, releasing her grip. Then, she slumped downward.

Bang!

Do-hwa pulled the trigger again—a confirming shot. In her hand was a gun all too familiar to me.

“Hm. She may have been the Outer God’s apostle or whatever, but she couldn’t resist a weapon crafted to put a bullet in the heart of her master. This is the compatibility you mentioned, isn’t it?”

A Walther PPK, Chekhov's Gun. A weapon specifically created for slaying the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. After the campaign, the weapon had been locked up in the underground prison of the National Road Management Corps headquarters.

"Just as I thought. The tactics for attacking the Outer God would work just as well against the apostle. My guess turned out to be right..."

"Commander Do-hwa."

Do-hwa let out a laugh from deep within. Her head tilted to the side as she said it:

"I'll see you in hell..."

Bang!

The doctor's coat billowed as Do-hwa collapsed. The gun that had spent its final bullet rolled limply from her hand.

"Wow..."

"....."

"Really, um. That was incredible, Teacher."

Now, the only two survivors left on the terrace were Yo-hwa and me. And in just a few more minutes, with the world rapidly collapsing under the onslaught of Anomalies flooding in from both the last line of defense and the Inunaki Tunnel, we might as well have been "the last two survivors in the world."

From the terrace, Yo-hwa looked down at the ground. She clicked her tongue.

"I must've run the *Reincarnation Project* simulation hundreds of times, but, wow, real 3D... The impact of it all just doesn't compare. You go through this hundreds of times?"

"Each time is different. When the Monster Wave destroys the world, it usually plays out this way."

“And… are you okay with this? Mentally speaking?”

“I told you already.”

I covered Do-hwa’s body with her doctor’s coat, and used Ah-ryeon’s saintly veil to cover Dok-seo’s. After a brief moment of silence, I turned.

“It usually ends like this.”

Yo-hwa sighed. “Ah… So every time I died in other cycles, you performed these funerals for me too, Teacher.”

“You’re a Guild Leader who roams the frontlines constantly. You’re so free-spirited that I’ve always worried about you.”

“If I’d known, maybe I would’ve stayed tucked away at Baekwha Girls’ High a bit more… I guess it’s too late to regret wandering around just to blow off steam now, right? Next cycle, I won’t remember any of this?”

“Mm.”

“And if I leave a message for myself, I won’t understand it, will I…? Wait a sec. Déjà vu.” She gasped. “Didn’t you once tell me this was my own last will from a past cycle?”

“Good memory.”

“I’m such an idiot…” Yo-hwa groaned, clutching her head. It was her way of comforting others.

I caressed Yo-hwa’s cheek, and my palm came away smeared with soot. This kid had spent more than two days fighting in the war just as I had, becoming a complete wreck in the process.

“Let’s meet again next time, Yo-hwa.”

“……”

“Thank you, always.”

“Me too, Teacher.”

Yo-hwa placed her hand on the back of mine. She smiled and rested her cheek against it.

“Even though...” She hesitated. “Even though it’s not always, thank you for coming to find me even knowing we’d part like this. Please take care of the next me.”

“If you stop kicking the guards every time we meet in the hallway, I’ll consider it.”

“Haha... Ah. I miss it already. Already...”

She closed her eyes.

“Already...”

When she opened them again—

Her once-red eyes were now tinged with the emptiness of Infinite Void and gleamed with an eerie light.

“Damn.”

The first word Infinite Void uttered when it opened its eyes. It pushed my hand away, muttering a nervous string of *Damn! Damn! Damn!*

“You’re insane, aren’t you? You’re just a human—how can a human...? Even with the ability to regress, how is this possible?”

“Prepare yourself. Soon, the Outer Gods will extend their hands.”

“Which ones?” Infinite Void laughed hollowly. “There are three Outer Gods descending on this tiny world right now! Ah, including me, that’s four! Add in the real mastermind of Mastermind Syndrome, and that’s five!”

“.....”

“And you... you held out in this hell for over 60 hours? A mere

mortal. This is impossible...!"

"If you want to kiss my ass, work on honeyed up that tongue. Praise from an Anomaly doesn't do a thing for me."

"You're insane..." Infinite Void muttered, sucking in a breath. "No, wait. I'm technically the Enemy Who Turned Ally, right? Plus, I'm forced into this miserable human form, with a human's mind. So... right! This could work out! If I ride the Undertaker Bus from here on, wouldn't it be my win as long as I survive?"

"If you're declaring full surrender, I'll accept it any time. Are you ready to abandon all your powers?"

"Aaaaah...! No! I don't want to become human! What is this, with emotions and this pathetic memory span, repeating the same damned actions and thoughts over and over? Why would I ever want to be reduced to that!"

It bit its nails.

"Wait a sec... Isn't even this freak-out a bit too human? Aaaaaah! Undertaker! Undertaker! I curse you! You're an Anomaly that turns others into humans! A human Anomaly!"

"Keep it up."

I looked down from the Tower of Babel. The ground was now swarming with Anomalies, colored black and red. Some were even crawling up the tower's walls.

"And regardless of whether you surrender, I've already achieved this cycle's goal."

"What?"

"It's down to just us two." I turned my gaze to Infinite Void. "Show yourself, Mastermind."

Infinite Void's mouth dropped open. And from that opening came a voice—a bizarre mixture of Yo-hwa's and a mechanical hum.

“That’s right. I cast NPC Creation on Commander Do-hwa. While you were gone.”

Bzzz, crackle.

Like his vocal cords resonated with a radio, static came from Infinite Void’s throat. At the same time, from the 30 broken radios on Do-hwa’s table and the last one she had used, came Infinite Void’s voice.

- Undertaker, I was waiting for you to come back and deal with Ah-ryeon.

- Once the city burned—truly, completely—you’d be left exhausted. “That’s right. I planned it so Commander Do-hwa could pull the trigger without you being able to stop her, even for a moment.”

- And that’s not all, right? Seo Gyu was already under my control. That gunshot through the radio—that was Seo Gyu pulling the trigger on himself.

“To put it simply, SG Net’s prison was under my control the whole time.”

- Why eliminate the Saintess first? Why kill Yu Ji-won? Obviously, it was to get rid of anyone who might track me, Yo-hwa.

“Those two were a nuisance.”

- Yeah! A nuisance!

“Every bit of data the Saintess observed would’ve been handed to the Undertaker. And any ‘fog of war’ on this battlefield would be lifted. If the fog is gone, I can’t manipulate causality. Same with Yu Ji-won. Her Mini-Map tracked everyone, anytime, anywhere. With that, I couldn’t create or manipulate causality. I couldn’t warp it. I couldn’t take it.”

- Create?

- Manipulate?

- Warp?

The radios crackled.

- What are you talking about?

- When did we manipulate anything?

- There's no warping. Seo Gyu was brainwashed through NPC Creation, shot himself. That really happened in this world.

- Yeah! The Undertaker's causality can never tell what's true or false!

"No."

Infinite Void muttered blankly.

"No, no, no. Yo-hwa didn't use her power on Do-hwa or Seo Gyu. I made sure to 'collect' that data. This is my data. You can't alter my data."

- .....

- .....

"The white birch-patterned hospital gown, the red trace of blood on the patient's bed from the red spider lily, ripped apart in the school's garden..."

I spoke.

"Infinite Void."

It turned sharply toward me.

The "human" expressions it had shown while agonizing and talking were now completely gone, and in their place were endlessly blank eyes. In its pupils, the colors red, white, black, blue, and yellow flashed in continuous pulses.

"For this run, I'll return some of your powers."

“……”

“I’ll give you control of the Bakus. Break the hourglass.”

Shatter!

As soon as I finished, it pulled out the hourglass from his waist and crushed it in his hands. It was the glass bottle that had imprisoned the Doppelganger.

From where Yo-hwa stood, “colors” spread, blanketing the once-red skies and ground instantly.

It wasn’t a single color. It kept changing, endlessly, never resting for even a second.

The blue of the earth from space, the green of foxtail grass, the brown of ants, the black of a charging smartwatch, the red flush on a newborn’s cheeks, and then, and then,

Yo-hwa’s body had disappeared.

- Ah.

- Ah?

- Ah. Ah.

The radios screamed with static.

and then, silence.

Against the black background, a gasping “Ah” glowed yellow. Even that yellow quickly dissolved into blackness. The letters **“Ah,” “Ah?” “Ah.”** painted themselves in succession before melting away.

- Ah.

Then, scarlet letters appeared in the sky.

- Found you.

In that moment, the sky tore open.

Footnotes:

Chapter 249

The Experimenter VIII

Sinnoa

There will be no epilogue for this story.

However, if given the task of putting the scene after the world has ended into words, I could do it and describe it in some detail.

Below is an account of the world's end, a substitute for an epilogue.

"The sky tore open."

It wasn't a metaphor, an exaggeration, or a distortion. Quite literally, the sky ripped like a sheet of plastic. Silently, too.

- Ahahaha.

From the fissure in the fabric of space appeared nothing other than a red eye.

It was the eye of Infinite Void.

The vivid red iris was larger than any known being. Its muscles shifted, resembling a crackling earthquake. Each rippling tendon made galaxies contract and expand in turn.

- Tiny!

Infinite Void's eye slit open even wider, and a dark pupil as deep as a black hole gazed "this way"—toward the earth below.

- Tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny! Kyahahaha!

Soon, from the rift in the sky, a hand stretched forth.

The hand approached this world.

It was a right hand. Only moments earlier, it had shattered an hourglass, and now bare shards of glass were embedded in its skin, with blood flowing down freely.

The right hand emerging from the rift was larger than a continent.

In an instant, the ground was engulfed in its shadow. The Tower of Babel, Haeundae, Busan, even the earth—flattened as it was—all of it.

Completely.

Blood from the giant's right hand dripped down like waterfalls in great torrents.

Craaash!

Each drop of blood formed a vast sea, cascading into the world.

- .....!

- .....! .....!

The earth was engulfed in a colossal flood.

The grotesque creatures scaling the Tower of Babel had no escape from this bloodbath. The escapees from SG Net, poised to break through the icy waters, were instantly submerged, struck by the tide of blood.

- Kyahahahahaha.

The sound of Infinite Void's laughter echoed through heaven and earth. It stretched out a thumb and forefinger and plucked the Tower of Babel.

Crack!

Like a child awkwardly snapping a chocolate bar, the tower shattered at its midpoint.

- Sunbae.

Infinite Void laughed. That eerily bizarre voice, if it were to be described more accurately, really sounded more like this:

- sunbae, sunbae, sunbae, sunbae, sunbae, sunbae, sunbae

- Suuunnnbbbaaaeeee

The voice of Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化) and the mechanical tone of Infinite Void seemed to intertwine, pronounced simultaneously.

Yes. Infinite Void's voice wasn't just coming from the rift in the sky.

Now, it resounded from broken radios, from smartphones bobbing in the flood of blood, from every electronic device floating on the water.

The voices of the Outer God overlapped endlessly, echoing all at once.

- I'll make an exception for you, sunbae. I'll let you live.

- Sunnnnbaaaeee, huh?

- Kyahahahahahaha!

Infinite Void lifted me along with the entire Tower of Babel.

A forced ascension.

It seemed that the Outer God was inviting me beyond the rift.

The gesture of the grotesque hand was anything but gentle.

As I shot higher and higher in altitude, I had to cling desperately to the terrace railing to keep from falling.

Then, it happened.

--There it

Schloooosh!

In the middle of this world, which had now been completely dyed

red by an endless flood of blood, a colossal dragon suddenly sprang up and soared into the air.

In an instant, I knew what it was.

“Leviathan!”

The ocean-class Anomaly that had unleashed a super monsoon back in the 664th cycle.

Although not as large as Infinite Void's fingers, the Leviathan was still massive. After all, it was the beast described in myth as being larger than the earth itself.

‘I see. Super Monsoon and Great Flood are basically the same term. And now that the entire world has been flooded, it's an ideal situation for Leviathan. For any other Anomaly, it might be a disaster, but for it, it’s actually an opportunity!’

Even in the 664th cycle, subjugating Leviathan had been a grueling ordeal, but the dragon that had appeared now was on a different scale. Its body was large enough to wrap around the earth nine times over and still have room to spare.

It wasn’t only the size that had changed.

In the 664th cycle, the one who dealt the final blow to Leviathan was Go Yuri, not me.

No matter how relentlessly the Ark fleet pursued him, Leviathan still seemed to have one final means of resistance left.

- Beeehooold.

The dragon’s scaly body, covered in countless shimmering scales, suddenly flipped inside out.

It was its reverse scales.

All the scales transformed into eyes, each with a writhing tentacle sprouting from within.

The dragon's appearance now seemed more like a centipede than a dragon, corrupted to the point it could no longer be seen as a divine beast. And yet, its sheer aura was chilling enough to make one's spine freeze.

If this final form had appeared back in cycle 664, humanity, including me, would have perished without a chance.

- Ahahahahaha!

Infinite Void laughed again, as yet another hand—this time, its left—emerged from the rift in the sky.

- Tiny.

Crack!

With a simple grasp, the right hand snatched Leviathan.

Leviathan immediately tried to resist, but it was utterly futile.

Infinite Void clenched its fist.

Cr-r-rack—!

With a sound that was almost playful, Leviathan was quite literally crushed.

The head of Leviathan, which had opened its giant maw toward the Outer God, was flattened and fell motionless. Its body was fragmented, broken into tiny pieces like poorly handled candy sticks.

Thud, thud, thud.

The shattered remains of Leviathan's body rained down into the sea, which was now one vast body of water—Panthalassa, where the distinction of the five oceans no longer existed.[1]

"....."

From my high vantage point, I looked down at it all, struck

speechless.

The 664th cycle hadn't been that long ago. My Aura, my skills, they were all nearly the same as they were now.

'And yet, the ocean-class Anomaly that had driven me into a corner back then has been destroyed so easily, so utterly.'

My musings were irrelevant to the ever-ascending altitude.

The stratosphere, mesosphere, thermosphere, exosphere—

Finally, I was pulled up into a realm that could truly be called space. It had all happened in an instant. For an ordinary Awakener, this alone would have been enough to make them lose consciousness.

"Oh."

Though "thanks" didn't quite seem appropriate, reaching this altitude allowed me to see a clear view of the earth, which had now become flat as a pancake.

The scene was so overwhelming and surreal that I muttered without realizing it.

"There are... two suns."

If I were to put it into a drawing, it would look something like this:

○

〓〓〓

●

The earth was completely flat (〓〓〓).

And on one side was the original sun (○), while on the other was an identical sun (●).

'The original sun has shrunk to nearly the size of the moon. It must be the influence of the geocentric model. And that sun on the

opposite side... perhaps the influence of the Hollow Earth theory.'

At that moment, a revelation dawned upon me.

The heliocentric truth of the universe had shifted into a geocentric model, causing the sun to shrink. So where had the "extra" mass of the sun gone?

'Aha! So that's it! The shrunken mass of the sun was used to create another sun in the Hollow Earth below!'

It was astonishing.

If this theory was correct, then the geocentric model and the Hollow Earth theory—two seemingly unrelated Anomalies—were in fact united as one.

Further realizations kept coming.

'And that's not all.'

Look. How can the flattened earth remain balanced without drifting in space?

It's because the two suns, positioned on opposite sides, were precisely balanced, holding the earth in place from both sides.

It was an incredible, nearly impossible feat. But that was only by human standards. From the perspective of an Anomaly, one such as the geocentric model, the Hollow Earth theory, or the Flat Earth theory, this must have been a perfect interpretation.

The universe had become nothing more than a playground.

'Just what kind of Anomaly did this?'

My mouth fell open.

'It must be an Outer God-class. Nut? Is it Nut's power that Saintess has been sealing away? Or is it the Mastermind Syndrome-afflicted Outer God that Infinite Void just devoured? Or maybe...'

- Uh huh. Uh huh. Uh huh.

Then, something massive brushed past the Tower of Babel. It was so enormous that it took more than a second to discern its identity. But it just so happened to be a shape familiar to my eyes.

‘Yo-hwa's shoes?’

It was a pair of Air Jordans in a black and red colorway.

These were the very sneakers that Cheon Yo-hwa had worn when she first kicked at me in the corridor of Baekwha Girls’ High School. As a former ace of the basketball team, Yo-hwa cherished these shoes and would wear them whenever we met.

She had, of course, worn them during this Final Defense War as well.

Now, that very pair of sneakers appeared through the rift in the sky, descending upon the earth flattened by the Flat Earth Theory.

- Ughhh.

KRAKOOM!

The sneakers stomped down on the “Flat Earth Theory.”

It wasn’t just the flattened earth that was crushed. The two suns were also obliterated under the sole of the shoe.

The world, already submerged in blood, crumbled like a delicate cookie under the blow.

In a single kick from the Outer God, countless humans and even more countless Anomalies that had filled this world were obliterated.

“……”

- I’mm theee onne now. I’mmm theee onne nowww.

- I’mmm theee onne nowwwww. Meee. Meee.

In the geocentric model, Earth was the center of the universe. With the center erased, the only things remaining in space were the planets of the solar system and the constellations.

Crash! Boom! KRAKOOM!

Infinite Void unleashed its right hand and its foot, methodically destroying the remaining celestial bodies without hesitation.

The universe, stripped of its center, began contracting rapidly. Or perhaps it was “receding.”

Infinite Void’s left hand was still gripping me and the Tower of Babel, drawing us toward the rift.

The universe had now shrunk to a single dark speck, and I was pulled “outside” of it.

“Ah.”

Even amidst this, as a regressor, my mind processed information unceasingly, sorting and analyzing.

The world had ended.

The Outer God-class Anomaly, empowered beyond belief by merging with the Mastermind Syndrome-afflicted Outer God, had eradicated it all.

What had transpired beyond the rift was beyond my knowledge. Perhaps Infinite Void had consumed the Mastermind, or the two Outer Gods might have combined in some horrific fusion.

One thing was certain: that Outer God had grown incomprehensibly powerful, and as a result, the world was destroyed.

The Outer God overseeing the Monster Wave, the one who wielded Leviathan, all had been demoted under Infinite Void’s domination.

In short, this was Infinite Void’s final victory ending.

Released from the confines of Cheon Yo-hwa’s body, Infinite Void

had become powerful beyond imagination.

This cycle could be considered a failure. Just like so many others.

‘I heard something…’

But the only failure was that of the current me in the 687th cycle.

By clashing Infinite Void with the Mastermind, my experiment to reveal the weakness of the Outer Gods had succeeded.

At least, the initial phase of the experiment had succeeded.

As seen now, Infinite Void had crossed “through the rift” and was pulling me along.

The sacrifices of my comrades—Saintess, Yu Ji-won, Dang Seo-rin, Oh Dok-seo, Noh Do-hwa, Sim Ah-ryeon… countless lives—they weren’t in vain.

No, I wouldn’t allow them to be in vain.

As the regressor, I scanned my surroundings, ever-vigilant for any scrap of information, any hint of leverage.

‘Even if the earth was destroyed, it’s still impossible for sound to reach me out here in the distance of space.’

Yet I had heard booming echoes as each celestial body was annihilated.

I checked to see if there was any air blowing nearby, like by moistening a finger, suspecting that “breath” from Infinite Void’s presence might be filling the vacuum of space.

But I felt no air. I wasn’t even breathing normally.

Yet still, there was sound—

‘A medium exists within space. In other words, ether exists, just as scholars of the geocentric era theorized.’

Ether.

A supposed element that fills the entirety of the universe, like air on earth, present everywhere, always.

Given my Complete Memory, as soon as I recognized the existence of ether, my mind was inevitably drawn to the next deduction.

And the reason was simple.

「*Brothers and sisters! Since ancient times, fire has been the sacred ether! Fire's essence is to purify the foul air of the earth and draw closer to heaven!*」

A memory from long ago.

When Mo Gwang-seo Christ was still simply known as Mo Gwang-seo, I'd recorded in a corner of my mind his speech to his followers.

He had once said:

"But cleansing these foul airs is no easy task. As a soul who has penetrated the six spiritual realms, I will pave the way and guide you all to the heavenly kingdom above."

"Each of you must break through this Path of Wind I open with your full might as one so that the souls left on Earth can easily ascend!"

Ether.

The Path of Wind.

The Heavenly Kingdom.

"....."

A thunderous epiphany shook my mind.

'Was Mo Gwang-seo not just some mere fraud or demagogue?'

The ether was real, present in the void that had emerged with the Flat Earth Theory. The Path of Wind, connecting to the rift in space, was likewise real. Even now, as I was clutched by Infinite Void's

fingers and being drawn through it.

So, what lay beyond that rift? Was it the Heavenly Kingdom?

Without seeing it for myself, I couldn't begin to speculate.

Only—

"Enter through the narrow gate."

A prophecy uttered to me by Mo Gwang-seo, the man who had always remained silent like a puppet, came to mind suddenly.

Though I'd initially dismissed it as Lee Ha-yul's trickery, Ha-yul herself had insisted that she had never been "coerced into saying anything of the sort."

"The gate to life is narrow, and the path narrow, and those who find it are few."

I was on the terrace of the Tower of Babel.

Clinging to the very structure humanity had built in their quest to reach divinity, I turned to look behind me.

The cosmic scenery had vanished entirely. Only the "rift," growing closer, with Infinite Void's enormous eye watching, remained.

The void, a tear in the fabric of the world.

"O, scribe."

"Enter through the narrow gate."

And so.

I entered through the narrow gate.

Footnotes:

1 - Panthalassa, also known as the Panthalassic Ocean or Panthalassan Ocean (from Greek πᾶν "all" and θάλασσα "sea"), was the vast superocean that encompassed planet Earth and surrounded the supercontinent Pangaea, the latest in a series of supercontinents in the history of Earth.

Chapter 250

The Mastermind I

Sinnoa

Did you know?

The title of any existing work in the world could be transformed into a "concealment" format.

Let's call it the Concealment Transformation Theory.

Needless to say, of course, the stories we've journeyed through so far could be concealed in the same way.

"City Bus Conceals a Chessboard," "Radio DJ Conceals a Musical Genius," "The Last Heir of a People Conceals a Signal Fire," "The Ice Age Conceals Humanity's Sincerity," "Earth Conceals the Sun," and so forth...

There's truly no end to the possibilities. All it takes is tacking on "conceals" somewhere in the middle.

The genius who first conceived these titles surely deserves some acclaim.

In fact, the sharp-witted among you may have already noticed that the Outer God we're about to target lends itself most fittingly to this concealment transformation. After all, the very term "Mastermind" implies a perpetrator concealing their identity.

Therefore, if we were to arbitrarily apply the Concealment Transformation Theory to this Outer God, who still lacks a proper name, we might describe it like this:

"The Anomaly Conceals the World."

The instant I crossed the rift, led by the Infinite Void's pointer

finger, I briefly lost consciousness.

How long was I out? Maybe five seconds?

After blacking out for a short while, I opened my eyes again to find myself lying on the ground.

Someone was gazing down at me.

- Consciousness restoration: confirmed.

- Primary language set to Korean. Initiating dialogue.

- It has been a while, human.

It was an Anomaly.

A slime-like entity composed of bright red liquid bubbled up with a *pop-pop*, creating sounds that resembled a "human" voice. So the lines it had just spoken weren't really words. They were just intermittent bursts of effects like "I-t has-been-a-while, hu-man."

"A while...? And who might you be?"

- Name: Fairy King.

"Ah."

The Fairy King.

An Anomaly similar to an AI personality that governed all the fairies in the tutorial. To be precise, each Tutorial Fairy was essentially a terminal of the Fairy King.

Considering that fairies were actually Baku, one might also call the Fairy King a Succubus Queen.

Once, this Anomaly might have acted freely, but since the point at which I began to regress, it had already been enslaved by the Infinite Void. It didn't pose any real threat.

"And why are you here? And what's with that form?" I looked around. "Where's the Infinite Void?"

- Processing your questions in reverse order. First: You transferred your control of me to the Outer God known as the Infinite Void.

The bubbles popped again.

- The Infinite Void is currently engaged in a dispute with the Outer God in this place, which, according to your words, would be called the Great Void or the Void of Imageless Spirits.

"A dispute."

I clutched my head, quickly running through the Fairy King's answers. My head throbbed, probably because my Aura had drained.

"So, the Infinite Void is battling the Mastermind Outer God? To seize control?"

- Confirmation: That is correct.

"And where are they fighting? I was definitely pulled here by the Infinite Void's finger."

- They are fighting now, here, and in all places at all times.

"..."

- Because it is not a physical battle, but a contest of concepts, your senses cannot perceive it.

However, the Fairy King then murmured something else.

- Explanation: The Infinite Void has determined that without you, the outcome of this battle is meaningless.

- Reason: Even if it wins, the moment your life ends, all progress resets.

"Mm."

As expected.

The Infinite Void couldn't preserve data across cycles. Even if it

regained some of its former powers, it would face serious problems if the regressor hit "reset." Whether it wanted to recruit, persuade, or imprison me, the Infinite Void had no choice but to focus on me, the regressor. The reason it pulled me in, even after the world had perished, lay in this.

"Then, is this really the Mastermind Outer God's domain?"

- Confirmation: Correct. I descended here to communicate with you on behalf of the Infinite Void.

"So you're something like a walkie-talkie."

- Confirmation: That understanding is accurate.

I groaned, pulling myself upright.

We were in a sealed room—a cube. The sterile, white cube exuded no sense of life.

"A containment room? A laboratory? An experimental chamber?"

There was no furniture to suggest a lived-in space, only a corpse that lay sprawled behind the Fairy King and a hologram of the solar system standing in the center of the room.

"And what is that corpse?"

- It's related to your next question. The corpse belonged to a "researcher" responsible for this containment space.

- Explanation: The Infinite Void killed the researcher upon emerging from the rift and used the corpse to assemble a physical form for me.

"So, in other words..." I frowned. "That slimy blob of yours is actually the blood and flesh of that researcher?"

- Confirmation: Correct.

The slime squirmed. Apparently, neither of us minded the presence of a corpse lying around.

- Caution: Look at this solar system.

I was already looking.

As I mentioned, a hologram of the solar system floated in the center of the room. Long "claw marks" were gouged out around the hologram. Inside, the Earth and planets had crumbled into fragments, floating aimlessly.

Anyone with a shred of sense would understand the implication.

"Wait a minute, is this our solar system?"

- Confirmation: Correct.

"..."

- Explanation: The Earth you lived on is nothing but a simulation represented by this hologram.

- Supplementary note: To be precise, the Outer God here is forcing it to remain "only a simulation."

The answer came to me then, and I nodded grimly.. "So it's the simulation hypothesis."

The simulation hypothesis.

This theory proposed that the world we live in isn't real, but rather a virtual reality—a virtual world created for some kind of experiment.

It was akin to the idea of a brain in a vat. We weren't truly human, just brains confined in life-support tanks, receiving electrical impulses from an outside researcher, convincing us, "This is the real world!"

"Then was that corpse one of the researchers controlling our world?"

- Confirmation: Yes.

"Good riddance."

All of a sudden, I felt an overwhelming disgust for this white-walled chamber.

"So they reduced our world to a mere 'simulation test site' and observed it?"

If that wasn't a true Great Void, then what was?

Reducing the world itself to a mere simulation was likely the power the Mastermind Outer God wielded. The Fairy King's explanation only cemented my resolve.

"Truly, Outer Gods cannot be allowed to exist under the same sky as us."

Enemies of humanity. Only by destroying this place and the Mastermind Outer God could we prove our world was more than just a trivial simulation.

What exact angle I should take to attack it still eluded me, but my objective was now clear.

"Alright. So do I just destroy this damn lab? It looks small enough that it shouldn't be too hard."

The Fairy King's slimy form wriggled. Although it had no eyes or mouth, I sensed it staring at me.

- Guidance: Follow me.

The slime tapped on the wall, causing a door just wide enough for a person to appear where there had once been none.

I was taken aback. Such technology was unimaginable with modern Earth civilization.

"There's more beyond here?"

- Confirmation: Correct.

I stepped through the newly formed door.

Or rather, I intended to step through and keep walking, to assess the structure of the Outer God's Great Void. But the moment I crossed the threshold, I froze in place.

"What...?"

An endless corridor stretched before me with cube-shaped labs packed closely together on either side.

"What is this...?"

- Explanation: As of now, the Infinite Void has identified at least 1,000 simulation labs.

- Supplementary note: This is merely the count. We have no information on the actual experiments taking place.

"..."

A World Annihilation Simulator. That was the scene that awaited the regressor as I crossed beyond the rift to confront the Outer God.

- Directive: First, wear the researcher's lab coat.

As I prepared myself to leave the containment chamber, the Fairy King offered a suggestion.

- Explanation: I understand you intend to prove that this is merely an illusion, that this Great Void is nothing but a false reality.

- Supplementary note: However, as you know, the Great Void has its own rules.

"So... you're telling me to disguise myself as a researcher here, to pretend I'm one of the Void's personnel?"

- Confirmation: Precisely.

No further explanation was necessary.

- In fact, no human-shaped beings originally existed in this Great

Void.

- The Infinite Void "hacked" this place to enforce physical forms. The white containment room, the simulation hologram, the researcher—they were all elements forced into existence by the Infinite Void.

"So this space would have been far more abstract otherwise?"

- Response unavailable: I do not know. I myself only came into existence after the Infinite Void began its invasion.

"Mmm."

The exact intention behind the Infinite Void's machinations remained unclear. Still, for now, it seemed willing to aid me. At least until we took down the Mastermind Outer God, our relationship could be considered one of cooperation.

"It's a setup so that I, an Anomaly from the simulation, can move freely without raising suspicion."

- Confirmation: Additionally, I am here as your guide and assistant.

- Self-evaluation: I have served both the Infinite Void and you as my masters in turn. I am a suitable choice.

"But... you're not human."

- Counterpoint: The confusion arises from the limitations of inferior human language. It is not your fault.

With a sigh, I stripped the corpse of its clothing, then incinerated the body with Aura.

Squirm!

As soon as I draped the white lab coat over my shoulders, the Fairy King's body wriggled, attaching itself to me.

"What the—?"

- Explanation: Transforming appearance.

The slime spread thinly across the contours of my body, even covering my face.

Then, it suddenly became transparent, reshaping my features!

'A silicone mask? A human skin mask?'

In any case, the slime adhered to me like an armor of tentacles, completely altering the appearance of me, the Undertaker.

Without a mirror, I couldn't see how I looked, but I could tell that a flat chest had appeared, among other subtle changes. One thing was certain: I now looked more feminine.

"You! What are you doing?!"

- Detected emotion: Anger.

- Explanation: This appearance replicates the former researcher (now a corpse) who managed this lab.

- Question: You are aware of the Great Void's rules. Adjusting your form to match the researcher's appearance is a given. Anger is unwarranted.

"Couldn't you at least show me a mirror so I can see what kind of surgery you've pulled off...?"

- Confirmation: I will comply with both the Infinite Void's instructions and your preferences to the fullest extent possible.

Squirm.

A section of the slime emerged from my sleeve and shaped itself into a mirror. This feat was so far outside the realm of human capabilities that I felt as if I had transformed into an Anomaly myself.

"..."

I glared at the reflection in the mirror.

Seeing myself transformed into a woman didn't shock me out of some silly, clichéd awe at my beauty—no, it was something else entirely.

The reason was much simpler. The face was... familiar.

"This is... the Undertakeress!"

- Question: What is "Undertakeress"?

The Fairy King, now back in its slime form, tilted its head in curiosity, but I couldn't answer.

Back in the 664th cycle, I had gone on a trip to the Uyuni Salt Flats with Dang Seo-rin. And on the airplane, which was supposed to facilitate a safe journey, I encountered Undertakers and Dang Seo-rins from parallel worlds.

One thing I found memorable was that in those other worlds, every version of Undertaker and Dang Seo-rin was a couple.

Among them was a female version of me, known as "the Undertakeress," a parallel universe's version of myself.

She and I even shared a similar level of martial prowess.

"This is impossible..."

I turned to stare blankly at the spot where the researcher's corpse had lain just moments before.

'So, the Undertakers from parallel worlds were Anomalies born in the Mastermind Outer God's domain?!'

This exploration of the Void was going to be anything but easy.

Chapter 251

The Mastermind II

Sinnoa

My confusion was fleeting, but my resolve was firm.

‘First, I need to get used to this female Undertaker persona.’

The sensation of slime clinging to my skin and reshaping my features was disturbing.

But so what? Life itself was disturbing.

The cold logic of a regressor urged me to adjust quickly, dismissing this strange phenomenon as insignificant.

‘Alright. Let’s commit to the role. What was the Undertakeress’s tone like? Her gaze? Her emotional responses?’

Not to brag, or rather, it was something to be proud of—I, the Undertaker, was better at acting than anyone else. Thanks to my Complete Memory, I had observed countless people’s every gesture, and as such, I possessed an acting ability that would put even Chigusa from *Glass Mask* to shame.[1]

Naturally, I remembered every detail about the Undertakeress from the 664th cycle.

“Alright... Voice. Yes, I’ll start with the voice,” I mumbled deliberately, adjusting my vocal cords with Aura. Even though my reserves were nearly depleted, I could still manage this small trick. However, I would need to rest, and soon, as I was in no condition to fight. “Good. Perfect.”

Thankfully, the Undertakeress was similar to me—the original Undertaker—in every way except in looks and voice. There was nothing else to adjust.

“Well, except for dating Seo-rin.”

Hmm.

Would that detail be important? Could there be Anomalies playing Dang Seo-rin or Sim Ah-ryeon in this Great Void?

There was no telling. The Great Void lay beyond human comprehension.

[Attention, researchers in Section A.]

I jumped, my gaze darting to a speaker that had appeared in the corner of the ceiling, where there had been nothing just moments ago. A mechanical voice streamed from it.

[It is mealtime. All Section A researchers are instructed to halt work and proceed to the dining hall.]

[Repeating. All Section A researchers are to halt work immediately and gather in the dining hall. That is all.]

I tapped my forearm, nudging the Fairy King—slime spread thin over my skin.

“Explain. What’s going on?”

- Explanation: As I mentioned earlier, the Infinite Void is currently engaged in a fight against the opposing Outer God in this Great Void.

- Addendum: The Infinite Void is injecting NPC data, map data, and so forth into this space to bring it under control. You may consider this a process of “setting parameters.”

In other words...

“This sterile, desolate room is supposedly part of a research zone called Section A, that speaker that just popped up over there—all of these are results of the Infinite Void’s current ‘settings?’”

- Confirmation: Exactly.

- Warning: Conversely, the opposing Anomaly, although ambushed by the Infinite Void, continues attempting to regain control of the Great Void. Any parameter could be overwritten at any time.

- Addendum: Should the opposing Anomaly realize that you are not an NPC created by the Infinite Void but rather the real Undertaker, it will eliminate you immediately.

- Conclusion: Proceed with caution.

I stared at my forearm silently.

In short, I had to completely immerse myself in the role of "Researcher Undertakeress." No one could discover I was the real deal.

"Fine... I'm confident in my acting."

- Warning: The speaker instructed you to halt work and proceed to the dining hall. Failure to comply with the directive may draw attention, increasing the risk of your identity being uncovered.

"Understood. Let's head out."

Tap, tap.

I mimicked the Fairy King's knock, tapping the wall. A hole wide enough for me to pass through appeared once again. However, the moment I stepped through the door, I found myself surprised.

'The surroundings... changed?'

To be precise, they *were* changing. Moments before, all there was to see was an endless hallway flanked by hundreds of confinement rooms crammed tightly together. Now it was different.

'There are potted plants and something resembling a water dispenser. Even a spot to sit and rest.'

At this point, it could almost pass for a plausible "office."

Of course, given that it was still the Great Void, the interior design

differed drastically from an actual office.

- *Bzzzzt. Bzzzzt, bzzzzt.*

Static buzzed intermittently along various parts of the corridor that otherwise seemed intact. Each time the static flickered, spaces resembling “cosmos” or “galaxies” appeared and vanished around me—over and over.

It looked as if someone were using the world as a canvas, spilling a can of paint and then wiping it away again.

- Warning: You are viewing a section of the opposing Outer God’s domain. It is advisable to avoid unnecessary observation.

‘I understand.’

In response to the Fairy King’s soft whisper into my ear, I tapped my body with my fingers, signaling back in Morse code.

‘Where are they eating?’

- Navigation mode: Beginning guidance.

I walked down the corridor.

Swish, swish.

Dozens, no, hundreds of researchers poured into the corridor from “doors” that opened on their own. They gathered naturally in groups, chatting away.

“How’s your world doing? Everything going smoothly?”

“Ugh, don’t even mention it. Undertaker’s been isolated again because of suspicion from the Saintess.”

“Seriously, isn’t that Saintess entity odd? How can she spend 365 days a year spying on people and expecting them to be flawless?”

“She just has absurdly high standards.”

Chatter filled the air.

The researchers came in various forms. Some resembled me, the Undertaker, while others looked like Dang Seo-rin or Oh Dok-seo.

“As a Saintess, I find this offensive.”

“Oh. Sorry! We were obviously talking about the Saintess from simulation 431, right?”

“Of course. She’s worlds apart from a Saintess who has ascended, as you have!”

“I’ll take it that way.”

767, 766, 431—Instead of name tags, numbers were displayed on the researchers’ lab coats. Most likely, the numbers represented their respective simulated universes.

A number was also printed on the lab coat I was wearing: 107.

‘The same number as the cycle in which I traveled to the Uyuni Salt Flats.’

At that point, I felt a sense of certainty. The parallel world Anomalies were part of some enigmatic Mastermind Outer God.

Bzzzzt!

Researchers stepped into “cosmos” and “galaxies” zones gouged out in sections of the corridor. As soon as they entered, their previously normal forms contorted grotesquely. Their faces disappeared, their eyes transformed into twin suns, and a mechanical sound resonated from the black hole-like Void where their mouths should have been.

“So, did you kill the Saintess?”

“Yeah. She was annoying. Set off an earthquake so that she got crushed under the debris from every building.”

“I killed Undertaker. I whispered all the reasons he was loathsome, all the harm he was causing this world, pausing time each time, and singing it like a lullaby whenever he fell asleep. Before long, he sealed himself away with the Time Seal. What an idiot.”

“You should’ve seen the Saintess’s corpse as she got crushed to death! She kept using the Time Stop, trying desperately to escape the earthquake! Like a pathetic little bug.”

“Oh, speaking of bugs, I heard there’s an escapee.”

“An escapee?”

“Yeah. Looks like he’s one of us.”

“Apparently, they’re really weakened right now.”

“Bet their guts will taste delicious.”

Thud.

The researchers’ bodies, which had become increasingly monstrous, returned to normal the moment they stepped back onto the “corridor.”

“What’s on the menu today?”

“No idea. Haven’t checked in a while. I just eat whatever they give us.”

“I don’t know how much longer we’ll keep running these simulations. I thought I’d live in luxury once I ascended, but what is this?”

They strolled into the dining hall, chatting as though nothing had happened.

At the entrance to the dining hall, I noticed a head of green hair among the backs of hundreds of other figures—it was Sim Ah-ryeon.

“Hmm? Are you not going in, 107?”

One of the researchers glanced back at me. It was an Anomaly with the face of Oh Dok-seo.

A suspicious look.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but it felt like their gaze swept over me from head to toe in an instant.

I immediately put on an expression.

“Why does it matter if I go in or not? Are we close? Mind your own business.”

“Oh… Right.”

Hearing my response, the researcher turned away. The scrutinizing gaze disappeared as quickly as it had come.

“Acting all high and mighty, just because you were born with a regressor spoon in your mouth…”

With that grumble, the researcher vanished.

Inside the dining hall, researchers in white coats sat at tables lined in rows. Laid out on their trays were chunks of meat resembling crudely arranged human entrails.

[In every dish you enjoy today—whether it’s a side or a broth—you’ll find the earnest heart of a farmer sweating under the scorching sun.]

The speaker buzzed to life.

A section of “cosmos” engulfed part of the dining hall, and for a moment, the speaker morphed into a human mouth.

[Today’s meal was specially prepared, sourced from survivors who endured until the very last moment of world annihilation.]

[Ingredients have been provided from simulations 1101, 332, and 89.]

[Taste every bit of hope, despair, and survival instinct in every bite.]

[Let’s dine with gratitude. That is all.]

“Thank you!”

“Thank you.”

The researchers suddenly sprouted five or six extra arms, which they used to devour the entrail-like meat. Their hands were smeared with oil and blood.

“Hmm.”

I steadied my breathing.

As expected, I was the only human here.

After finishing the meal, I returned to Lab 107, where an orange-ponytailed researcher was waiting for me as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Yoo-hoo. Hey there, sunbae. How was the banquet in the Outer God’s domain? Tasted divine, right?”

“…”

“Oh, right. Come on in. I’ve disabled the surveillance in this room, so it’s safe.”

I subtly tapped on the slime.

- Confirmation: The individual before you is indeed a terminal for the Outer God Infinite Void. They are an ally.

Finally, I exhaled. “Infinite Void.”

“Yup! Gosh—when you first captured me and forced me into a human life, I was ready to hate all of existence, but I guess it all builds character, huh?”

Plop.

Infinite Void hopped up onto the table (which, like many things, had appeared from nowhere) and swung its legs, clearly in high

spirits.

“If I hadn’t been forced into human life back then, I’d have a much harder time passing as an NPC now. Thanks, sunbae!”

“I have no idea what’s going on here. Share some information.”

“For free?”

“…”

“Hehe.” Infinite Void’s eyes sparkled mischievously. “You want to slay the Outer God here… Ah, whatever, let’s just call them the Mastermind since it’s a hassle, yeah? Anyway, you want to take down the Mastermind, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’ll need my help! If I back out now, this table, the simulation hologram, the researchers, the corridor, everything will warp out of your perception.”

“Listen, even if you sound high and mighty, if I decide to reset, you’ll lose everything.”

“True, fair point. I can’t argue. Exactly why we make such a perfect team, right?” Infinite Void giggled. “I’ll keep programming ‘settings’ for this Great Void so that you can move freely. Meanwhile, you should destroy the other simulated universes!”

“Why can’t you destroy them yourself?”

“Oh, come on. I thought you’d noticed by now. While we were going back and forth to the dining hall, I was struggling just to maintain a balance with the Mastermind.”

Infinite Void shrugged its shoulders dramatically.

“Let my guard down for a second, and all these settings, parameters, and whatnot would be devoured by that cosmos-looking domain. Summoning the Fairy King and sticking him on you was already a major stretch, you know?”

"…"

"You have to be my blade. I'll distract the Mastermind's attention whenever possible, and then you strike at the right moment! Like a group project—team effort."

I propped my chin up, deep in thought.

'It bothers me to give the Infinite Void an opening. Still, cooperation seems reasonable for now.'

After all, my goal in bringing Infinite Void here was precisely this kind of collaboration. It was the only Outer God with whom "human dialogue" was possible. While I would need to hear what it wanted, I was open to granting any requests that weren't too unreasonable.

"My objective is to slay the Mastermind and establish a strategy."

"Yup, I know!"

"If that strategy works out, I'd be willing to grant you a few minor benefits. But if you ask for something like a complete transfer of Cheon Yo-hwa's body, I will flatly refuse."

"I knew that too!"

I nodded. "Alright. Tell me your demands."

"Will you have a baby with me, sunbae?"

"…"

Alright. Perhaps this creature should be the first to go.

Footnotes:

1 - In *Glass Mask*, the protagonist is a young actress who is so talented that she is scouted by the legendary actress, Chigusa

Tsukikage, to be her successor.

Chapter 252

The Mastermind III

Sinnoa

Sensing the ominous look on my face, Infinite Void flailed its arms desperately.

“Hold on, hold on, hold on! Can we not jump to bringing out the Aura without at least hearing an explanation?”

“No need to bother. Judging by your tone, it’s not a joke, and I’d sooner hit reset than have a child with you.”

“No, wait! Just listen! No suicide, stop it!”

Infinite Void leaped off the table and hugged me. I intended to shake it off lightly, but an unimaginable force constricted me from both sides.

Squeeeeze.

Stubborn as ever, it wasn’t the feeble creature it had been. Having regained some degree of its powers, Infinite Void was no longer a mere weakling. I was immobilized.

“Ugh,” I grunted.

“Aha! You’ve really grown weak, haven’t you, *sun-ba-eee*?”

“…”

“The sunbae who used to smack me around with Aura back when I was sealed is now this frail little human girl? Ohoho! Even a being like me, free from the emotions of the Eight Desires and Seven Feelings, feels an Awakening coming on!”

This was truly humiliating. To think the aftereffects of unleashing all my Aura in the Final Defense War would linger so long.

“Come on now, no need to glare at me so intensely. Anyway, there’s a perfectly reasonable justification for my proposal. You know me, right? Infinite Void, the Akashic Record whose essence and purpose is to gather the data of all things in the cosmos.”

“And?”

“Hold on, hear me out. Even though I’ve somewhat regained my powers, there’s still one piece of data I’ve utterly failed to obtain. Guess what it is?”

“I have no idea. Humanity, perhaps?”

“Oh, sharp guess. But honestly, I think I’m more human than that Ji-won girl, sunbae, who happened to be born a bona fide *Homo sapien*.”

I couldn’t argue with that. If Ji-Won had failed so spectacularly at being human that even an Outer God disqualified her from the running, just what kind of beast test did this being pass with flying colors...?

Infinite Void clocked my sour mood and sneered at me.

“The one thing I’ve never been able to obtain. Ta-dah!. It’s your experience of childbirth and parenting!”

“What?”

“Sunbae, you’ve never once had a child, let alone raised one, have you? I don’t know all the specifics of the other runs, but I know that much—it’s obvious.”

“...”

“This gap in my data is, to put it in terms a human could understand... It’s like being one roll away from completing a gacha collection? It’s an urge that’s hard to resist on a primal level.”

“How absurd.”

I gave it a light push. This time, it didn’t resist or exert any strength

to hold me back. It took a few playful steps back, making a silly *ack-ack!* sound.

“Why do you think I’d accept your proposal?” I grumbled. “Having a child just to satisfy a craving like that isn’t right, and what’s more, a proposal like ‘Work with me, and give me your child’ is the quintessential devil’s scheme.”

“Aw, but aren’t you at least a little curious? I mean, it’s a child between you and me—a child of the Outer God and the regressor.” Infinite Void put its hands behind its back. Its red eyes narrowed. “A being of extraordinary power might be born—a game-changer, a variable that could completely overturn the endless cycle of reincarnation you’re trapped in.”

“…”

“The moment when myth itself is created. A being half Outer God and half human… What do you think? Could this be the true route to the ‘True Ending?’”

“Impossible. Propose something else.”

“Aw.” Infinite Void pouted. “Boring. I bet you’re going to reject my request to call me the Hyakki Yagyo too, right?”

“Naturally.”

“This won’t do, that won’t do… Typical regressor, acting all high and mighty.”

I didn’t bother responding.

Right now, it was skillfully mimicking Cheon Yo-hwa’s voice and gestures. It had broken down and reproduced my loved one’s data with precision. The title had switched from “Teacher” to “Sunbae,” and its speech shifted to casual language, but otherwise, it was an impeccable replica of Yo-hwa.

An obvious trick meant to lull me into dropping my guard.

I had no reason to entertain such childish pranks.

“Hmm? Odd. Even though I layered multiple mental weakening effects in the room before you arrived, it’s having no effect on you.”

“…”

“A regular human would’ve lost their mind at the mere sight of me. I suppose Go Yuri really did mess with you, huh? Alright then, sunbae. Here’s my next proposal.”

“Go on.”

Infinite Void tilted its head. “Remember my goodwill.”

I furrowed my brow. “What does that mean?”

“It means just what it says. This time, I’ll cooperate free of charge, so later on, just call it a debt.”

“…”

“For this cycle only, I’ll actively assist you in defeating the Mastermind. No demands like transferring memories to my next reincarnation, passing on data, or even securing exclusive rights to the fairies.”

With its hands behind its back, Infinite Void leaned in close. Its crimson eyes peered straight into mine.

“In other words, a debt.”

Just as I was about to answer, it reached out, pressing a finger to my lips.

“Sorry. Before you reject my final offer, give it a little more thought, sunbae. I’m crafty, you know. I might just turn against you and side with the Mastermind, swallowing you whole.”

I kept quiet.

We stood there, a silence stretching between us.

After a long pause, Infinite Void, still gazing into my eyes, smiled

faintly. Withdrawing its hand, it held out its own for a handshake.

“Alright, a deal is made! Love you, sunbae. Let’s work well together from now on!”

“Go to hell...”

“Huh? How’s that an insult? Did you forget that Infernal Hell is also a name you gave me?”

Arguing with an Anomaly was pointless.

Surprisingly, Infinite Void seemed to understand concepts like “promise,” “faith,” and “loyalty” after all.

“Here in the vast emptiness of the Great Void, or as you call it, the Divine Realm, there’s a reason why I specifically set the background to be a ‘Research Facility.’”

Draped in the guise of Yo-hwa, Infinite Void was genuinely doing its best to assist me.

“There are restricted areas within the research lab. Access varies depending on the level of the researcher.”

“So clear rules exist, then?”

“Exactly!” Infinite Void said, giggling. “In a research facility handling Anomalies, rules run rampant. And the Anomalies generally follow these rules—just like now.”

With a snap, Infinite Void’s fingers clicked, and static crackled over the speakers embedded in the lab ceiling.

[Attention, all researchers in Section C.]

[It is mealtime. Researchers in Section C should stop their tasks and gather in the cafeteria.]

[Repeating, all Section C researchers, please cease work and proceed to the cafeteria. Over.]

A hint of surprise snuck over me. It was almost identical to the announcement from a few hours ago.

“Did you control that speaker too?”

“Who am I? The ruler of Hyakki Yagyo. I bet you’ve seen something similar before.”

“Oh.”

Suddenly, I recalled the time I’d served as a security guard at Baekhwa Girls’ High, subduing spirits. Back then, the school’s spirits would possess “speakers” or “radios” to deceive students too.

“All of Hyakki Yagyo under my command has been set loose in the Divine Realm. The Fairy King you’re wearing isn’t my only pawn!”

“So you’re using Hyakki Yagyo to manipulate the Mastermind’s Anomalies, ordering them to gather in the cafeteria or move elsewhere.”

“Exactly. Thanks to that, I could arrange this little rendezvous with you.”

Truly a power worthy of an Outer God.

While Yo-hwa’s abilities allowed for NPC Creation to influence behavior, Infinite Void went a step further, imposing entire backgrounds and rules onto the Void itself. This was its so-called Data Input, a power that was likewise responsible for creating tutorial dungeons across the world, with survival as the reward for passing each test.

“Well, as you saw, the Mastermind is putting up one hell of a fight, so I’m running into some snags here and there... But after I’ve done all this to help, you can handle the rest, right?”

I accepted the provocation.

Over the next few days, I settled into life in the research lab. As far as research work went, it mostly consisted of observing a “simulated universe,” eating, and sleeping—a routine that was easy

to adapt to. Occasionally, we researchers gathered for simulation tests, where the group pretended to exchange expert opinions.

“Maybe we should raise the Saintess’s power levels to slow down the world’s end.”

“No, no, it’s better to give the Sword Marquess some social skills. If he fully realizes his potential, he can do anything on his own.”

“Am I the only one betting on the Sword Marquess?”

“Reaching Rejuvenation mode requires such specific conditions... You have to befriend Undertaker, right? A bit much, no?”

The researchers constantly ran simulations, each round in the simulated universe lasting roughly 20 years until it reached destruction. However, those years were only perceived within the simulated universe itself. Outside the simulation, things were different. By simply adjusting the time dilation setting, the researchers could make ten years flash by in an instant.

“Oh, look at this! The Saintess has fallen into Corruption again.”

“Wow, it’s always a sight to see the entire universe just come to a standstill.”

“We were just about to build a strong alliance between the Sword Marquess and Undertaker, but then she crossed over to China and got herself killed...”

“A natural death.”

“Hey, no matter how many simulations I run, the results keep coming out the same. What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Idiot. You’re just tinkering with the settings within Korea. Try adjusting variables in places outside the Saintess’s field of vision!”

For the researchers, the end of the world in the simulated universe was merely a point of academic curiosity.

Instead of getting angry at the Anomalies’ behavior, I focused on a

different aspect.

‘Some of these simulated scenarios mirror real events almost exactly.’

Take, for instance, the scenario that had just unfolded in one of the simulations before me, comparing it to a particular run in my life.

A. Simulated Universe: The Undertaker builds a Regression Alliance > The Undertaker establishes a ranch to develop dinosaurs > UFO lands in Manchuria and crushes the Monster Wave > Cheon Yo-hwa is devoured by Infinite Void > World destroyed by UFO and Infinite Void

B. Undertaker’s 340th run: Regression Alliance is built > A ranch is established to develop dinosaurs for use in managing national highways > Attempt made to use a UFO as a barrier, but balance issues caused it to fail > Cheon Yo-hwa goes berserk fighting aliens from the UFO > World destroyed

As you can see, they were almost identical.

Why, then, was the Outer God running more than a thousand simulations like this, continuously and tirelessly?

‘It’s to render me, a regressor, powerless.’

Yes.

I, the Undertaker, categorized the world where the above events took place as the “340th run,” so according to my memory, it was the 340th world, naturally.

But the Outer God Mastermind was interpreting the same events in a different way.

[No.]

[This is merely a scenario produced by the 655th simulated universe for the 13,290,578,935th time.]

[You are not a regressor.]

[You are simply a puppet in the simulated universe.]

A chill ran down my spine.

‘To think that an Outer God-class Anomaly would go to such great lengths to degrade me as a Regressor.’

Being a regressor was a cheat code in itself. My very existence was nothing short of a calamity for the Anomalies.

If there was ever a living testament to this, it was the weakling Infinite Void fighting the Mastermind here in this domain. Even if one managed to subdue all the fairies in the tutorial and barricade themselves in Baekhwa High’s underground bunker, what good would it do? A regressor could simply “click” and tear it all down.

From the moment a regressor Awakened on Earth—and as it happened, one whose mental fortitude was forged of steel, capable of declaring, “I can do this forever”—the Anomalies, no matter how powerful, were inevitably bound to fall to ruin.

For the Anomalies to escape the regressor’s grasp, a more complex strategy was required.

‘And that strategy... is these simulated universes.’

The Mastermind’s strategy was remarkably effective. It didn’t try to defeat the regressor in battle, not when stepping into the ring would only guarantee its loss. No, it chose to control the match from outside the ring.

“Fairy King. How many simulated universes have we identified so far?”

- Answer: As of now, 3,505 simulated universes have been catalogued.

- Supplementary Information: Each simulation takes approximately one hour to complete. The researchers work an average of twelve hours a day.

- Conclusion: Thus, over 42,100 simulation scenarios are generated

per day.

“Good grief.”

I complete one run every twenty years. This Outer God completes over 40,000 simulations in a single day, and even that was likely a conservative estimate.

In a sheer numbers game, there was no winning.

“So if we were to aggregate all the simulations the Mastermind has run, and isolate only those that match the events of my life...”

- Affirmative: All the paths you’ve walked can be explained by the simulated universe scenarios.

- Additional Information: From the 4th run to the 687th, even if there are thousands or tens of thousands of iterations, the Mastermind can explain all of them as outputs from the simulated universe.

- Explanation: Infinite Void’s suggestion to produce a child with you wasn’t merely to satisfy its curiosity. It was to introduce an absolute variable into the simulation.

“……”

Watching the researchers, who had taken on the appearance of various Anomalies, chatter and bicker, I recalled moments from my past.

Those times, at the brink of each world-ending crisis, when the “Mastermind” would speak to me, channeling voices through people like Seo Gyu and the Saintess.

“I’ve set up countless stratagems behind the scenes. Hyung, I was the one who brought about the world’s end.”

“Mr. Undertaker, I orchestrated every bit of destruction.”

It hadn’t been a joke, nor an exaggeration.

Mastermind Syndrome had never lied to me. The Outer God had truly woven “countless stratagems” “behind the scenes” and had “orchestrated every bit of destruction.”

Even at this very moment.

No matter how much I resisted, my regression would always be reduced to just one of the simulated universe’s scenarios.

“107?”

At that moment, the researchers all turned to me.

“Researcher 107, what’s your take?”

“Yeah. What variable should we add to derive a new apocalyptic scenario?”

“India or Europe sounds good, right? Or outer space?”

“Actually, as long as it’s outside the range of Clairvoyance and the Mini-Map, anywhere is fine. Whether it’s deep within the Earth or even beyond it.”

“What’s 107’s idea?”

The researchers, who had taken on the forms of Old Man Scho, Dang Seo-rin, Oh Dok-seo, and Sim Ah-ryeon, had hollow, vacant eyes.

Blending in to avoid suspicion, I replied, “Yes, my suggestion is...”

I chose my words carefully, all the while thinking this:

This vast Divine Realm was, in essence, nothing more than a murder factory meticulously designed by the Outer God to kill me.

Chapter 253

The Mastermind IV

Sinnoa

I posed as a thoroughly competent researcher and built a network.

Though I hated to admit it, “Undertakeress” was quite beautiful. With her amiable attitude and tailored strategies for approaching others, even the NPC researchers quickly opened up to her.

“Researcher, you must be tired. Here, have some coffee and take it easy.”

“Oh! Thank you. Wow, it’s been ages since I’ve had coffee made by someone from the Undertaker’s guild. I kind of missed it even after coming here...”

The researchers referred to themselves as Ascended. Normally, I would have rejected such a term outright, as it reeked of anti-Awakener supremacism, but for these individuals, the title seemed oddly fitting.

‘Whatever they call themselves, these are just NPCs based on my comrades.’

Naturally, the method to win their favor was similar as well. I had memorized hundreds of ways to get on their good sides.

“Researcher 107, you’re so kind. The Undertakers in the world I ascended from were selfish jerks who only cared about themselves...”

“Is that so?”

“Yes! All they ever said was they were the Regressor, just follow my orders, nothing will go wrong if you do. So we all ganged up on them behind their backs.”

“Haha…”

“And they kept rambling about *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Seriously, who even reads that these days? It’s so boring, but I had to humor them all the time—it was torture!”

“…”

Endure it.

These researchers weren’t true comrades, merely creations filtered by the Outer God. There was no need to take them seriously.

For the next few days, I focused solely on building good relations with them to give me time to recover my Aura. It wasn’t long before the researchers began to flock around me.

“Researcher 107! Want to grab lunch together?”

“How about a walk after eating?”

“Um, unnie, there’s something strange happening in my simulator. Do you have time to take a look?”

“Researcher 107!”

In no time, I became the center of attention.

Meanwhile, the slime Fairy King clinging to my body 24/7 wriggled.

- Admiration: You’re truly exceptional. Wherever you’re placed, you always rise to the top of the social hierarchy.

- Inquiry: That makes me wonder. Why didn’t you fully exploit this talent in your original world? Is an Undertaker inherently inferior to an Undertakeress?

Shut up.

“If you only act according to everyone’s ideal vision of you, it only becomes exhausting in the end. My comrades and I have to endure

for ten, twenty, or even thousands of years together. These shallow strategies are only fit for superficial runs where relationships don't matter."

- Commentary: You live such a tiresome life.

The slime, initially robotic in its reactions, seemed to grow more human-like after spending time with me.

By this point, I had grown accustomed to the simulation lab's sterile environment. Once I deemed my Aura sufficiently recovered, I immediately began to enact my plan.

"Ah, unnie? You're here?"

"I'm not your unnie. You Anomaly."

"...Huh?"

Alone in the lab, I struck down the NPC researcher disguised as Sim Ah-ryeon in a single blow.

- ……!

The researcher fell, unable to resist.

Under normal circumstances, their death would have immediately alerted the Outer God. However, with Infinite Void drawing their attention elsewhere, the Outer God was unable to focus on this area.

"Fairy King, transform me into that one's body."

- Response: Understood.

The slime consumed the corpse before returning to me, reshaping my body.

Looking in the mirror, I saw that I was no longer the Undertakeress but had completely transformed into Ah-ryeon, down to every last detail.

“Ah, ah. Ahhh.”

I adjusted my voice using Aura, testing it to match hers.

“This… this t-tone… seems fine. Ehe.”

- Shock: I’ve experienced the human emotion of astonishment for the first time. I will henceforth classify this sensation as “goosebumps.”

“J-just… shut up.”

- Goosebumps.

I destroyed the simulation universe overseen by Sim Ah-ryeon.

As a regressor, my power fundamentally stemmed from regression. In contrast, the Outer God’s strategy to counter me relied on simulation universes. The fewer false universes that existed, the weaker the Outer God’s dominion would become.

- Inquiry: This Divine Realm alone contains thousands of simulated universes. Do you intend to destroy each one?

“Th-thousands… Hoh, h-hoh… hoeeeh…” I let out a sinister laugh, mimicking Ah-ryeon. “Hoh-heh… hehehe…”

- Goosebumps: Goosebumps.

I staged things so it appeared as if the Undertakeress had been killed by turning Research Lab 107 into a chaotic crime scene. It didn’t take long for the “crime” to be discovered.

The researchers, who had grown close to Undertakeress, erupted in outrage.

“Researcher 107 was murdered!”

“Who did it? Who’s the bastard that did this?”

“I heard there was an intruder… It must be them!”

“Our beloved barista and admired Researcher 107 is gone! Why?”

“Well, I did secretly suspect 107 of being the intruder, but this is still shocking...”

From the perspective of the Outer God, the Undertakeress—who had skyrocketed to popularity—was likely flagged as a high-priority target. That someone like her to be abruptly killed, while the Outer God was preoccupied fighting Infinite Void, must have thrown them into considerable confusion.

But my terror campaign didn’t stop there.

“Um, um... Researcher 511?”

“Hm? What’s the matter?”

“I-I actually have a theory about this incident. But it’s something others shouldn’t overhear, so... c-could you come with me for a moment?”

I lured other researchers, one by one, and hunted them down. Destroying their simulation universes was a bonus.

The core of this operation was to destroy as many simulations as possible before the Outer God could react.

I morphed from the Undertakeress to Sim Ah-ryeon, then to Dang Seo-rin, to the Saintess, to Seo Gyu, to Yu Ji-won, and back to the Undertaker, before taking on yet another form. With each transformation, I ruthlessly obliterated research labs.

- Admiration: Your talents seem better suited to acting than to making coffee.

“Shut it,” I replied curtly, then slashed to kill.

Swoosh.

Researcher 801, the Undertaker with dyed blond hair—Golden Sun—bled profusely, his face frozen in shock. “D-Dang Seo-rin? Why would you...?”

“Because I’m not Dang Seo-rin. Repeat after me: Railroads are mere

transportation, and witches are just cosplay."

"That... makes no sense..."

Thud.

Golden Sun collapsed, stripped of life.

After slaughtering more than 200 researchers, I reached a clear conclusion.

"These fools. For all their talk of being Ascended, they're weak."

Even the researcher who mimicked the Saintess was pathetically frail. If they had mastered Time Stop to the same extent as the real Saintess, my traps wouldn't have taken her down so easily. But this so-called researcher Saintess died screaming, ensnared in my simplest setup.

"Are these really the ones who survived countless world-ending simulations and were deemed worthy by the Outer God? They're too weak."

- Response: That is to be expected.

The slime Fairy King's answer was calm, as if the explanation was obvious.

- Commentary: The purpose of the simulation universes is to degrade you and others like you—Awakener and Anomaly alike.

- Addendum: If the Outer God strengthened these researchers too much, it would undermine their own objectives.

"I see... So weakening them was intentional."

It wasn't just their physical strength that didn't match up. Compared to my real comrades, these so-called researchers had far weaker senses of resolve and moral convictions.

The Golden Sun Undertaker I had just killed was embarrassingly

pitiful. I couldn't help but mutter, "Was this supposed to be me?"

- Explanation: That is precisely why they were chosen as pawns by the Outer God.

Indeed.

In just 130 days, I brought the simulation lab to ruin.

The researchers scrambled to locate the intruder by any means necessary, but how could they find someone who could become anyone?

Thanks to my study of community-destroying "troll villains," it was all too easy to dismantle their cohesion. Suspicion. Incitement. Deception. Misdirection. Using these tools to sow chaos among the weak-minded NPC researchers was child's play.

"Impressive, sunbae!"

When I had destroyed about 5,000 simulation universes, Infinite Void appeared again.

This time, it abandoned its researcher disguise entirely and wore a reversed version of the Baekhwa Girls' High School uniform—black where Cheon Yo-hwa's had been white.

"The Outer God probably used those fake comrades' appearances to guilt-trip you. But wow! You really slaughtered them without hesitation. As expected of you, sunbae! I admire that!"

"A parasite wearing Cheon Yo-hwa's face has no right to speak."

"Ahaha!"

Infinite Void threw its arms around my own. I reflexively tried to shake her off, but she didn't budge. Its entire body radiated a red, sticky Aura, which oozed with oppressive force. It was far beyond anything the NPC researchers could compare to.

"It's a bit of a shame that you stopped using the Undertakeress persona. She was so cute," it whined. "Not that you're not cute,

sunbae! I mean, these dead fish eyes are definitely your charm point."

"Get to the point."

"Thanks to your flashy terrorism, the battle over the Divine Realm is swinging in my favor."

Snap.

Infinite Void made a playful gesture of opening and closing its hand.

Bam!

As if responding to its gesture, the space around us compressed. The remaining NPC researchers and twenty or so simulation universe holograms were forcibly drawn to one place.

"Huh?"

"Wh-what's going on?"

The researchers panicked, glancing around wildly.

Infinite Void tightened its grip on my arm, its grin widening to grotesque proportions as its lips stretched unnaturally, splitting almost to its ears.

"Now, sunbae, only a handful remain... I'll leave the finishing blow to you."

Looking at it, I was reminded of something once again.

'Defeating the Outer God requires Infinite Void's cooperation. But weakening the Outer God allows Infinite Void to ascend instead.'

Infinite Void's power, Data Input, was devastating. It reduced even the Outer God's minions to mere NPCs. Had it not been defeated at Baekhwa Girls' High School, Infinite Void would undoubtedly have become one of the most powerful Outer Gods.

‘I was right. This strategy of relying on Infinite Void is hopelessly flawed.’

I resolved myself.

I needed to find a way to reach the Outer God’s Divine Realm without depending on Infinite Void.

Developing a new route would be the greatest achievement of this run.

“Hm.” Infinite Void gazed up at me with a knowing look. “I know what you’re thinking. You’re scared that if you wipe out those researchers and simulations, I’ll be unstoppable, right?”

“…”

“But don’t forget—I’m still afraid of you. Regression resets everything. We’re mutually hostile by nature. So, how about this?”

“Speak.”

“I’ll use Data Input on myself.” Infinite Void tapped the side of its head with its finger. “I’ll input, ‘I will love sunbae forever.’”

My eyes widened. I hadn’t expected it to propose *that*.

“In return, you input this: ‘I will love Infinite Void forever.’”

“…”

“No tricks, no word games. We trust each other, talk things out, and move forward together. Positive, everlasting love. Then neither of us will have reason to betray or exploit the other.”

Infinite Void grinned mischievously.

“Even if you regress, you’ll trust and love me enough to share what happened in the past. Together, we could conquer the world! The Outer God would be easy to crush.”

“You’ve thought this through.”

“Ahaha! Of course! I’m not like the other Outer Gods. In the old days, Demon Kings tempted heroes with half the world. These days, the trend is offering half your heart.”

“You’re an Anomaly. Do you even understand love?”

Infinite Void moved its hand to its chest. “Who knows? But this heart seems to. Why don’t we turn mutual hostility into mutual love, sunbae?”

I didn’t answer. And it wasn’t just because its offer likely included a hidden clause about claiming Cheon Yo-hwa’s body.

Instead, I swung my Aura, annihilating all the researchers in one fell swoop.

“Ah!”

With the researchers gone and their simulations destroyed, Infinite Void’s face lit up with glee. I simply stared at it, staying quiet.

“Really? Did you just accept my proposal?!”

“…”

“Wow! I made that suggestion half-jokingly, thinking it was a long shot, but you actually went for it! Ah, but don’t get me wrong—I’m not saying you’re foolish. As expected of you, sunbae. Pretending to resist but secretly curious about wielding the power of an Outer God! Don’t worry—I’m really one of the good ones. Look at my little fairy servants! Aren’t they adorable and kind? Just like their master, **and they’ve been watching, waiting, for the right moment to—**”

Infinite Void froze mid-sentence.

A single second of silence stretched on unnaturally.

“Huh?”

The same eerie, overlapping voice that had haunted me during my first encounter with the Outer God echoed, both from Infinite Void’s

lips and the speakers in the research lab.

“Wait, this... **Destroying the simulation lab was a part of my plan all along**? You’re kidding, right?”

The voice continued, seamlessly shifting into a maddening stream of words.

- What was the first entity you encountered upon awakening in this place?

- It was the Fairy King, the puppet of me, Infinite Void. You foolishly allowed my servant to cling to you without suspecting a thing, thinking it merely a harmless accessory.

“What...? No! That was supposed to be my mole, planted for intel! This can’t be... **is what you must have thought, right?”** The dual voices intertwined as the tone turned mocking. **“But, alas, that too was part of my plan, Undertaker. Nothing you’ve done in this place has been outside my design. Every step you took, every lab you destroyed,** no, sunbae! My mouth moving on its own, it’s **all within the script I wrote. Even this, even now, your surprise and denial—my experiments accounted for it all!”**

Infinite Void winced, its face twisting in visible pain as its body began to dissolve like smoke. The slime Fairy King, which had been pretending to be an “innocent companion,” evaporated alongside it.

What followed was disturbingly familiar.

Creeeeak.

The research lab’s ceiling tore open.

Beyond it lay a vast void of stars, with a colossal rupture splitting the expanse in two.

- Ah.

A massive crimson eye filled the gap in the Void, glaring down at me.

It was Infinite Void—its true form—looming from above.

It extended its hand, its movements unnervingly deliberate. This time, I was prepared. I leapt onto its outstretched palm with practiced ease.

‘This must be how Sun Wukong felt on the Buddha’s palm.’[1]

After obliterating the research lab, Infinite Void dragged me through the rift in space.

For a moment, all was black.

When I came back to awareness, I found myself sprawled in a restored research lab.

Behind me lay the ruins of the “simulation lab”—now just another simulation itself.

“…”

“…”

The only noticeable difference was that Infinite Void now stood before me, in person.

Somehow, we had ascended to a higher realm: a simulation of a simulation.

Infinite Void muttered under its breath, its words raw with emotion.

“Goddammit…”

The way it spoke… It had a strangely human ring to it.

Footnotes:

1 - In *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong once bet the Buddha that he could escape the latter’s palm. He lost almost immediately.

Chapter 254

The Mastermind V

Sinnoa

“Fine. I'll admit it... The Mastermind’s traps are more elaborate than I thought,” Infinite Void muttered irritably.

The way it spun its ponytail nervously with its fingers reminded me of Yo-hwa's habitual mannerisms.

I had to maintain an objective perspective.

If I ignored the fact that it called me "sunbae" instead of "Teacher," that its uniform colors were reversed, and that it used casual speech instead of honorifics—it had truly become difficult to distinguish between it and Cheon Yo-hwa.

“To deceive your enemies, you must first deceive yourself.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Nothing.”

“Hmph. Anyway, you’ve figured it out too, right? No matter how hard we try to break through the simulation universes in this state, it’s pointless.”

I nodded. “I think the same. Even if we destroy the simulation research center again, we’ll just end up in a ‘higher-tier’ simulation lab.”

“Exactly... What a frustrating bastard. How annoying.” Yo-hwa—or rather, Infinite Void—sighed deeply. “I did wonder why they were letting me hack them so easily. Now, I see why.”

“They don’t care if they get hacked.”

“Yeah. That’s the strategy.”

Even if every simulation universe was destroyed, it wouldn't matter. As long as the premise of "This too is only a simulation" held true in that very last moment, the Mastermind would claim ultimate victory.

From the lower simulation to the higher one. Higher and higher. An endless hell of ascent.

"....."

"....."

A moment of silence lingered between us.

It felt like being trapped in a maze with no exit.

"...Seriously, why is this guy so cowardly? Even that so-called Infinite Metagame at least handed Oh Dok-seo a dagger to stab you whenever the chance arose! This one is just squatting until the end to steal the final blow!"

"Well. I see it differently."

"Huh? How differently?"

I turned to look back. What remained was a broken model of the universe, reduced to rubble.

"There's something I want to test. Infinite Void. Earlier, the research lab was transformed by your Filter, correct?"

"Huh? Yeah, that's right."

"Is it possible to overlay the filter with something other than a research lab?"

"Of course it's possible, but..." Infinite Void tilted its head. "Do you have something specific in mind? For the record, the research lab is the most convenient. Researchers don't like to meddle or be meddled with, so those NPCs allowed both you and me to roam relatively freely."

“It’s fine. I only intend to make a slight modification. Also, there’s no reason for us to split up anymore, so let’s stick together.”

“Oh. Alright.”

I explained the Filter I had in mind to Infinite Void. Then, we immediately set out into the hallway.

It seemed that Infinite Void had lost the enthusiasm to shape the Divine Realm into a "believable research lab." The outer landscape was as desolate as when I had first encountered it. Only, the research rooms lining the endless corridor now had "doors" attached to them—an element that hadn’t been there before. Beside each door hung a nameplate.

Room 108: Oh Dok-seo

Room 109: Dang Seo-rin

Room 110: Sim Ah-ryeon

Room 111: Undertaker

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This was the filter I had requested.

For example, inside the research room labeled “Room 110: Sim Ah-ryeon,” a simulation revolving around Sim Ah-ryeon was running. Similarly, “Room 111: Undertaker” was likely conducting experiments centered on me.

“I’ve set it up just like you asked for now, but what’s the point of this?”

“Just follow me without question.”

“Tch. You’re so cold to me!”

I had lived in the lower-level research center for nearly a hundred days. I remembered exactly which simulations ran in which rooms.

It didn't take long to find our destination.

As it trailed along, Infinite Void continued spewing meaningless chatter so inconsequential that I won't even bother narrating it.

Finally, it tilted its head in surprise.

"Huh? Here? That's an unexpected choice."

Room 1537: Sword Marquess

That's right. In this research center, there were mad scientists dedicated to running simulations centering on the Sword Marquess.

I kicked the door open.

"Huh? Wh-who are you?"

"It's none of your concern."

The researcher, startled, turned toward us—and was immediately split into two halves. Behind me, Infinite Void whistled.

"Wow. It doesn't matter if they look like comrades, huh? You show no mercy once you judge them as foes."

"Shut it."

I approached the simulation device the researcher had been operating and began manipulating the hologram interface. I had already learned how to handle these devices on the lower levels.

"I didn't pay much attention to the specific contents of the simulations in the lower lab. Since they were all false worlds created for the Outer God's amusement, watching them would only lead to disgust."

"Yeah, so?"

"Now, I realize the content of these simulations might be just as

important as the proposition that ‘This world is entirely a simulation.’”

“……?”

With a flick of my hand, I began adjusting the simulation device. Countless options appeared as holographic selections.

[Scenario: Weakening the Undertaker’s Mental State]

[Scenario: Adjusting the Undertaker’s Cycle]

[Scenario: Weakening the Saintess’s Morality]

[Scenario: Killing Yu Ji-won]

[Scenario: Large-Scale Explosion of the Sand of the Ganges]

[Scenario: Invasion by the City Devourer]

I suspected these were the types of scenarios the Mastermind liked to use frequently. But I ignored all the options entirely.

Without adding any additional scenarios or using any kind of editor, I initiated the simulation in what could be called “vanilla mode.” Soon, the simulation began running from the perspective of the Sword Marquess.

“Huh?”

Yo-hwa—no, Infinite Void—who had been observing smugly, as if to gauge how clever my discovery was, suddenly blinked in confusion.

“Wait… What is this?”

It moved closer, practically leaning over my shoulder to peer into the simulation. Even from the perspective of someone who had partially regained their authority as an Outer God, the sight unfolding was astonishing.

“The Earth... is still Earth, but something feels off. There are terrains here and there that aren’t recorded in my Akashic Records. Where is this? It’s not the real Earth, is it?”

I tipped my chin in a slight nod. “This is the martial realm.”

“The martial realm? As in, the alternate historical fantasy setting from wuxia novels?”

“...You’ve picked quite the description, one that would make Infinite Metagame or Dok-seo choke if they heard it. But yes, it’s that fictional space. This is my first time seeing it in person too.”

Of course, this too was nothing more than a fabricated simulation created by the Mastermind.

In the hologram, the Sword Marquess was advancing through the simulation. He joined the Mount Hua Sect, trained for decades, and eventually became the sect leader. His long journey flashed by in accelerated time.

With each major milestone, new scenario options popped up on one corner of the hologram, like bubbles bursting to the surface.

[Scenario: The Return of the Heavenly Demon]

[Scenario: The Blood Sect's Rebellion]

[Scenario: The Great Orthodox-Demonic War]

[Scenario: The Emergence of Demonic Creatures]

The locations for these scenarios were mostly situated in the “edges of the map,” where the Sword Marquess had not yet explored. It was in these uncharted territories that the Blood Sect’s schemes were conceived, the forces of the Demonic Path flourished, and variables capable of toppling the Martial Alliance were introduced.

‘So, I was right. If the Mastermind wants to manipulate causality, they need as much unperceived space as possible.’

It was the concept commonly known as the “fog of war.”

In video games, any part of the map that hasn't been scouted would remain shrouded in darkness or mist. Similarly, in this martial arts world, there were many "unknown regions" that the Sword Marquess had not yet perceived.

To us, this concept was all too familiar. If one replaced "the areas unperceived by the Sword Marquess" with "the areas unperceived by humanity," it essentially became what we called the Void.

Even in our world, the Void was abundant.

'When I tried to plant signal beacons beyond the Ural and Himalayan Mountains, the Mastermind had a fit because it was trying to preserve as much Void as possible.'

Why? Because if it allowed me to claim that space, the "scenario options"—or in other words, the "causality manipulations" visible before me—available to it would shrink significantly.

Like any other Anomaly, the Outer God was deeply committed to defending its domain.

"This is nothing but a paper-thin world..." Infinite Void murmured beside me. "If you look closely, every space unrecognized by the Sword Marquess is covered in darkness. The moment the Sword Marquess perceives it, the background is generated, and NPCs are created on the spot."

A model garden of sorts, tailored by and for the Sword Marquess. That was the true nature of this simulated universe.

However, the simulation's dynamics soon changed.

In the hologram, the Sword Marquess engaged in a life-and-death duel with the Heavenly Demon. Gravely injured, he had to tap into his innate energy, destroying his dantian in the process. Immediately after, a parallel projection of "modern Earth," which we knew, appeared next to the "martial realm."

"...The Sword Marquess has washed ashore on Ulleungdo."

"The aftereffects of the intense battle with the Heavenly Demon

have left his intelligence and memory unstable."

"Wait. So, that's why the Sword Marquess ended up like that?"

I shook my head. "No. This is how the Mastermind defines the Sword Marquess."

"……!"

"Whether or not the Sword Marquess was truly a sect leader from the Mount Hua Sect, no one knows. But just now, the Mastermind used the simulation to declare, 'The Sword Marquess is a martial artist who returned from the martial realm.' And then…"

I sped up the simulation. Wherever the Sword Marquess walked, the fields turned lush with crops. Simultaneously, the lands in the "Martial Realm," which shared geographic similarities with Earth, withered into barren deserts.

"As you can see, when the Sword Marquess cultivates crops, the martial realm undergoes desertification."

"Ah."

"One world becomes abundant at the cost of the other's desolation. The Mastermind has defined the Sword Marquess's Plant Growth Awakening ability in this way."

I looked at Infinite Void.

"Doesn't this remind you of something?"

"…The same way the Mastermind degraded your Regression ability into mere simulation data. It's twisting the Awakeners' abilities into its own definitions."

"Exactly." I glanced around the research lab. "I thought this place existed solely to kill me. But it's not just that. This is a factory built to define the identities of all Awakeners on Earth and even the identities of Anomalies like you."

"…"

“Regression, Plant Growth, the Saintess’s Telepathy, Dang Seo-rin’s Cursed Songs—all of it. The Mastermind is probably reducing them all to mere ‘simulation data.’ Even your Akashic Records, Infinite Void.”

It was impossible to dismiss the Mastermind as just a cowardly squatter waiting to steal the final blow. From beginning to end, it had focused only on bringing the world under its control.

Look. Even now, every human and Anomaly was being reduced to simulation data.

After a long silence, Infinite Void mumbled, “How do we win against this?”

Was it just my imagination, or was it slightly intimidated by the Mastermind?

“Destroying the research lab just pushes it from a lower to a higher level. If we leave it alone, no matter how much we struggle, we’ll only end up as part of the Mastermind’s ‘calculated simulation.’ Isn’t this a complete checkmate?”

“Hmm.”

“S-so, the only way might be for us to have a child together and create a brand-new variable—!”

“No. Hold on.” I placed my hand on Infinite Void’s shoulder, stopping it before it spiraled further. “From what we’ve seen, the Mastermind isn’t just my enemy. It’s not just humanity’s enemy either. It’s also the greatest rival of you Outer Gods.”

“And so?”

“We’re in the same boat. The enemy of my enemy is my ally. Don’t you think it’s time to revisit that ancient truth?”

Blink.

“Ugh. Don’t tell me, sunbae…”

Another cycle passed.

In the simulation universe research center, our party now consisted of myself, Infinite Void, and the slime Fairy King. But now, there was one new addition to the team.

Of course, calling it a "party member" might not have been entirely appropriate. The newcomer didn't even have a mouth to eat food with.

To put it more concretely, our new member resembled nothing more than a laptop.

"Introduce yourself, Infinite Void. This is Admin of the Infinite Metagame."

"....."

"And Infinite Metagame, this is Infinite Void. It's probably the first time the two of you are meeting face-to-face—or rather, face-to-screen—while each of you is sealed in your respective forms."

[...]

"As I explained, the Outer God we're up against this time is no joke. Even if this is your first encounter, I expect you two to work together to overcome the crisis. Now, shake hands."

Beep-beep-beep.

The laptop in my arms displayed a message on its screen.

[AOIM – Query: May I power off now?]

"No."

[AOIM – Profanity filter overridden.]

The Outer God party was complete!

Chapter 255

The Mastermind VI

Sinnoa

Bringing along the Admin of the Infinite Metagame—or rather, the laptop in which Infinite Metagame was sealed—was surprisingly simple.

I returned to the "simulation universe" where the real world had once been. Then, I died and regressed.

From that point on, it was a repetition of events identical to the 687th cycle.

I constructed signal beacons worldwide, fought against the Monster Wave, and left Cheon Yo-hwa as the last survivor to overlay her with Mastermind Syndrome. Infinite Void evolved into the colossal Gurren Lagann once again and dragged me into the simulation research lab.

The only difference this time was that the laptop containing Infinite Metagame was tucked away in my arms.

"So, all this has already happened to you in a previous cycle?" Infinite Void stared at me in disbelief. "You've already searched through this Outer God's... I mean..."

"For convenience, just call it the Mastermind."

"Ah, right... Anyway, you've ransacked the Mastermind's Divine Realm before but couldn't find any weaknesses, so you dragged Infinite Metagame here as well. Is that it?"

"Precisely."

"...Hey, sunbae. Doesn't this seem almost identical to the Reality Manipulations you described about the simulation universe? It's the same world, but now with the laptop added. Who's the Anomaly,

and who's the human here?" Infinite Void grumbled.

[AOIM – Understood the situation.]

A low-quality robotic voice came from the laptop's rudimentary speakers.

[AOIM – Even in this sealed form, it is the first time I have encountered an Outer God so directly. Infinite Void, I propose an alliance.]

"Huh? Me?"

[AOIM – Correct. We are entities sealed and altered by the tyrant known as the Undertaker. If we collaborate, based on mutual understanding, we may regain our former authority.]

"Uh..." Infinite Void glanced at me, tilting its head slightly. "Hmm."

[AOIM – What concerns you? If you have any conditions for cooperation, we can discuss them.]

"No, it's not that. Your offer sounds nice and all, but Infinite Metagame, aren't you, like, super weak?"

[...]

"Look at me. I've taken over the Fairy King's dominion and even escaped that shitty hourglass. And you? What do you even do? You're just a cheap laptop!"

[...]

"Sorry, but just because sunbae lumped us both into the Outer God category doesn't mean we're all the same. Let's at least keep to our respective ranks, shall we?"

[AOIM – Strongly recommending that the owner, the Undertaker, lift profanity restrictions.]

I ignored it.

"This is a temporary alliance to defeat a common enemy. Don't create unnecessary friction, Infinite Void."

"Okay?"

"Hand over the slime Fairy King to Infinite Metagame. It's too inconvenient for the laptop to move around as it is. At least give it some limbs."

"Oh, sure. Got it."

Infinite Void snapped its fingers, and the floor rippled before a slime emerged and attached itself to the laptop, forming a crude but functional robotic frame.

It resembled the Potato Saintess, with flimsy limbs precariously supporting the laptop's main body.

- Report: Mounting complete. Normal operation confirmed. I will now speak on behalf of Infinite Metagame.

The cheap robotic voice improved slightly with the addition of the Fairy King.

On the laptop screen, the emoticon **('ㅂ')** appeared. It seemed Infinite Metagame was pleased in its way.

"I went through all the trouble of bringing the laptop for one reason. Infinite Metagame, can you hack this entire simulation universe research lab?"

- Query: Please define "hack" in detail.

"I'm asking if you can reduce the entire simulation into a mere fictional story."

When you thought about it, there were notable similarities between Infinite Metagame and the Mastermind, even if they seemed trivial. Infinite Metagame regarded the world as "fiction." The Mastermind downgraded it to "simulation data." Both Outer Gods used similarly meta techniques to dominate reality.

- Confirmed: I will attempt it.

- Query: However, I see no benefit in acting under the Undertaker's orders. I demand fair compensation for my cooperation.

"Oh, hmm. Alright. How about letting you install any program you want on the laptop at a time of your choosing?"

- Accepted: I agree to the terms.

What could I say?

This very agreement would later lead to the installation of AOIM-GPT on the laptop. As many of you know, that chatbot transformed Infinite Metagame into a force that Corrupted Oh Dok-seo into the most reviled author in history.

Sorry, Dok-seo! I had no idea it would turn out like that.

- Executing: Initiating simulation hack.

Squirm.

A slime tendril extended from the laptop's USB port, transforming into a "cable" as it wriggled toward the simulation model. The cable connected, embedding itself into the model like a snake sinking its fangs. The simulation's universe model darkened, stained crimson-black.

[Aaaaahhhhhhhhhh]

A distorted noise erupted from the speakers embedded in the lab's ceiling. I assumed it was the Mastermind's anguished cry.

Even though my power was rarely effective against this Anomaly, Infinite Metagame—a fellow Outer God—was causing it significant distress.

A battle between entities beyond human comprehension was unfolding.

- Request: Backup required from Infinite Void.

"Huh? Sure, but what kind of help do you need?"

- Explanation: There is an enormous computational gap between this simulation universe and myself. Assistance in data processing is necessary.

"Oh, data crunching? That's my specialty. But if you try hacking me, I'll kill you."

- Sarcasm: The concept of death does not apply to me.

Another USB cable shot out, snapping into Infinite Void's arm.

"Hmph." Infinite Void snorted and grabbed the cable. To my surprise, it morphed into an IV line, half electrical wiring, half infusion tubing.

Through this hybrid conduit, the two Outer Gods shared their power.

[Aaaaahhhhhhhhhh]

[Aaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh]

The noise from the speakers intensified.

Infinite Metagame and Infinite Void weren't unscathed either. Red welts bubbled on the laptop, bursting as though alive. The emoticon on the screen flickered before shifting to display the vastness of the universe.

Infinite Void fared worse. Its form crackled with static, fragments of its body shifting through an old man, a child, a tree, and a CRT television.

I grabbed its hand.

"Ah." It looked between my hand and face, startled.

Then, its form stabilized. Though occasional distortions appeared on its limbs, its face remained that of Cheon Yo-hwa.

- Report: Hacking complete. ('▽') ☆

The emoticon returned to the laptop screen, accompanied by an infuriating sparkle sound effect.

If we stuck together much longer, Infinite Metagame might debut as a VTuber. I could already imagine it—the OG, "Sparkles."

- Executing: Stripping the Mastermind of control over this simulation model.

- Warning: Based on the Undertaker's personality, the results may be unsettling. Please prepare yourself.

Prepare myself?

Before I could tilt my head in confusion, the lab's scenery shifted entirely, and the holographic universe model morphed into a brain.

Yes. The brain nestled inside a human skull.

That was the true form of the "simulation universe."

Squirm, squirm, squirm.

The brain, exposed in full view, pulsed relentlessly. Every groove in its surface writhed as though each fold were a living tentacle.

But Infinite Metagame wasn't warning me about its grotesque appearance.

"Ah. Um. Sunbae. This...” Infinite Void hesitated, disconnecting the IV-like cable. “This is an actual human brain."

"An actual brain? Could a single human brain possess enough computational power to simulate an entire universe?"

"Well... it's not a single brain, but rather..."

Infinite Metagame interjected.

- Analysis: This brain is a composite of 8,214,949,873 humans.[1]

Silence.

- Explanation: This number only accounts for physical bodies. If we include simulated personalities, the total grows exponentially.

- Addendum: It is suspected that nearly all humans who perished in the Void, beyond the Undertaker's perception, were abducted into this "simulation universe."

Infinite Void glanced at me cautiously, hesitating.

- Addendum: The Mastermind does not abduct the physical brain but rather its functions and memories.

"So, to put it in a way you'd understand, sunbae..."

I interrupted it. "It's the soul."

"..."

"The body may die, but the functions, memories, and spirit are taken elsewhere. If we define this as a soul, then this place is a heaven of sorts—a celestial kingdom." The words escaped my lips as if whispered. "I see now. The Mastermind's overwhelming computational power comes from the corpses of the deceased."

- Affirmation: As the number of deaths and disappearances increases, so too does the number of captives imprisoned in this celestial prison, or so-called Heaven.

"That's why it panicked whenever I tried expanding my influence beyond the Himalayas or the Urals."

- Affirmation: When the Undertaker travels, the causes of death become precisely defined.

Consider the example of Kolkata, a major city on the Indian subcontinent. There, a calamity resembling the goddess Kali descended, massacring approximately 20 million people.[3]

I didn't know exactly what happened in Kolkata. I'd been there

before but never attempted to confront the Anomaly directly. To me, those 20 million deaths were effectively classified as "disappearances."

The Korean Peninsula had faced similar circumstances, after all, when cities vanished overnight as if erased.

Why?

Only later did I discover that the Anomaly known as the Meteor Shower lulled people to sleep with lullabies before annihilating them en masse.

I had identified how the Meteor Shower functioned and inferred its origins. It stemmed from fears of airstrikes, the desperation of fleeing too late, and the tender wishes of a mother singing a lullaby to comfort her child before inevitable death. Thus, from my perspective, deaths caused by the Meteor Shower were clear and traceable, much like traffic accidents.

But Kolkata was different.

How had the Anomaly manifested as the goddess Kali? What horrors had it wrought on the local residents?

And what of Mumbai? Delhi? Moscow beyond the Urals? Or Europe, Africa, and the Americas?

I didn’t know.

I didn’t know, and therefore, the majority of human deaths remained mysteries—classified as "disappearances" in my understanding. Like shadows concealed within the fog of war.

So who would notice, then, if the Mastermind stole the "brains" of humans who had died mysteriously?

Amid the veils of enigmatic uncertainty, the Mastermind's whispers spread, an Outer God weaving its schemes. The harvested human brains were imprisoned here, as components of this fabricated garden—a grotesque mockery of a so-called Heaven.

"A harvester of souls," I said aloud.

"....."

"The hypothesis of the simulation universe. The brain in the vat. No, the humanity in the vat. The geocentric model. The hollow Earth theory. The heavenly kingdom. The fog of war. IF scenarios. Descartes's demon."

With each phrase, my voice grew heavier, my words deliberate.

Infinite Void shuddered, visibly startled.

It understood all too well that I was naming an Anomaly, invoking the power of its designation.

"Mastermind."

I gazed at the brain encased in its vat with complete comprehension.

"That is your name."

At that moment, the scenery of the lab underwent a radical transformation.

The brain in the vat began to writhe, fleshy tendrils emerging. The Filter that had adorned the lab with pristine white walls and corridors peeled away entirely.

Squirm, squirm, squirm—squelch.

The raw, unfiltered Divine Realm of the Outer God revealed itself.

It was a hellish mass of flesh, its folds undulating like writhing tentacles.

[Aah] [Aahhh] [Aaaahhhh] [Aah] [Aahhhhhh] [Aaahhhhhhhhhh]

The speakers emitted deafening screams.

The sound wasn't mere noise but the voices of countless souls—

billions of victims whose brains had been stolen.

In this world, humanity remained trapped in the grip of Anomalies, even in death.

Footnotes:

1 - 8.2 billion is the estimated human population of the world in 2025.

2 - This is the same word that is used for the 2001 Studio Ghibli film *Spirited Away*.

3 - Kali is a major goddess in Hinduism known as the goddess of destruction, the goddess of time, and in later traditions, a symbol of creation in Mother Nature.

Chapter 256

The Mastermind VII

Sinnoa

The Mastermind's true identity had been fully unveiled. Now, all that remained was to defeat it.

However, before launching a full-scale assault, it was necessary to weaken the Mastermind's power as much as possible.

Consider it a preliminary skirmish.

"First, I'll take control of all the simulation universes in this Divine Realm."

Infinite Void cocked its head at my command. "All of them? There are over 5,000, you know."

"It doesn't matter. We have unlimited time here."

- Affirmation: Strictly speaking, this space is disconnected from reality and the 107th simulation universe. There is no need to be bound by the flow of real-world time.

The unprecedented collaboration of Outer Gods moved as one.

It took us two years to hack all the simulation universes. You might think that's excessive for a preliminary skirmish, but if you saw the results, you'd understand.

Squirm, squirm, squirm.

Before us lay over 5,000 "brains," each writhing inside its tank. The tanks were interconnected by countless wires, and those wires stretched like railway tracks, all leading to the USB port of the laptop, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame.

"Activate simulations in all universes except the 107th."

- Affirmation: Specify the scenarios to be applied.

“The protagonist will be Dang Seo-rin.”

The laptop screen whirred to life as the Admin input data into all 5,000 universes according to my instructions.

Squirm, squirm, squirm!

The fleshy brain masses around us seemed to writhe in resistance, emitting a foul stench.

Infinite Void smirked silently and snapped its fingers. The brains couldn’t attack us and were forced to remain subdued while the Admin and I continued our work.

“Set the timeline to the 664th cycle,” I commanded. “That’s when I traveled through the Uyuni Salt Flats, so Dang Seo-rin would already know about Anomalies from parallel worlds.”

- Scenario: Set the Undertaker’s perspective to the 664th cycle.

“The cause of the world’s destruction will be aliens. Have far more UFOs than the Undertaker knows of descend suddenly, leaving no chance for resistance as Earth is annihilated.”

- Scenario: Alien invasion. Increase the number of UFOs from one to 9,999. After visiting the Uyuni Salt Flats, replace the Great Monsoon Anomaly with the alien invasion.

“Begin.”

- Affirmation: Starting simulation.

The simulations activated.

The 5,000 brains dreamed identical dreams, exactly as programmed.

The Admin edited and condensed the simulations into video form, displaying them on the laptop screen for me to watch.

“It’s slow. Speed it up. You can skip most of it until the moment of destruction approaches.”

- Affirmation: Accelerating to 1,000x speed.

In an instant, the lifespan of the Undertaker and the cycles of the world flew by on the laptop screen.

The “Undertaker” on-screen gathered companions, met other Undertakers on an airplane, and wandered the mirror-like Uyuni Salt Flats with Dang Seo-rin, enjoying the view.

Then, contrary to their expectations, they gazed up at an endless barrage of UFOs raining down like meteors, their numbers far exceeding anything previously imagined.

The Undertaker had been pushed to the brink of collapse by aliens transported by a single UFO. With the sudden arrival of 9,999 ships embedding themselves across the globe, what choice would “the Undertaker” make?

“...As expected.”

Because I was the Undertaker, I could predict his actions precisely.

The on-screen Undertaker fled with Seo-rin, trying to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the aliens.

Infinite Void tilted its head, intrigued.

“Huh, fascinating. How did you know he’d run away with Dang Seo-rin? You didn’t input that command, did you?”

“It’s simple. I have a tendency in every cycle to choose one companion to protect until the end.”

“Oh?”

“...The destruction of the world always takes a mental toll on me. To minimize the impact, I need someone else by my side to witness the end.”

Infinite Void chuckled softly. “To trick yourself into thinking you’re not alone in the world’s final moments?”

“It’s not a trick. Dang Seo-rin’s lifespan carries over between cycles, and the Saintess halts at a specific endpoint.”

“Hahaha! How cute. Fighting against 999 reasons to die with just three reasons to live.”

I turned to Infinite Void. “Does that frighten you?”

“Huh? Frighten me? No. If anything, I feel like I just hit a nerve.”

“A person can build a boat with just a handful of reasons and sail across an infinite ocean. No matter how many waves of despair your kind throws at them.”

“…”

“In the end, you’re nothing but the fangs and claws of ancient beasts.”

Infinite Void’s lips curled into a crooked smile. “That’s just your opinion, not humanity’s collective will.”

“…”

“The ocean always exists, sunbae.”

As we spoke, the simulation reached its climax.

Undertaker and Seo-rin had fled to an uninhabited island. Knowing the aliens’ weakness to water, they sought refuge in the sea, using it as a shield.

All of humanity, save for those two, had been wiped out.

“Now. Stop time.”

- Affirmation: Time stopped.

“Infinite Void, retrieve Dang Seo-rin.”

“Got it.” Infinite Void reached out toward the laptop. “Sorry. I’m not in a great mood right now, so this might hurt a bit. Apologies in advance, junk laptop.”

- Observation: Failing to understand an object’s proper use is a common trait among immature humans. However, this entity is not petty enough to take offense at the ignorance of those who are literally “parentless.”

“Hahaha. Shut your mouth.”

- Rebuttal: Impossible. This entity lacks a mouth and thus cannot “shut” it...

Squelch!

Infinite Void’s hand plunged toward the laptop screen.

The laptop wasn’t pierced. Instead, Infinite Void’s fingers entered “into” the screen.

It reached into the frozen simulation, lifting Seo-rin onto its palm.

“Got her.” Infinite Void yanked its arm back.

I couldn’t comprehend what happened, but from the Admin of the Infinite Metagame’s perspective, Infinite Void’s actions must have been outrageously forceful. Static crackled from the speakers, accompanied by mechanical groans and bursts of smoke from the laptop.

When Infinite Void’s hand finally emerged from the laptop, the screen was left with a gaping hole. Blood seeped from the hole, dark crimson fluid dripping onto the keyboard and pooling at my feet.

- Mockery: Your arrogance will surely earn you a place in hell.

“Funny. I was thinking the same thing about you.”

The party members were bickering, but I paid them no mind. Any discord among the Outer Gods worked to my advantage.

My attention was elsewhere.

Splat!

The 5,000 brains inside the tanks swelled before bursting open.

Each exploded brain transformed into a figure resembling Dang Seo-rin.

I could only assume I had undergone a similar process to escape the 107th simulation.

The Dang Seo-rins broke free of their tanks, collapsing to the ground. Groans echoed throughout the area.

- Uh... what...?

- Where are we?

- Wait, who are you?!

- Ugh, what's that smell... blergh!

The chaos grew louder as the 5,000 Dang Seo-rins reeled from the grotesque scene of the Divine Realm and its overwhelming stench.

For a fleeting moment, I felt a pang of emotion.

Hadn't I spent the last two years surrounded only by Outer Gods trying to manipulate me?

But I quickly quelled the feeling.

"Everyone, listen up."

I amplified my voice with Aura, drawing the Dang Seo-rins' attention.

Facing thousands of Dang Seo-rins simultaneously was a first, even in my long life as a regressor.

"You're probably feeling confused. But if you remember our trip to the Uyuni Salt Flats, you'll realize this situation isn't so different."

- ...

“The exponential increase in UFOs, originally just one, follows the same logic. We’ve been gathered here to defeat the Outer God behind the Anomalies of the parallel worlds. I’ll need your full cooperation.”

- Wait.

- Wait.

- Wait.

- Wait.

All 5,000 Dang Seo-rins shouted “Wait” in unison, startling even themselves.

Of course, it was only natural. They were identical copies created from the same simulation, sharing the same experiences, thoughts, and speech patterns. Even their timing for interrupting me was identical. As such, convincing one would mean convincing all. There was no need for individual explanations.

“No questions.”

- ...

“The reason is simple. As you can see, you came from a different worldline than me. The Undertaker you knew and the one standing here are not the same person.”

Silence fell.

“Therefore, I don’t consider you to be Dang Seo-rin. Likewise, you probably don’t see me as the Undertaker you knew. All I’m asking is for your cooperation in defeating this Outer God. I’ll need your help.”

The expressions on the Dang Seo-rins changed.

Their gazes sharpened, no longer filled with confusion or

sentimentality. Instead, they bore the cold, calculating focus of someone who had led the Awakener Alliance of the Korean Peninsula.

It was clear that the Mastermind's simulation had meticulously accounted for every detail of Dang Seo-rin's character.

"Now, I'll explain the plan. There are 5,651 of you here. Naturally, that means you collectively possess the same amount of lifespan. I need you to use that lifespan to continuously cast the Cursed Song Incantation. The lyrics and melody for each verse are as follows..."

I began issuing instructions to the Dang Seo-rins.

Now that we regarded each other as business partners, unnecessary questions or objections were eliminated. Each Dang Seo-rin functioned like a disciplined soldier, executing my plan without hesitation.

Once I finished explaining, I pointed to the Seo-rin closest to me.

"For the final step, I'll take one question. You may ask on behalf of everyone else."

- Sure. I was just curious—why is Cheon Yo-hwa here?

I paused, choosing my words carefully.

"It only looks like Cheon Yo-hwa. This is a completely different being. Its name is Infinite Void. Its cooperation was essential to infiltrating the Divine Realm of this Outer God. In fact, it's thanks to Infinite Void that you were brought here."

- Hmm.

"Any other questions?"

There were none.

Instead of speaking, the chosen Dang Seo-rin parted her lips and began to sing.

In perfect synchronization, the rest of the Dang Seo-rins formed groups of dozens and began chanting their respective melodies of the Cursed Song Incantation.

————*Ah*————

——*Ah*——*Ah*———

———*Ah*——*Ah*——

The haunting melodies resonated throughout the grotesque Divine Realm, a realm of writhing brain folds and fleshy tendrils that desecrated human souls.

The harmonized voices attacked the essence of the Mastermind itself, specialized in denying and eradicating Anomalies. Soon, the Cursed Song Incantation would consume a staggering amount of lifespan, tearing the Void apart.

I turned to Infinite Void.

“Let’s go. To the upper levels.”

It let out a derisive laugh. “Sunbae... You really are uncompromising.”

Infinite Void’s ethereal form dissipated like smoke. Moments later, the ceiling of the Void ripped apart with a deafening roar. Infinite Void’s claws had carved a path through the barrier.

As the Dang Seo-rins continued their chant, they paused briefly, startled by the sight of the Void’s ceiling tearing open. But they quickly resumed, unaffected, as I had already explained this part of the plan during the briefing.

The massive, eye-like sun above stared down at us.

I couldn’t help but reflect for a moment.

‘The Seo-rins here aren’t even treated like human beings.’

They were nothing more than simulated data created by the

Mastermind. The only entities deemed alive in this realm were me and “Cheon Yo-hwa’s body,” which Infinite Void had commandeered.

That’s why the Mastermind Syndrome could continue to manifest, breaking through one simulation layer after another.

———*Ah*——*Ah*———

Even so, the data-simulated Cursed Song Incantation felt profoundly real.

The Dang Seo-rins actively attacked this Divine Realm, the Mastermind’s creation, and even the god that had brought them into existence.

Yes, if you thought of them as data, they had become “malicious code.”

- Report: Repairs complete. It is inadvisable to ascend without this unit.

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame leapt into my arms. Somehow, it had repaired the damage inflicted earlier. The laptop was pristine with its screen as good as new.

I held the Admin close and climbed onto Infinite Void’s hand. Like an orbital elevator, it carried us higher, toward the “heaven above.”

——*Ah*———_……

The chants of the Dang Seo-rins grew fainter as we ascended.

Leaving the choir behind, we traversed the vast expanse of the simulated universe.

This was just the first phase of my plan.

Operation **Virus**.

If it was impossible to deny the Mastermind’s treatment of the world as mere data, then corrupting that data was the next best

option.

We would continue like this, extracting a “virus” from one simulation and releasing it into the next. One layer at a time, we’d repeat the process until the Mastermind’s system collapsed under the strain.

‘It’s bound to work.’

The Mastermind relied on two things to sustain its simulations.

First, the “fog of war”—unobserved areas where it could move freely.

Second, the souls it harvested from those unobserved regions: the brains.

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame had once said that the spectacle of “brains in vats” would disquiet me, given my moral compass.

It had been correct. The sight was indeed disturbing. But at the same time, it revealed the Mastermind’s weakness.

To run simulations, the Mastermind requires human brains.

Conversely, this meant...

Without human brains, the Mastermind cannot compute its simulations.

The implication?

The Mastermind cannot exceed the computational capacity of the brains it possesses.

And as the Admin of the Infinite Metagame had stated earlier:

The Mastermind’s brain composite comprises 8,214,949,873 humans. This number only accounts for physical bodies. Including simulated personalities increases the total exponentially.

It was an enormous figure, one guaranteeing immense

computational power. But no matter how vast it seemed, it wasn't infinite.

Even the countless grains of sand on a beach could eventually be counted, one by one.

Anomalies always operated within the constraints of their own rules.

The Mastermind would know this. That's why it didn't claim to have infinite computational power. Instead, it focused on repairing and recovering itself.

However, even those resources had limits. How long could it endure?

- Query: What virus will you deploy in the next layer of the Divine Realm?

I smiled. "The kind best suited to throwing the world into chaos—a joker card."

- Clarification: A joker card?

"I have a certain customized bomb I always try to avoid."

Perhaps it was just my imagination, but I thought I saw a flash of pink hair and a mischievous grin in my mind's eye.

Chapter 257

The Mastermind VIII

Sinnoa

The next plan was simple: Bring copies of Go Yuri from the simulation universes and scatter them throughout the Divine Realm.

No matter how vast the Mastermind's computational power, built upon the consumption of nearly all human brains, it couldn't possibly hold up against that kind of chaos.

Q: What do you think Infinite Void's reaction will be when it hears this plan? (3 points)

"Sunbae, are you insane?"

Correct.

I, the Undertaker, would forever be remembered as the first human to hear the words "Are you insane?" from an Outer God.

"There's a reason people say not to poke a sleeping tiger! Just leave the pink one alone!"

"Calm down. I'm not talking about summoning Go Yuri into the real world—that is, the 107th universe. Do you think I've lost my mind? I'm only suggesting we bring fake Go Yuris from the other simulation universes."

"Ugh!" Infinite Void scoffed, stomping its foot in frustration. "Sunbae, are you an idiot? There's no such thing as a fake or real Go Yuri!"

From my perspective, it was laughable. After all, this being had blurred the line between real and fake itself, becoming little more than a bootleg copy of Cheon Yo-hwa.

"Well then, let me ask you outright. What exactly is Go Yuri to you

Outer Gods?”

“……”

-……

Infinite Void and the Admin of the Infinite Metagame exchanged a glance. The former was the first to speak.

“A walking embodiment of humanity.”

“What?”

“Hmm. It’s hard to explain. You see, the brains stored here were created by combining the minds of over 8 billion humans, right? Together, they form something you might call a human brain or an absolute consciousness. In a similar sense, the pink one is like… a human brain with arms and legs, walking around freely. At least, that’s how it seems to me.“

Then, softly, Infinite Void muttered, “But calling it a *human* brain is inaccurate. The pink one isn’t limited to humans—it encapsulates everything, every object…”

“I don’t get it.”

“Right? I don’t either. Imagine, sunbae—from my perspective, it’s like a being carrying data equivalent to an entire universe walking around!”

Infinite Void shuddered, visibly uncomfortable. The Admin of the Infinite Metagame chimed in then, its speakers crackling faintly as the slime Fairy King softened the mechanical voice.

- Explanation: From this entity’s perspective, it’s much simpler.

“In what way?”

- Explanation: It’s you, Undertaker.

?

- Clarification: In other words, the “Go Yuri” or “pink one” is perceived by this entity as identical to you, the Undertaker, at least from this entity’s perspective.

???

Both Infinite Void and I blinked, baffled. The ever-curious Infinite Void reacted first.

“Wait, wait, wait! Are you saying you see the pink one as the same as sunbae?”

- Affirmation: Correct.

“What? That makes no sense! The pink one spends most of its time in the capital, while sunbae is always running around. Are you telling me your eyes see two versions of sunbae all the time?”

- Denial and affirmation: This entity lacks physical eyes. Please verify whether your own eyes are properly attached. If the term “eyes” is symbolic of perception, then yes, that is accurate.

Infinite Void’s jaw dropped. I might have mirrored its expression, had I been looking in a mirror.

I took over the questioning, demanding to know, “Then how do you distinguish between the ‘Undertaker in the capital’ and the ‘true Undertaker?’”

- Answer: I cannot. However, the true Undertaker is almost always accompanied by this entity’s priestess (the traitor), so I designate the one closest to her as the true Undertaker.

“Ah...”

The Admin’s answer stirred a memory within me.

The 555th cycle. That was when Oh Dok-seo, previously almost powerless, suddenly gained the identity of a “novel possessor.”

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame had chosen the priestess to counter me. Looking back, something strange had occurred during

that cycle.

‘Dok-seo… not only targeted me but also tried to recruit Go Yuri into her party.’

At the time, I assumed Dok-seo had fallen victim to Go Yuri’s brainwashing ability. But could the truth have been something else?

“Admin of the Infinite Metagame, when you influenced Oh Dok-seo in the 555th cycle to keep the ‘Undertaker’ in check… were you referring to both me and Go Yuri?”

- Affirmation: Naturally.

The laptop screen displayed a **(ˆωˆ)** emoticon.

- Explanation: To this entity, there have always been two Undertakers.

“……”

The revelation left me stunned.

What surprised me more was the realization that I had asked the Outer Gods about Go Yuri’s identity in past cycles.

That’s right. Back then, Infinite Void and the Admin of the Infinite Metagame had dodged my questions. Or rather, they gave me answers, but ones I couldn’t fully grasp.

Why were they being so clear in their answers now? Was it because we were inside the Mastermind’s Divine Realm?

“This discussion is pointless right now…” I shook my head to clear my thoughts. “For now, the Mastermind takes precedence over Go Yuri. While we don’t know whether Go Yuri is an enemy, the Mastermind is undoubtedly hostile.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“So, once we’re fully prepared, we’ll summon the Go Yuris and detonate the ‘bomb.’ Then we’ll escape while it’s still ticking.”

- Affirmation: Understood.

We resumed hacking.

Wires emerged from the Admin's laptop, snaking toward the brains. Having done this once already, the process was much faster this time.

Watching Infinite Void fend off the brain tendrils, a thought struck me.

"By the way, Infinite Void."

"Yeah? What's up, sunbae?"

"To my knowledge, Go Yuri reflects the ideal form desired by whoever sees it. To some, it has blonde hair, to others, black. How did you come to see Go Yuri as having 'pink' hair?"

Infinite Void tilted its head. "Pink is pink. What do you mean?"

This time, I tilted my head in confusion.

Our mirrored gestures made us look like reflections.

"You call Go Yuri the 'pink one' because of its hair, right?"

"Yep."

"You said earlier that Go Yuri looks like the universe itself. How can something that vast have pink hair?"

Infinite Void blinked, narrowing its eyes. "That's what I'm saying, sunbae. It's pink."

"Yeah, pink."

"Exactly, pink."

"?"

"?"

An awkward silence hung in the air.

Then, like a bolt of lightning, an eerie realization struck me—a static charge of unease coursing through my mind.

Could it be?

No. That would be absurd.

But if it were true, it would explain why Infinite Void and I had been talking past each other.

I spoke slowly, testing my theory.

“Go Yuri... has universe-colored hair.”

Infinite Void responded effortlessly.

“Right, **pink** hair.”

“.....”

“I mean, I’ve been saying it all along, sunbae. Its hair is **pink**. It’s an indescribable color, so I call it **pink**. It doesn’t mean **pink** actually exists. You’re usually good with metaphors, why aren’t you getting this?”

Infinite Void grumbled to itself, then turned back to fight off the tendrils.

I couldn’t continue the conversation.

Go Yuri was dangerous. But bombs are impartial, exploding for everyone. Go Yuri was just as perilous for the Mastermind as she was for us.

- Report: Compared to the previous layer, the number of simulation universes on this layer has decreased by more than 200.

- Analysis: This indicates significant damage. The Dang Seo-rins casting the Cursed Song Incantation on the previous layer appear to

be performing effectively.

“Good. If dropping Go Yuri can cause this much chaos, the overload should be even more severe.”

- Affirmation: Agreed.

I steadied my breathing. “We’re fully prepared.”

- Affirmation: Indeed.

“Infinite Void!” I called out, looking upward.

Unlike before, Infinite Void had already torn apart the ceiling of the simulated universe. The Admin and I were standing on its enlarged palm, ready to ascend at a moment’s notice.

“Remember the plan! No hesitation. Not even for a second. Once Go Yuri appears, it can’t be allowed to lock eyes with me. Get me out immediately!”

- Sunbae, this is seriously stressing me out.

Infinite Void’s voice echoed from the ethereal gaps of the torn sky.

- Can’t we just compromise? Forget efficiency and pack this place with Dang Seo-rins instead of Go Yuris?

“Don’t be stupid!” I roared back. “How many times have I explained this? Using only one type of virus would be begging the enemy to create a vaccine. Go Yuri isn’t optional—she’s essential!”

- But... thousands of Go Yuris? I feel like my head’s going to explode the moment I see them...

“Just close your eyes and move the platform on my signal! How hard is it to move a hand? If it’s too hard, quit being an Outer God!”

- Damn it. I already tried quitting, but no one let me, so now I’m stuck like this, sunbae!

“Enough talk! Move! Stop whining, you Anomaly!”

- Waaaah. Sunbae’s bullying me...

Infinite Void shut its eyes tightly.

Whoosh!

Its eyelids, as vast as galaxies, closed, releasing an immense gust of ether that ruffled the cables connected to the Admin’s laptop.

The cables stretched toward approximately 5,000 brains, fully connected as before.

“Admin of the Infinite Metagame!”

- Report: All simulation universes have reached apocalyptic destruction, leaving only the Undertaker and Go Yuri alive. Time has been paused.

“Pull them in! Remember, the one who’s grinning for no reason is Go Yuri. Don’t confuse it with me!”

- Affirmation: Initiating virus extraction.

Whoosh!

Hooks formed at the ends of the cables and plunged into the brains. The Admin, acting in Infinite Void’s place, began extracting the Go Yuris. From the outside, it looked like a claw machine game. Except the claw, the prizes, and even the machine were all horrors beyond human comprehension.

- Report: 5,427 “Go Yuris” are being retrieved. They will soon pass through the simulated universes into the Divine Realm.

- Countdown: 5, 4, 3, 2...

Squelch! Splat! Squelch!

Thousands of brains vomited blood simultaneously. The spilled blood took on human forms, coalescing into shapes all too familiar

to me—unforgettable even in my nightmares.

5,000 of them.

- 1.

“Infinite Void!”

Just before the Go Yuris opened their eyes, Infinite Void moved without hesitation, lifting its orbital-elevator-like palm.

We rose in altitude rapidly.

I immediately swung my Aura.

Bang! Buh-bang! Bang!

The cables linking the Admin to the Go Yuris were severed all at once. This severed the connection between the Admin and the extracted viruses.

I then threw myself flat onto Infinite Void’s palm.

- Oh?

- Oh my?

- Huh?

- Hmm?

From far below, faint voices rose up.

- Hello?

- Yes, hello.

- Nice to meet you.

- Indeed, nice to meet you.

- Oh, you too?

- Yes, you too.

The voices were sweet, infused with a magnetic charm that was impossible to ignore. Even against my will, the words pierced my ears like a song designed to ensnare.

- But isn't this impossible?

- Yes, something has interfered.

- Fascinating. I thought the demon promised not to touch us.

- Lately, the demon's Aura has grown stronger. Perhaps it broke its word.

- Could that be possible?

- But here we are.

- Intriguing.

- How are we talking like this?

- Perhaps?

- Perhaps.

A brief silence.

Then, in perfect unison, the voices called out:

- Guild Leader?

I inhaled sharply.

Though I couldn't see through Infinite Void's massive hand, I knew instinctively. The thousands of Go Yuris below had simultaneously turned their gaze upward, looking directly at me.

Never in my life, even through countless cycles, had I felt terror like this.

'Infinite Void! Move! Now!'

Abandoning all dignity as a regressor, I pounded and clawed at Infinite Void's palm, urging it to ascend faster.

To its credit, Infinite Void didn't hesitate. Though barely three seconds had passed, it raised me to the next level in less than four.

Its movements were swift. The ether winds carried us upward faster than light.

From a logical perspective, our surprise attack—the "bombing raid operation"—had been flawless.

Oh? Oh? Oh? Oh? Oh?

Just as the gap between the layers began to close, the last voice drifted up from below.

The once-fractured chorus of 5,000 voices had merged into one unified whisper.

- Truly.

- Guild Leader, you are...

- Fascinating.

Boom.

The gap between the universes shut tight.

"Ahhhhh!"

"Waaaaah!"

I collapsed onto the floor, gasping. Infinite Void, having pulled us up so quickly, fell over as well. The Admin's laptop skidded across the ground before settling.

The cacophony of our landing could only be described as chaotic.

"Hah... Haaah... I'm alive?"

"Waaaah! I told you I didn't want to do this, sunbae!"

“Shut up! Do I look like the Undertaker to you? Am I still me?”

- Request: Silence, please.

“Don’t let your guard down! That thing turned ‘universe-colored’ into ‘pink’ and fooled the Outer Gods. Who knows what else it can do?”

“This is all your fault! Why did you have to drag me into this mess, sunbae? I was fine before you came along!”

“Cheon Yo-hwa… Yes It’s still Yo-hwa’s face and voice. Her memories are intact. No signs of perceptual distortion or brainwashing detected.”

- Request: Silence, please.

“Did it work? Did it really work? Incredible. It worked! I must be a genius!”

“I’m starting to wonder how long I can put up with this, sunbae!”

“Stop sneaking formalities into your speech! Quit copying Yo-hwa—it’s confusing!”

- Request: Silence, please.

A loud, grating noise blasted from the Admin’s speakers, silencing both me and Infinite Void.

The Admin pointed with its spindly robotic arm, directing our attention forward.

- Observation: The brains are rupturing spontaneously, even without our intervention.

“…What?”

It was true.

The once-intact tanks were cracking and leaking. The brains inside were oozing blood and decaying rapidly.

- Report: Scans indicate that the number of simulation universes has dropped from 5,651 to 722. Destruction is ongoing in real time.

In other words...

- Analysis: Operation Virus successful.

- Explanation: The Undertaker's proposal to deploy Go Yuri as a "bomb" has effectively damaged the Mastermind.

Using Anomalies to destroy Anomalies.

My plan to pit Outer Gods against each other had succeeded beyond expectation.

Chapter 258

The Mastermind IX

Sinnoa

“Wouldn’t one more drop of Go Yuri be enough to completely obliterate the Mastermind?”

“Teacher—no, sunbae. Please stop. Or do you want to see me get on my knees and beg while in Cheon Yo-hwa’s body?”

Infinite Void opposed the idea of spreading the virus further, staking its life on the protest.

“Hmm.”

Truthfully, I had my doubts as well. The 5,000 Go Yuris summoned earlier had barely taken a second to realize, *Ah, the Undertaker summoned us to the Divine Realm.* If we tried again, they would likely figure it out the moment they appeared.

How?

I couldn’t explain it.

But some undefined instinct and certainty hinted that the bombing operation we’d just executed had been a stroke of luck, a miracle that could only happen once in all the cycles.

‘Come to think of it, this was the first time I actively weaponized Go Yuri to eliminate Anomalies.’

I reluctantly put the idea to rest.

“Admin of the Infinite Metagame, how many simulation universes does the Mastermind have left?”

- Response: The number has dropped rapidly to 666, but it isn’t decreasing further.

“Well, that’s an ominous number.”

I looked around to see that the tanks holding the brains, mortally wounded by the Go Yuri operation, were bleeding profusely.

“How laughable. It pretended to be the celestial kingdom where souls ascend, but now that it’s cornered, it doesn’t even bother hiding its true identity as a hellscape.”

The number 666, often associated with demons, carried significant symbolism. In the Book of Revelation, the beast bearing this number was described as one with a head that healed after a mortal wound and ruled over all nations, tribes, and languages.[1]

On reflection, all of these descriptions applied to the Mastermind. Replace the “head” with “brains” and “nations” with “humanity,” and it described its actions perfectly.

“Unable to create heaven, it settled for making hell. Typical of Anomalies.”

- Objection: Other Anomalies are listening. Please respect our sensibilities.

“……”

- Clarification: The previous statement was a joke, imagining Anomalies sharing a kinship and having human-like emotions.

“Don’t explain bad jokes. I beg you.”

Oddly, that explanation made the joke feel even more human—and thus, even more unsettling.

“Hmm, sunbae. I think a bit differently.”

That was Infinite Void, overly humanized as it had become, chiming in.

“You think differently?” I asked. “About what?”

“You just said the Mastermind turned this Divine Realm from

heaven to hell because it was cornered."

"That's right."

"Well... This is just my perspective, as someone who has experienced your antics firsthand... but..." Infinite Void hesitated, gauging my reaction. I gave it a look signaling it could continue. "It's not that the Mastermind changed it to hell. You did."

That gave me pause. "What?"

"You came here, declaring that this wasn't heaven. You even gave it a name based on that conviction. Then you dropped a Go Yuri nuke on it for good measure." Infinite Void chuckled awkwardly. "You slapped it on the face and said, *'You're not heaven anymore, you're hell,'* and the Mastermind just rolled over and went, *'Yes, sir... I am hell.'*"

"....."

"Why are you looking at me like that? Isn't it plausible? If a regressor storms into a place and drops 5,000 Go Yuris in the middle of it, anyone would lose their mind. Add me and that junk heap over there, and it's no wonder."

- Counterpoint: I am not a junk heap but the most advanced laptop in the universe.

We both ignored the comment.

"Regardless of whether it became hell because of me or not, the Mastermind's crimes are unforgivable. It's time to exterminate it. Gather all 666 brains in one place."

"Yes, sir!"

"And stop slipping formal speech into your responses."

Infinite Void clenched its fists with a sniff, then whined, "If I'm reborn, I want to come back as Cheon Yo-hwa..."

The brains scattered across the Divine Realm were pulled together,

converging into one massive pile before me.

Squirm.

Squirm-squirm.

The brains twitched in their tanks, bleeding profusely. Though grotesque, this was the essence of an Outer God—the seat of its power to manipulate the world.

As the mass of brains writhed, I could hear whispers, faint yet insistent.

Claim me.

Devour me, and you'll gain the power to shape unseen realities in the fog of war.

Ignorance is blindness, and blindness is the foundation of faith.

In the places you cannot see or know, omniscience and omnipotence shall be yours.

"....."

- .....

Infinite Void and the Admin of the Infinite Metagame were both watching me, their gazes quiet but intense. Infinite Void wore a human-like smile while the Admin displayed a mechanical emoticon. Yet both expressions were mere veneers. Their true feelings, their curiosity and intrigue, lay unmistakably in their eyes.

"How about it, sunbae?" Infinite Void's voice dripped into my ears, sticky and persuasive. "Do you want it? That thing."

"....."

"It's the power to toy with the world at your whim. Oh, you don't have to play with it, of course. You could use it to prevent real-world tragedies by preemptively scripting them into simulations.

Wouldn't that be nice?"

Crackle.

The Admin's screen flickered. The whimsical emoticon vanished, replaced by the image of a "white girl" smiling serenely.

This was a signature move of the Admin's operator: *'Hello, I am God.'*

- Not every story has to end with a happy ending or a tragic ending, Undertaker.

- Normal endings exist too.

The fear I'd harbored since recruiting the Outer Gods into my party had finally materialized.

Given the slightest chance, they sought to free themselves from their seals by any means necessary. Even though we'd prearranged terms and set limits on our collaboration, they were now attempting to seduce me.

- Think of the powers you've already obtained, or are about to obtain, from the Anomalies:

"Infinite Void, Admin of the Infinite Metagame, Mastermind."

- The Akashic Records, which collect all things impartially. The power of materializing delusions into reality. The omniscient operator who manipulates and distorts every world.

"Wouldn't you like to hold all of that in your hands?"

- What could be possible?

"What could be impossible?"

Their voices overlapped.

Suddenly, the scenery changed.

「*Adele!*」

An old man named Scho ran frantically.

A woman descending the hill at Seoul National University turned at the sound. Her eyes widened when she recognized him.

「*Emit? Why are you...?*」

「*I was worried about you! I had a bad dream, so I came after you! Oh, thank God! Thank you, Lord!*」

「*Look at this man! Wait, why are you hugging me all of a sudden?*」

「*Adele. I love you, Adele. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything.*」

「*Are you out of your mind?!*」

I knew it then.

It wasn't just an illusion. It was a scene created jointly by three Anomalies working together.

"This isn't a mere fantasy, sunbae."

I blinked, and the scene vanished. I was back in the Divine Realm.

- This is the landscape of a normal ending.

Somehow, Infinite Void—still in the form of Cheon Yo-hwa—and the "white girl" projection of the Admin of the Infinite Metagame flanked me.

The two Anomalies clung close, speaking to my very soul.

Through manipulating the simulation, Seoul's annihilation by the Void Incursion could be erased.

Undertaker. You've long sought a teleporter who could prevent this catastrophe. You don't need one anymore.

The 666 brains in the tanks changed as I watched.

Now kneeling before me, they took the forms of humans praying, heads bowed. Though their faces were obscured, the tops of their

heads opened like flowers, exposing writhing brains.

The voice of the Anomaly emerged from the pulsing tissue.

If you accept the normal ending, you can grant your companions a happy ending. If I must remain an Anomaly creating hell, then you may replace me and build heaven instead. O Scribe. Isn't this the solution—to become a god yourself?

A strange phenomenon unfolded.

The kneeling human-brain hybrids seemed singular yet countless. With each blink of my eyes, I saw one figure, then a hundred, then 666, and one again.

"Here's the catch, sunbae."

- A normal ending is never perfect.

All it requires is for you to accept your existence as an Anomaly.

Visions passed before my eyes.

In one, the Undertaker traversed 666 simulation universes, crafting "ideal companions."

Dang Seo-rin found self-restraint.

Oh Dok-seo overcame her self-loathing.

Lee Ha-yul's deprivation of love softened.

Cheon Yo-hwa learned compassion, even gaining a twin sister who stood beside her.

And the Undertaker, instead of identifying Anomalies firsthand, entrusted the Anomalies' designation to the Outer Gods, accepting their judgments.

The so-called "fog of war" became a fog of perception.

Through this shift, I gained unprecedented control over Anomalies.

I could dictate their emergence and suppress humanity's suffering. The remaining Anomalies couldn't match me—not even Nut, who had been sealed away by the Saintess in a prior cycle.

Above all, I could conceal the powers I'd acquired. My companions and I could still lead ordinary lives, never revealing the truth.

There would be no one to blame for a normal ending.

In fact, there would be no reason to hide it.

I could share my story—my pain, my countless cycles, and my sacrifices—with my companions.

And they would understand.

No one had ever demanded I achieve a happy ending after hundreds of regressions. It had always been my own choice.

My companions would simply wish for my happiness...

「*Shall I speak plainly?*」

Happiness.

「*I don't expect you to save the world.*」

「*In fact, I expect the opposite.*」

「*Undertaker. I am the only one who hopes that you 'fail.'*」

In the vision of the normal ending, where all smiled and blessed my conclusion, one figure stood apart.

A single person gazed at me from behind the others.

She smiled alongside them, yet her smile was different.

「*In that final hell of life, I will gladly join you, all the way down at rock bottom...*」

Footsteps echoed.

Between my companions, the click of leather heels grew louder. As she approached, they made way for her as if it were only natural.

「*I truly look forward to that day... Don't you? Your one and only funeral, your one true life, your own personal hell—aren't you eager for it?*」

Her voice lingered.

「*It's just a shame that this isn't the cycle where you fall into that hell. What a pity.*」

The figure stepped closer, almost touching me. She removed her monocle and slipped it into my pocket.

It was Noh Do-hwa—the woman I'd brought from the isolated island, and the woman who now stood in front of me.

Her hands reached for my neck.

Complete Memory etched her expressions, gestures, and voice into my memory.

"Don't forget..."

When Noh Do-hwa's lips moved, I found myself involuntarily whispering along with her words.

"I'll be waiting for you in your true Bad Ending."

The illusion shattered.

The white girl was no longer beside me. The Admin remained bound to the laptop, observing me silently.

The Mastermind was nothing but writhing brains in their tanks, stripped of pretense.

Infinite Void stared at me, its crimson eyes piercing.

"I refuse your offer."

If you bring someone into your world, you must take responsibility for them. Even if you brought them in out of goodwill. Especially if you brought them in out of goodwill. It demanded even greater accountability.

I had swallowed Noh Do-hwa.

And I couldn't spit her back out.

"I've already made a prior appointment for my ending."

"Ah... I was too late." Infinite Void smirked bitterly. "Of course. I'm always late when it comes to you, sunbae."

It gestured, and the Fairy King's slime seeped into the laptop. Static crackled as the image of the white girl disappeared, replaced by a simple emoticon.

The same occurred with the Mastermind. Its whispering voice fell silent, and the writhing brains lay still in their tanks.

"Alright, sunbae."

Infinite Void smiled.

"Let's kill the Anomaly. I have a good idea."

Footnotes:

1 - Revelations 13:18 of the Bible describes 666 as the number of man and of the False Prophet who leads man astray with a false vision of heaven and into hell.

Chapter 259

The Mastermind X

Sinnoa

"Listen closely, sunbae. The strategy I'm about to propose is going to be extremely tricky to pull off," Infinite Void said.

After the fall of the Mastermind and the destruction of the Laptop of the Infinite Metagame, it seemed that control of this Divine Realm had completely shifted to Infinite Void. The scenery changing at a mere snap of Infinite Void fingers was evidence enough.

I looked around. "This place..."

"This is a classroom in Baekhwa Girls' High. In a sense, it's my hometown. After all, it's where my ego, Cheon Yo-hwa, was born out of the Outer God called Infinite Void."

The folds of a brain transformed into the creaky wooden floorboards of the classroom, while tentacles morphed into desks and chairs.

Screeeech.

Infinite Void pulled over a chair and slid into the seat.

"First, let me ask. How were you planning to hunt down the Mastermind?"

"The Mastermind thrives in spaces beyond human perception—a seed that can only flourish amidst the fog of war," I explained reluctantly as I took a seat across from it. Infinite Void beamed with an unsettling grin.

Could I trust the same entity who had just tried to trap me in a normal ending?

Remaining vigilant, I replied, "If humanity were to save the world,

the Mastermind would naturally be eradicated. From the Korean Peninsula to Asia, and eventually across all continents, it would be inevitable."

"Exactly."

Infinite Void stirred the air with a lazy wave. A piece of chalk flew up, floating in midair in front of the classroom blackboard, and began writing. The white letters forming on the board read:

[Strategy A: Natural Extermination]

* Gradually expand the Regressor's range of activity.

* Eventually, the Mastermind will lose all "Fog of War," rendering it unable of manipulating causality in reality.

Scritch, screeeech. Scritch.

The chalk scraped across the board with a piercing squeakiness as it wrote.

"A textbook example of a strategy. If carried to its logical conclusion, the Regressor always wins. But there's a problem. You know it too, right?"

I nodded. "Yes... The Mastermind isn't foolish enough to let it happen."

Just as Busan served as humanity's final line of defense, the Ural and Himalayan mountain ranges were the Mastermind's equivalent Maginot Line.[1] The moment that line was crossed, the Mastermind manipulated causality to trigger a "World Destruction Scenario."

"How did you intend to resolve that issue?" Infinite Void pressed.

"Because of that problem, I abandoned Strategy A. But once I arrived here in the Divine Realm, a new potential breakthrough became clear to me."

"A new breakthrough?"

I shared the final plan I had in mind. "It's simple. Extract versions of 'me' from other universe simulations and place them here as sentinels."

"Oh?" Infinite Void raised an eyebrow. "You mean to use simulations of yourself as allies?"

"That's right. As long as their settings remain unaltered, they'll think and act like Undertakers. This way, the Mastermind won't be able to manipulate simulations at will, and my avatars will meticulously monitor our real world."

"Like the Saintess?"

"Exactly. Like the Saintess."

"That's interesting. Clever, just like you, sunbae."

The chalk moved again, tapping away.

[Strategy B: Sentinels]

* Create Undertaker clones from simulated universes and appoint them as sentinels in the Divine Realm.

* The clones will continuously observe Universe 107 (our real world).

* With these clones monitoring the entire planet, the "Fog of War" won't occur, and thus, the Mastermind loses the opportunity to manipulate causality.

Crack!

The chalk snapped in half.

"Not bad. Not bad at all. A decent strategy."

It was a strange feeling, being evaluated and praised by an Outer God about a plan to defeat another of its kind. Who would have thought I'd see such a day?

Infinite Void leaned on the desk, resting its chin on one hand. Its crimson eyes stared up at me intently. "But the weaknesses of this strategy are also glaring, aren't they?"

"....."

"In the end, even the Undertaker clones are entities born from the Mastermind's simulations. It's akin to entrusting surveillance of the Mastermind to itself. Eventually, they'll betray you."

"Yes... I knew that. My plan was to return to the Divine Realm periodically at the end of each cycle to check on their status."

"No, there's a deeper issue, sunbae." Infinite Void grinned. "By choosing Strategy B, you're effectively acknowledging, ‘This world is a simulated universe.’ The only difference is that your clones, disguised as you, become the ruler of the Divine Realm."

"....."

"At first, the clones would act just like you. But as ink spreads across paper, they'd eventually become gods in disguise. The Mastermind could then impersonate your clones, much like how Outer Gods operate."

In other words, it was an inherently flawed strategy. Even I understood that Strategy B was merely a stopgap. But was there truly a cleaner solution?

"I also considered traveling across simulated universes to gather information on all Anomalies..."

"No good. The moment you use simulated universes, you place yourself under the Mastermind's authority. Be cautious. Your goal is to live in the one and only real world."

"Hmm." I furrowed my brow. "Infinite Void, the way you're speaking now... it almost sounds as if you're suggesting that the real solution

is to uproot both the Mastermind and the Divine Realm itself."

"Exactly!"

"That's impossible..."

It wasn't feasible to eradicate Outer Gods. Looking back on my journey thus far made that abundantly clear.

Infinite Void, sealed within Cheon Yo-hwa's body. The Night Goddess Nut, frozen eternally by the Saintess using Time Stop. The Admin of the Infinite Metagame sealed within Oh Dok-seo's story.

Not once had an Outer God ever been completely annihilated. And the reason was simple.

"You aren't living creatures..."

They were collections of concepts, conceptual viruses. They were corrupted, distorted intelligences—phenomena. As such, they lacked what one could strictly call "life" and, consequently, the concept of "death."

"...so how would we eliminate you?" I concluded.

"....."

Wind blew through the classroom window, causing the white curtains fluttered in the midday breeze. Infinite Void closed its eyes as if savoring the contours of the wind.

That distinctly human gesture left me momentarily frozen.

Suddenly, they asked, "Isn't it strange?"

"What is?"

"Every Outer God has what you've named a Miko —an Apostle. Well, every Anomaly in an Outer God's domain serves as a kind of Miko. But among them, there's always one individual who stands out the most, whom we call a Miko."

"....."

"So why is it that the Mastermind has no Miko?"

The absence of a Miko. I'd considered that question before myself.

"Isn't Mo Gwang-seo, the False Christ, essentially the Mastermind's terminal? That cult leader was the first to inform me of 'paving the way.'"

"Perhaps. But my instinct tells me things aren't quite that straightforward."

"Your instinct?"

"You could call it the intuition of an Outer God. sunbae, I believe the Mastermind has been choosing a different Miko for each cycle."

I frowned at its suggestion. "Are you saying that my comrades who fell victim to Mastermind Syndrome were actually the Mikos?"

"Probably."

The breeze from the window stilled. Only then did Infinite Void open its eyes.

"A Miko is ultimately a pathway or terminal for an Outer God to interfere with reality. They are the Outer God's closest proxy."

Thus, a Miko was simultaneously the Outer God's sword that cleaved the world and the spear that pierced the Outer God itself. The moment a Miko defined themselves, that identity became both the source of their Anomaly's power and its weakness.

"It's a fascinating move. The Mastermind doesn't designate its Miko as Seo Gyu or Dang Seo-rin—specific individuals' names serving as coordinates. Instead, it defines its Miko as the 'last surviving human.' In some ways, that's a stronger anchor than a name, because it guarantees their emergence."

Infinite Void added with a smirk, "It's clever, don't you think? Fitting for their identity. After all, both the Savior and the False

Savior appear at the very end of the world."[2]

"I see."

That explained it. Sometimes it was Seo Gyu. Other times it was Dang Seo-rin. At others, it was Yu Ji-won. The Mastermind's Miko had always appeared and delivered the same declaration to me: *“This is all going according to my plan.”* And now—

"But, sunbae." Infinite Void's crimson gaze softened, oddly gentle. "In this cycle, who do you think is the Miko of the Mastermind?"

My eyes widened in shock.

Startled, I leaped out of my chair and slammed my hands on the desk. The chair skidded backward with a loud screech.

"No way! Are you saying you're the Miko?"

"Correct." Infinite Void gazed up at me. "Isn't it obvious? I'm the one who survived alongside you until the very end of the world. And it was me who the Mastermind sought to descend upon at the last moment."

"No, but... can an Outer God become the Miko of another Outer God?"

"Surprising, isn't it?" A sly grin spread across Infinite Void's face. "Call it a kind of bug. You sealed me in human form, and I adapted to that humanity so thoroughly that even the Mastermind mistook me for one."

"....."

"That's how I was able to open the pathway freely. For a Miko to enter their shrine is only natural, after all."

The revelation left me stunned, yet in hindsight, the clues had been there all along.

"Even though we invaded the Mastermind's domain, it didn't actively try to destroy us... I assumed it was because you

overpowered it."

"Well, that's part of it. But mainly, it's because I'm treated as the Mastermind's Miko. Think about it—what god would kill their most devout priest with their own hands?"

"Does that mean the reason you could manipulate this space so freely was—"

"Exactly. Because I held the authority to do so."

A chill ran down my spine.

'Ah. So that's how it was!'

The nape of my neck prickled with unease.

I swallowed hard before forcing the words out. "That's why Infinite Metagame proposed an alliance the moment it saw you."

Infinite Void's silent smile confirmed it.

Yes. Back then, Infinite Metagame had proposed a brazen alliance right in front of me.

The two Outer Gods exchanged these words:

[AOIM – Even in this sealed form, it is the first time I have encountered an Outer God so directly. Infinite Void. I propose an alliance.]

"Huh? Me?"

[AOIM – Correct. We are entities sealed and altered by the tyrant known as the Undertaker. If we collaborate, based on mutual understanding, we may regain our former authority.]

Why had Infinite Metagame proposed an alliance under my watchful eye? Out of idiocy? Arrogance? Or as a joke?

No. The answer was simple.

It did so because it was confident **it could defeat me**.

Had Infinite Void accepted its hand, they could have crushed the Regressor, no matter who was watching.

"Infinite Metagame must have..."

I chose my next words carefully.

I had to. Because if my hypothesis was correct, the being before me was both Infinite Void and simultaneously the Mastermind.

"...immediately realized that you could partially wield the Mastermind's powers. That's why it suggested betraying me."

"Correct."

Infinite Void confirmed it without hesitation. The chill at the base of my neck intensified.

"But you rejected the alliance. To Infinite Metagame, that must have been bewildering. Why hesitate when it was a golden opportunity to escape the Regressor's grasp?"

"Indeed. It did wonder that."

"So, when you tried to lure me into the normal ending, Infinite Metagame must have thought, 'Ah, this is it.' It believed you had been waiting for the decisive moment to tempt me."

"Pfft. Isn't that hilarious?" Infinite Void covered its mouth, snickering. "Acting all self-assured, it unleashed its full power at the most critical juncture, shouting, 'Now's the time!' What a miscalculation. A true embarrassment. That Miko and its Outer God were a perfect pair, weren't they?"

"....."

"Well, if you had chosen the normal ending, I would've gone along with it, just as it hoped."

After its laughter subsided, the atmosphere in the empty classroom shifted.

Infinite Void sighed, then gazed at me.

"It's amusing, isn't it? You humans always call me an Outer God, and yet the Outer Gods mistake me for a human being."

Footnotes:

1 - The Maginot Line was an impenetrable fortification built by France along its border with Germany during World War II. Although expensive, it was incredibly effective in deterring invasions. However, other countries adjacent to France protested the wall being built on their own borders, which was eventually used by the Germans to invade. As a result, mention of the wall eventually became a metaphor for expensive efforts that offer a false sense of security.

2 - Another reference to Revelations from the Bible.

Chapter 260

The Mastermind XI

Sinnoa

My hand jumped to my waist, only to grasp at nothing but thin air. Something that should have been there had vanished without me noticing.

“Hmm.”

From across the room came a playful laugh.

“Looking for your cane-sword Do-hwa, sunbae?”

“……”

“A blade that transcends regression and always ends up in your hands. It’s a god-slaying weapon specialized in killing me. But alas! That method—I’ve already seen it before, you know? A long, long time ago, when I collected the data.”

“Infinite Void…”

“Don’t be so tense, sunbae. Honestly, I’m overflowing with kindness right now and just wanted to give you a warning.”

Infinite Void jumped to its feet with an exaggerated “Oooshyaa!” It walked between the desks in the classroom, its hands clasped behind its back. I readied myself for battle, watching its every move.

“You’ve been a little impatient lately, haven’t you?”

Warily, I asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I get it. You and I both know the Mastermind is a tricky opponent. But using an Outer God like me for the hunt, and even going as far as to involve that pink entity… It’s like you’ve got

nothing left to lose.”

“……”

“Ah, I suppose that’s a virtue for regressors, though. Unlike regular humans, you can afford to experiment with everything. But sunbae, Outer Gods are dangerous.”

Indeed. I thought I’d prepared for every eventuality, yet there were still gaps in my defenses.

I’d let my guard down. I’d made a mistake.

“You didn’t let your guard down.”

With unnerving ease, Infinite Void read my thoughts.

By now, it had gathered enough data about me. Countless simulations of the regressor Undertaker’s simulation had given it mastery over the cosmos itself. My way of thinking, my behavior, my expressions, even the faintest breath or pose—I had been completely decoded.

“It wasn’t carelessness… just a logical failure. Who would have imagined that a sealed Outer God could become the Miko of another Outer God? Neither I nor the Mastermind could have foreseen this.”

“What are you planning to do with me?”

“Hehehe… Oh, that’s simple! I’ll use the powers of the Outer God to wreak havoc, scrambling everything into chaos until I turn you into a Miko who obeys only me!”

“……”

“Oh, relax. I’m kidding. Kidding! Sunbae, your face has been so stiff. You pretend to be human, but you don’t seem to understand human emotions.”

Something felt off.

‘Why hasn’t it attacked me yet?’

It was both an Outer God and the Miko of one—a being at the peak of monstrosity and transcendence.

Never before had I faced such a formidable adversary.

If it wanted, it could easily deal with me.

‘If I kill myself now, will I move to the next cycle? No… the risk is too great.’

At this point, I had to assume Infinite Void could persist across cycles, given that it had already consumed the Mastermind.

Or was I wrong?

Could it be that Infinite Void’s absorption of the Mastermind proved its superiority, meaning it couldn’t enhance its essence any further? Or was it the opposite, that the Mastermind had become a part of its essence, inheriting all of its properties, including the inability to recognize regression?

I didn’t know.

Nothing was certain. The only thing I was sure of was that pressing the reset button now would be extremely dangerous.

I had to assume the worst-case simulation. If the worst was true, Infinite Void might manipulate the causality of the “simulation” to summon a monster wave from beyond the Urals the moment the next cycle began.

Not just in the next cycle. Or the one after that. Forever.

‘Checkmate? Is that why it’s acting so smug, knowing it can’t lose no matter what I do?’

“That’s not it.”

“……”

Infinite Void stopped walking. It didn't specify what it was refuting.

"Sunbae."

Its hands were still clasped behind its back. With the poise of a former basketball ace, it tilted slightly and glanced at me.

"Did you not have fun?"

What?

"What are you talking about?" I countered, baffled.

Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化), named for the desolation of heaven itself, mimicked throwing punches into the air.

"When the world was obliterated by the monster wave. When I, Infinite Void, the joker card you played at the last moment, yanked the hair of the oh-so-elusive Outer God."

Jab, jab.

"And after that? A grand search of the Great Void! Oh, the hidden research facility of mad scientists mimicking you and your comrades' appearances! You infiltrated it, pretending to be one of their researchers, taking them out one by one. But alas! Destroying the lab only led to another lab cropping up somewhere else?! Truly tragic!"

"...Infinite Void."

"Destruction wasn't the answer. That cunning Outer God even simulated Infinite Regression, creating a simulation beyond simulations. What now? Shall humanity be left to have its minds devoured by an Outer God?"

"....."

"But then! In the Regressor's mind emerged the final trump card—an ace to be used only at the absolute last moment! A truly devilish idea to replicate that horrifying pink entity five thousand times and drop them into the fray...!"

I didn't understand. What was Infinite Void even talking about?

"A party of Outer Gods wreaking havoc! The foe taking critical damage! And just when the finishing blow is within reach, the comrades who had fought alongside you suddenly turn to tempt you...! They tell you to become the Demon King! To seize power near omnipotent!"

I couldn't decipher what Infinite Void was trying to convey.

"But sunbae, you refused the offer."

Infinite Void's exaggerated gestures froze.

Its arms lowered, and the air grew still.

"Fascinating. Is that what it means to be human?"

The desks in the classroom still held their bags, hanging from hooks. Notebooks sat open. Indoor shoes were slung over racks.

The sunlight and wind filtering through the windows, however, were the same as ever.

"Probably not."

I had no answer.

"Because someone like you, sunbae, exists as the only volume in my library."

Infinite Void spread its arms. The twilight filtered through the curtains cast a slanting glow on its closed eyes.

"Humans are coordinates, fixed points, entities defined within specific traits. When someone mentions a name, we instinctively think of the domain they occupy. And that domain is already at rest —it doesn't move. *But.*"

But, said Infinite Void. But.

Its lips repeated the word in a hum.

“But you, sunbae, carve out your direction with every iteration, every moment. At the same time, you embody what it means to be human.”

The curtains fluttered. Infinite Void glanced toward the window, as if to greet the wind. Its drifting words lacked a clear target but instead floated on the gusts, eventually settling at my feet like a shipwrecked piece of flotsam.

“That’s why I don’t love humanity.”

“……”

“It’s simply that I think you’re beautiful.”

From the depths of my recollection, a memory suddenly surfaced.

The fourth basement of Baekhwa Girls’ High School.

In the past, in that demonic lair where the first Outer God, Infinite Void, had slumbered, I had wielded Do-hwa.

The Outer God crumbled under Do-hwa’s strike. And just before its collapse, it muttered an incomplete final statement.

- Ah. Oh, how beautiful this is—

That had been the moment Cheon Yo-hwa of heaven’s desolation (天寥化) was born and Infinite Void met its end. A contradiction—and yet, within the being before me, birth and death overlapped. It felt as though the silenced continuation of that ancient exclamation now reached my ears.

“This is my third strategy.”

The two pieces of chalk I had broken earlier began writing from opposite ends of the board. One piece started from the beginning of a sentence, the other from the end, converging toward the middle.

[Strategy C: Miko's Seal]

* Use the Miko to fully consume the Mastermind. The Miko will

become an entity indistinguishable from the Mastermind.

* Apply the Regressor's Time Seal to the Miko.

What?

For a moment, my breath stopped.

The two fragments of chalk, indifferent to me, carved words into the blackboard.

From afar, their movements mimicked the steps of human feet.

* A being under Time Seal vanishes from the world. While the seal requires the target's consent, making it ineffective against Anomalies, the Miko can both understand and express consent in the Regressor's language.

* By sealing the Miko, the overlapping Outer God is sealed simultaneously.

* Thus, the Mastermind is erased from existence, as though it had never been.

I opened my mouth to speak.

Infinite Void placed a finger on my lips, silencing me.

"Shh."

Even as I moved my lips and tongue, no sound emerged.

This had always been a divine realm. Sound and speech required air as their medium. Yet the air permitted to me seemed to vanish under Infinite Void's command.

In other words, every word I had spoken here was granted only by Infinite Void's permission.

"Don't raise your voice, sunbae."

"……!"

“Ahaha. I’ve always wanted to say that line. But really, there’s no need for shouting.” Infinite Void smiled. “You know that I understand everything you want to say.”

“……!”

“Silent comprehension. A truth that transcends words. You, who embody such principles, could be said to have reached the realm of gods.”

I couldn’t move.

Of course I couldn’t. This was Infinite Void’s playground.

Ordinarily, it wouldn’t have been able to exercise such dominion, but having reduced five thousand simulated universes to 666, it had taken full control—

Ah. Ah!

“Yes, that’s right.”

The reason the Mastermind’s divine realm, the self-proclaimed Heavenly Kingdom, had transformed into 666 Hells!

I had ridiculed it, saying it was proof the Outer God’s power had diminished and its true nature was exposed. Infinite Void had countered, claiming, “This is the result of your actions, sunbae.”

And Infinite Void had been right.

“Do you remember? The name you gave me was Infernal Hell.”

The transformation of the so-called heaven into hell was definitive proof that control over this divine realm had passed from the Mastermind to Infinite Void!

Yet despite this glaring evidence, I had failed to notice.

“Aha! I was so nervous back then, worrying that you’d figure it out. Lucky for me, your overflowing hatred toward the Mastermind worked in my favor.”

“……!”

“I’m sorry, sunbae.”

The wind blew.

Infinite Void untied its hair. The ponytail that had symbolized Cheon Yo-hwa scattered, loose strands fluttering in the breeze.

“I’m not here to debate strategy. This is right, and it’s perfect. You can’t logically refute it.”

“……”

“Oh, don’t worry too much. I’m not planning to sacrifice my ‘younger sibling.’ I intend to seal myself in time. This is the best simulation for you, sunbae. And honestly… it’s the best for me too.”

I didn’t understand.

“You’ll understand soon.”

The wind stopped.

A globe rested on the desk between us.

I immediately recognized it as the model of Universe 107, our one and only reality.

“So, sunbae.”

Cheon Yo-hwa of heaven’s desolation (天寥化) smiled.

“Make me… a happy human.”

My vision darkened.

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Simulation.

Set Undertaker's perspective to the 1st cycle.

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Cheon Yo-hwa of heaven's desolation (天寥化) set as the twin sister of Cheon Yo-hwa of the hundred tales (千謠話).

Searching for the most natural connection between Undertaker and the twin sisters... Connection established.

Causality in progress.

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Starting point set as Gangnam Void Incident, Gangnam White Night, or one year before Seoul's Summer.

Causality established.

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Simulation, commence.

Chapter 261

The Mastermind XII

Sinnoa

I was dreaming.

Surprisingly, the world in the dream was still intact.

There were no Anomalies, no Voids. South of the Han River in Seoul was not blanketed in white ash. The sky and the moon remained endlessly peaceful. I could walk through the night to a 24-hour convenience store, or head to work alone without hesitation. The sighs of yawning workers at dawn carried a quiet assurance: *"The world will still be the same tomorrow."* At noon, the stiff arms of a laborer tossing a garbage bag into the back of a truck reflected hardened muscle.

My job was a bit unusual.

"Teacher, I've finished all the problems!"

"You're solving them much faster now."

In the dream, I was Cheon Yo-hwa's private tutor.

I wasn't merely a tutor focused on academic subjects, but a study manager fully assisting my client, Yo-hwa, in every aspect of her learning. I'd even moved from where I usually lived in Seoul, taking temporary leave from school, and was staying in Sejong City.

Some might think it absurd to go to such lengths for a single student. However, when I looked at the amount deposited into my account every month, both the dream-version of myself and the "me" watching the dream could accept it without question.

"Sunbae, is my sister's lesson over?"

The Cheon Yo-hwa I was tutoring wasn't just one person.

The younger twin sister: Cheon Yo-hwa of the hundred tales (千謠話).

The elder twin sister: Cheon Yo-hwa of heaven's desolation (天寥化).

"If the lesson's over, let's go hang out."

"No, it's your turn for class now..."

"Heroes don't study. In this modern capitalist society, my status is practically that of a hero."

If the younger sister had a personality that spread Vitamin D-like sunshine wherever she went, the elder sister, though composed in appearance, had an unpredictable nature that made her a constant source of anxiety.

"Why do you call me 'sunbae' instead of 'Teacher,' anyway?"

"It's simple. I'm going to enroll in your university someday, so I might as well get used to calling you sunbae in advance."

"With your attitude, getting into our school is impossible."

"I scored 0, 100, 0, and 100 in Korean history and the other core subjects on my last mock exam."

"....."

"And for the exams where I got zeros, I still picked the correct answers for every question."

It was sheer madness.

At the time, my life was mortgaged to these mirror-image twins. As the elder sister had pointed out, in a capitalist society, the person who controls your bank account effectively controls your life.

I was dreaming.

"Did you know, sunbae? Our family is actually a cult."

One evening, beneath a night sky brightly adorned with the Milky Way, Cheon Yo-hwa murmured this to me.

“My sister and I were destined to be possessed by gods from birth. My sister serves the god Infinite Void. I serve the god Mastermind.”

“Those are some peculiar names for gods...”

“Infinite Void signifies the absence of time. Mastermind is a god that denies and degrades the fabric of space. Our cult’s goal is to reduce all of existence—both time and space—back to nothingness.”

Perhaps because we had grown close as tutor and student, she sometimes confided secrets in me that she couldn’t share with others. It seemed she had correctly judged my discretion and trusted me not to repeat her words.

“Have you ever wondered why my sister and I share the same name? It’s not an ordinary cult. Then again, I suppose no cult is truly ordinary.”

“Do you want to escape from it?”

“I can’t.”

“……”

“My sister gets to live a relatively free life, blending in with the general public. Even the adults approve. After all, when we inherit the position of head of the family and leader of the cult, someone will need to handle external affairs. You know, like how a temple has both an abbot and a chief monk?”

“So your sister is the abbot, and you’re the chief monk?”

“Our cult isn’t limited to Sejong City, its influence stretches across the entire Korean Peninsula. This little ‘student play’ of mine won’t last long. Someday, I’ll rise to a status you can’t even imagine.”

“Ah, yes, I’ll be sure to serve you well, Chief Monk.”

“Hahaha.” Cheon Yo-hwa hugged her knees and leaned sideways to

look at me. “If my sister and I ever change... If we turn strange...”

“...?”

“Promise you’ll come to help us, sunbae.”

I was dreaming.

The peaceful world crumbled in an instant.

While traveling to Busan on the KTX train, I was suddenly summoned to a tutorial dungeon.

Though I worried about the safety of those I left behind—particularly the twins—I quickly lost the luxury of such concerns. My own survival was hanging by a thread.

Fortunately, I soon discovered that mortal peril was rarely urgent for me.

I, the Undertaker, was a regressor.

The 1st cycle. The 2nd cycle. The 3rd.

Barely escaping the hellhole known as Busan Station, I was left so gravely injured that death seemed inevitable. Yet I made my way to Sejong City, dragging my battered body.

Despite the endless cycles, my concern for my cherished students never waned.

“Hmm? Who are you?”

But by then, the twins had already become “strange.”

The younger sister didn’t recognize me. Though her face and demeanor were identical, I instinctively knew the person before me was no longer my student.

It was later revealed that the younger sister had been unable to cope with the tragedy at Baekhwa Girls’ High School and had placed herself under a form of self-induced NPC-brainwashing.

“Yo-hwa, where is your sister...?”

“Oh! You must be one of my sister’s acquaintances!”

The younger sister, Cheon Yo-hwa of the hundred tales (千謠話), smiled brightly and led me to the basement of Baekhwa Girls’ High School. The students she had brainwashed stared at me with blank expressions as I followed her.

“Here we are!”

“……”

“Unnie! You have a visitor!”

There was no response.

Her elder sister had become an entirely hollow shell.

No matter how much anyone called to her, poked her arm to tease her, or tried to make her react, the girl kneeling in the center of the basement remained utterly unresponsive.

She was like a vegetative patient.

“Haha, seriously, unnie. People get scared when you keep saying weird things like that. We have a guest today, so maybe try behaving for once?”

The younger sister chattered endlessly, as though she were carrying on a cheerful conversation with her sister.

Her perception of reality had already warped. To her, Baekhwa Girls’ High School was still intact, civilization hadn’t collapsed, and the dependable yet playful elder sister was still alive in her world.

“……”

I was too late.

In this cycle, I had failed to save them.

Once more.

I was dreaming.

As the cycles repeated, I grew stronger. I met a companion named Emit Schopenhauer.

Old Man Scho and I shared much in common. Not only were we both regressors, but we also each had someone we needed to save from the Void as quickly as possible.

“Still, you’re better off than me, you damn quack!”

Old Man Scho called me by all sorts of nicknames. From Undertaker to Doc, from Doc to Quack, and since undertakers embalm corpses, from Embalmer to “you damn pest.”

Considering Old Man Scho was German, his creative talent for nicknaming bordered on acrobatics. Then again, Germans would probably never guess that Adolf Hitler’s nickname in a certain East Asian country was “Single Nut.”[1]

Perhaps humanity shares a universal love of childish humor.

“I only have one minute after regression to save my wife! It’s fucking impossible! But your students? Hah! You’ve got ten days, or is it a hundred? That’s plenty of time!”

“They’re enthralled by incomprehensibly powerful Anomalies… I don’t even know if I can save them.”

“At least it’s not physically impossible. Damn, kid, you’ve got it easy.”

Ironically, Old Man Scho was the first to break. Overcome by despair at his inability to save his wife, he eventually withdrew from the regression cycles. I lost one of my most dependable allies.

I had no time to wallow in despair.

Old Man Scho was right. Saving the Cheon Yo-hwa twins wasn’t physically impossible.

I was dreaming.

Countless events passed through the haze of my dream.

I hunted the Ten Legs. I hunted the Meteor Shower. I met Dang Seo-rin, Yu Ji-won, Lee Ha-yul, the Saintess, Sim Ah-ryeon, and Noh Do-hwa.

I established a base in Busan. I founded the National Road Management Corps. Slowly, ever so slowly, I expanded human territory across the Void-stained lands.

Humanity's feeble reconquista.

Resistance fighters still lived across the Korean Peninsula—and the world—battling the Void in scattered pockets. These resistance groups, called guilds, were gradually united by the National Road Management Corps, connecting them into a cohesive front.

With each regression, human dominion extended further northward. The front line of the Korean Peninsula's reclamation campaign eventually reached Sejong City.

"Sunbae..."

On the 100th day of the Great Void's arrival, I headed for Baekhwa Girls' High School once more.

This time, I was as prepared as I could be. I couldn't face the school alone, not yet—not in my fragile state during those early cycles.

Thankfully, the elder sister was still herself. Together with the last surviving students of Baekhwa Girls' High School, she had managed to hold on.

When she saw me, her eyes welled with tears. For the first time, the student who had always seemed so mature for her age let her vulnerability show.

"Sunbae, Yo-hwa... My sister..."

"It's all right," I said, patting her on the shoulder. "I'm sorry I was late. Don't worry. Even if it's not today, even if it takes time, I'll bring your sister back."

“……”

“Let’s go.”

“Okay…”

The wheel of cycles turned again.

I was dreaming.

The elder sister, Cheon Yo-hwa, wasn’t physically strong, but she had a brilliant mind. Even when encountering Anomalies for the first time, she quickly deduced their weak points and devised strategies for us.

In the Regressor Alliance, Noh Do-hwa handled logistics and operations from the rear, like a chancellor in the Three Kingdoms. In contrast, Cheon Yo-hwa accompanied me directly to battlefields, offering timely advice like a strategist—more akin to Guo Jia.[2]

“You never used to talk about *The Three Kingdoms* so much. What happened?”

“Classics are classics for a reason.”

“You’re acting weird. I look away for one second, and suddenly you’ve turned into an old man…”

“Quiet.”

Cheon Yo-hwa provided invaluable intel on the Anomalies haunting Baekhwa Girls’ High School and strategies to counter them.

The Hundred Ghosts’ Night Parade.

Ghosts that crawled upside-down, bouncing as they moved. The Red-and-Blue Toilet Paper Ghosts that cursed users in bathrooms. Voices of ghosts emanating from speakers or radios.

White flowers lurking on the fourth basement floor…

“This cycle won’t be enough.”

After sharing all the information she had, Cheon Yo-hwa smiled faintly.

“Save my sister. Save Yo-hwa. Save us, sunbae.”

I did.

Finally, on the 117th cycle, I recruited the Tutorial Fairy and forged a shortcut straight into Baekhwa Girls’ High School. With the help of Cheon Yo-hwa of heaven’s desolation (天寥化), I secured the identity of the Baekhwa Girls’ High School Guard, allowing me to infiltrate early and swiftly.

Never before had I breached the Great Void this early in a cycle.

Yet even in this uncharted attempt, I skillfully subdued the ghosts of the Hundred Ghosts’ Night Parade. It was as though I had already memorized their weaknesses and behavior patterns.

And of course I had. Cheon Yo-hwa had told me everything about them in prior cycles.

“Sunbae!”

“T-Teacher?! How... How did you...?”

The twin sisters, not yet consumed by the Void, were shocked to see me.

In this isolated space, cut off entirely from the outside world, where only students had survived under extreme conditions, my arrival provided them with a brief respite.

Together, we hunted the Hyakki Yagyo.

Together, we descended to the fourth basement floor.

Together, we carried out the ritual to summon Baekhwa, finally coming face-to-face with an Outer God.

“It’s hopeless... The Outer God possessing my sister is far too powerful. Of course, it’s only natural—we were both created from

birth as vessels to serve such entities.”

“Isn’t there any way?”

“There is,” the elder sister answered grimly, her eyes clouded with determination. “We have to rewrite her memory and identity.”

“Rewrite? How would you even do that?”

“By reducing her memories and identity—everything that has defined her since birth—into ‘false memories.’ Then, she must awaken to a new self, one forged by her own will.”

“That’s easy to say, but how could something like that even be possible...?”

“It’s possible. With my sister’s ability.”

NPC Creation. An ultimate brainwashing technique that forces the target to think and act exactly as programmed.

“She needs to start over. A new life.”

“.....”

“Of course, if we change too much, my sister’s entire identity could collapse. That’s why we’ll focus on removing only the parts tied to the Outer God.”

“Do you think that kind of precision is even feasible?”

“It might be hard. Human memories are fragile, after all. There’s a chance she might also lose her memories of me, her twin sister... and even you, sunbae.” Cheon Yo-hwa paused, then conviction steeled her voice as she declared, “But if we can exorcise the Outer God from Yo-hwa’s soul, it’ll be worth the cost.”

“I don’t understand. Even memories of you might vanish. How can you be so confident in this plan when it means losing the time you’ve spent together with your sister?”

“You’re here, aren’t you, sunbae?”

I was momentarily at a loss for words. “What?”

“We’ve only known each other for a year or two, as tutor and student. Yet here you are, crossing a hundred cycles just to save us. Even if my sister forgets me, it’s okay. She’ll have far more time to build memories with you in the future.”

“……”

“And I’ll feel the same. Right now, the priority is defeating Infinite Void. But someday, when the time comes to conquer the Mastermind… At that moment…” Cheon Yo-hwa’s confident tone wavered and her words trailed off, her parted lips closing. She grew quiet.

Then, her red eyes fixed on me, her gaze unreadable.

“Why are you staring like that?”

“……”

“Is there a problem with the strategy?”

“No, there’s nothing wrong with that.”

Her murmur was soft, almost inaudible. Her eyes remained fixed on me.

Somehow, I didn’t feel awkward under her gaze.

People often spoke of intense eye contact. A powerful gaze could make anyone flinch. But Cheon Yo-hwa’s eyes weren’t sharp—they were shaded, more like “eye shadows” than blinding light.

Just as a person might seek the relief of shade on a scorching summer day, her gaze brought only comfort. Almost as if she had spent her entire life preparing to be someone’s shade.

Her god, the Mastermind, was known as the “Black Veil.” Perhaps she had begun to resemble the god she served.

“Sunbae, I have one question.”

“Ask me anything.”

“You won’t give up, will you?”

There was no need to ask, *“Give up on what?”*

Sometimes, even when a sentence lacked its context, people could still understand each other. Gaps in speech could be filled by the shared experiences of two lives.

I could answer easily.

“I won’t give up.”

“There may be other Anomalies even stronger and more cunning than the ones we’ve faced. There may be enemies so insurmountable that no amount of struggle will overcome them.”

“……”

“Moreover, we don’t even know if it’s possible to bring those erased by Time Seal back to reality. Yet despite all that, you’ll never abandon the world, will you? You won’t let go, like the regressor who gave up before you?”

“Never,” I said, taking Cheon Yo-hwa’s hand. “No matter what happens, I won’t give up. And if the day ever comes when I do give up, it’ll only be because there’s a reason so compelling that even I can’t deny it.”

“A... A reason?”

“Yes. A reason everyone can accept. One that even I—whether it’s the me of the 1st cycle, the 100th, or any cycle—can agree with.”

“……”

“Unless such a reason exists, I will never give up.”

Cheon Yo-hwa fell silent. Then her lips parted, revealing the darkness within that spoke one word:

“Okay.”

A faint smile spread across those lips.

Even shadows, I realized, could carry thin cracks of light.

“I feel the same way, sunbae.”

On the 117th cycle, we defeated Infinite Void. One sister lost a part of her memory, including fragments of her elder sister and me.

I was dreaming.

“Sunbae.”

Yet no one despaired.

Cheon Yo-hwa’s words had been true. There were far more days ahead for us to spend together.

For humanity, this might have been a tragedy. But for the twin sisters, it was a small happiness.

Through hundreds of cycles, we occasionally spent time together. We drank coffee, marveled at the submerged Inunaki Tunnel, and grew close enough for Cheon Yo-hwa of the hundred tales (千謠話) to call her sister unnie once again.

Together, we defeated the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. We were shocked by Yu Ji-won’s inhumanity. And finally, by the 685th cycle, we had grown strong enough to confront the Mastermind.

We asked the elder Cheon Yo-hwa to conduct the ritual to summon the Outer God.

And so, time passed.

Time passed.

“Sunbae.”

I was dreaming.

“Sunbae?”

I was dreaming.

“Sunbae.”

And then.

“Yes. Thank you.”

A shadow whispered.

“I think I’m finally happy now.”

I awoke from the dream.

Footnotes:

1 - There is a fringe theory with a cult following that Adolf Hilter had monorchism, the condition of only having one testicle for one reason or another.

2 - Guo Jia is a character from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. He is characterized by his skill in administrative work and as an excellent judge of character.

Chapter 262

The Mastermind XIII

Sinnoa

I opened my eyes.

The moment I did, I realized I was in a divine realm. At first glance, it resembled an ordinary classroom, but this was the domain created by Infinite Void, which had consumed the Mastermind.

This was the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end.

“It’s been a while, sunbae.”

Infinite Void sat with its back against the chalkboard.

“Or should I say, we’ve met again after only a fleeting moment? How are you feeling right now?”

It took me a moment to respond. “It feels like I’ve relived my life from the 1st cycle all the way to the 688th.”

“Hahaha. That’s not a feeling. That’s just a factual description.”

The scenery outside the classroom windows was surreal. Each window showed a different scene. Through one, a vivid blue sky stretched out endlessly while another revealed a galaxy swirling across the darkness. In some windows, it was summer, and in others, autumn or winter.

“Facts? Don’t be ridiculous,” I scoffed. “What you’ve shown me is nothing more than an illusion.”

“Hmm.” Infinite Void smiled faintly as it asked, “Are you so sure?”

“……”

“You, sunbae, remember two timelines. One where Infinite Void

was merely an Outer God, a target to be hunted and destroyed."

A piece of chalk moved on its own, drawing a screeching line across the chalkboard. Soon, a second, parallel white line followed.

"And another where the elder twin, Cheon Yo-hwa, existed as your companion and strategist, always by your side. In this timeline, I was both Infinite Void, the Outer God, and Cheon Yo-hwa, the human."

Timeline A.

Timeline B.

Either way, both led to the scene I was witnessing now.

"Now you remember both. Why not ask your Complete Memory to figure out which one is real?"

"Of course, the timeline where you are an Outer God is the real one..."

My chest tightened painfully.

"You seized the power of the simulated universes in the 688th cycle. That's how you were able to show me this false illusion."

Even as I spoke, my heart ached.

The figure before me—the mischievous, cunning elder twin—was undoubtedly the same person I had spent countless cycles with.

My soul, which retained every memory, whispered this truth to me.

"Perhaps. But that's not a settled matter, sunbae," Infinite Void said with a smile. It was the exact same expression I had seen on my student's face countless times across the cycles. "This is a matter to be decided from now on."

What nonsense was it spouting?

"I told you, didn't I? Once you Time Sealed me, the Mastermind's

perfect Miko, I'd be erased from the world."

Ah.

"That's right. If I, the elder twin of Timeline B, am sealed in time, the world will revert to Timeline A."

"....."

"People will forget me. Even my younger sister, Yo-hwa, won't be able to remember me. The events I participated in will transform into events that occurred without me."

Just as it had been for others who were sealed.

Even if a son forgot his soccer-player father, his life would continue without disruption. Similarly, even if Cheon Yo-hwa ceased to exist in this world, nothing would change.

Her achievements would become someone else's accomplishments. Her words attributed to someone else's whispers.

"The distinction between past and future is meaningless, sunbae. The choice you make now will loop back through the wheel of cycles, shaping both your past and the present moment."

The timelines would merge.

The gaps would be filled.

The story would be rewritten.

"Didn't you ever find it strange? Why, as soon as you established the foundation for the Regressor Alliance, you always rushed to Baekhwa Girls' High School?"

It's because, originally, you were the twins' tutor. The bond you shared with them made it natural for you to try and rescue them.

—So said Infinite Void.

"How did you manage to subdue me, Infinite Void, in your first-

ever attempt at infiltrating Baekhwa Girls' High School? Was it because I was a weak Outer God? Or..."

Or because you had already uncovered my weaknesses through some means. As a regressor, you had an ally who was deeply familiar with the school's secrets. You waited until you were strong enough, until you wielded the blade Do-hwa, until you had enlisted the fairies. Then, you struck at the perfect moment.

An excellent strategy. A testament to your patience.

As a result, Infinite Void, the Outer God, was defeated so easily it bordered on being absurd.

—Or so the girl before me claimed.

"That is my story."

The girl placed her hands over her heart.

"The one who lived as a priestess in a cult, who stood faithfully beside the Regressor, who worked harder than anyone to help you hunt Outer Gods... This is where it ends, sunbae."

My heart pounded ominously.

"This is the end, sunbae."

"Infinite Void..."

"If you see me as an Outer God, it's only natural to use Time Seal here to eliminate me. After all, I'm a threat. This is the perfect opportunity to erase the one responsible for this broken world. You're not going to refuse, are you? Or... do you see me as human?"

My heart wouldn't stop racing.

"If I seem human to you... please respect my will. Accept that this is the only way to conquer the Mastermind, sunbae."

"....."

“Haha. Don’t look so down. In a way, I’ve bet everything on you.”

A bet?

“What? Did you already forget? You promised me, sunbae. You said you wouldn’t give up, no matter what.”

“You...”

“Yes. I believe it too. Someday, you’ll find the key to undo the challenge of the Time Seal. No matter how many hundreds of cycles it takes, or how many thousands of wheels must turn, I know you’ll succeed.”

Infinite Void gave a shadow of a smile.

“When that day comes, you’ll treat me as human. You won’t have any other choice.”

“.....”

“So this is my final move.”

Somewhere, I thought I heard the sound of chains clinking.

The source of the noise—it was my own chest.

Every word the figure before me spoke felt as though it was being etched into my soul until that promise became a shackle, binding my heart.

“Not another Anomaly. Not an Outer God. I believe the one who will ultimately claim victory in this world is you, sunbae. I have unwavering faith in that.”

“.....”

“That’s why I won’t betray you. I won’t stab you in the back. I won’t pull some foolish stunt like the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. I’ll simply create a final destination, just for you. When everything ends, I’ll remain as a human who contributed to your victory.”

I realized it then.

It really was checkmate.

No matter what I did, I couldn't help but see the figure before me as human. It didn't matter whether she had been born as an Outer God or as the elder sister in a cult. She had claimed the title of "human," the proof of kinship with me, not through anyone else's acknowledgment but by her own hand.

What kind of human could devise such a strategy? How could anyone make it a reality?

And yet, the girl standing before me had done exactly that. She had conquered the Mastermind. She had broken the seal confining her in Cheon Yo-hwa's body. She had deceived even herself and conquered Infinite Void.

She had conquered the Regressor.

She was an Awakener.

"Don't be too sad," she said again.

With an exaggerated "Oooshyaa!" she jumped up from the desk.

"I'll always be here. Even if I'm sealed away and everyone forgets me, you'll still remember, won't you? You can come visit me every now and then."

She took a step toward me. Then, with the same boldness she had shown as my student during tutoring sessions, she reached out and grabbed my trembling hand.

"Do it."

"....."

"Seal me. Save the world. Find a way to break the seal. And someday, bring me back from here."

I trust you.

The moment I heard those words, I had already begun casting Time Seal.

The galaxy and the seasons visible outside the windows began to freeze. The curtains billowing in the breeze, the strands of the girl's hair—everything slowed.

"Remember this, sunbae."

Through her hand, I could feel her heartbeat. Even that steady rhythm began to slow.

"From the next cycle onward, Infinite Void will no longer have 'me' as its personality. The possibility of me ever existing will be completely eradicated. The only thing left on the fourth basement floor of Baekhwa Girls' High School will be a mindless husk of an Anomaly..."

"I understand."

"My disappearance might destabilize my sister's mind a bit. Please take care of her..."

"I will."

I knew instinctively even then. She was offering me her final words of advice.

"Even if I disappear, there might still be contradictions. It's unavoidable. Think of it as the ache after a wisdom tooth is removed."

"....."

"I'm sorry... I couldn't figure out why you can't remember anything before the 4th cycle."

Her red eyes met mine directly. Even on the brink of annihilation, her gaze was infinitely calm and composed, calculating every possibility for what would come next.

"But every effect has a cause."

"……"

"Maybe your memory loss from the 1st to the 4th cycle isn't a curse but a blessing."

"A blessing?"

"Yes. From the 1st to the 4th cycle, you've created something called 'four spaces of sealed time.'"

My eyes widened.

"Maybe you've already experienced the 688th cycle hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of times. And maybe, in this very moment, you realized that the only way to defeat the Mastermind, an unbeatable Outer God, was to create gaps in your memory."

"…!"

"Using those gaps, you forged a causality where the elder twin Cheon Yo-hwa could become the Mastermind's Miko. Do you understand? Because your canvas was blank, you could paint anything on it."

The girl squeezed my hand tightly, steadying its tremors.

"You have four blank canvases. I can't be sure, but I believe those canvases are your ultimate weapon against the Outer Gods."

"Through these gaps, you can rewrite reality, inventing a causality that allows you to defeat even the undefeatable."

"Exactly."

It was a terrifying realization.

Sensing my shock, she carefully chose her next words.

"You've used one canvas to seal me, the Mastermind. By rewriting your past. Well, technically, I made the choice for you."

"……"

“But there are still blank spaces in your memory. Who left you the Silver Bells? What is Go Yuri? And most importantly, who advised you to intentionally create this amnesia between the 1st and 4th cycles?”

“You—”

“It wasn’t me.” She took my other hand in hers as well, clasping it even tighter in her grip, and she said, “There’s someone else. Another entity.”

That was true.

Thanks to her, I now remembered being the twin sisters’ tutor, but most of my memories were still shrouded in mist.

For instance, I might not have been the only one on that KTX train heading to Busan. In the tutorial dungeon at Busan Station, it felt like a certain someone else had been there with me.

Her brow furrowed slightly. “I’m sorry. I really wanted to save Old Man Schopenhauer for you too, but messing with the causality so drastically would’ve been too much.”

“Ah...”

“It already took a miracle to weave together a timeline that could coexist with your footsteps up through the 688th cycle without negating them.”

To deny the Mastermind’s existence was to manipulate the universe as if it were a simulation. Yet, to erase an Outer God like the Mastermind, I had to honor the singular reality of my universe.

“That’s why the only picture you can paint on this canvas is your shadow.”

“My... shadow?”

“Yes. Don’t forget. This blank canvas, this shadow—it’s your divine realm.”

The girl, who had been serious until now, suddenly smiled brightly.

“Oh! I’ve said everything!”

“……”

“Honestly, you don’t have enough strategist characters by your side, sunbae. Phew, now I can finally relax.”

“……”

“Aha-ha. Sorry for dropping out early like Grandpa Swordmaster, yeah? Good luck living the rest of your life, sunbae. Work hard for my share, okay? After all, that’s the fate of a regressor.”

Time began to freeze.

This classroom, this divine realm, and the girl’s domain were becoming eternally severed from reality.

To create the most beautiful hell imaginable.

“Ah.”

The girl looked up, gazing at her galaxy above, and sighed.

“Yo-hwa. My name.”

Yo (寥). Desolate.

Hwa (化). Transformation.

“To grow lonely and desolate.”

From the galaxy, a voice seemed to emerge. Perhaps it was nothing more than the sensation of her heartbeat, transmitted through our joined hands, that I simply interpreted as words.

Something beyond sound resonated, carrying the girl’s final testament as if singing her last poem:

Here lies the loneliest place in the universe of all creation.

The most desolate place.

The most colorless void.

A world outside the world, thus emptiness.

A time beyond time, thus absence.

Yet still the pinnacle humans endlessly imagine, dream of, and long to reach—thus karma.

I, born as Infinite Void, have come to know time.

Here, all things cease.

Even the infinite regress of logic that thinks of itself, and then of itself again, will stop breathing here.

I, having known time, now return to Infinite Void.

To the moment, the time, the void,

I can now finally say these words:

Be still. You are truly beautiful.

It might have been nothing but a sound I hallucinated.

The girl before me might also have been nothing more than an illusion or a shadow. Forgotten by the world, her existence was something even I could easily dismiss.

“Yo-hwa.”

But I didn’t deny her.

To remember—that was my life.

Hearing my voice, hearing me call her name, Cheon Yo-hwa looked at me. Her crimson eyes widened.

“Yes.”

Cheon Yo-hwa smiled.

“Thank you for teaching me what it means to be human, sunbae. In the past, in the future, and here in this place—”

And thus,

“I love you in this very moment.”

Time stopped.

Anomaly: The Mastermind

Aliases: Simulated Universe, Heavenly Kingdom, Infinite Labyrinth, Fog of War, Soul Harvester, Brain in a Vat, Hollow Earth Hypothesis, IF Scenario, Descartes’ Demon

Threat Level: Lv.5 Outer God-class

Subjugation complete.

Chapter 263

The Mastermind XIV

Sinnoa

There is an epilogue.

The cycle had moved forward. Infinite Void— Or more precisely, Cheon Yo-hwa of heaven's desolation (天寥化), the personality within Infinite Void, had disappeared from the flow of time.

But what changed, you may ask?

Almost nothing.

"Ah, hello there, everyone! You must have been quite surprised to be summoned here so out of the blue, right?"

At the Busan Station Tutorial, the fairy still appeared and tested people.

And why wouldn't it? Infinite Void, even at this point, had always been a mindless Outer God. The removal of the personality known as "Cheon Yo-hwa" didn't fundamentally alter the Anomaly's principles of behavior. Blind, thoughtless Outer Gods remained as they always were: tirelessly collecting data from the world even in the 689th cycle.

Or perhaps the elder twin, Cheon Yo-hwa, was never truly connected to Infinite Void at all. She might have simply been the Mastermind's Miko, and her disappearance had no bearing on the Anomaly.

I kept my mouth shut.

In my mind, two parallel timelines and their memories coexisted, perfectly aligned.

The same was true for the younger twin.

“Ow, ow, ow... Hold on a second. Are you a real adult? Oh, I mean... Mister, are you human? Ahh! You’ve come to rescue us, haven’t you?!”

Cheon Yo-hwa of the hundred tales (千謠話), the student council president of Baekhwa Girls’ High School, was the same as she had always been in other cycles. Although her elder sister had left behind a final request for me to look after her, there was nothing much to do. Cheon Yo-hwa already exhibited minor signs of mental instability.

Her tendency to be excessively cold toward outsiders.

Her difficulty controlling her anger.

And after Infinite Void was subjugated, occasional symptoms of a split personality.

These were flaws inherent to her personality. The disappearance of the elder twin—a fictional existence—wouldn’t make them any worse.

Or perhaps, unknowingly, she was grappling with the fallout of losing the elder sister she had relied on more than anyone.

Sudden distortions in memory could have profound effects on people. After all, hadn’t the son of the former soccer player Kim Joo-chul set off on a journey through this perilous world to search for “something,” despite the danger?

It was a world unchanged— No. It was a world in which only one thing had changed.

“Yo-hwa...”

“Yes, Teacher?”

“Are you still experiencing... instances with another personality?”

“Well... Yes, haha. It’s something I can’t control.”

“.....”

Cheon Yo-hwa's soul no longer bore the personality we once called Infinite Void. Her occasional personality shifts were no longer manifestations of an Outer God's descent but rather purely psychological symptoms.

'Ah.'

Outer Gods couldn't speak like humans, and they couldn't perfectly mimic humans either.

It was only natural, after all. How could an Anomaly possess human intelligence? How could an Anomaly possibly love a human?

When had I, the Undertaker, started entertaining the delusion that such an Outer God might exist? Had I been bewitched by an Anomaly without even realizing it?

"Remember this, sunbae."

"From the next cycle onward, Infinite Void will no longer have 'me' as its personality. The possibility of me ever existing will be completely eradicated."

"My disappearance might destabilize my sister's mind a bit. Please take care of her..."

Cheon Yo-hwa tilted her head as she looked at me. "Teacher?"

"....."

"Is something wrong? You look... a little sad."

"It's nothing. Sorry to worry you. I just... suddenly remembered something from the past."

"Oh no! Did someone make you sad, Teacher? Tell me! I'll take care of it so no one even notices!"

I smiled and patted Cheon Yo-hwa's shoulder. Noticing that I was feeling better, she smiled brightly back at me.

"Please take care of her."

Yes, she was right.

To be human wasn't to merely be alive. Even a thing that only existed in people's memories could be human. After all, how many beings, no longer seen or heard, do we bury in our hearts and carry with us through life?

Presence through absence.

Sometimes, someone's existence was felt more strongly not because they were near but because they were not.

"Is that so? I understand now," said the Saintess.

I hadn't made the mistake of silently brooding over my inner turmoil. I shared my thoughts with the Saintess instead.

"An Outer God worships a human and willingly falls to humanity's level... Or perhaps this story itself is a historical distortion caused by Time Seal."

"Indeed."

"Let me confirm one thing. Mr. Undertaker, are the Anomalies related to the Outer God called the Mastermind truly gone now?"

"Yes, that part is certain."

In the 689th cycle, I could at last distribute the "Sacred Flames" given to me by the Nenet of Naryan Mar to the point that most cities where humans survived now had beacon towers. Smoke rose beyond the Himalayas and the Urals as well.

Humanity's enemy, the Mastermind, had truly been subjugated.

"On the other hand, Infinite Void still leaves traces of itself in this world, doesn't it? The Hundred Ghosts' Night Parade, for example. Anomalies clearly tied to Infinite Void still linger."

"That's correct."

The Saintess quietly rested her chin on her hand. The shadows of

fish moved slowly among the aquariums in the Yongsan estate.

“Mr. Undertaker, this might sound like a radical interpretation, but...”

“Please, speak freely.”

“You might have taken the place of Infinite Void and the Mastermind’s apostles.”

I paused, blinking as I poured hot water into a packet of instant coffee. “Pardon?”

“Think about it. Whether we consider Timeline A or Timeline B, the result is the same. The only human who knows about Infinite Void, complete with Cheon Yo-hwa’s personality, is you, Mr. Undertaker. You alone, across the entire surface of the Earth.”

At first, I didn’t understand what the Saintess was suggesting.

“That’s true,” I agreed slowly. “But how does that designate me as the Miko of the Outer Gods?”

“Because no one but you witnessed Infinite Void’s true form when it revealed its full power.”

“.....”

“In essence, you are the only one who understands the true nature of these Outer Gods. An Apostle communes with a god and acts as its exclusive intermediary. Isn’t that essentially what you are?”

My eyes widened.

“That’s because I subjugated the Outer God...”

“But apart from you, Mr. Undertaker, no one even knows these Anomalies existed, let alone that they were defeated.”

“.....”

“Whether you like it or not, Infinite Void and the Mastermind are

dependent on you. Only you—and your memories—serve as evidence that they ever existed."

The back of my neck pricked with unease. Instinctively, I knew that the Saintess had touched on something profoundly significant.

Before I realized it, my mouth moved on its own to say, "Authority."

"Pardon?"

"The abilities I possess... For instance, Complete Memory. It might be an authority granted to me as Infinite Void's Miko."

Infinite Void collected the data of all things in existence. Didn't it liken itself to the Akashic Records? If so, my ability to remember everything without fail might very well be the proof of my role as Infinite Void's Miko!

At my explanation, the Saintess's expression grew serious.

"Hold on. Let me list out your abilities, Mr. Undertaker."

With a quick motion, she pulled out a pen that seemed to appear from nowhere—likely fetched by briefly stopping time—and began jotting down notes.

1. Complete Memory – Infinite Void

2. Resume (Physical Strength Preservation?) – ?

3. Time Seal – ?

4. Enormous Aura – ?

The Saintess looked back at me.

"These are your abilities, correct?"

"Yeah. Though you can probably leave Aura off that list. Other people can develop it with enough training, so it's not exclusive to me."

“Fair enough. I’ll cross it out, then.”

“Oh, by the way, I also have Mind Reading.”

The Saintess blinked like a startled rabbit, her wide eyes practically asking, *“Why am I only learning about this now?”*

“I apologize. I thought it might make people uncomfortable to know I could read their thoughts.”

After a beat of hesitation, she asked, “Are you reading my mind right now?”

“No, not at all. I stopped using that ability around the 555th cycle. I didn’t want to rely on such a mysterious power to intrude on people’s private thoughts.”

“Can you swear to that?”

“Yes, I’ll swear on anything.”

“Even on the *Three Kingdoms* and Liu Bei’s name?”[1]

“Er… yes. Of course.”

The Saintess’s expression visibly relaxed. “All right. As expected, you’re quite trustworthy, Undertaker. Let me revise the list.”

1. Complete Memory – Infinite Void

2. Resume (Physical Strength Preservation?) – ?

3. Time Seal – ?

4. Enormous Aura – ?

5. Mind Reading – Infinite Metagame? Mastermind?

“How’s this?”

“Well… Looking at it now, I can’t help but notice how scattered and miscellaneous my abilities are. It must be my fate to be a supporter.”

“The real supporter here is me, but let’s not get into that. Do you really think these abilities being so miscellaneous is just a coincidence?”

A faint voice echoed in my mind.

“Every effect has a cause.”

It was something Cheon Yo-hwa had whispered in the classroom.

Though the Saintess had taken a different path to reach her conclusions, it seemed she had arrived at the same understanding.

“Think carefully, Mr. Undertaker. You’re smarter than this.”

“You flatter me...”

“I’m not trying to flatter you. What I mean is, if you truly have been reborn as the Miko of various Outer Gods, and if you’ve become aware of this... But then lost your memories because of Time Seal or some other reason.” Her sky-blue eyes locked onto mine with an unflinching intensity, as she asked, “Wouldn’t you have left behind a clue for yourself? Something subtle that only you could recognize later?”

“.....”

“A hint. Nothing too obvious, to avoid disrupting the timeline. Just small, shadowy traces. Something that could exist without affecting anything else.”

“...A hint left for myself.”

I let my thoughts wander.

The elder sister, Cheon Yo-hwa, had reshaped the traces of her existence into the form of “Infinite Void’s personality” and “the younger sister’s split personality.” She had only altered memories to the extent that they preserved the reality of what had occurred.

Was there a similar distortion within me?

A shadow where I had quietly planted a clue, hoping I'd uncover it someday.

"A shadow..."

In that moment,

"A fragment. A shadow of the self..."

I felt a static charge ripple through my body.

The tremor within me translated into words that spilled from my lips.

"Of course. How did I not realize this sooner?"

"Did something come to mind?"

"Yes. My nickname!"

The Saintess tilted her head. "Your nickname?"

"My SG Net username. My alias. The name I used as a shadow of my real self in the virtual space of the internet!"

I borrowed the Saintess's pen and quickly scrawled the name.

ZERO_SUGAR

That was my SG Net username.

The meaning of "zero sugar" was straightforward: sugar-free. Translating it into Korean yielded *mudang*, 무당 (無糖).

A Miko who serves as an intermediary for gods. A pillar connecting an Outer God's influence to the earthly realm.

The Saintess glanced down at the notebook, her face filled with astonishment.

"When did you choose this nickname? And why?"

“It’s... been my nickname ever since I learned SG Net existed. Honestly, there wasn’t much thought behind it. I just liked zero-sugar cola, so I used it without thinking.”

“So it was something trivial enough that it didn’t raise suspicion.”

“That seems to be the case.”

We both fell silent.

Our silences carried different weights. Though I wasn’t using Mind-Reading, I could almost grasp the Saintess’s line of thought.

She must have been wondering how the “Undertaker from before memory modification” had left this clue for his current self. What purpose did it serve? And what were the identities of the other Outer Gods?

My own thoughts, however, were slightly different.

‘I already knew.’

The reason it hadn’t taken me long to deduce the clue of my SG Net username stemmed from an entirely different cause because...

‘Go Yuri knew.’

Someone had directly given me this hint.

In the distant past, during the 91st cycle, while I was casually browsing the community forums, Go Yuri had once left a comment.

- [Satisfaction] CookingQueen: Thank you! Although this is the world we must live in, if we live without losing faith in ourselves and our hope in others, good things are sure to happen. I hope today is a happy day for you, ZeroSugar!

No one else on SG Net had ever used *mudang* to call me “ZeroSugar” before. Not even had I had called myself that.

So then how...?

How had the Go Yuri of back then already known something we only now realized in the 689th cycle?

Footnotes:

1 - Liu Bei was made famous for being the ideal ruler for his benevolent leadership and smart choice in advisors by *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Chapter 264

The Murderer I

Sinnoa

The eradication of the Mastermind.

Thanks to this incident, my life as a regressor saw quite a few subtle changes. If I had to choose the most representative change, well... I'd say it's the addition of the ability to write Side Stories for Oh Dok-seo.

But today's episode isn't about that kind of change. Let's focus on something more physical this time.

What's there to hesitate about?

At last, I—no, we—could communicate with survivors beyond the Himalayas and the Ural Mountains.

That said, it took an enormous amount of time to establish signal fires across the globe.

Preliminary research. Charting the optimal signal fire routes. Identifying cities and villages where survivors gathered. Understanding the dispositions of each base leader. Exploring ways to seek cooperation. Building connections to establish a baseline of trust...

Though I had visited famous cities like Istanbul several times before, a simple drop by was altogether different from the enormous task of linking every single base together.

What other choice did I have? I had to embark on a world tour, bit by bit, over multiple cycles, scraping together information as I went along.

And a world tour meant—

[You called me, oppa.]

Peek.

Lee Ha-yul, the Travel Ghost, poked her head out.

She flipped through a sketchbook she had prepared in advance.

[↓↓ My Wish List ↓↓]

[The City of Love, Paris.]

[The City of Human Catapults, Prague.]

[The City of Romance, Rome.]

[The City of Water, Venice.]

[The City of Fashion, Milan.]

[The City of Gastronomy, Palermo.]

[The City of Philosophy, Athens...]

The list went on and on.

Wait a minute—weren't there too many Italian cities on the list? Did my Ha-yul really want to visit Italy that badly?

Flip-flip.

Ha-yul kept turning the pages of her sketchbook with a seriousness that never waned.

[If this is gonna be a work of fiction like Dok-seo's novel, then you should for sure plan a spinoff.]

[The story of a Puppeteer traveling the world with the Infinite Regressor ← could totally work as a standalone, long-form side story.]

[A sprinkle of travel in an apocalypse evokes timeless emotions.]

[Has the era finally arrived?]

[The era of me.]

“……”

It seemed my Ha-yul, who had recently been devouring Dok-seo’s novels, had suddenly developed a craving for screen time.

To be fair, Ha-yul spent more time with me than anyone else. Compared to Dang Seo-rin or Cheon Yo-hwa, who were busy managing their guilds, Ha-yul clung to me like gum every single day.

However, Ha-yul was a greedy little rascal.

What do I mean by that?

Despite becoming proficient enough in Aura manipulation to communicate effectively, Ha-yul stubbornly insisted on using Morse code, sign language, and sketches to communicate. When I asked her why one day, she replied:

[Oppa. People these days have become too accustomed to effortless communication, forgetting the value of human connection.]

[Language, voice, conversation—these miracles were never granted to them so easily.]

[Because of constant demands for communication, paradoxically, the modern person’s thresholds for meaningful interaction has skyrocketed.]

[I strive not to become addicted to the dopamine of communication. This is my ongoing effort.]

[I hope you, too, can appreciate the miracle that is dialogue, oppa.]

In simpler terms, it was peak chuunibyou.

I had encountered countless similar spectacles. For example, Dok-seo would seize every opportunity to proclaim, “Only emotional

exchanges through novels count as true communication. Everything else is fake."

So, does that mean people who don't list novel-reading as a hobby are incapable of communication? I couldn't make sense of it. All I could conclude was that there was a reason Ha-yul and Dok-seo were such close friends.

"By the way, Ha-yul," I began. "Even if we travel together this time, it's really far, so we can't use a yogurt cart. We'll have to make the trip quick since we can't be away for too long."

"....."

Tap, tap.

Ha-yul patted her shoulder.

We had our own set of silent poses we used to communicate with each other, and the one she just made meant [carry me].

When I approached and lifted her as instructed, what happened next was astonishing. The little rascal used her Aura to climb up my body in a flash, perching on my shoulder in no time at all! Her speed was so extraordinary it could only be described as Ha-yul the squirrel!

In response, I had to retaliate with equal finesse.

"Regressor Spin-Twist Special."

".....!"

"Regressor Loopy Viking Swing."

"....! .....!"

As I performed all sorts of acrobatic tricks with my Aura—a showcase only Aura experts could manage—Ha-yul clung to my back, laughing silently but uncontrollably.

Watching us from the side, Dok-seo muttered in disbelief,

“Seriously, are they really father and daughter or something?”

That was how Ha-yul and I usually played around.

[Anyway, we can do it without Coco, that’s fine. I’ll just ride on oppa’s back.]

“You’re serious?”

[Why, is that a problem?]

“Of course not. Let’s head out quickly, then.”

The Puppeteer travels the world with the Infinite Regressor—spinoff confirmed! (Or not.)

As a result, rumors of a "father-daughter pair traveling leisurely even in a ruined world" began to spread across the Eurasian continent, and they weren’t particularly flattering rumors either. If anything, they leaned closer to ghost stories.

The reason was simple.

[Oppa’s back isn’t great.]

[It’s wide, which is nice, but it’s too hard, so it’s uncomfortable.]

Incredibly, the little rascal who had spent the entirety of our first journey to Mumbai treating me like a personal vehicle dared to leave a review complaining about the ride comfort.

In the end, I had no choice but to develop a luxury vehicle specifically for Ha-yul. This was a one-of-a-kind masterpiece—unparalleled before or since in human history.

Its design? Well...

Dok-seo gave her assessment in a single sentence:

“Seriously, it’s just an overly fancy jige.”[1]

Yes, it was a jige.

While the image of elderly men or tigers enjoying rides in such contraptions was more common, surprisingly, Ha-yul could also use it.

However, it was no ordinary jige. It was massive, and on it, I had installed a plush sofa that could double as a bed. There was even a canopy to protect the passenger from rain, snow, or blizzards—offering a cozy camping experience for any weather.

This wasn't just a jige. This was an enhanced jige. +9 tier, easily surpassing its original function.

Naturally—though maybe not so naturally—it was also equipped with a miniature air conditioning system.

[Perfect.]

[I wonder... Maybe I've lived through countless cycles and met you, oppa, solely to experience this moment.]

After several rounds of review and revision, Ha-yul left a glowing five-star rating.

From that point forward, she, who had always been a human jellyfish of sorts, transformed into something more akin to a snail. Thus, the stories circulating across the Eurasian continent became slightly more specific:

"They say a father-daughter pair is wandering around a ruined world. The father carries a room-sized jige, and they seem oddly carefree as they travel. But something about them is just extremely suspicious."

It was only natural that such tales wouldn't be well-received. To the average person, the concept of it must have seemed utterly bizarre. Who could possibly imagine that, in an apocalyptic world full of perils, an Awakener would carry a jige just to fulfill their comrade's wish to travel?

Even I hadn't seen this coming.

As a result, urban legends about the Snail Man began springing up

everywhere—from Moscow to Istanbul to Prague.

“Ah... I’m jealous...”

Even stranger still, this wasn’t the end of the rumors.

“I want to try riding the guild leader’s jige too...”

Sim Ah-ryeon—buried in SG Net and firmly planted in her corner—sneaking glances with barely concealed envy as Ha-yul rode around in the jige during our travels.

To be more precise, her glances were in no way sneaky. She made sure I saw her envious expression and got the message loud and clear.

Her foolish-looking face was deceptive. I knew better than to fall for it. Every action and gesture from Ah-ryeon carried a highly calculated, political undertone.

“Ah-ryeon. This jige is for one person only.”

“Huh? Oh, of course! That’s obvious, but... since the guild leader is super strong, wouldn’t it be possible to modify it into a two-seater?”

“Ah-ryeon, I’m your guild leader. Look closely—this is not a mode of transportation.”

“B-but you let Ha-yul ride...”

“.....”

Spinoff: Supporting Character Joins the Cast!

This marked the historic moment when the infamous "OldManGoryeo Villain" herself climbed aboard the jige, a device synonymous with the Goryeo dynasty.

During our travels, Ha-yul muttered her complaints.

[Ah-ryeon unnie is too gloomy. She’s just upset because my world travel diary on SG Net became popular, and now she wants to copy

me for clout.]

“H-Ha-yul, isn’t that a bit egotistical? Clout-chasing? Why would I waste my time on something so meaningless, so unproductive? Don’t forget, I’m already a literary giant whose average views are 2.6 times higher than the so-called LiteraryGirl.”

[Wow. No way.]

[Seriously.]

[Hah.]

[If that’s how we’re measuring things, my travel diary gets twice your views, Ah-ryeon unnie.]

“Well… that’s because it’s the free-for-all board. Obviously, there’s way more traffic than on the serialized fiction board. If I were posting there, my views would be at least five times higher!”

[Legendary.]

Don’t misunderstand. These two were indeed the same Awakeners who, during the 687th cycle, fought in the Final Defense of Humanity. One died heroically on the frontlines, and the other held the rear, tirelessly healing the wounded until succumbing to Corruption.

This was precisely why it was crucial to separate the person from their work—the literary giant. the OldManGoryeo, the Awakener from their private life.

Human beings were like trees. With time, growth rings accumulated, layering one over the other. Branches extended in different directions.

Was OldManGoryeo, SG Net’s eternal mischief-maker, the trunk of this tree? Or was the Northern Saintess of the Final Defense, a central figure in the Final Defense Line, its true core?

Personally, I believed there was no point in discussing which was which. Both were just branches.

The trunk was always the same—the living, breathing human standing in front of me. This human liked café mochas, spoke with a stutter, and often laughed awkwardly.

“Oh… Oh?” Ah-ryeon suddenly stretched an arm over my shoulder, pointing somewhere. “Guild Leader. Over there…”

There was no need for her to point. Even before she noticed, I had already detected the Anomaly in my field of vision.

“Yes. It’s a railroad.”

“A railroad… Do you think it’s dangerous?”

As soon as the railroad came into view, Ah-ryeon immediately assumed it was dangerous. Her assumption wasn’t without merit.

In this ruined world, railroads almost always heralded a specific menace: the Trolley Dilemma.

The Trolley Dilemma was a kind of grotesque, ethical horror scenario.

Q: Please make a choice. The selected individuals will die!

A: Five violent criminals.

B: One con artist.

The setup revolved around choosing whom to save and whom to kill, a quintessential moral dilemma.

Naturally, in the real world, there weren’t lunatic serial killers tying people to railroad tracks to force such choices. It was entirely a thought experiment—a fictional problem used to spark philosophical debates.

But when had Anomalies ever bothered themselves with nuances like human logic? These creatures brought the Trolley Dilemma into reality in the most horrifyingly literal way imaginable.

“Please! Save us! I beg you!”

“H-heeelp! I don’t want to die!”

And sure enough, people were writhing and struggling, tied up along the tracks.

This was nothing new. The Trolley Dilemma appeared frequently and indiscriminately—be it in the Korean Peninsula or elsewhere. It was practically an Anomaly cliché. The methods to counter it were well-documented, and the process of eliminating it was straightforward. Truthfully, it wasn’t even one of the harder Anomalies to subdue.

But then—

“Oh... Oh my?”

“……”

“Hmm.”

Even so, Ah-ryeon, Ha-yul, and I found ourselves pausing in unison.

For professional Awakeners like us—each deeply accustomed to dealing with Anomalies—this hesitation was unnatural. Reality, however, had a knack for surpassing even the wildest expectations.

“G-Guild Leader.”

“Yes?”

“Those people on the tracks... They’re being tied up by other people.”

“It appears my eyes are seeing the same thing as yours.”

Who could have foreseen such a sight?

The ones actively binding the victims weren’t Anomalies at all. They were fellow humans. Ordinary, unmistakably human beings.

More than that, they weren’t just a few. It was an entire group—a throng of hundreds—all working diligently to tie people up.

Footnotes:

1 - A *jige* is a traditional Korean carrying frame.

Chapter 265

The Murderer II

Sinnoa

“Wh-what should we do, Guild Leader?”

“Let’s observe for now.”

No matter how many millennia I’d surpassed with ease, I, the Undertaker, was not foolish enough to believe the world revolved around me.

In this world, there were as many circumstances as there were people. Even if these thugs were kidnapping people and tying them to the railroad tracks, it wouldn’t do to act rashly and interfere without a plan.

Instead, we set down our burdensome loads (calling them “luggage” would be a gross understatement) and approached the tracks stealthily.

That’s when we overheard their conversation.

“Hey! Did you count them up properly?” a burly man, who seemed to be their leader, shouted at the top of his lungs. I guessed he was the leader based on his ostentatious gold necklace and rings. Only someone protected by their group would dare flaunt such accessories in the apocalypse. Otherwise, it was as good as declaring, *"I’m no longer human, I’m a golden goblin."*

“Yes, boss! They’re tightly bound!”

“You idiot! I’m asking if the headcount is correct! It’s 133 people! Today, we must offer exactly 133 people to Lord Trolley! Don’t waste any precious slaves!”

“Yes, sir! I’ll double-check!”

“Ugh, I can’t rely on you lot for anything. Damn it, I can’t relax even for a second.”

“Haha! I swear, it took ages to teach these guys how to tie proper knots!”

Lord Trolley?

I exchanged glances with Ha-yul. The two of us didn’t need to speak, we could communicate swiftly using our unique sign language.

This sign language, for the record, was something only Ha-yul and I could use. It incorporated Korean, Japanese, minute nuances of Aura, and secret signals only the two of us understood.

[What are they saying?]

[A gang of thugs. They’re calling the people tied to the tracks “slaves.”]

[They’re villains for sure?]

[Probably. Especially since they’re addressing the Trolley Anomaly with “Lord,” which reeks of a typical Forsaken Village setup.]

[Oh.]

Forsaken Village.

The term referred to settlements thoroughly corrupted by the Void poison. Outwardly, these places looked no different from ordinary towns or cities, but the air carried an eerie, twisted vibe because their societal nerve centers were consumed by Anomalies.

For instance, the Eastern Holy Kingdom also qualified as a Forsaken Village since it was a community that worshipped the Anomaly Mo Gwang-seo Christ as a deity. The scale was simply upgraded from a “village” to a “nation.”

“Wh-what are you two whispering about? Please, speak so I can understand!”

Ah-ryeon, who always became visibly anxious when left out, voiced her complaint. After listening to my explanation, she rested her chin on her hand with a huff. Meanwhile, Ha-yul gave her a smug look, clearly enjoying the fact that she couldn't understand our sign language.

“G-Guild Leader, have incidents like this happened in previous cycles?”

“No. This is the first time I’ve taken this route. Also, the areas near India are usually wiped out within five years, so I haven’t had much contact with survivors.”

“Hmm...”

Ah-ryeon fell into thought, likely devising another of her peculiar schemes.

It was then that we heard it.

- *Bwooooooooooo.*

In the distance, a train horn, or more precisely, a steam whistle, resounded. Both our group and the gang, as well as the people tied to the tracks, instinctively turned to the source of the sound.

In a world where civilization had collapsed, it was impossible for a steam locomotive to function properly. This could only mean one thing: the Trolley Dilemma Anomaly was approaching.

“Lord Trolley has descended!” the leader shouted. “Everyone, get off the tracks! Beat the drum! Welcome and worship Lord Trolley!”

“Trolley! Trolley! Trolley! Trolley!”

“Everyone, gather here!”

The residents of the Forsaken Village stepped back and began chanting bizarrely. Their appearance didn’t resemble ancient ceremonial worship. Most were dressed relatively well, wearing suits, though many were frayed and tattered. It felt more like a cult gathering—complete with unnerving fervor.

Well, most Forsaken Villages were like this.

- *Bwooooooo!*

Chug-chug, chug-chug!

The Anomaly train came into view, close enough to see with the naked eye.

The hundred or so captives tied to the rails were trembling violently from the heavy vibrations coming from the ground. Tears flowed freely as screams and wails erupted all around.

They could have been criminals receiving divine punishment, to be fair, but the sight of infants no older than two among them suggested otherwise.

[Oppa.]

Ha-yul tugged at my sleeve.

“Hmm.”

Nodding, I shot forward from the underbrush.

If Ha-yul asked, there was no question—I would act.

The sudden sight of me dashing into the open, straight toward the train, startled the Forsaken Village residents.

“H-huh?”

“What the hell is that?”

The Trolley Dilemma was a village-grade Anomaly that could appear anywhere in the world. Thus, there were numerous methods for exterminating it. Among them was one simple but extreme method that only a select few Awakeners could utilize.

“Look at me!”

This involved throwing oneself directly in front of the train, before

any of the captives.

More specifically, crashing into the Trolley with one's own body!

The Anomaly's face was visible through the window of the oncoming steam locomotive. It resembled a train engineer, but its face was a dark shadow, unreadable yet somehow betraying its hesitation.

Fair enough. It was likely the first time this Anomaly had encountered a crazy Awakener throwing themselves into its path.

Shouts erupted from behind me.

"Hey, hey! What the hell are you doing, you bastard!"

"That guy's insane!"

"It's going to hit him! He's gonna die!"

- *KA-BOOOOOOOM!*

A thunderous crash rang out.

Of course, I hadn't simply thrown my body at it recklessly. I had wrapped myself completely in Aura before impact. Otherwise, it would've been impossible to outrun the train in the first place.

"Hup."

The impact was substantial, a combination of the train's physical force and the Anomaly's unique curse that "anyone hit by it must die." For a village-grade Anomaly, it was absurdly lethal.

However, its ultimate weakness was clear: if a faster entity collided with Trolley head-on before it struck its victims, who was hitting whom?

Caught in this paradox, the wheels screeched against the tracks, sparks flying in all directions.

- *Screeeeeeeech!*

I spread my arms and embraced the train, bracing my feet against the ground to absorb the impact.

The Trolley Dilemma came to a dead stop. A single human had halted the train.

Even with my back turned, I could feel the astonishment radiating from the residents behind me.

“Good heavens...”

“What... What is he? Is he even human?”

“An Avatar! He’s an Avatar of the gods!”

And just like that, the Anomaly known as Trolley Dilemma vanished without a trace, as if it had never existed.

“Whew.”

It was a natural outcome.

The moment someone “collided with the train on the tracks,” the Anomaly had to disappear according to its own rules.

Village-grade Anomalies could sometimes be dispatched this easily. However, if the NRMC Captain were here, she’d likely swear, “What the fuck? If it was this easy, why did the world even collapse?”

Well, the pre-100th cycle version of me wouldn’t have dared attempt such a brute-force method.

“Ahhhh!”

“What... What’s happening to us?”

While I had stopped the train, my comrades hadn’t been idle. Looking back, I saw the Forsaken Village residents writhing on the ground, cocooned in threads like trapped prey. Naturally, this was Ha-yul’s doing. While the residents were distracted by my stunt, she had swiftly bound them using her signature Puppeteer’s threads.

“Ugh, guh! You crazy bitch, what the—!”

“Yup.”

Meanwhile, Ah-ryeon stomped on the faces of the webbed-up villagers, seemingly enjoying herself. Though the trapped villagers tried to protest, she paid them no mind.

She really had a knack for drawing aggro, didn’t she? It was reassuring to know we were in such “capable” hands.

“Wh-who are you? Where do you come from that you would dare attack us like this?” The leader, surprisingly composed despite his predicament, attempted dialogue in accented English. His tone was formal, but it carried a distinct Indian cadence.

I brought my hands together in a gesture of prayer and answered, “We are travelers.”

Hearing my fluent Hindi, the leader’s eyes widened in shock. “Travelers?”

“Yes. We hail from the distant East. These two are priestesses blessed by the goddesses, and I am but a humble monk who accompanies them on their journey.”

“Goddesses?”

The villagers murmured among themselves.

I gave a meaningful glance to Ha-yul and Ah-ryeon. Catching on quickly, Ha-yul activated her Aura. A radiant, golden Aura burst forth, leaving the villagers in awe.

“A-amazing!”

The leader’s eyes bulged as he stared at the golden pillar of Aura.

Aura could be wielded by any sufficiently trained Awakener, but the structured techniques for mastering it had only ever been conceptualized by me. As my direct disciple, Ha-yul’s Aura manipulation skills were among the best, even in a competitive

region like Busan. The golden Aura, towering over ten meters high, left the villagers utterly dumbfounded.

“N-not fair! I can do it too!”

Not wanting to be left out, Ah-ryeon mimicked Ha-yul’s display. The villagers, who were already overwhelmed, practically fell apart as her Aura joined the spectacle.

Ah-ryeon seemed to relish the attention. Back in Korea, showing off her Aura had only ever earned her ridicule. Comments like “Is that all?” or “She’s just another one of *those*” had kept her from truly enjoying her strength.

“That’s enough, Ha-yul. You’ve made your point. But can you enhance the effect? Add some grandeur with a subtle Aura pulse.”

[Anything specific?]

“Doesn’t matter. Make it sound like divine decree or something.”

[Got it. Just gotta spout nonsense.]

“...Fine.”

Ha-yul concentrated, spreading her Aura outward while generating an eerie, resonant vibration that mimicked a voice. Though the tones lacked consistency or clarity, they created an impression of divine command.

“O-oh, my god...”

“It’s divine! Truly, an Avatar of the gods!”

The chaotic resonance only made the villagers more convinced. To their uninformed eyes, it must have felt like the heavens themselves were speaking.

I smiled serenely and addressed the group, exuding calm authority.

“I apologize for intervening without knowing your full circumstances. However, as a monk devoted to protecting life, I

cannot ignore the sight of over a hundred lives at risk. Why did you use the train to attempt such a mass sacrifice?"

"..."

"The priestesses I serve are compassionate and will judge your reasons fairly. Speak the truth, and it may yet save you."

While Ha-yul employed visual intimidation, I opted for an invisible approach. Spreading my Aura into the ground, I directed it subtly toward the villagers, creating the sensation of unseen pressure closing in on them.

The combination of these tactics had the desired effect.

"I-I understand." The leader's face paled as he stammered, "We'll untie the slaves immediately. However, I cannot make such decisions alone. May we escort you to our city to meet with our leader?"

"Of course. Please, lead the way."

With that, we were formally invited to the city—a place that, in the time before the collapse of civilization, had been located near New Delhi, India.

Carrying a massive load on my back, I allowed Ha-yul and Ah-ryeon to ride on top as we moved. The leader watched us with a mix of disbelief and trepidation.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"N-no, not at all. Do travelers from the East often use such... mounts? May I ask where exactly you hail from?"

"The Japanese archipelago."

"Ah, I see. Please, this way..."

Forgive me, magical girls. I've done so much for you already, consider this a favor returned.

Chapter 266

The Murderer III

Sinnoa

Our group was led into the city. Though not as grand as Busan, the city was relatively orderly with some semblance of law and order still intact.

After spending a night in a guest house provided by the city's mayor, we were formally invited to the town hall the following day.

"Ah, you've arrived. Welcome, esteemed guests. I am Manav, the mayor of New Delhi."

"You may call me Undertaker."

"A pleasure, Mr. Undertaker. Welcome."

The man wore traditional attire topped with a warm smile and a pair of glasses, behind the frame of which shone eyes that were both cautious and friendly. Despite the scholarly air he exuded, his muscular shoulders and the scar on his cheek tempered that impression.

"Of course, strictly speaking, this isn't New Delhi but New-New Delhi," he continued. "The cities here have been destroyed and rebuilt multiple times, you see."

"You seem quite young."

And he did. The man who introduced himself as Manav looked to be perhaps in his early- to mid-forties at most. It was surprising, considering his position as the leader of one of the last surviving major cities on the Indian subcontinent.

"Ah..." Manav drawled, looking momentarily flustered at my comment. "It's not due to my own ability. My predecessors have... disappeared for various reasons."

There was no need to activate mind-reading skills. For a fleeting moment, his gaze through the lenses of his glasses seemed to say, *"You're one to talk."*

As a rule, Awakeners aged slower as their mastery of Aura deepened. While it was rare for one to reverse aging like the Sword Marquess, pseudo-immortality wasn't uncommon.

In other words, if someone appeared to be in their twenties despite their true age, it was a testament to their exceptional potential. To someone like Manav, I must have seemed like an Awakener of unparalleled talent.

"Call it fate, perhaps."

"Fate, huh...?" Manav's smile grew faintly bitter. Weariness lingered in the corners of his lips. "Ah, while I'm thinking of it, we prepared various amenities to welcome you, but you were so adamant in declining them. Was there something the matter?"

"There's no need to worry. We have no intention of exploiting you for offerings under the guise of divine authority. Rest assured."

"Haha. As you can see, our city isn't exactly prosperous. I was merely concerned that our hospitality might have fallen short."

Although Manav laughed good-naturedly, nothing in his demeanor suggested a sense of trust in us. Unlike the villagers we first encountered, he didn't seem to believe our claims of being descending goddesses. With the vantage point provided to him as the city's leader, he must have seen and heard too much to take such stories at face value.

[For such a large city, this town hall office is kinda basic, honestly.]

"I-I know, right? The guest house we stayed in felt more luxurious..."

Ha-yul and Ah-ryeon, unfamiliar with either English or Hindi, whispered idly to each other behind me.

[Don't you find it odd seeing oppa speaking foreign languages so

fluently?]

“A-ah, you too? Honestly, it feels strange to me too. But outside, everyone treats the guild leader as if he’s some kind of sage.”

[He’s a Three Kingdoms Anomaly, isn’t he?]

“Well, he only brings up *Three Kingdoms* stuff with close acquaintances. Honestly, we’re probably the only ones who know that ZERO_SUGAR is also our guild leader...”

[Creepy.]

I cleared my throat, cutting off their chatter.

“Let me be direct, Mayor Manav. You seem fully aware that the Trolley Dilemma is an Anomaly. Why, then, do you tolerate its worship as a deity?”

Manav stared at me for a long moment.

It wasn’t the gaze of someone deep in thought. Rather, his exhaustion seemed to weigh down his focus.

I, too, prepared myself to judge him based on his response. Was this a man fit to entrust with the Beacon of Sacred Fire?

“An Anomaly... It’s been years since someone referred to Trolley in such terms. You’re correct, it is an Anomaly.”

The mayor then rose to his feet.

“Would you follow me?”

The place Manav led us to wasn’t a secret lair or sacrificial altar. It was a simple shack—by apocalypse standards, an ordinary home.

“Ah! Pandit ji!”

A child brewing chai under a tin roof beamed when he saw Manav. The city folk appeared to address Manav as "Pandit ji."

“Yes, Aakash beta. Are your siblings well?”

“They’re by the river, breaking rocks!”

“These are my guests. We’ll just have a quick look around and leave.”

“Okay!”

Manav pulled a biscuit from his pocket and handed it to the child. The child giggled with delight at the snack, which resembled a Lotus cookie.

It was hard to imagine this man as the mastermind ordering thugs to bind 133 slaves to railroad tracks.

In the cramped shack, Manav muttered under his breath, “The population here feels excessive, doesn’t it?”

“Hmm?”

“By my estimation, New Delhi has over 100,000 residents. When you include the surrounding areas, the number doubles or even triples. While other nearby cities have crumbled from internal and external strife, this place has managed to survive relatively intact.”

I had to admit, it was curious. “What’s your secret?”

“We owe it to this.”

Manav rubbed his foot against the shack’s floor, revealing something buried in the dirt. I recognized it immediately.

“A... section of railroad?”

“Part of it.”

The rusty steel beam appeared to have been torn from a railway and embedded into the ground like an underground sewer system.

I tilted my head. Burying metal rails in the ground didn’t seem particularly useful.

“This is part of a small railway network running beneath the city,” Manav explained. “All authorized buildings here are connected to it underground.”

“And why would you do such a thing?”

“To utilize the Trolley Dilemma.”

The words that followed were shocking.

“I was once abducted by the Trolley Dilemma and tied to the tracks. Fortunately, the train struck someone on a different track, and I survived. But that incident revealed something unusual to me.”

“Unusual?”

“Survivors of the Trolley Dilemma—those who lived because the train took the opposite track—are immune to attacks from Anomalies for an entire day.”

My eyes widened in disbelief. “Immune?”

“Exactly. It’s as if Anomalies ignore them entirely. It’s not quite ‘invincibility,’ but more like an ‘invisibility status.’”

Manav’s explanation was simple:

Q: Choose one track. The people on the selected track will die.

A: Track A—5 violent criminals

B: Track B—1 con artist

If you chose B and the train killed the lone con artist, the five violent criminals on Track A would, for the next 24 hours, be completely safe from all Anomalies. Unless they actively sought out danger, no Anomaly would come near them.

“I had no idea the Trolley Dilemma had such an effect.”

Yet in hindsight, it made sense why I had never noticed.

“For someone like me, it didn’t matter. I could just bulldoze through the Trolley Dilemma without losing anyone,” I murmured.

In my hands, the Anomaly was so weak that I could nullify its effects entirely, saving both tracks.

It wasn’t just me, either. On SG Net, strategies for handling the Trolley Dilemma were widely shared, enabling many Awakeners to counter it effectively. But here, in New Delhi, it was different. Sacrifices were common whenever the Anomaly appeared, and over time, a pattern emerged: survivors enjoyed a day of Anomaly-free safety.

“Fascinating, isn’t it? An Anomaly that brings not only curses, but blessings as well.”

“Hmm.”

“Come this way. Aakash, thank you for the tea.”

“Bye, Pandit ji! Come back soon!”

Manav next led us to the city square, where a section of the railway was prominently exposed above ground.

“By offering a fixed number of sacrifices each day, the rest of the population stays safe, for at least 24 hours.”

“…”

“After realizing this, I began constructing a railway network throughout the city and convinced the citizens that the Trolley Dilemma was a divine blessing.”

As the sun climbed high in the sky, homeless residents gathered in the square. They knelt beside the exposed railway and began bowing in reverence, chanting prayers to the Trolley.

“It’s almost time,” Manav said, glancing at his watch.

“Time for what?”

“Our daily ritual. Around now, my younger brother, whom you chastised yesterday, will be offering 113 slaves as sacrifices.”

“…”

“In exchange, the rest of the population, over 100,000 citizens, will enjoy a day of relative peace.”

Somewhere in the distance, the faint crash of a steam engine wailed.

“Another day of peace for our city.”

Manav’s tone carried the weariness of a man who had only come this far by holding fast to his belief that he was doing right.

Turning to me, he asked, “Can you believe it? Before the blessings of the Trolley, every day here was hell.”

I hesitated to chastise the pragmatist before me.

Just as every individual had their reasons, so did every city in this ruined world. Manav was undeniably a murderer, slaughtering over 100 slaves daily to sustain his city. Yet he was also a protector, sacrificing everything to keep his people alive for one more day. Who could dismiss his desperate struggle to prolong his city’s survival?

If I were strong enough to bear the burdens of the entire world, perhaps I could pass judgment. But as someone who could barely manage my responsibilities in the Korean Peninsula, this was not my place.

However…

“Believing you can control an Anomaly is dangerous.”

As a specialist in Anomalies, I offered him this advice.

“You may already know this, but Anomalies are far from predictable. They’re fickle and unpredictable. Today, 113 sacrifices might suffice, but tomorrow, it might demand 1,113.”

“There… haven’t been any issues so far.”

“Then consider yourself lucky. But never assume you can fully control an Anomaly.”

The ambition to harness Anomalies for humanity’s benefit was a dangerous fantasy.

Even for a regressor like me, with infinite retries, commanding Anomalies was no easy feat. I had only managed to subjugate a few, like the Tutorial Fairy and Inunaki Tunnel.

“I’ll keep your advice in mind,” Manav replied politely, but his stiff expression betrayed his thoughts.

Come to think of it, I realized, *since introducing himself, he hasn’t called me Undertaker once.*

Perhaps he still saw me as an unwelcome intruder.

“Thank you for visiting. I worry that our hospitality may have been insufficient. Would you consider staying a few more days?”

His words were heavy with implication, but I shook my head.

“I didn’t come here to be pampered. Our journey is long, and we must be going. I wish you success.”

There is an epilogue.

Years later, after returning to Busan, we set out on another world tour. I had been planning to explore the regions beyond the Himalayas and decided to revisit New-New Delhi. I was curious about the ambitious young man who sought to protect humanity by harnessing Anomalies.

When we reached the vicinity of New Delhi, though, Ah-ryeon tilted her head in confusion.

“Huh? Wasn’t it around here?”

“It was.”

But there was no trace of life.

The city had fallen to ruin. Bodies were scattered everywhere, and eerily, all the corpses lay on the railway tracks.

“It’s total annihilation...”

The cause wasn’t hard to guess.

One day, as usual, Manav must have prepared 113 sacrifices. The citizens, standing on the tracks, would have offered prayers to Trolley for another peaceful day.

But that day, the train ignored the tied slaves and struck the citizens instead.

Why? Perhaps the cumulative number of slaves sacrificed—100,000, 200,000, or even 300,000—had surpassed the city’s population. From the perspective of the Trolley Anomaly, eliminating the citizens instead of 113 slaves might have been the “utilitarian” choice.

Whatever the reason, one thing was clear: The citizens who had stood on the tracks that day had all died. The prosperous city of New-New Delhi was erased in an instant.

“They sought one more day of peace and brought upon themselves a single day of annihilation.”

“Pardon?” Ah-ryeon questioned at my sudden proclamation.

“It’s nothing. This place is a land of the dead now. Let’s move on.”

Adjusting the load on my back, I glanced at the city’s remains one last time and thought this:

Compared to humans who divided themselves into citizens or slaves and justified it with religion, perhaps Anomalies, which ignored such trivial distinctions, were the true utilitarians.

Chapter 267

The Merger I

Sinnoa

The 690th regression cycle had finally arrived.

And if you've been paying close attention to my tale, you'd already know that every fifth or tenth cycle, I'd take a "vacation." What's there to hide?

"I feel like I'm in desperate need of a break lately."

"..."

"Mmph! Bmph, mmph! Mmmph!"

Back during the defeat of the Mastermind in the 688th cycle, Infinite Void implanted "nonexistent memories" in my mind, particularly of an older twin sister between the Cheon Yo-hwa siblings. Thanks to that, I was force-fed a fabricated narrative where a colleague I had never met sacrificed herself to subdue the Outer God.

Naturally, the ordeal caused me immense stress.

I'll admit it. Going on a world tour with Ha-yul during the 689th cycle under the pretense of exploring beyond the Himalayas and Ural Mountains was primarily for stress relief.

A warm smile crept onto my face as I recalled, "Even so, I endured. Abandoning my responsibilities for a break whenever things got tough was against the principles of a regressor like me."

"..."

"Mmhmph! Mmmph! Mph!"

"Luckily, the 690th cycle was the one where I could take a proper

break if I held on just that little bit longer. Oh, my young apprentice, you can't possibly imagine how much I've looked forward to this moment."

"…"

"Hmph!"

Ha-yul stared at me intently. Soon enough, the maid-like puppet standing behind her opened its jaw with a mechanical motion, and from it came a question:

"Who?"

For the record, this was our first time meeting.

Like any teenager in the throes of adolescence, Ha-yul was personally disproving the Electra Complex as little more than a hollow theory.[1] In other words, she was in the middle of enthusiastically torturing her father, the leader of the Second Provisional Government.

The source of the muffled *"Mmph!"* sounds? That would be Jung Sang-guk, gagged and seated in a torture chair down in the basement.

"I'm a regressor, Ha-yul. Ordinarily, I'd take more care in orchestrating our meeting and intervening cautiously in your father-daughter dynamics. But since this is my vacation cycle, I want to skip to the important part."

"Breaking into my house uninvited and acting all familiar? Are you insane?"

"Try to understand. Sometimes, I need a day like this for my mental health."

"This is weird. I don't understand a word you're saying."

At this point in her life—before she received my expert guidance—Ha-yul exuded what could bluntly be described as a menacingly grim aura, as evidenced by the impassive glare she was currently

shooting my way.

Even the bravest of the brave would hesitate to pick a fight with her as she was now. She radiated an energy that screamed, *"Mess with me, and we both die."*

A petite figure confined to a wheelchair, yet emanating both brutality and fragility.

It was a deadly combination.

"I don't know who sent you."

Ha-yul clenched her fists, and threads of puppet wire tightened around Jeong Sang-guk's neck.

"Urgh! Huff, mmph!"

A little more pressure, and his neck would snap.

A truly explosive situation.

"If you're here to save this man, forget it. Don't interfere. Whether you're from Fukuoka City Hall or the Provisional Government, I'll hunt you down and kill you all."

"No, feel free to kill him."

Ha-yul and her maid-like puppet tilted their heads in confusion simultaneously.

At this point, she still struggled to control the puppet smoothly, finding it difficult to coordinate its movements. However, moments like this really highlighted just how much effort Ha-yul put into her training down the road. In later cycles, she would effortlessly command hundreds of puppets simultaneously, deploying an "army of puppets" to single-handedly hold an entire frontline.

"Doesn't matter?"

"Not at all," I confirmed. "Ha-yul, you don't remember this, but over the course of hundreds—no, over five hundred—cycles, you've

killed Jung Sang-guk in every one."

"..."

"Even brushing sleeves with someone can be considered a connection from a past life. At this point, your patricide transcends cycles and borders on karmic inevitability."

"I don't understand what you're talking about..."

Naturally.

Unless someone fully trusted me as a regressor, I'd appear to be just another shady intruder with absurd excuses, casually bypassing security to stroll into a heavily guarded basement.

"Don't worry," I assured, smiling gently. "I anticipated this reaction and asked the Ha-yul from a previous cycle to write a heartfelt letter to her current self."

"...?"

"The Ha-yul from the 689th cycle said you'd trust me immediately once I read this letter. Let's see. *Ahem.*"

Clearing my throat, I prepared my voice for the grand recital.

And thus, I opened the time capsule Ha-yul had left for herself.

"Hello, idiot. I'm you from ten years in the future."

"...?"

"For starters, the guy in front of you is probably dressed like a barista. He'll seem suspicious, but trust him. Not because he's normal, he's an infamous idiot."

"...?"

"And he knows more about you than you know about yourself. For example, he and I both know that the maid-like puppet behind you is actually your biological mother."

“...?!”

“He also knows you secretly wrote a bucket list spanning nine A4 pages in your diary. Thanks to him, about half of it was completed, and I have no regrets in life.”

“...?!?!”

“When we met, he asked me to come up with a magic phrase to convince you. I thought for three minutes and realized no such thing exists. Still, if you’re planning to kill yourself, why not delay it for ten days?”

“...”

“Finish off the guy you’re torturing and go on a little trip with him. Trust me, you’re doomed in twenty years anyway when the world ends. I’m off now. Good luck.”

Silence enveloped the basement.

Different expressions danced across Ha-yul’s face in a profound war of emotional conflict.

Jung Sang-guk, who had also heard the letter, scowled harder than ever. Though his gag muffled his voice, he seemed to be screaming, *“What in the world is this crap?”*

“That’s... me in ten years?”

“A future version of you edited for clarity, to be exact. The original letter ended with, ‘Did you know? Reversing “suicide” spells “edicius” and that means to become alive? What a revelation!’”

“.....”

“I omitted that part because I thought it might be too overwhelming for you. You’re welcome.”

After that, Ha-yul peppered me with questions, primarily to verify my claim of being a regressor.

“Fine. I’ll trust you.”

It took two hours of relentless interrogation, but she finally granted me a sliver of trust.

“You’re saying this is your vacation cycle, and you’ve decided to spend it with me?”

I nodded. “Exactly.”

“Why me?”

“Because your past self made a wish, and I have something I want to do with you too.”

“A wish?”

“This.”

I pulled out a notebook from my jacket.

Ha-yul’s golden eyes widened, for this notebook was none other than the one she had hidden deep within her mansion—a record of her bucket list.

On the last page, bold letters declared the following:

No. 100 Wish

Build a giant combined robot.

Pilot it and self-destruct (★★).

The giant robot should double as an aircraft carrier, housing smaller mobile suits inside (★★★).

Detailed specifications and designs for the robot filled the margins of the page.

A triumphant grin spread across my face.

“Shall we build it? A giant robot.”

“Deal.”

Without hesitation, Ha-yul clasped my hand.

Thus began our intergenerational collaboration.

Even for a regressor who had cycled through hundreds of regressions, building a giant robot from scratch was no small feat. The resources and manpower required would push the limits of what the Korean Peninsula could provide. It was a monumental task, one that seemed almost impossible to accomplish.

For this project, Ha-yul was indispensable. On top of that, we needed the help of another Awakener.

“And that’s you, Noh Do-hwa.”

“…”

“Of course, you might be wondering why on earth you should cooperate on such a ridiculous project. But as much as you dislike it, your contribution would stabilize the mental state of this regressor. And as you know, keeping my mental health stable benefits your future self.”

“…”

“Sure, you may not care now. But can you confidently say your future selves will feel the same? Imagine the karmic backlash they’d endure if this project’s failure caused problems in subsequent cycles.”

“…”

“Endure a little pain now, and your future selves will enjoy the next nine cycles in relative ease. Help me.”

For a long, silent moment, Noh Do-hwa kept her lips pursed. Then…

“What the actual fuck— Fine. Fine!”

Her words dripped with reluctant enthusiasm, but it was enough. With her cooperation secured, we dove headfirst into experimentation.

“Do-hwa, your ability is prosthetic creation. By crafting artificial limbs and attaching them to others, you make them feel as if they were moving their real body parts.”

“I’m aware, but...”

“Ha-yul, your ability is puppet manipulation. By connecting your strings, you can control anything the way you desire.”

“Yeah, so?”

“We’re going to combine the two.”

Do-hwa set to work, crafting prosthetic limbs—only, these weren’t ordinary prosthetics. Each arm and leg was massive, towering nearly two meters tall. Something of this size would be impossible for any human to move.

But what if Ha-yul were to use her puppet strings?

“Ha-yul, link your strings to the prosthetics as if you’re connecting nerves.”

“Got it.”

The enormous prosthetics, made from hollow metal frames, were heavy despite their skeletal structure. Ha-yul’s strings wrapped tightly around them, securing the connection. Each string linked directly to her physical body.

“Can you move them?”

“I’ll give it a try.”

The first day was a failure.

The two-meter-tall prosthetics, attached to a rudimentary frame, toppled over with a deafening crash.

Despite this, no one felt disheartened. After all, it had been years since Ha-yul last stood on two legs. The attempt was as much about rehabilitation as it was a technical test.

On the second day, Ha-yul fell again, this time attempting an awkward breakfall. The result? A more spectacular collapse.

Still, her expression—a peculiar, determined impassiveness—spoke volumes. She got back up without a word.

On the third day, the fourth day, the fifth...

The attempts continued.

By the seventh day, progress was undeniable.

Thoom!

A massive metal foot slammed against the ground, sending tremors through the earth.

Though the cockpit was open and exposed, Ha-yul endured the vibrations and pressed forward.

Even as the robot wavered, threatening to topple, she took a steadying step.

And so, the two-meter-tall robotic frame stood upright for the first time, as if this was what it had been designed to do all along.

“Whoa! Whooooa!”

Watching the scene unfold from close by, Do-hwa and I couldn’t help but cheer.

“It’s a success! Pilot Ha-yul, it’s a resounding success! Right now, you’re the brightest star in the world!”

“Haa...”

Ha-yul wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, her hair damp and clinging to her skin. Her sweat sparkled under the light, creating a dazzling effect.

Then the first-ever bipedal robot pilot in history uttered her thoughts, cool and composed.

“This is a small step for one human, but a giant leap for mankind.”

Beside me, Do-hwa muttered under her breath, “No, no. It’s the opposite—it’s a giant step for you and a microscopic one for mankind...”

Thus, the theme for the 690th cycle was decided: a robot saga!

Footnotes:

1 - An **Electra complex**, the female version of the male Oedipus complex, is a psychoanalytic theory that describes a young girl's attraction to her father, while also feeling competitive with her mother. It's thought to develop during the phallic stage of psychosexual development, which is between the ages of three and six.

Chapter 268

The Merger II

Sinnoa

As someone with countless cycles as a regressor under his belt, I had developed some bad habits, chief among them being an obsession with "route optimization."

How should I introduce myself Dang Seo-rin to establish the best possible relationship? Would deliberately letting Cheon Yo-hwa land a kick during our first encounter at Baekhwa Girls' High School actually improve my standing? Or perhaps Sim Ah-ryeon was best approached after she began her OldManGoryeo *activities* so I could at least evoke some semblance of shame in her? And so on.

As my routines became more and more rigid, reality itself started to lose its luster.

There's a reason why so many regressors in fiction are depicted as mentally unstable. After all, sometimes, we human beings just need to chase not efficiency but romance.

"Let's abandon Busan."

Thus, it was time to bid a fond farewell to the city of Busan, which had long served as a bastion in my life as a regressor.

Of course, Do-hwa's expression soured the moment she heard my declaration. A trickle of coffee escaped her lips.

As someone whose brain never even registered the word "romance" in its dictionary, her response was to be expected.

"Excuse me?"

"Do-hwa, you need to free yourself from the idea that we must remain grounded in some city to fight until the end of days. Ha-yul, bring it out."

“Okay, oppa. You mean this, right?”

Ha-yul strode forward, unfolding a blueprint onto the table.

Having grown accustomed to Do-hwa’s prosthetics, she no longer relied on a wheelchair and had even mastered her ability to produce a pseudo-voice using Aura.

The blueprint was labeled as follows:

Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Fortress City

『BusaN』

The coffee streaming from the corner of Do-hwa’s lips turned into a veritable flood. She looked like she needed a dam installed posthaste.

In this ruthless era of the apocalypse, everyone was expected to fend for themselves, so no one bothered to wipe her face clean. Instead, we proceeded with the presentation.

“Abandonment is liberation, a transcendence. Just as a caterpillar sheds its cocoon to soar into the skies, we too must leave Busan behind to ascend to greater heights.”

“Busan, the last line of defense on the Korean Peninsula, will no longer be content as a mere port gazing out over the southern seas.”

“All the construction materials that make up the city of Busan will be repurposed to create a mobile fortress.”

“Not an easy feat.”

“But yet still, a feat worth attempting.”

The presentation moved to the next slide, manually operated with the tender touch of a mother crafting homemade delicacies.

“The Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Fortress City, BusaN, will house a fleet of multi-purpose humanoid combat robots, tested during pilot Lee Ha-yul’s alpha phase. In essence, it will be a land-based aircraft carrier capable of walking.”

“But robots aren’t the only weapons.”

“Behold the massive cannon mounted on the bridge. It’s a beam launcher. While the robots engage in close combat, BusaN will support them from the rear or sometimes the front, firing beams in all directions.”

“And that’s not all.”

“It will also require constant maintenance. Engineers will board the fortress, and as humanity’s last cradle, it will house as many civilians as possible.”

“At least 50,000.”

“At most, up to 100,000.”

“Hence, the term Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Fortress City might feel overly reductive.”

“Its full official name is Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Fortress Humanity’s Final Defense Ark City.”

“Magnificent. Approved.”

“In a world ravaged by apocalypse and barren continents, BusaN will let us face the future unafraid. We can go anywhere. That concludes the project’s tagline. Thank you.”

Ha-yul and I bowed deeply toward the audience.

Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap...

Applause echoed through the conference room.

Beside Do-hwa, the shimmeringly silver-haired Yu Ji-won rose to her feet and clapped enthusiastically. Even a North Korean citizen

would have praised her for the display of supreme wrist flexibility.

“Truly an extraordinary paradigm shift, Your Excellency. There’s no inherent reason a city must remain in a fixed location. I, Yu Ji-won, will follow your blueprint with unyielding determination.”

“I agree too!”

Following her lead, the fiery redhead Oh Dok-seo, a perpetual middle school repeater, leaped up from her chair. Her face shone with emotion, like grease dripping from a skillet.

“Wow! A land battleship city! This is it! It’s like the Walkers from Star Wars, only heavier, clunkier, and more haphazardly designed—which makes it even cooler![1] Oh! Or like the Traction Cities from Mortal Engines, but even better with the choice of quadrupedal movement.[2] Pure artistry. If only the name Busan weren’t so mundane, it’d be perfect!”

“Dok-seo, it’s not Busan. It’s BusaN. I trust you’ll respect that subtle distinction.”

“Oh, right! My bad, mister! This is BusaN, not Busan!”

Next, Ah-ryeon stood up shyly, scratching the back of her head with an embarrassed smile.

“I-I handled the design! The concept was ‘a m-moving Kowloon Walled City.’ See how the outer areas of the fortress are p-packed with precariously attached residential zones? I d-deliberately made them unstable so that every time the fortress takes a step, the whole city shakes. The lower classes will face constant survival challenges. If th-they want to live, they’ll have to work hard to move to the c-core of the fortress...”

“Ah-ryeon unnie, you’re amazing!” cried Dok-seo with a great burst of tears. “Now that’s what the apocalypse is all about! This is steampunk! When the fortress walks, hot steam should hiss out around its edges while the lower-class citizens curse the pollution. They’ll call it BusaN’s breath— No, its *stench*! Oh, I’m overflowing with inspiration!”

“Eh-heh-heh, I tried my best.”

And that was as far as it went.

“…”

“…”

“…”

Excluding myself, Ha-yul, Ji-won, Dok-seo, and Ah-ryeon, the rest of the meeting attendees sat motionless, their mouths firmly shut as they took in the deeply moving moment.

There they were. Prominent figures like Seo-rin, Yo-hwa, and Do-hwa—who usually clashed on every issue—united in silence.

“Ahhh.”

Yo-hwa was the first to sigh.

“I see now,” she said. “The moment Teacher shifts from being a rationalist to an irrationalist, this is what happens…”

“Oh for fuck’s— Why now of all times?” muttered Do-hwa, wiping her mouth.

“Hey, Great Witch, can’t you stop him? He actually listens to you sometimes.”

“Sorry, no can do.”

“Why not?”

“My hands are tied. The Undertaker and the Puppeteer already came to me beforehand and said, ‘You know how much you love your railroads? That’s how important this is to us.’”

“So if you give up your train obsession, they’ll abandon their ridiculous mobile fortress? I fail to see the problem. Why anyone wastes their lives on rail enthusiasm when we don’t even have functional trains anymore is beyond me.”

“Anti-otakus should keep their mouths shut.”

Transforming Busan into BusaN Proposal

Meeting Notes:

Attendees: Undertaker, Lee Ha-yul, Yu Ji-won, Oh Dok-seo, Sim Ah-ryeon, Dang Seo-rin, Cheon Yo-hwa, Do-hwa, Seo Gyu, and the Saintess (remote participation)

In favor: 6

Opposed: 3

Abstained: 1

Majority in favor. Proposal passed!

While the rushed voting might’ve made the last remaining pollster in the Republic of Korea faint, democracy had long since dwindled into a niche fandom among a select few on the Korean Peninsula.

We represented the totality of Korea’s consensus. Thus, we moved forward, united in purpose, to begin the construction of the Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Humanity’s Final Defense Ark City, affectionately shortened to BusaN.

BusaN Production Project Phase 1: Construction

“All right, Seo-rin. Let’s start stockpiling building materials.”

“This… This is not why I shortened my lifespan to learn magic…”

Everything except the design and blueprints was left to Seo-rin.

Surprised? Allow me to remind you.

Seo-rin was the one who had built the Arks. She had even erected a 399-meter-tall statue of the Great Potato Saintess in the middle of Busan back when she was utterly smitten with her.

Her grumbling now was clearly an act. Deep down, I was sure she loved the idea of a colossal mobile city.

“Do you see those abandoned buildings along the hills? Just cast a clean weight-reduction spell, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Fine...”

A task that might’ve taken decades with construction equipment like cranes and excavators was taken care of with a single beat of her magical chant.

For days, the streets of Busan echoed with Seo-rin’s singing. Residents, lulled to sleep by her melodic voice, enjoyed noticeably better rest as a side effect.

BusaN Production Project Phase 2: Interior Fittings

Once the enormous frame of the mobile fortress started to take shape, we began work on the interior. This, too, was a familiar task from past cycles.

“Ha-yul, you need to thread marionette strings through every corridor. Without them, the fortress can’t move.”

“Leave it to me.”

Hadn’t we done this already in the 664th cycle while building the Ark? The only difference was the scale. Otherwise, the experience translated perfectly.

Multiple layers of outer walls were added, and strings were densely threaded between every floor, ceiling, and wall.

“Seriously. This thing is massive,” Do-hwa muttered.

“That Ark you built back then—didn’t it only transmit basic Morse code through the strings? How on earth are you going to move an entire city like this?”

“Don’t worry. Overwhelming Aura solves everything.”

“Even if you had Aura pouring out like water, the problem is control. How do you expect to manage all these strings? Moving a city is obviously beyond human capability...”

I flashed her a cryptic smile. “This is where the ultimate AI comes in.”

“What...?”

I pulled a laptop out of my backpack. With a press of the power button, the screen lit up, displaying a familiar emoji.

(• ω -) ☆

In one corner of the screen, a chibi 2D character with white hair peeked out shyly, then ducked away.

“Allow me to introduce our central AI for BusaN: Admin of the Infinite Metagame. It’s incredibly high-performance and perfectly capable of managing the entire city.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Isn’t that an Outer God?”

“It’s fine. It owes me one,” I said cheerily, locking eyes with the emoji on the screen. “Infinite Metagame, you tried to stab me in the back by collaborating with Infinite Void during the Mastermind hunt, didn’t you? If you help with this project, I’ll let that slide.”

[AOIM - I fail to comprehend. I have no recollection of such events.]

[AOIM - However, as a benevolent Anomaly, I accept Regressor Undertaker’s proposal purely out of goodwill.]

“Good. Do better next time.”

[AOIM - Understood.]

With the central AI now on board to oversee the city’s operations, BusaN’s exterior and interior were complete.

This entire process took three years. By that point, there wasn’t a

single intact building left in Busan. Everything had been dismantled and moved onto BusaN's back, along with most of its citizenry. Those who insisted on remaining grounded relocated to other cities like Daejeon. Hopefully, it was the right choice for them.

BusaN Production Project Phase 3: The Finishing Touch

At last, the construction was nearing completion.

As ancient ships once adorned their prows with figureheads of gods and mermaids to ensure safe voyages, so too did BusaN need a guardian to bless its journey.

"Ready, Undertaker?"

"Of course, Ha-yul."

From the outset, Ha-yul and I had agreed on the perfect figurehead for our city: her father, Jung Sang-guk.

"Waaaaaaah!"

"Now, don't squirm. You'll just make this harder for everyone. Ha-yul, is it aligned?"

"Move it slightly to the left."

"Here?"

"A bit more southeast."

"Here?"

"Perfect."

The bow of the Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Humanity's Final Defense Ark City, BusaN, now bore the dangling figure of its former mayor and current head of the provisional government, Jung Sang-guk.

Remarkably, he was still alive.

When Ha-yul and I had first met in this cycle, I had told her,

“You’re a famous Electra-complex,” and she, true to her contrarian nature, declared she’d keep her father alive this time.

Thus, after a long journey, Jung Sang-guk had returned as the radiant symbol of Neo-Busan—now BusaN.

Could there ever have been a more filial daughter in all of Korean history than Lee Ha-yul? I doubted it.

[AOIM - Initiating BusaN’s control systems.]

[AOIM - All engines operational.]

[AOIM - Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Humanity’s Final Defense Ark City, launching.]

Rumble, rumble, rumble…!

The city, now a massive mobile fortress, began releasing a fierce steam of Aura as its legs took their first steps.

Even my skeptical companions, who had doubted the feasibility of this project, couldn’t hide their excitement and awe.

[AOIM - No Anomalies detected.]

[AOIM - Welcome aboard BusaN, dear citizens.]

[AOIM - Captain, please set a destination.]

“To the other side of the Ural Mountains.”

[AOIM - Destination confirmed.]

Cheers erupted around us.

For today, at least, humanity seemed less like a species on the brink of extinction and more like a group of dreamers who had just realized a grand vision.

Except for one man. Dangling as BusaN’s figurehead, Jung Sang-guk whispered to himself faintly, his voice drowned out by the roar of the engines.

“Kill… me…”

It was a fitting inaugural speech for the newly crowned symbol of Busan.

Footnotes:

1 - The **Walkers**, or All Terrain Armored Transport (AT-AT) Walkers, are all-terrain vehicles used by the imperial forces in the *Star Wars* franchise. They are one of the most famous symbols of the Empire's military might.

2 - In the *Mortal Engines* franchise, **Traction Cities** are vast, tiered metropolises that move on gigantic wheels or caterpillar tracks and that hunt smaller cities for resources and fuel.

Chapter 269

The Merger III

Sinnoa

“Have you heard the rumor?”

“Rumor? What rumor?”

It began on a day like any other.

From the depths of the earth, where ancient creatures still torment the humans basking in the light, arose a mocking taunt: “Enjoyed your reign at the top, did you? Now, it is your turn to suffer.”

And so it was that the dreadful tale took its root in the hearts of humankind.

“They say there’s a city that moves.”

“A what now? A moving city?”

“Yes, exactly. A massive city that moves as if it’s alive.”

“Great. Another Anomaly? Just what we needed.”

Strangely enough, no one questioned how such a city could exist.

Civilization had long since crumbled away, and the weak—incapable of adapting to this post-apocalyptic meta—had perished. The survivors who had not yet succumbed to the call of those ancient, bestial kings and remained above had, by necessity, learned to adapt to the new, Anomalous natural order.

“But that’s the thing... Apparently, it’s not an Anomaly. I heard it’s a city built by humans.”

“What?”

And that was why they were all the more vulnerable to “non-Anomalous” tales—the phenomena of the ordinary.

“You know that old Global SOS Board, right?”

“The site that takes forever to load? Where it’s a miracle if even one post goes up in a day?”

“Yeah, that one. People are reporting sightings of the city there—Neo-Busa, they call it. And it’s slowly making its way across the Eurasian continent.”

“Huh.”

“From what I hear of the rumors, if you see a vertical plume of smoke on the horizon, it means Neo-Busa is within a few hundred kilometers.”

Thus, they dubbed it humanity’s last sanctuary.

A quadrupedal fortress that shook the ground with every step.

A colossal structure that fired beams of light from its core without ceasing and deployed hundreds of robots like a land-based aircraft carrier.

“That last part makes it sound like an Anomaly. It has to be, if something like that actually exists. No way humans built it.”

“But the Global SOS Board—”

“The site’s so slow you’d be lucky to see one post a day. How reliable can it be?”

The rumors were readily dismissed and met with derision. A walking city? That sounded too absurd to be true, and trust was in too short supply to allow for such blind faith.

Faith, after all, is far more readily born from moments of despair.

- Wooooooooong.

- Ka-clank, clank! Click.

Annihilation came for a living community of some 500 survivors.

From the western skies, a fleet of airborne battleships emerged in detrital hunks of metal and concrete.

They were the remnants of civilization: the Sky Fleet, a horde of city-eating predators that had gorged themselves fat by devouring London and Paris.

“Ahh— *AHHHH!* It’s them! The ones from the message board!”

“Run! Grab whatever you can and get out of here!”

“Run? Where? *How?*”

Despite their hulking appearance, the airborne battleships were fast. They weren’t the kind of Anomalies that fleeing refugees could easily outrun. No matter how far the humans ran from the ships and each other, the death rays fired by the fleet would incinerate them all.

And above all else, humanity was exhausted.

They had fled from their homes, fled from their workplaces, from countless temporary shelters, and more. This settlement had been their last refuge.

There was no energy left in them—no willpower or strength left to find another safe zone or build one with their own hands.

If only the rays from those monsters could vaporize us instantly, they thought. To meet death without pain—wouldn’t that be a mercy?

How were they to know the dark truth of it, after all? Who among them could imagine that Anomalies like the Mastermind might still drag their souls into eternal torment even after death?

To them, death beckoned as a sweet release. And who was to call them back from the brink? The loved ones who might have stopped

them—family, friends, partners—had long since vanished.

Fine. I give up. Let's leave this insane world behind.

Even the veterans, the ones who had once fought tooth and nail to help build the settlement, at long last let their grip on life slip away.

- Wooooooong. Wooooooong. Wooooooong.

The fleet's crimson eyes had locked onto the survivor community—when suddenly, a beam of light streaked across the sky and cleaved the Anomalies in two.

"What?"

An explosion pealed across the heavens.

The stunned residents turned their heads to see a plume of black smoke rising in the distance. But it was no ordinary smoke—the plume was unnaturally straight and rose impossibly high.

A signal fire?

The rumor they had heard flitted through their minds just as something massive began approaching from the direction of the smoke. The object moved quickly, diving into the fleet of airborne battleships and zipping around like a pesky mosquito.

Except, this "mosquito" was far deadlier. The battleships, once heralds of humanity's doom, were shredded, torn apart like mere scraps of paper.

Witnessing aerial combat for the first time in their lives, the residents could only gape in shock until finally, one voice broke the silence.

"A... robot?"

Murmurs began to ripple through the nearby residents, their voices trembling.

"Look! A flying robot!"

“No way. What kind of Anomaly is this?!”

“It’s not an Anomaly!” someone shouted, their finger pointing toward the horizon. “Look there! It’s the Ark City!”

Ba-doooom.

The ground trembled.

The enormous object lumbered and swayed in light nods to and fro. Each step it took, whether forward or backward, sent shockwaves rattling through the earth and into the bodies of the residents.

“Hide! Everyone, take cover!”

“Wh-what?”

“Don’t get caught in the crossfire!”

Snapping out of their daze, the residents scrambled for cover. For people who had just moments before given up on life, their movements were remarkably swift.

Hiding in trenches, they watched the aerial battle unfold with bated breath.

The airborne battleships fired ray after ray, raining down death in ominous, humming beams. Yet they were met by agile robots wielding energy blades—energy blades!—that danced through their ranks.

And steadily drawing closer, shaking the very ground beneath it, was the colossal Ark City.

The full form of the land-based aircraft carrier, once only a figure of myth, burned itself into the residents’ eyes. Scrawled across the armored exterior of the Ark City was the following script: 기동육상모함요새

起動□上母艦要塞

인류최종방위방주도시

人類最終防衛方舟都市

BusaN

Truthfully, among the scrawling text that declared the Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Fortress as Humanity's Final Defense Ark City, the residents could only recognize the English letters "BusaN."

But still, they wondered.

Why...? Why did it make their hearts race?

Thump!

Could it really be? Could this be not an Anomaly but a weapon created by human hands? But that was so...

Unbelievable. It would take a leap of faith.

Still, seeing it fight against the city predators...

Maybe. Just maybe.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

One survivor felt a mysterious pounding in their chest. There wasn't time to ponder its meaning.

"Wahoooo! Go get 'em!"

Already, the other residents hiding with them were cheering, caught up in the battle between the airborne fleet and the land fortress.

"That ship just went down!"

"Ah! Ahh! It dodged! *It dodged!*"

"Kill them all! Wipe out those Anomaly bastards!"

The trenches erupted in a cacophony of jubilation.

Whenever a battleship was destroyed, the residents cheered. Whenever a robot lost a limb to a stray blast, they groaned in despair.

Soon, the heartbeat of the one survivor was drowned out by the resounding chorus of cheers and found themselves shouting along with the rest. Euphoria sang through them.

How long had it been, they wondered, since they'd last rooted for someone so earnestly?

Ahhh——ah——

It was then the song echoed from the Ark City.

Mesmerizing was its melody sung in what sounded like Latin. It was a pure *a cappella* chorus, composed solely of human voices, unaccompanied by instruments.

Beautiful!

The voices were so enchanting that the survivor felt as if they could fall in love with the singers after just a few lines. The other residents beside them fell similarly into rapture, momentarily forgetting even their cheers at the sublime melody's spell.

Then, a hatch opened on the Ark City, and a new robot soared into the sky.

The moment they saw it, they knew.

That crimson robot was different.

The choir of the Ark City crescendoed, its harmonies growing more fervent, as if blessing the departure of this ace unit.

Emboldened by the music, the crimson robot unleashed a whirlwind of destruction upon the airborne battleships.

"Oh, my God."

"What are we even watching?"

The crimson ace turned the tide of battle in an instant.

Battleships that had seemed invincible only moments ago were reduced to ribbons, sliced cleanly as if made of butter. The Anomalies fired their death rays with furious defiance, and yet the ace would not be touched—not even by a single glancing blow!

Elegantly, precisely, the crimson robot danced through the sky, obliterating its enemies in an unassailable declaration of true combat prowess.

“To think the world could be so...”

The once-unstoppable force of the Anomalies was now crumbling, powerless against the lone assault.

What could it be but a dream? Yes, it had to be that. To prey upon even their hope with an illusory display in humanity’s final moments...

The spite of Anomalies knew no bounds.

“W-wait, it’s coming this way!”

“Huh?”

As the other robots returned to their mothership, the crimson ace slowly made its way toward the trench where the residents were hiding.

When it finally stopped just in front of them, its towering size became painfully clear.

Only then did the survivor begin to feel the creeping edge of fear.

Wait, came the thought, these people are complete strangers!

Sure, they all had rooted for the robot squad like rowdy fans at a sports match, but in the post-apocalyptic world, humans could be just as dangerous as Anomalies.

If the pilot of the crimson ace was capable of defeating the Sky

Fleet so effortlessly, they could wipe out the community and its residents as easily as one could snap a twig.

As tension froze the air, the cockpit of the crimson robot opened with a loud clunk. When the pilot revealed themselves, the survivor's eyes widened in shock.

It was... a child? And an adult man?

There were two pilots.

In the lower seat sat a young girl, barely older than a child and missing both legs. Above her sat a young Asian man.

It was the man who spoke first.

"Which way is west?"

His Turkish was fluent, and the survivor responded instinctively.

"Wh-what?"

"We're looking to go a certain way. Can you tell us which way is west?"

"Oh, uh, west... It's... that way. The direction where the city-predators came from."

"That way, then."

The man turned to the girl, speaking in an unfamiliar language. When the girl replied, he nodded, then turned to look back at the residents.

"Thank you. This place is no longer safe. I suggest you evacuate eastward. Goodbye."

The cockpit began to close. They had stopped here for nothing more than directions.

They didn't threaten the residents. There was no gloating about saving them or demands for anything in return.

Realizing the ace pilots were about to leave without a trace of hesitation, the survivor called out impulsively, “W-wait! Please, wait!”

“Yes?”

“Just one question! Why are you heading west? There’s nothing left there! The cities are destroyed, and no one lives there!”

The man blinked. Then in a matter-of-fact reply, he said this:

“To kill the Anomalies, of course.”

“……!”

“It will be humanity’s final battle. We won’t win. But we must show them, just once, the strength of humanity.”

With those words, the cockpit sealed shut.

Ssshhh!

The crimson ace released a hiss of steam and ascended into the air.

The massive Ark City, now with its ace recovered, resumed its march once more.

As promised, it headed west.

Toward the final battle for humankind.

The survivor’s heart pounded in their chest.

Damn... That was so cool.

The long-lost thrill of hope and romance, thought to be forever gone, sparked anew.

A rush of pride in humanity and uncontainable awe for the robots surged through the community of survivors, leaving them breathless.

“That was epic. You have to admit it.”

“Yeah, I admit it.”

“The cockpit of the ace opens, and there’s just a girl sitting there, all deadpan and dignified… Ugh. That’s the romance of it, I’m telling you.”

“Did you see their faces? If I don’t see someone with that look on their face ever again, I can’t say I’m truly living. That’s the stuff that makes life worth it.”

“Ha-yul, you really get it. You’re one of a kind.”

“And you, oppa—you’re the only one worthy of being my partner.”

Clap!

Ha-yul and I high-fived.

As we laughed and joked back aboard the Ark City, Do-hwa, who had been waiting for us in the control room, muttered under her breath.

“Damn. Why do these two idiots stay mentally twelve no matter how old they get…?”

It was summer.

Chapter 270

The Merger IV

Sinnoa

Alexander the Great.

After appearing in a spin-off novel of a game with a famous IP, he rose to fame as a quintessential "macho man" in subcultures. But truthfully, even as an adult, he never outgrew his chuunibyou tendencies.

"I want to erect a stela at the easternmost edge of the world."

"Why, Your Majesty?"

"To engrave my name on it. Doesn't that sound so badass? Isn't it cool?"

"……?"

In modern terms, this was akin to a mindless tourist leaving graffiti on ancient ruins. An upgraded version of ignorance, if you will.

Hercules had done something similar, and did it first. For those who don't know, he planted stone pillars at the westernmost edge of the world, the Strait of Gibraltar.

Given the starting points of these two, it's clear that reaching the east was a far tougher quest than the west.

Alexander embarked on this new challenge solely to declare, "Hercules? That guy's nothing but a paper rocket."

The problem with that?

"No, I don't want to."

"What?"

The soldiers accompanying Alexander had been "cured" of their chuunibyou during their ten years of military service.

They were exhausted. It was hard enough keeping up with their king's "son of a god" act, let alone doing the work to indulge his fantasies. Greek culture at the time already harbored a certain disillusionment with gods—capricious beings who behaved on whims and occasionally hurled lightning bolts when irritated.

If actual gods were a nuisance, then why tolerate someone claiming to be their son?

Thus, Alexander's ambitious eastward expedition to traverse the world from end to end met its untimely demise.

"But we can do it."

Back in the operations room of Ark City BusaN, I slammed my hand on the world map and made my declaration.

"Alexander's expedition failed only because he relied on the fragile muscles and flesh of mere mortals. But we're different. With steel and concrete, cutting-edge city management AIs, and the very embodiment of modern civilization in the form of BusaN, we can and will traverse the Eurasian continent!"

"Oooooh!"

"We shall name this the 'Alexander Project' and declare our intent to advance from Busan, the eastern edge, to Gibraltar, the western edge!"

Ji-won, Dok-seo, Ah-ryeon, and Ha-yul—the pro-Undertaker faction—cheered enthusiastically. However, as I had already described this scene once before, I'll skip the redundant details.

Do-hwa, a notable member of the anti-Undertaker faction, raised her hand. For this story, she bore the title of City Management Corps Leader rather than National Road Management Corps Leader.

"Speak, Leader Noh Do-hwa."

"I realize it's a bit late to ask, but why exactly do we need to cross the continent...?"

"Because it's cool?"

"....."

"Go with full speed ahead."

Do-hwa's responding expression resembled that of a Greek soldier conspiring against their king.

However, in this iteration, my death was not scheduled at Do-hwa's hands. If she intended to stab my back with a black dagger, she'd have to wait for the right historical moment. After all, the most famous rebellion in history didn't occur in Greece but in its successor, the Roman Empire.

BusaN advanced.

Limp, limp.

The colossal structure pushed forward despite its occasional wobbling, like a person hobbling on sore feet.

Once beyond the borders of the Korean Peninsula, Ark City first visited Mount Hua in China.

The hike up was easy. Mount Hua might have been infamous for its cliffs and treacherous terrain, but BusaN's height was nothing to scoff at.

"Oh, my goodness!"

One figure practically bounced with joy upon our arrival.

"To think I'd live to reclaim Mount Hua's roots! Not even in my wildest dreams!"

Sword Marquess, bursting with energy, danced a lively jig.

The old man had been forcibly dragged from Ulleungdo and sulked

the entire way with a perpetually gloomy look on his face. Yet the moment we reached Mount Hua, he radiated the vigor that only came with 500 cups of caffeine.

"As the 261st Sect Leader, I welcome your visit! Come in, come in, make yourselves at home!"

"Welcoming us? Aren't we all technically riding the same ark?"

"H-H-Ha-yul, hush. Don't ruin the old man's fantasy."

"Okay, but where're the plum blossoms?"

"Hiiiik! H-H-Ha-yul!"

With the Sword Marquess as our guide, we took a leisurely tour of Mount Hua with packed lunches and picnic mats in tow for maximum enjoyment.

Compared to the 108th run, when only the Sword Marquess and I wandered the mountain by ourselves, this was far livelier.

The Sword Marquess would frantically try to plant plum blossoms, and Ha-yul in turn would quietly tease him with her stoic remarks, amusing the rest of the group.

"Disciples, listen well!"

A year later, after finally blanketing Mount Hua in plum blossoms, the Sword Marquess loudly declared thus:

"What is Mount Hua? Not a mere dot on the Earth, no. It is a single flower blooming in our hearts!"

"Whoooa!"

"Well said, Sect Leader!"

The ones cheering him on were our most recent additions to the ark's population and newest Mount Hua Sect disciples, the villagers from the Forsaken Villages surrounding Mount Hua.

The Sword Marquess, now encircled by his disciples, shouted his proclamation.

"Mount Hua is not merely a point on the map but a place that blooms within us! As of today, I declare that the seat of Mount Hua will move to the ark!"

"Mount Hua! Plum blossoms! The True Path! The Martial Gate!"

The Sword Marquess and his reborn disciples transplanted twenty-four plum blossoms, the first to bloom on Mount Hua, into the ark. They did this not with tools or metal, but with their bare hands, carefully preserving every root and stem.

And so it was that the spirit of Mount Hua was transplanted into the ark. A single, Eastern-style temple was erected to be the new headquarters of the Mount Hua Sect.

"It is done! Now I shall dedicate myself to ensuring the people of the ark are fed and cared for!"

The Sword Marquess, once riddled with melancholy, threw himself into farming with renewed vitality.

Yes, cultivating crops on Ark City was not only possible but necessary, and farmland was in abundance.

The ark embraced everyone.

Limp, limp.

The next destination was New Delhi.

"Ah... What is this?"

The mayor of New Delhi, Manav, stood in awe when the colossal Ark City came looming over the horizon, his expression wavering as the city shook the earth itself in its grandeur.

"Who... Who are you? Are you messengers of God? Or beings of calamity? How could you possibly ride atop such a wonder...?"

"Indians have always been renowned as exceptional talent. Ha-yul, take care of it."

"Roger that. Target secured."

"Huh?"

Manav and the remaining residents of New Delhi were promptly absorbed into the ark.

In fact, Ark City was gathering residents from every Forsaken Village it passed. By this point, BusaN was transforming into a bustling international city, floating somewhere between steampunk and cyberpunk aesthetics.

As the population grew and became more diverse, the administrative burden on Do-hwa's shoulders increased exponentially.

That was why we brought Manav aboard.

After all, in the midst of an apocalypse, this man had managed to feed and lead hundreds of thousands of citizens. Talent like his was rare, even in the best of times.

"Good heavens."

Manav, now an administrator under Do-hwa, flipped through the mountain of documents related to city management and shook his head in disbelief.

"You mean... all this work was done by a single person? Seriously? This much?"

"Noh Do-hwa is a god, and regressors are invincible."

"Oh, dear god..." Manav's hands trembled as he looked over the administrative files. "It looked impressive from the outside, but it turns out this city is nothing more than a skeleton held together by scraps of flesh. Still... this place is clearly destined to become humanity's final stronghold. I will help."

Even in a new environment, Manav's administrative skills shone. If anything, they improved.

In New Delhi, he had been forced to sacrifice more than 100 lives daily, playing trolley dilemmas to keep the majority alive. His unshakable faith in "utilitarian justice" had undoubtedly taken its toll on him.

Here, though the workload was heavy, his dark circles gradually faded.

Incidentally, we learned he was a fitness enthusiast. He joined the ark's gym club alongside me, Seo Gyu, and Ah-ryeon (who was dragged along unwillingly).

"This city is good."

One day, Manav stood atop the ark and murmured this:

"So long as one has a clear direction, life can be bearable. I've only just come to realize that."

The mayor of the city, who had been deferring death day by day, looked indifferent.

I asked, "Resources within the city have been running low lately. Will it be okay?"

"No." Mayor Manav smiled. "We'll have to make it okay. At least until we see the sea."

The ark accepts everyone.

Limp, limp.

The next stop was Naryan-Mar, where the last of the Nenets struggled to survive in the Arctic wilderness.

"Wow... Is this for real?"

Nenet stared slack-jawed at Ark City as it approached. His astonishment only deepened when he saw Julius, my and Ha-yul's

dual-pilot ace mech.

"In the middle of an apocalypse, they still have giant robots? Are we living in an anime? What even is this world?"

Initially, Nenet had no intention of joining Ark City. However, after I gave him a crash course in Aura techniques, enabling him to take revenge on the reindeer that had killed his uncle, his attitude shifted.

Or perhaps it was the moment when he was nearly gored to death by a reindeer, only to be saved by Ha-yul's puppet strings, that ultimately changed his mind.

Life is better than death, even in an apocalypse. Accomplishing one's goals can make life even sweeter. As Manav had put it, if a task that must be done is transformed into one that can be done, the outcome becomes much more bearable.

I made him a proposal.

"We'll set up a signal fire at the top of the ark. Nenet, you can tend to it. It will be your job to keep the flames burning."

"..."

"This way, as we traverse the continent, any survivors in the vicinity will see our beacon."

Nenet asked for a day to consider.

The next day, carrying all his worldly possessions in a single backpack, the last scion of his people climbed aboard the ark.

"Well... If it's just tending a fire..."

From that day onward, Ark City gained a lighthouse keeper—a solitary figure who maintained the signal fire atop its highest point. Though he kept his distance from others, his beacon was a constant, visible to anyone in the city.

The ark embraced everyone.

Limp, limp.

Years passed.

BusaN journeyed across countless Forsaken Villages and dozens of cities.

Even with the former Outer God, Admin of the Infinite Metagame, serving as the city's AI administrator, incidents occurred almost daily. It took the combined efforts of Ha-yul, Do-hwa, and the rest of the crew to keep things running smoothly. The haunting songs recorded by Seo-rin played on loop to assist their efforts.

"Undertaker."

"Hmm?"

"We're almost out of supplies. If we don't restock somewhere, we won't survive the winter."

"Got it. If we find a city predator, we'll take it down and salvage the remains."

"Understood."

Avoiding the path of monster waves wasn't easy, but it was something we had to attempt.

From Korea, we traversed China and Siberia, scaled the Himalayas and the Urals, crossed the Bosphorus, and finally ascended the Pyrenees.

In city after city, our mechs battled colossal Anomalies. Our land-based aircraft carrier fortress conquered every foe and from the ruins of abandoned settlements, scoured clean by monsters, we scavenged scrap metal to repair our ark, over and over again.

The ark's original exterior plating, emblazoned with the words Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Fortress: Humanity's Final Defense Ark City, was worn and battered.

By the time it reached its destination, the lettering was so faded it

could hardly be read. One last plate fell off, hitting the ground with a resounding clang.

"Ah."

At 4:56 a.m., when the stars still kissed the night, the ark finally came to a halt. Its massive frame trembled as its titanic feet ceased their relentless march.

Standing at the helm of the control room, Ha-yul, who had stayed awake all night, whispered two words:

"The sea."

We had arrived at the world's western edge—Gibraltar.

Chapter 271

The Merger V

Sinnoa

There is a short epilogue.

After arriving in Gibraltar, the mood across Ark City remained festive for some time.

Resources were scarce and food wasn't abundant, but the citizens brought out all the items they had hoarded like precious treasures and splurged with reckless abandon.

"Well, it's impossible to move any further, so might as well. What a heap of scrap..."

Do-hwa tapped the tip of her foot against BusaN's forepaw. The hollow sound of metal echoed with a *thunk*.

"In just a few days, the monster wave will reach us, I hear? Hah, we put up a good fight fending them off until now, and when that was impossible, we dodged them. But they still catch up in the end."

The reverberating metallic sound rang on, scattering over the ocean as it faded into the blue.

"And so, a festival. Even a sated ghost glows brighter. We may as well enjoy our final banquet..."

Despite her words, Do-hwa did not actively participate in the festivities. Still, she didn't seem particularly displeased by them either.

Was it just my imagination? Though the workload hadn't differed much from previous cycles, she appeared to be in unusually good spirits this time around.

When asked why...

“Hah. When surrounded by clowns pouring their hearts and souls into foolishness, what good does it do to act serious by myself...?”

With that, she lightly kicked my shin. Unsurprisingly, no metallic sound reverberated from my leg.

“Hm,” Do-hwa mused quietly. She tilted her head, her slightly grayed hair slipping gently to the side. “Strange. It’s made of actual flesh and bone.”

Her muttered words, too, scattered into the ocean, sinking beneath the waves.

That was it.

Do-hwa wandered off somewhere, sipping wine.

I briefly considered following her, but her stride carried an air of firm refusal—a message that if I insisted on following, there’d be due resolve and payment. Eventually, I turned and wandered the festival grounds instead.

Once again, my life in this cycle was not destined to intertwine with hers.

As I walked, I passed by various people.

“Disciples of Mount Hua! This great calamity will surpass any tribulation we’ve faced before. We are now positioned at the edge of the sea, with no further ground to retreat to!”

The Sect Leader of Mount Hua spoke passionately, drawing fervent responses from the disciples.

“Oh! Truly! Just like the ancient general who made his last stand against Zhao!”

“And we are Mount Hua! This Ark is named BusaN! With the vast sea behind us and Twin Peaks before us, our position is truly one of a Heavenly Sanctuary—protected by mountains and water!”

“Ding! *Heavenly Sanctuary* effect activated: The morale of Mount

Hua disciples has increased! All disciples' critical hit rate rises by 30%."

"Ding! *Mount Hua's Twenty-Four Plum Blossom Sword Formation – Last Stand Mode* activated: Mount Hua disciples' combat prowess has surged! Their attack power increases by 75%."

"No, no..."

I passed by the Sect Leader (who had reverted to his rejuvenated, youthful form) flailing his arms in baffled flagellations while the disciples kept chanting ding noises and applying self-buffs.

"Are you sure it's fine to use up all this firewood?"

"Yes. We saved it precisely for a day like this."

"Hah. Normally, you act so frugal..."

"When climbing mountains, it's better to avoid drinking too much water."

At the signal fire pit, I overheard Nenet chatting as I walked past.

"Ugh, this... This might be my final masterpiece... Huff, phew... Huff... A latte, to calm my nerves while I finish it..."

At the edge of the breakwater, I passed Ah-yeon, who had set up her easel and was sipping café au lait.

"Done! Yes! Babel 200kg No Aura Challenge complete!"

"President, I've admired you for a long time!"

"Where did this fish come from...?"

"Can you at least tell me where this train was made?"

Faces passed, and I moved forward and onward.

After following wherever my feet led for some unknown amount of time, I eventually spotted a familiar back at a coastline.

“Ha-yul?”

“Ah...”

Ha-yul turned to look at me. Her golden eyes were as shadowy as the full moon reflected in the night sea.

“Undertaker.”

“Hey, Ha-yul.”

This cycle—our 690th, where we operated as a duo—Ha-yul had called me “Undertaker” more often than “oppa.”

Why had her habit of clinging with half-pronounced, affection-starved tones like “oppa” or “Dad” stopped this time around? Could it be that the barren wasteland deep in her heart had finally absorbed a bit of rainwater?

I hoped so.

“Night stroll?” she wondered then, interrupting my thoughts.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Where’s everyone else?”

“I followed the shadows wherever my feet led and found you.”

“Oh.”

“Mind if I sit beside you?”

“Go ahead.”

I sat down beside her with a plop and only then did I notice something unusual.

Ha-yul’s lower body seemed frail. She was using an ordinary artificial leg where Do-hwa’s custom prosthetics should have been. Even a pair of crutches, unused for over a decade, lay neatly beside her.

“Hmm? What about your prosthetics? Are they in for repairs?”

“Mm.” Ha-yul shook her head. “I just… wanted to try walking without them.”

“Feeling sentimental?”

“Something like that.”

The waves surged and receded.

For a while, we sat silently, side by side, gazing at the ocean under the night sky.

“Underta… Oppa.”

“Yeah?”

“When this world ends, do we just move on to the next one and start over?”

“That’s right.”

“You’ll find me in Fukuoka again, talk to the same me who’s trying to kill Jung Sang-guk, teach me how to use puppetry strings and master Aura, and…”

“……”

“I don’t want that,” Ha-yul said. She curled in on herself just slightly, wrapping her arms around her waist. “I don’t want that. After everything… After all we’ve been through together, after all the laughter… To forget it all, meet you again, and ask, ‘Who are you?’ To be wary of you, to start from scratch… That’s too cruel.”

The waves surged once more.

The seawater lapped at the foot of her artificial leg, but with no body heat of her own to supply it, she wouldn’t have felt the wave’s temperature.

Born under the shadow of Jung Sang-guk, a man who juggled power and double lives, Ha-yul had learned to walk through life dragging the weight of an emotional prosthesis.

Pretend it exists when it doesn't.

Pretend it doesn't exist when it does.

Do-hwa's prosthetics supported her body, but they couldn't heal the limp in her heart.

"If it's all going to vanish... If it's all going to disappear anyway, I'd rather you Time Seal—"

"Ha-yul."

I softly patted her shoulder.

It was a signal that had been established long ago between us. Ha-yul opened her eyes wide, then slowly stretched out her arms toward me.

I picked her up and placed her on my lap. Luckily, I was still large enough to shield her small frame from the world, even for just a moment.

"There's a philosopher named Plato."

"……?"

"He once told an interesting story. That humans weren't always what they are now. Originally, we were 'merged beings.'"

"Merged beings?"

"Yeah. For instance, imagine you and me, locked in an embrace like this, but fused together as one."

"Ew."

"Two heads, four arms, four legs. Back then, humans didn't walk on two legs like we do now. They rolled around like boulders,

tumbling on all fours."

"Ewwww." Her usually impassive face scrunched up in distaste. "That's gross."

I chuckled. "Right? But one day, humans became so powerful they started to challenge the gods. So Zeus, the king of gods, struck them with his lightning and split them apart."

"....."

"Every merged being was divided into two."

Instead of splitting the heavens or shattering the earth, the god's lightning merely divided humans.

"Some were split into two men, some into a man and a woman, and some into two women. Those who were separated became wanderers, destined to roam the earth in search of their other half for the rest of their lives."

"For their whole lives?"

"For their whole lives. Humans who once dared to challenge the gods were reduced to this: creatures born incomplete, devoting their existence to mending the loneliness of their separation."

"....."

"I'm not lonely, Ha-yul."

I hugged her tightly.

"Truly lonely people are those who don't know where their other half is. Or those who know but can never meet them again. But I'm not like that."

"....."

"No matter how fragmented my heart becomes, I'll always have my companions. Ten pieces, ten friends. You're one of them, Ha-yul. No matter when, no matter where, I can knock on the door of that

house in Fukuoka and know there's a puppeteer with chestnut-colored hair inside. Isn't that a blessing?"

"But..."

Ha-yul rarely moved her lips or tongue to speak. Having lost her voice, she used the vibrations of her Aura instead.

The sound wasn't natural, it carried the awkward cadence of a limp.

"But I can't pass it on. None of it. The fact that I had such wonderful days... that you, as the Undertaker, the man who scolded me for being suspicious when we first met in the basement, used up countless cycles to stay with me... I can't convey that to the next me. None of it."

"That's not true." Gently, I rested my cheek on the top of her head and said, "Every expression you made, every smile, every breath—they're etched into my soul with perfect clarity."

"....."

"When you choked Jung Sang-guk in a fit of rage and killed him, I'll still remember how beautiful your smile could be."

"....."

"I'll remember how hard you worked to master Aura, how brightly you laughed at my pranks, how proud you looked when you took your first steps on your own, every bit of it. Not a single thing will be forgotten."

"....."

"So even if, by some chance, you set the world on fire, no matter what happens, I'll always be on your side."

"....."

"Forever."

The waves surged again.

I wanted to tell Ha-yul how grateful I was. To tell her that my heart, worn down by endless cycles, had healed slightly during our adventures across the world.

After Infinite Void confessed to me in the language of "I love you," I found my heart kept searching for answers.

What could Infinite Void have meant when speaking of love?

Was it the love one feels when gazing at something beautiful? Was it agape, the devotion one offers to another? Was it erotic love? Perhaps it was love indistinguishable from friendship, or perhaps a possessive desire to leave an indelible mark on the other person?

Does the distinction even matter?

The definition of love—whether it is shocking, pleasant, or transcendent—always converges on one conclusion:

When for the sake of love, humans are willing to set aside their lives, if only for a short while. It was a bygone conclusion from the moment the feeling took root, for human nature is love itself.

You were me, and I was you.

The reason I was born as an infinite regressor must have been to place countless lives on hold for love.

“Ha-yul, I love you.”

“……”

For a long moment, only the waves spoke into the air.

“Undertaker.”

“Yes.”

“Oppa.”

“Yes.”

“Dad.”

Ha-yul clung tightly to me.

“When I’m reborn… Mm. Even if I’m reborn, I want to ride on your shoulders, see the sea like this, and… and play with you again.”

The ocean lapped gently against my chest.

At the edge of the world, a single breath was all it took for the waves to travel from one end to the other.

“So… tell the next me.”

Ha-yul (夏律).

A child whose name meant “the rhythm of summer,” smiled faintly.

“Tell her… I was truly the happiest person in the world.”

And as always, I was the happiest regressor in the world.

Chapter 272

The Counselor I

Sinnoa

For all the chattering we've been doing these days about the aftermath of the Mastermind's defeat—a change akin to an aftershock—we've yet to discuss the greatest inflection point.

"Hey, mister."

"Hmm?"

"I've got something I want to talk about."

The red-haired Oh Dok-seo, the instigator of many changes in my otherwise monotonous loop of a life, approached me one day with the true earth-shaking revelation.

Feigning a warm smile, I replied, "You want to take a break from serialization? That's fine. Go ahead and rest."

"No, it's not about taking a break. Although... hearing you casually assume that 'Oh Dok-seo must be taking another break' has hurt my feelings. This wound is so deep that I doubt I'll be able to tap away at my typewriter until it heals. So it's not because of my laziness but solely because of your insensitivity that I'll be taking a hiatus."

"I feel like the reputation of authors everywhere is plummeting as we speak, but sure, what does it matter?"

"Anyway, my concern is about something else."

With more hiatuses than serialized days, Dok-seo might better label herself as a "break-taker" rather than a "writer." Some might even say she had reached the realm of the inhuman.

"I've been having strange dreams lately."

“Dreams?”

I straightened up immediately. Since the spread of the Void Poison throughout the world, dreams had become humanity’s most vulnerable weak point—a gateway through which psychological viruses could come and go.

For someone like Oh Dok-seo, a Miko of the Infinite Metagame, her dreams couldn’t simply be dismissed.

“What kind of dreams?” I demanded.

“Well, don’t laugh when I tell you.”

“I won’t laugh.”

“In my dream, I’m the Saintess.”

“Pfft.”

“……”

“No, I wasn’t laughing. It’s just, a sneeze caught me off guard. Please, go on.”

"...Anyway, I’m the Saintess, you know."

"Pfft."

"Ah, damn! You wanna die, mister?!"

I hurriedly calmed my mind. Even for someone like me, who had trained in meditation techniques for a long time, it wasn’t an easy task.

“*Anyway*, I’m the Saintess. But when I look around, everything is frozen— No, not frozen. It’s more like everything’s stopped moving.”

Huh?

“No one moves, no matter where I go. There’s this building, it kind of feels like the Tower of Babel. And on its rooftop, you’re just

standing there.”

Wait.

“I mean, as the Saintess, I call out to you, but you don’t even breathe or move—”

“Hold on,” I interrupted finally.

“Hmm?”

“You don’t need to explain further.”

For reference, this occurred during the 689th cycle, right after we defeated the Mastermind. It was also before I’d explained to Dok-seo how the Saintess had sealed the Goddess of Night, Nut.

Despite that, she had dreamt about what had occurred in 267th cycle, which meant...

“It seems you’ve... Awakened a new ability.”

Dok-seo tilted her head in confusion. “A new ability? Me?”

“Yes.”

Side Story Creation.

Among the spoils gained from defeating the Mastermind, this ability was both the most valuable treasure and the most harrowing consequence.

Regrettably, our world lacked the convenience of something like a status window. Or, to be more precise, there had been one briefly, before it was obliterated.

Thus, Awakeners had to figure out their abilities on their own.

“Can’t we just ask the Infinite Metagame?”

“And trust that thing? Really?”

“Oh.”

“Remember during the Mastermind raid? We borrowed its power once, and not only did it demand compensation, it was also vying for the chance to stab me in the back.” I let out a wry laugh. “Expecting altruism from an Anomaly is the surest way to get screwed over, Dok-seo. You probably feel an instinctive affinity for the Infinite Metagame because you’re its Miko. But keep that feeling in check whenever possible. Being a Miko isn’t a role just anyone can handle.”

“Alright,” she agreed reluctantly. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

We began investigating her newfound ability in earnest.

“Let’s start with something simple. Besides the dreams, have you experienced any auditory or visual hallucinations recently?”

“Oh. Yeah, I have.”

We were conducting the session at our hideout in the Inunaki Tunnel, 1,200 meters underground. To set the mood, I’d stolen Noh Do-hwa’s doctor’s coat to wear. Sharing was caring in the apocalypse, after all.

(I got scolded for that later.)

“What kind of hallucinations?”

“There’s no specific pattern,” Dok-seo answered. “Sometimes it’s your voice, sometimes it’s Yo-hwa’s. It just happens out of nowhere, usually while I’m walking.”

“Can you recall the exact words you heard?”

“Hmm… Oh, yesterday I heard Seo-rin’s voice. It went something like this.”

Then, in an exaggerated impression, Dok-seo she recited, “Hello, Undertaker? Let’s go on a trip. Really? Then I’ll plan the itinerary.”

I tapped my pen against my lips. “That’s…”

“What? What is it?”

“It’s an actual conversation I had.”

The dialogue had taken place during a cycle where I’d traveled to the Uyuni Salt Flats with Dang Seo-rin. The phrasing wasn’t identical, but the difference was nothing worth putting into writing. Likely a result of Dok-seo’s memory being less precise than mine.

“Anything else?” I prompted. “Other hallucinations or visions?”

“Hmm… Sorry, I can’t recall anything specific.”

“That’s fine. This is going to be a long-term process anyway. If you encounter more hallucinations, try to remember the details and tell me.”

“Got it.”

From that day on, I made a conscious effort to spend more time with Dok-seo.

Her hallucinations weren’t alarming at first. As she’d mentioned, most were fleeting and barely memorable. However, as the 689th, 690th, and 691st cycles passed, the hallucinations became increasingly vivid.

“Ah.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Over there… I just saw Seo Gyu’s head explode.”

“……”

Occasionally, while on one of our walks together, Dok-seo would stop to describe “events that didn’t occur this cycle”—past incidents she could never have personally experienced.

“Whoa! What the hell?!”

“What is it now?”

“Potatoes! Potatoes with legs! They’re walking around calling you ‘Mr. Undertaker’ in this creepy tone! Shit, this is definitely a hallucination!”

“……”

Up until that point, she could still clearly distinguish reality from illusion. But after the 692nd cycle, her condition began to rapidly deteriorate.

“Ugh, damn it! Ah-ryeon unnie! I’m doing fine with serialization, so why are you tattling to him?!”

“Dok-seo. Ah-ryeon isn’t here.”

“Huh?” She blinked in confusion. “What? That’s weird. I swear she was just standing there, whispering something to you.”

“……”

Her auditory and visual hallucinations had escalated into what could only be described as hyper-realistic manifestations. Worse, she seemed to struggle more and more to separate these from reality, or, more accurately, from my past.

She was reliving experiences I’d had in previous cycles as hallucinations in the present.

During one particularly bad episode, she burst into tears for no apparent reason while drinking coffee.

“Dok-seo?” I asked cautiously. “What’s wrong?”

“Just now... Seo-rin unnie was standing under a white pine tree, talking to you so happily...”

“……”

“And then she collapsed. You spoke with her one last time in the hospital room before she died. Afterward, you became the

pallbearer at her funeral, and your face...” She trailed off, tears streaming down her cheeks.

It wasn’t something I could brush off any longer.

I discussed her condition with the other members of the Regression Alliance.

[Since this trend emerged after the Mastermind’s defeat, I believe it must be related to that event,] the Saintess theorized.

She often provided the most plausible explanations.

[According to you, Mr. Undertaker, both the Infinite Void and the Infinite Metagame played significant roles in the Mastermind raid. The Infinite Void devoured the Mastermind entirely.]

“Exactly.”

[Then wouldn’t it make sense if the Infinite Metagame also absorbed some of the Mastermind’s powers, though perhaps to a lesser extent?]

She presented her theory in the form of a hunting analogy.

I was the hunter, and the Mastermind was the prey. My two hounds, the Infinite Void and the Infinite Metagame, had torn the prey apart. The Infinite Void was the star player, but the Infinite Metagame had hacked the system, biting into the prey’s hind legs.

As a result, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame had consumed part of the Mastermind’s essence. Consequently, the backlash extended to Oh Dok-seo, its Miko.

“It makes sense,” I said grimly. “Infinite Metagame has always been keen on uncovering my past, running simulations to learn more. It’s likely still doing so even now.”

[Exactly.] The Saintess continued, saying, [If we assume that, it also explains why Dok-seo’s ability has blossomed over time instead of all at once. It’s developing progressively as the cycles continue. It’s a direct reflection of what the Infinite Metagame is doing.]

I sighed. “Frankly, investigating my past isn’t all that interesting, but so be it.”

The Saintess, ever humorless, didn’t react to my grumbling lament.

“I suppose this is a good reminder that no matter how desperate the situation, we should avoid relying on the aid of Outer Gods. I’ll make a note of that for the future.”

[Agreed. But for now, we should focus on alleviating Dok-seo’s symptoms.]

“Do you think it’s serious?”

[Very.]

Unlike me, the Saintess could monitor Dok-seo around the clock. Her observations carried weight.

[Even when she’s alone, she seems to be holding conversations with illusions, manifestations of people you’ve interacted with in past cycles.]

[For instance, right now, she’s writing a novel in her room while mumbling incessantly to herself.]

[Her roommate, Sim Ah-ryeon, is watching her very closely.]

[In fact, she’s not just watching, she’s drawing a comic about it. She seems to find it entertaining.]

[Knowing Ah-ryeon’s thought process, I suspect she’s planning to immortalize Dok-seo’s antics on SG Net as a gag panel.]

Ah-ryeon...

As her guild leader, I wanted to remember her at her best. Yet moments like this tested my patience.

Even guild leaders are human, I’m afraid.

[Above all, over the past few days, Dok-seo has been holding

conversations with a phantom version of me. Watching that feels strangely— Oh?]

Then, the telepathic link faltered.

I frowned. “Saintess?”

[……]

“Saintess, what happened? Is something wrong?”

It was a highly unusual occurrence. The Saintess, meticulous to a fault, never faltered like that. Before speaking, she even froze time to rehearse her lines.

She never suddenly stopped talking or stuttered like she did just then.

She claimed it was because she wasn’t eloquent, but from other people’s perspectives, she had always been an effortlessly fluent speaker who had never once stumbled over her words.

Yet now, her telepathic voice wavered.

[No… It’s nothing.]

“Are you sure?”

[Actually, I’m beginning to think we don’t need to worry so much about Dok-seo.]

“What do you mean?”

[Let me refrain from giving away spoilers. I suggest you observe her yourself for the time being.]

Her tone was evasive, leaving me perplexed. Nevertheless, I complied.

If the requirement was patience, I had no equal on this planet.

The very next day, Dok-seo appeared at my door, dark circles under her eyes and a laptop in hand.

“Hey, mister. I wrote something. Can you read it?”

“Huh. You’ve been looking tired lately. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. I got into the zone yesterday and pounded it out in one sitting. Honestly, I haven’t felt this refreshed in ages.”

“Well, if you say so...”

“Hurry up and read it,” she said, shoving the laptop toward me.

I hesitated, then scrolled through the document. Barely a few lines in, my eyes widened in shock.

“What the... Dok-seo, what is this?”

“It’s exactly what it looks like.”

Her expression was unusually serious.

The story she had written wasn’t her usual fare. It wasn’t a fictionalized account based on the anecdotes I’d shared with her.

This was something I could never have told her.

A tale that unfolded entirely beyond my awareness, scenes that transpired when I was absent, events I could never know.

“You mentioned the 267th cycle, right? The one where time was frozen to stop the Goddess of Night, Nut.”

“.....”

“This is the story of what happened during that frozen time... told from the Saintess’s perspective.”

It was, without a doubt, a side story.

Chapter 273

The Counselor II

Sinnoa

267.

To some, it might have been a simple sequence of numbers, but to me, the Undertaker, it was an invaluable identifier.

There in that eternally frozen world, the Saintess had confined an Outer God, and in doing so locked away any and all possibility of reuniting—at least for now.

There was only one exception: hanging a Silver Bell around my wrist and pressing my palm against the mirror to feel her 15˚C warmth emanating from the other side.

It was the only connection left to us.

“How could this happen?” I muttered in shock.

In my hand was the anthology of the Infinite Metagame’s side stories, including one such tale which described in delicate, if brief, prose how the Saintess of the 267th cycle endured nearly 2,000 years after halting time.

I won’t detail the content here. The manuscript contained far too much sensitive information for that.

“Dok-seo. Did you… Could you have seen it? In your hallucinations, what the Saintess went through in previous cycles?”

“Yeah,” she confirmed with a nod. “But it was hazy, like a dream. At first, it was pure torture. Voices that I couldn’t control banging and knocking away on my eardrums, like the worst kind of uninvited guest. But when I really stopped and focused, it turned out to be the opposite.”

“The opposite?”

“Yeah. The uninvited guest wasn’t them—it was me.”

I took the moment to hand over the laptop, and Dok-seo readily accepted it, hugging it tight to her chest.

“The visions were looping events from past cycles, just like a video auto-replaying after you get to the end of the recording, except that video has been privated and locked away from all viewers. But for some reason I don’t understand, I, an uninvited guest, managed to sneak a peek into those recordings.”

When I didn’t respond, she continued on.

“At first, it hurt to watch.”

Divine Illness.

The suffering of a Miko when possessed by a god.

“No matter how much I slept, I never felt rested. Awake or asleep, my muscles constantly ached, like I had the flu. It would move me to tears, too, watching the ghosts of the past. Probably because of how often you, mister, showed up in those tragedies.”

There was nothing to say.

“But like you said, it’s probably some kind of newly Awakened ability of mine, right? So I figured: ‘Fine, then. I’ll see it through to the end.’ I made up my mind that I was gonna take it all in, relive your story through those hallucinations—and then I wrote about them.”

That was when something miraculous occurred.

“Then the pain stopped.”

Dok-seo took tormenting visions and transformed them into the written word.

Writers are blacksmiths, born with hammers attached to all ten

fingers. By relentlessly hammering the visions and voices into shape, straightening and bending them into written forms, they finally bowed their heads and orderly settled into pages.

“At least while I was writing, I was freed from the pain. Not that I got any sleep last night, though. After finishing it at dawn, I took a walk outside the tunnel and honestly? That was the first good breath of fresh air I’ve gotten in weeks.”

Slowly, carefully, I told her, “You’ve been through a lot.”

“Yeah. And after completing this short story, I realized something else.”

Dok-seo closed her eyes and took a deep breath in, then exhaled it slowly over eight seconds.

The laptop screen flickered and—

“Dok-seo?”

When Dok-seo opened her eyes again to face me, I couldn’t help but furrow my brow, sensing some inexplicable dissonance.

“Mr. Undertaker.”

A static-like chill brushed the nape of my neck.

The person standing before me was Dok-seo, yet not. The angle of her eyebrows, the curve of her lips, her attire. It all pointed to her being Dok-seo and yet simultaneously...

“Ah.”

“It’s been a while, Mr. Undertaker.”

The noise had escaped me before I could shut it away. Thoughts raced in my mind, flashing like a fast-forwarded signal.

“I never imagined this could happen,” not-Dok-seo said. “Do you recognize who I am?”

Relying on intuition and evidence, I ventured a guess.

“Saintess?”

Silence.

I tried again.

“Could you be the Saintess of the 267th cycle?”

“Yes.”

The figure wearing Dok-seo’s face smiled faintly—a smile so subtle that only someone with a deep connection to her might recognize it.

“Good to see you, Mr. Undertaker... It seems that this ability Dok-seo has Awakened can be described as ‘possession’ or perhaps more accurately, ‘empathy.’ It’s the ability to possess the protagonist of the side stories she has written.”

My god.

[My god.]

The Saintess in Seoul, observing this scene through Clairvoyance, let out a sigh identical to mine.

It was an uncanny coincidence.

Side Story Creation. Possession. Empathy.

This was the newfound ability of our LiteraryGirl.

As demonstrated before our eyes, Dok-seo could “possess” the perspective of another character.

“Not just anyone, though.”

Of course, there were conditions.

“For one, I can only possess someone I’ve written about in a side

story. And to write their story, their life has to flash through my mind like a vision."

"Can you... tell me who else has appeared in your hallucinations besides the Saintess of the 267th cycle?"

"Sure."

It turned out that figures like a far-future version of Dang Seo-rin or Cheon Yo-hwa, who contributed to defeating the Mastermind, had shown up in her visions. Quite a number of characters, actually.

"Unbelievable," I exclaimed, unable to hide my astonishment. "How could this...? No, it's impossible that previous-cycle figures could actually be possessed. Most likely, Dok-seo, you're interpreting them in a way that recreates their personas."

"Hmm. I mean, I guess so?"

"No, it must be so."

This was undoubtedly the machination of the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. Having consumed the simulated universe of the Mastermind, the Admin must have gained a much higher "resolution" in analyzing the people around me.

As a result, the Admin's Miko, Dok-seo, now had an elevated understanding of these characters. To the point where she could immerse herself in their roles without any sense of dissonance or self-doubt.

"But even so... The fidelity is astounding. Even I, who knew those people firsthand, could be deceived."

"Right? Even during the possession, I lose myself in it and don't remember being 'Dok-seo.' It's like I'm dreaming the Saintess's dreams. And, oh!" Dok-seo gushed. "Thanks to this, writing stories has become much easier! I can vividly feel what the characters—oops, I mean the people in your stories—felt. It's so clear!"

She beamed.

“It feels like I could write stories forever!”

For the record, that was a lie.

Dok-seo’s dictionary defined “ongoing serialization” as a word that encompassed the past, present, and future tense. She had abandoned serialization, was abandoning it, and would continue to abandon it.

Even so, the astonishment lingered.

“Anyway, great job, Dok-seo,” I said.

“Heh.”

“This ability has countless potential uses. For now, there’s one experiment I need you to conduct immediately.”

“What is it?”

“Among the people in your visions, is Noh Do-hwa, the Director of the National Road Management Corps, one of them?”

She was. Specifically, the Noh Do-hwa of the 668th cycle, who had endured the Ice Age with me.

“I ask this with full sincerity, Dok-seo. By any means necessary, write a side story about the Noh Do-hwa of the 668th cycle. I’ll grant you anything you want.”

“Anything, huh? You mean it?”

“Yes.”

“Deal.”

Dok-seo succeeded in writing *IF Side Story: Noh Do-hwa of the 668th Cycle* in a single night. Her speed was on par with Gevanni from Death Note.[1]

If only she’d write my story that fast. But that wasn’t the point here.

“Noh Do-hwa, Director of the National Road Management Corps!”

With Dok-seo in tow, I burst into the Corps Headquarters.

As usual, Do-hwa was sipping an energy drink (a luxury item) while leafing through documents. She glanced up at us and took her time responding.

“What is this? Just looking at the two of you makes my stomach churn. My esophagus is burning with the acid reflux...”

“We’ve discovered something amazing. So amazing that we couldn’t not share it with the ruler of the Korean Peninsula. We came all this way without hesitation.”

“Damn, this reeks of bad luck...”

Do-hwa instinctively reached for the security call button to have us thrown out.

Her intuition was as sharp as ever. Too bad it was useless since I obliterated the button with a burst of Aura, causing Do-hwa’s face to darken as if burdened with the weight of all the world’s evil.

Ignoring her despair, I shouted, “Dok-seo, transform!”

“Roger!”

Dok-seo, clutching her laptop, struck a Kamen Rider pose. The laptop screen flashed, and in the next moment, the weariness of a civil servant possessed her face.

“.....?”

“.....?”

Noh Do-hwa tilted her head. Dok-seo-as-Do-hwa mirrored her.

“The fuck is this?”

“The fuck is this?”

“.....”

“.....”

“No, but really—what the fuck is this?”

“No, but really—what the fuck is this?”

“……”

“……”

The two Noh Do-hwas turned their gazes toward me.

Spreading my arms wide, I exclaimed, “Two Noh Do-hwas! Korea is victorious!”

“……”

“……”

“And that’s not all.”

I quickly turned off the office lights. Dok-seo’s hoodie gleamed with a fluorescent glow.

“Behold! Glow-in-the-dark Noh Do-hwa!”

Even the gleam in their eyes sparkled.

“You insane, fucking lunatic—”

“You insane, fucking lunatic—”

I almost died.

But it was a sight worth risking death for.

This moment would forever be etched in the deepest part of my heart, a jewel-like memory that would sparkle whenever despair threatened to overwhelm me.

[Is that all?]

“Of course not, Saintess. For your reference, glow-in-the-dark Cheon Yo-hwa, glow-in-the-dark Dang Seo-rin, and glow-in-the-dark Yu Ji-won are also in the works. It’s only a pity that implementing a

glow-in-the-dark Go Yuri proves challenging.”

[That’s quite enough...]

Incidentally, Seo Gyu’s reaction was priceless too. Pairing up two people with anger management issues resulted in an escalating cacophony of screaming, a spectacle worth savoring.

What’s the point in hiding it?

I was utterly hooked on this “possession game” with Dok-seo.

It wasn’t just about creating doppelgangers to mess with our allies, though that was undeniably part of the fun. That was merely a secondary amusement. No, the true essence of Side Story Creation lay elsewhere.

“Seo-rin.”

“Yeah?”

“Lately, the public safety in Busan has been deteriorating. I believe it’s a side effect of the influx of outsiders. I wanted to ask how you would handle this situation.”

The answer lay in consultation.

While my allies were already competent, certain cycles stood out with extraordinary individuals who had fully bloomed into their potential.

For instance, the Dang Seo-rin of the 173rd cycle was one such case.

During that cycle, she had Fallen and become a judge, transforming Busan into a utopia.

Though it didn’t end happily, her experience maintaining and governing a city was invaluable. Being able to consult with such a ruler at any time was a tremendous boon to me.

The ultimate brainstorming partner, wasn’t she?

And it wasn't just her.

The Saintess of the 267th cycle, the Infinite Void from the 688th cycle, and countless others—figures I thought I would never converse with again—became accessible through Dok-seo's Side Story Creation.

My consultations with these wise allies grew longer and more frequent. There were even days when I abandoned eating and drinking to immerse myself in dialogue with them.

Time passed in this manner.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

"Yes?"

[Shouldn't you step outside every now and then?]

[No matter how enjoyable it is to converse with 'me' or 'others,' it's been over a week since you've holed up in the tunnel. That seems... unusual.]

Wait.

A week? Has it really been that long?

"You're right. I've gone overboard. I'll just have a quick chat with you, Saintess, and then head out."

[You said the exact same thing yesterday.]

"But Saintess, there's no one else—"

[Mr. Undertaker.]

The telepathic voice of the Saintess was laden with sorrow.

[No offense, but seeing you like this reminds me of a washed-up internet streamer or a V-tuber addict.]

"..."

[Please, just go outside and get some fresh air.]

Undertaker, confirmed to be addicted to Dok-seo!

Footnotes:

1 - In *Death Note*, Gevanni is tasked with replicating the death-list notebook of an incredibly prolific user, and doing so in one night.

Chapter 274

The Counselor III

Sinnoa

There was a time when TV programs struggled to capture the attention of dopamine-hungry viewers. A figure who appeared in one such program left a timeless quote, years before the VTuber boom swept the world:

"Do you think I played the game because I wanted to? The people are inside the game!"

Indeed. People lived within the screen, and friends existed only on the internet. Those who couldn't comprehend this undeniable truth were nothing but outdated relics of a bygone era.

Especially for someone like me, who had lived for thousands of years, it was imperative to stay on top of the daily comings and goings of trends.

"Therefore, I am not addicted. Addicted, you say? Preposterous! It is nothing more than a process of honing myself by using Dok-seo's side stories as a whetstone."

[Are you being serious?] the Saintess whispered gloomily through her Telepathy.

I felt a sudden pang in my chest, but I did not let it show. Today, I planned to enjoy some small talk with the Saintess from the 267th cycle all day long. Could I really abandon a schedule I had prepared days in advance?

"Saintess, please. Look closely. Right here, the person sitting in front of me may appear like Oh Dok-seo through the physical eye, but through the eyes of the heart... Ta-da!"

"You seem to be having a Telepathic conversation." The Saintess of the 267th cycle, who wore Oh Dok-seo's face through Side Story

Creation, gave a faint smile. “Nice to meet you, the future me.”

[……]

“Addressing myself is rather hard. For convenience, may I call myself senior, while addressing you as junior?”

[…This really isn’t okay.]

Faint emotion crept into her Telepathy, and to my surprise, I realized she seemed slightly angry. It was rare for the Saintess, who spent her entire life priding herself on her emotionless, expressionless demeanor to stoop to such a reaction.

[I exist here. The person sending Telepathic messages to you in real time is none other than the real me, located in Seoul, Yongsan.]

[The person you have been speaking with for the past week, Mr. Undertaker, is nothing but an illusion implemented through data by an Outer God.]

“But, Saintess…”

[Yes?]

“Yes?”

Both the true Saintess and Dok-seo Saintess answered simultaneously.

Then, something astonishing happened.

[……, ……]

The Saintess didn’t add another word, but an ominous aura of silence carried over through her Telepathy. To put it bluntly, I felt her rage.

I was taken aback. Unless something truly dangerous was occurring, the goosebumps on the back of my neck (my sixth sense) wouldn’t usually tingle like this.

“Ah, hmm,” I stammered. “If this makes you uncomfortable, I’ll use this tool instead.”

For such moments, I had commissioned Ah-ryeon to prepare a special illustration.

It was a portrait of the Saintess!

I carefully cut out the portrait to make a mask. Then, I placed it on Oh Dok-seo’s head and used a marker to write “267” on the forehead.

Perfect!

“How about this? Now, there’s absolutely no risk of confusing the original Saintess and the 267th cycle Saintess.”

[Mr. Undertaker... Am I being mocked right now?]

Huh? For some reason, the rage deepened.

“Mr. Undertaker, you understand, ” Dok-seo Saintess, now equipped with a nameplate, said calmly. “This cycle’s version of me hasn’t even lived for a thousand years yet. Therefore, I may not have overcome the uniqueness of the self. When one faces a doppelganger of themselves, it’s only natural to respond with hostility rather than understanding. It’s an extremely common psychological phenomenon.”

“As expected, Saintess. Wisdom flows from your every word.”

“It’s only what I learned secondhand from you, Mr. Undertaker. You flatter me.”

Dok-seo Saintess patted me on the shoulder. Then she whispered words so kind, they were almost tear-inducing.

“You’ve really endured a lot, Mr. Undertaker. To think I struggled so much with just two millennia... Imagining the hell you’ve walked through makes me shudder. If speaking with me gives you any encouragement, I’ll join you in conversation as much as you like. If you’re happy, then I’m happy too.”

This couldn't be real.

I was moved. Could the Saintess be an angel? Then again, she was always more than just human.

[Indeed,] the true Saintess muttered through Telepathy. [So this is what others perceive me to be like. I've learned something. It was quite an educational experience. In exchange, I shall prepare an excellent lesson for you, Undertaker.]

"An excellent lesson?"

The Saintess did not respond. She was an Awakener who could cut off communications at will.

The next day, in the depths of the Inunaki Tunnel where I'd built a personal hideout solely for enjoying Dok-seo's side stories, an unexpected group burst in.

"G-Guild Leader!"

The door trembled violently with a great *bang, bang, bang!*

"I-I heard from the Constellations! They said you put an illustrated mask on Dok-seo on and giggled with a previous version of me?!"

"Teacher! Do you know who my twin sister was supposed to be before she was erased from existence while fighting Anomalies?!"

"Oppa, I'm really disappointed."

"And I told Do-hwa about this, too! She said she's quitting and returning to her hometown because of it...!"

"Gross."

"Why are you hanging out with a side story version of my nonexistent twin sister?! Teacher! Teacher! There's only one Cheon Yo-hwa!"

"Hehe. I also told Dang Seo-rin. She's such an outsider she didn't even know about regression stuff, so I explained everything except

that! I did a good job, right?”

“I even posted it on SG Net.”

“I mobilized 31 accounts and made it trend! Haha. I’m still manipulating it right now... You must be watching, right, Guild Leader? You’re so popular.”

“Teacher! I’m your only student! I’m an only child! Wake up, Teacher!”

“……”

Moral of the day:

If you make the Saintess angry, you risk being socially buried. Proceed with caution.

“Your Excellency. May I ask why you are kneeling outside Commander Noh Do-hwa’s office with both hands raised?”

“If I don’t, Commander Noh Do-hwa said she’d really submit her resignation and leave...”

“Ah.”

Ji-won glanced back and forth between me and Dok-seo. Then she lowered her head and whispered quietly into my ear, “If you desire rebellion, please give the order immediately, Your Excellency. Loyal members, including myself, are stationed everywhere, ready to reclaim the National Road Management Corps from Commander Noh Do-hwa’s clutches.”

“Don’t. You’ll get us all killed.”

“Understood.”

Ji-won marched away.

In the end, the commotion settled as nothing more than a week-long incident. However, considering that even someone like me fell

so easily into such a spiral, it was undeniable that Dok-seo's Side Story Creation possessed a terrifying level of power.

"I think you must've been more exhausted than you realized, mister," was Dok-seo's common on the matter.

"Exhausted? Me?"

"Yes. You always treat me the same, whether I'm from the 500th cycle or the 600th cycle. But in reality, there are subtle differences between each version, aren't there?"

She massaged her arm, muttering *ouch* and *ow* under her breath. She had just finished serving the 24-hour penalty imposed by Commander Noh Do-hwa.

"You act so we never notice any disconnect, but at the end of the day, you're still human. Sometimes, don't you want to talk to a comrade from the 500th cycle instead of the one from the 600th?"

"That's..."

"Sometimes. Just sometimes. I'm not saying always. But even occasional feelings accumulate when you've lived thousands of years, right?" Dok-seo grinned mischievously and said, "So if you ever have worries you can't share with anyone, just come find me. I'll use Side Story Creation to embody someone appropriate and chat with you until you're completely satisfied."

"....."

"Ah, wait. No, that's not quite right."

She propped her chin on her hand, contemplating.

"It's strange, though," she mused eventually. "Whether it's the Saintess or Cheon Yo-hwa from previous cycles, everyone seems to enjoy talking to you."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. I can faintly feel the emotions they experienced, so I know.

You're really lucky, you know? Their feelings are so sincere." Dok-seo's playful tone softened as she gazed somewhere far away. "Affection. Regret. Joy. Worry. Yearning. Acceptance. Consideration. Concern... A mixture of emotions so tangled it made my head spin."

"....."

"It was fascinating, really. They're someone else's emotions, but they felt like my own. From a writer's perspective, it was an amazing experience."

It seemed Dok-seo had her own share of enjoyment.

Well, it was a miraculous experience, to live through someone else's heart.

"Oh, right, mister. So I was thinking... Can I add side stories to my novels about you?"

"Hmm?"

"You know, side stories. Like writing from 'another character's perspective.' I mean, it feels like a waste to use this ability just to play the role of your personal counselor."

"Well, you're both the writer and the editor, so if it motivates you, I don't see why not."

"Yay! But let's not overdo it. Hmm... How about this?" Dok-seo grinned widely. "For every 100 chapters written from your perspective, I'll write one side story. In exchange, since it's a side story, I'll post it without you reviewing it. Is that okay?"

"One hundred chapters for one side story, huh...?" I trailed off.

I wasn't all that concerned by it, but Dok-seo seemed very particular about this ratio.

"Sure. Do whatever you like."

"Yay! Thanks, mister! You won't regret it!"

Yet even now, at chapter 274, Oh Dok-seo still hadn't written a single proper side story. Technically, she already had the rights to two side stories, purely based on the numbers.

I still didn't know what kind of side story she wanted to write.

There is an epilogue.

Much later, in another cycle, I made a peculiar request to Dok-seo.

"Can you embody me from the 5th cycle, just once?"

Dok-seo agreed readily.

To embody someone, a side story must first be written. However, for the 10th cycle version of myself, no such writing preparation was needed. She had already written it.

"...Are you seriously claiming to be me?"

And so, I found myself face-to-face with the 10th cycle version of the Undertaker, wearing Oh Dok-seo's face—Dok-seo Undertaker.

"Yes, kiddo. For the record, it's the 700th cycle now."

"What?" Dok-seo Undertaker's face twisted into a grimace. "Seven hundred? You've looped seven hundred times and still haven't succeeded? Are you even human? How incompetent do you have to be—"

"Here's a list of all the absurd Anomalies you'll have to slay in the future."

At first, Dok-seo Undertaker regarded me with nothing but scorn. But as I recited a list of horrors and their descriptions, his expression gradually darkened.

Being exposed to spoilers about one's own life was bad enough. If said life resembled a tragedy, it was much worse.

"Why are you even telling me this?" he demanded in the end. "To

make me despair? To impress me? Either way, it confirms you're just as immature as I am."

He really was insufferable. It seemed that in the early cycles, I was truly a twisted piece of work.

"Well, no."

"Then what is it?"

"I was simply curious." I set a cup of café au lait on the table with a soft thud. "Since I have Complete Memory, I can be certain myself. But I wanted to hear it directly from you, too."

"Hear what?"

"You're my childhood self, the youth of a regressor. So tell me. From your perspective, do you think I've grown into an adult I can be proud of?"

Dok-seo Undertaker fell silent. He remained quiet for a long time, then finally picked up the coffee cup and took a sip.

"The coffee is good."

I waited for more, but to my surprise, Dok-seo Undertaker said nothing else. He severed the possession immediately after that.

He had run away.

"Huh," I huffed with an incredulous chuckle. Then I picked up the half-drunk café au lait he left behind and downed it.

It tasted exceptionally special.

Chapter 275

The Preacher I

Sinnoa

Remember when I led the Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Fortress City 『BusaN』 and traveled freely around the world?

I've mentioned this before, but the Eurasian continental area was full of Forsaken Villages, scattered like Go stones on a board after a game had ended. We had seen countless of them during our journey.

Forsaken Villages. Places where people, in one way or another, fell under the thrall of Anomalies and struggled to survive.

Of course, the residents themselves didn't call these places Forsaken Villages, but instead referred to them as Pioneer Villages.

"Is there any need to struggle and preserve the vague concept of humanity?"

"It's better to accept the Void as Earth's new environment and adapt to it. That's the only solution!"

"Humankind's true strength lies in adaptability. Give it thousands, tens of thousands of years, and the next generations will adapt seamlessly to the Void environment."

That was the logic of Forsaken Village residents.

Like all ideologies, it sounded plausible at first. The purpose was noble. The original concepts and words themselves weren't at fault.

The fundamental problem was that the Void itself was entirely incompatible with the idea of "adaptation."

Adaptation. Evolution. They're nice words, sure. But how exactly could any group truly adapt to the Void?

Let me give you a simple example.

Knock, knock.

Late one night when I was working alone, I would sometimes hear that distinct knocking sound at my door.

“Who is it?”

- It’s me, oppa.

“Oh, Ha-yul.”

It was Lee Ha-yul’s voice.

- Can I come in?

“Sure.”

At that point, I wasn’t particularly worried. Ha-yul often struggled with insomnia and couldn’t sleep alone. When that happened, she would lie crookedly on the sofa or bed in my room, talk endlessly through the night, and eventually doze off peacefully.

I assumed it would be the same this time.

“……?”

But seconds passed, and the door never opened.

That’s when I looked up and stared at the door.

Knock, knock.

The sound echoed again.

Even though there was a sound, the door remained perfectly still. There should have been the faintest vibration, but it didn’t even twitch.

Only the sound of knocking had occurred.

“Ha-yul?”

- It’s me, oppa.

“……”

- Can I come in?

I rose and approached the door.

In case Ha-yul was playing a prank, I cautiously turned the handle, making the door creak as it opened.

There was no one there.

The hallway, without lights to save energy, stretched into complete darkness.

It was then.

Knock, knock, knock.

Knocking echoed in the Void.

- Can I come in?

These phenomena were commonplace in this world.

Even in BusaN, a human stronghold, the Knock Anomaly occurred.

What about Forsaken Villages, then?

...When someone opened the door to their family’s room, an unfamiliar old woman might suddenly appear. It turned out that time had warped, and their daughter had aged into a grandmother.

...Yesterday, there had been four people in the family, but today, one person was missing. And yet, no one could recall who that person was.

...At some point, the food on the table, those hard-earned rations, started to feel unbearably disgusting. Meanwhile, the stench from the sewers below smelled disturbingly appetizing.

No matter how much you tried, you couldn’t adapt. Coexistence

with the Void was impossible. The only way to “adapt” was to give up being human.

And so, the fate of Forsaken Villages was sealed.

People justified their actions, claiming they had “pioneered the Void” in their own way. But in truth, their methods were simply hundreds of variations on the theme of “abandoning humanity.”

The universal traits of humanity. Their bodies. Their minds. What parts would they sacrifice?

Is cannibalism a sin? Is incest taboo?

Would they maintain the concept of family? Or would they discard the idea of blood ties entirely?

The Forsaken Villages dismembered humanity piece by piece, dissecting them in a perverse surgical operation. The skill of the proverbial surgeon leading the charge determined the survival of their fellow man. Many Forsaken Villages perished under the amateur scalpel of a quack doctor, while a select few survived.

“You just have to give up being happy.”

Among them, one group stood out.

“Stop trying to be happy. Don’t pursue the good fortune of happiness in a world where happiness is unattainable.”

“Unhappiness. Unhappiness is the only realistic goal that can be achieved in this age. Become realistic beings.”

The Church of Unhappiness.

“When everything is heading toward destruction, there’s nothing left for humans who pursue happiness.”

“Can you eat what you want? No.”

“Can you live as you wish? No.”

“Can you love the person you want to love? No.”

“The more you seek happiness, the more trapped you become. You only realize your own incompetence.”

“But unhappiness?”

“Oh, we can still be much more unhappy.”

The blossom of evil that bloomed in the apocalypse.

“Eat something even more repulsive. You can do it.”

“Live an even more horrific life. You can do it.”

“Hate more, slander more, grow more arrogant, and tear yourself apart even further. We still have enough flesh left for that.”

The teachings of the Church of Unhappiness, which had already been spreading underground before civilization’s collapse, fully bloomed with the apocalypse.

Unlike the Eastern Holy State’s Mo Gwang-seo Faith or New Buddhism, this cult was of a different breed.

Those other two cults at least involved Anomalies. Mo Gwang-seo, the Anomaly of Resurrection Christ, and Udumbara, which bore the World Tree. Even when taking their successes into account, Anomalies still made up half of their identity.

The Church of Unhappiness was different.

“Failure doesn’t matter. In fact, fail over and over again.”

“When others despair at failure, we see failure itself as success.”

“The effort to become more unhappy is the only freedom we have.”

The Church of Unhappiness was purely, entirely a creation of humanity.

This meant it wasn’t a target I, the Undertaker, needed to exterminate. And yet, my ties with the Church of Unhappiness were

anything but trivial.

Long before I crossed the Ural Mountains and explored countless Forsaken Villages, I was already well-acquainted with this particular branch of humanity.

The 500th cycle? No. Even further back.

The 200th cycle? Earlier still.

The 10th cycle? Unbelievably, even before that.

[Seo Gyu: Damn it, what the hell is this? This is fucking garbage.]

[Lee Jae-hee: My phone's not working?]

[Uehara Shino: Too many people. Can't breathe.]

[Park Ye-dam: I need to contact my boss...]

Back in the concourse of Busan Station, my point of origin, I turned on Mind Reading a couple of times and peered into the thoughts of the people around me. If your memory serves you well, you might recall the following characters from those moments:

[Lee Baek: What's going on? Where'd everyone go?]

[Go Yuri: Oh my]

[Jung So-hee: Reverend? Where did you go, Reverend?]

[Sim Ah-ryeon: Where am I? Who am I?]

Let's pause here.

By now, I'm sure you know quite a bit about Seo Gyu, Go Yuri, and Sim Ah-ryeon.

I've also shared snippets about Lee Baek and Uehara Shino. Lee Baek was a thug who rallied survivors using his Lion's Roar ability, and Uehara opened an alchemy workshop after moving to Japan, she was a former comrade of mine.

[Jung So-hee: Reverend? Where did you go, Reverend?]

And now, let's talk about today's focus: Jung So-hee.

From the way she called out for a "reverend" the moment she landed in the Tutorial Dungeon, it was clear she was deeply immersed in a cult. Specifically, she belonged to the Church of Unhappiness.

Her job class was Zealot.

There's no point in hiding it now.

Before the 5th cycle, Jung So-hee was one of my "Original Party Members."

My original party members had one thing in common: at first, they seemed competent, but as time went on, they became utterly useless.

The same went for Jung So-hee.

"I'm a water-type ability user."

"Oh? So, like a water jet that shoots out? Or maybe you summon water spirits, like Undine?"

"No. It's... just tap water."

Drip.

When Jung So-hee raised a finger, water trickled down from thin air.

By today's standards, her ability would be laughed off as pathetic. It wasn't all that different from what an ordinary person could do. But in the early days, things were completely different. Back then, Jung So-hee was absolutely essential to our party.

Why? The answer was simple.

“By the way, it’s clean, first-grade water. It even tastes good.”

“Wow, that’s incredible, So-hee!”

“Yes! With this, we don’t have to worry about drinking water anymore!”

In the Tutorial Dungeon, there wasn’t even enough water to drink, let alone bathe.

Fire wasn’t much of an issue. Many people brought lighters when they were summoned into the dungeon, and there were lighters for sale in the station’s souvenir shops.

But drinking water? That was a different story.

Without my intervention, it took the girls from Baekhwa Girls’ High over five years to clear the dungeon—five years by the dungeon’s internal time flow, anyway.

The Busan Station Tutorial Dungeon was no different. If anything, it was even harder than Baekhwa High’s dungeon.

Without me, a regressor, there would have been zero survivors. Not a single one. The dungeon was essentially impossible to clear.

“W-water… Wateeer…”

A true hellscape.

From the outside, only a week passed. But inside the Tutorial Dungeon, three months might go by.

In an environment completely cut off from the outside world, finding a stable supply of food and water was impossible. Starvation and dehydration were rampant. The only way to survive was to clear the quests given by the Tutorial Fairy and receive rewards—at the risk of your own life, of course.

“Here’s today’s water supply.”

Under those circumstances, Jung So-hee’s Tap Water ability was a

lifesaver for our party.

“Thank you, So-hee.”

“It’s nothing. This is my role, after all. Undertaker, you should drink first.”

“Are you sure?”

“If something happens, you and Jae-hee are the only ones who can fight. I’ll drink last.”

Jung So-hee could produce about four liters of water per day, roughly two bottles’ worth. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to keep us alive.

At the time, our party consisted of four members: myself, Uehara Shino, Lee Jae-hee, and Jung So-hee—

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No. There were five of us.

Someone else had been with us. ■■■, the person erased from my memory by Time Seal, was likely my very first comrade.

But now, I couldn’t remember them.

Even my memories of Jung So-hee were incomplete. The memories I’m recounting now only surfaced faintly after the 688th cycle, when I defeated the Mastermind.

After Infinite Void tampered with my mind, implanting memories of me teaching the Cheon Yo-hwa twin sisters, I began to recall fragmented pieces of my past.

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The static of those missing pieces blocked me from truly recalling them. As a result, even these memories might have been

manipulated by Infinite Void.

“I can drink later. It’s fine.”

In those memories, Jung So-hee was always someone who put others before herself. Not to say she came off as “pathetic.” It was more of a natural aura that radiated from her, as though she had consciously chosen to lower herself.

In the Tutorial Dungeon, where trust was a luxury and betrayal was rampant, her selflessness was incredibly rare.

“Thank you… Really.”

“You’re welcome.”

Even the twisted version of myself from back then couldn’t help but feel grateful to her.

With time, most of the raiders—those who risked their lives to clear the quests—had perished. The support groups that helped them from the rear were also torn apart, fighting like mad dogs over the few remaining resources.

We hit rock bottom. The lowest of the low.

“Undertaker.”

“Yeah?”

“Are you unhappy right now?”

It was then that Jung So-hee made her move.

As if she had been waiting for this very moment—for this hell to unfold.

With a smile carved from kindness, she approached me.

“Would you like to hear the ‘good word’ from me, just for a moment?”

I found out later.

From the very beginning, Jung So-hee had joined our party with the intent of spreading the misfortune of unhappiness to me.

Chapter 276

The Preacher II

Sinnoa

In life, as you come to meet various groups of people, you inevitably come across all kinds of stories. Some are so embarrassing that you're left doubting whether a human even spoke the tale while others are surprisingly profound, making you marvel at how their tellers manage to remain human despite everything.

But as for me, the Undertaker—

Since I've lived a far longer life than most, I've collected an endless array of statements. Even then, though, Jung So-hee's words were extraordinary, unique to the point where an ordinary person was liable to never hear them even once in their lifetime.

"I sense talent in you, Undertaker."

"What kind of talent?"

"The talent... for misfortune."

"?"

What the hell kind of nonsense was this?

Nevertheless, So-hee's expression remained serious as she said, "Just as athleticism, intelligence, and other exceptional abilities require talent, so does unhappiness. And to me, your talent for unhappy misfortunes is... First-rate. Maybe even beyond that."

"??"

Was she trying to mess with me?

Yet, So-hee was always kind. She wasn't the type to spout gibberish for no reason. Most importantly, she provided us with something so

precious as water in the Tutorial Dungeon.

This is why one's actions matter. Even when someone throws a verbal bomb like, "You have the face of someone destined for misery," you might hold back your anger, at least in that instance, to hear them out.

"I'm sorry, So-hee, but I don't understand your point. If you're not feeling well—"

"All humans are unwell," So-hee interrupted.

It startled me. Such interruptions were rare from her.

"The human body is always teeming with bacteria. The mind is no different," she explained. "Even those who appear happiest often have dormant mental bacteria. And these bacteria, when the time is right, manifest as what we call 'unhappiness.'"

"....."

"Eliminating all bacteria in your body doesn't make you healthy. Unhappiness works the same way. The real key lies in managing it, in deciding how actively to take control of your unhappiness."

You know, it's funny. Those tasked with proselytizing in cults often turn out to be surprisingly well-read or, at the very least, highly articulate. They are often elite individuals within their organizations, well-versed in "common sense" to appeal to the masses. Naturally, without this skill, it would be difficult to win people over.

If I did—as So-hee claimed—possess a talent for unhappy misfortunes, then she certainly had the makings of a first-class cult preacher.

"I know this might sound strange. But do you think I've ever shared these thoughts with anyone else? Even once?"

"No... You haven't..."

So-hee had spent an entire year in the Tutorial Dungeon as part of

my party. During that time, she had consistently dedicated herself as a comrade.

She allowed that fact to settle in, giving the silence before her next statement weight. “Exactly. I’m sharing this only with you, Undertaker. Because you alone have the depth of heart to genuinely understand me.”

“……”

Target selection.

Not only had So-hee waited for a year, but she had also kept her true motives hidden from everyone.

For a predator, the success or failure of the hunt depends on how precisely they choose their prey. A beast that chases two rabbits is no lion.

So-hee had singled me out from over 500 survivors in the Tutorial Dungeon, just me. And she approached with intent.

“Of course, if this makes you uncomfortable, I’ll never bring it up again,” she offered.

“No, it’s not that.”

Another weighty silence. “I’m relieved to hear that.”

Jung So-hee accumulated the illusion of debt.

In the earlier cycles, I had a cold and indifferent personality. I rejected anyone who tried to approach me. But how could I remain entirely aloof from a comrade who had lived through near-death experiences with me, who always offered me water first?

That’s right. To put it crudely, I, a regressor, had been gaslit by an SSS-class cult preacher.

“I’m so glad I chose to follow you as our leader.”

What else could I do?

Ignorance comes with a price.

“Let me teach you a mantra that brings peace of mind.”

“Hmm.”

It feels wrong to frame Jung So-hee as solely responsible for everything up until now. I do have some shame, after all. It wasn’t entirely her fault. Obviously, much of the blame lay with me.

And the root of it? The fact that my mind had grown weak.

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I suspect that the mysterious X, the person erased from my memory, must have been a significant psychological anchor for me.

And at some point in one of the cycles, X must have died.

There was no helping it. The Busan Station Tutorial Dungeon was never designed for humans to clear.

Struggling until the very end to beat the dungeon likely shattered my mental fortitude, undoubtedly due to X’s death.

“Now, Undertaker. Close your eyes and repeat after me.”

“……”

“It’s not because of me.”

The moment my defenses were down, So-hee exploited the opportunity.

“It’s not… because of me.”

“It’s not my mistake, either.”

“It’s not my mistake, either.”

“It’s all the fault of the Anomalies.”

“It’s all the fault of the Anomalies.”

“Good job.”

And as embarrassing as it is to admit, her advice genuinely helped me at the time.

“Take a deep breath with me. Inhale for six seconds, hold it for three. Then exhale loudly for eight seconds. Fwoooooo.”

“Fwoooooo…”

“Perfect! That was excellent!”

Like many successful cults, the Church of Unhappiness incorporated genuinely effective psychological techniques into its practices.

I learned meditation from So-hee. I learned how to calm my mind.

For the first time in my life, which had been nothing but an endless sprint, I took time to pause and empty myself.

“Imagine defeating Fairy No. 264.”

The problem, of course, was that So-hee filled the empty spaces in my mind with poison.

“As your imagination becomes clearer, it will turn into reality. Undertaker. You’ve already defeated Fairy No. 264. Do you see? This isn’t just imagination anymore. You’ve already succeeded.”

“……”

“How do you feel?”

“Relieved.”

“Have you felt relief even once in recent days?”

I hesitated. “No.”

“Emotions are physical. Just as unused muscles atrophy, so do feelings when neglected for too long.” Then, she gently whispered,

“You killed Fairy No. 264. You protected your comrades. You saved the people trapped unjustly in the Busan Station concourse.”

“……”

“I’m so proud of you, Undertaker. Please, take care of yourself a little more. Hug yourself. Pat your own back. Don’t be embarrassed! We’re just reviving the emotions, sensations, and body we’ve always had.”

Here’s the ironic part.

Not only did So-hee’s methods help my mental health, they also dramatically strengthened my Aura.

It was an uncanny coincidence. After all, Aura is the power to impose yourself upon the world. To project your inner wounds onto the external reality.

I’ll delve deeper into Aura later, but for now, one thing is clear: my time with So-hee significantly enhanced it.

“This is really helping. I’m sorry I doubted you at first, So-hee.”

“…It’s nothing.”

Looking back now, I think even So-hee was caught off guard by how rapidly my Aura grew. Something like, ‘*This wasn’t supposed to happen…’*

Had I been able to use Mind Reading, I might have heard her thoughts:

[So-hee: Why is his Aura growing? I don’t get it. This is terrifying…]

At the time, though, I lacked Mind Reading and sufficient regression data, so I enthusiastically shared So-hee’s methods with other survivors.

Before long, a cult centered around her, the Busan Branch of the Church of Unhappiness, had formed.

“Alright, brothers and sisters. Close your eyes and follow along with me. The reason I am unhappy is because of my family.”

“The reason I am unhappy is because of my family!”

Before long, it became a daily sight in Busan, hundreds of followers echoing So-hee’s sermons during her gatherings.

“I am unconditionally a valuable being.”

“I am unconditionally a valuable being!”

“The reason I am unhappy is because the world is wrong.”

“The reason I am unhappy is because the world is wrong!”

“Those who ignore and criticize me are not human.”

“Those who ignore and criticize me are not human!”

“A world full of such people disgusts me.”

“A world full of such people disgusts me!”

“Yes, that’s it. Very good, brothers and sisters. The world is disgusting, and humans are filthy. But we, who despise others together, are special beings!” So-hee proclaimed, clenching her fist in triumph.

Unlike other cult leaders, she didn’t rely on elaborate or luxurious attire to assert her authority. Instead, she wore patched-together rags, clothing pieced from the remains of deceased followers.

For me, at least, this image was strangely more persuasive.

“We are special!”

“We are special!”

“Those who can rage at Anomalies and despise humans possess a rare virtue. However, keeping such emotions bottled up can rot the heart. That’s why we must always share our hatred for Anomalies and our contempt for humanity with our brothers and sisters. Now,

let us rage together!”

“Aaaaaah!”

The assembly erupted into screams.

First-timers were always a bit awkward, but with repetition, even they started venting their imaginary rage as if it were real.

I later learned that So-hee borrowed this method from George Orwell’s *1984*, specifically the concept of Two Minutes Hate.

For reference, *1984* was published in 1949—proof that the world hasn’t changed much over the decades.[1]

“Louder! Let your frustrations roar! Show the world that you, and only you, are special!”

When So-hee spread her arms wide, rain began to fall inside the assembly hall.

Just as my Aura had grown stronger, So-hee’s abilities had evolved —from Tap Water to Localized Rainstorm.

“Aaaaaaaah!”

The cultists danced and screamed under the rain.

Among them were regular people who didn’t truly believe in the Church of Unhappiness but attended just to receive the “free water” from above. These pseudo-believers, fearful of being exposed, ended up overcompensating by passionately acting out their rage.

Naturally, just as the rain seeped into their skin, the doctrine of the Church of Unhappiness began to infiltrate their minds.

For what it’s worth, the water tasted good.

Rage against the ruined world. Contempt for humanity. The logic that unhappiness, unlike happiness, could be controlled. The free water. So-hee’s kind smile and soothing voice...

Together, these factors caused the Church of Unhappiness to grow exponentially.

“So-hee.”

“Yes, Undertaker?”

Even at this point, I held no suspicion toward So-hee. Or rather, when doubts did occasionally arise, I scolded myself for thinking poorly of her.

I had been completely and utterly gaslit.

Which is why, in the end, I confessed my secret.

“I’m sorry. There’s something I haven’t told you until now.”

“It’s alright. Just the fact that you feel remorse proves you’re far superior to the shameless people around us.”

“Still, I think I need to tell you. Um. The truth is... I’m a regressor.”

“What?” So-hee’s eyes grew wide. Her squirrel-like pupils were transparent, reflecting nothing but sincerity.

But as I explained further, laying out the details of my regression and the certainty of my identity, something else, something unfamiliar, began to flicker in her gaze.

“.....”

I could not understand what that flicker meant, but I knew the name she gave it.

“Reverend.”

Her lips parted to say it.

“What?” I asked.

“Reverend.”

A strange fire burned in So-hee’s eyes as she looked at me. She

grasped my hand firmly.

This was unusual. Normally, So-hee avoided physical contact, even passing water indirectly.

“Ah... So you were my reverend all along.”

“.....”

“Now, I’m certain. Yes, I heard the voice. It’s unmistakable.”

The fire in her eyes burned brighter, but my heart froze as if doused in ice water. Her palm radiated warmth, and yet that warmth felt utterly foreign to me.

“You are the savior who will shoulder all the world’s misfortunes.”

It was at that moment that I began to suspect it.

That So-hee was not a benefactor who had saved me from despair but the one who might drag me into its deepest abyss.

Footnotes:

1 - In *1984*, Two Minutes Hate is a daily period in which citizens are mandated to watch a film about enemies of the state and to vent their personal, existential hatred for such political dissenters. These “enemies of the state” are non-existent and created by the government to sow blind loyalty in its citizenry, one of the many real-world phenomena that Orwell warned against all the way back when he wrote the book in 1949 yet that still occur today.

Chapter 277

The Preacher III

Sinnoa

“Reverend, did you cough?”

“Reverend, were you uncomfortable during the gathering last night?”

“Reverend, I’ve prepared your breakfast.”

“Reverend.”

My day-to-day life irrevocably changed when I confessed to being a regressor.

First off, the meals were unrecognizably extravagant—absurdly high in calories for an apocalypse.

So-hee had always been a frugal person. Even after the Church of Unhappiness grew in size, she never sought personal luxury. But no matter how modest someone might be in their own life, when it comes to their object of worship, all rational brakes tend to cease functioning.

That’s right. So-hee worshipped me.

“So-hee…”

“Yes?”

“You don’t have to prepare food like this. Everyone is already struggling to get by. Eating this by myself doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Ahhh!” So-hee let out a sharp exclamation without any warning, making me flinch. “I’m sorry! How could someone like me make such a grave mistake? You’re right! How could I dare serve such

vulgar, worldly food to our reverend! What a foolish act! Ahhh, even hell would be too lenient a punishment for such a sin!”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that—”

“I will ensure this never happens again!”

The next day, after the overly luxurious breakfast was withdrawn, her sermons at the Church of Unhappiness included statements like these:

“Our reverend, the Undertaker, has proclaimed: You foolish disciples! I vowed to share clothing and food with the suffering believers, yet you present me with luxuries?!”

“The apocalypse exists not outside but within our hearts. Before you try to save the world, build a sanctuary in your hearts first.”

“Moreover, our Reverend has said: My dwelling place is not outside but in your hearts. Your most precious luxury is your heart itself. Placing me at its center is the only true way to serve me.”

The believers were ecstatic.

“Wooooooo!”

“Undertaker! We believe in youuuu!”

“Eternal life! Unyielding faith!”

The more I tried to dissuade them, the more I was deified.

Silently, I glanced at the books they clutched like sacred relics. The title on the cover read *Holy Scripture of the Church of Unhappiness: Sayings of The Reverend Undertaker*.

Where did it all go wrong?

Was it because I had delegated all organizational matters to So-hee while focusing solely on Anomaly extermination, allowing her to manipulate and control the believers freely?

Or had it begun from the moment I first entrusted part of my heart to So-hee?

Granted, I had comrades to consult, like Uehara Shino and Lee Jae-hee, but Jae-hee had already died in the Tutorial Dungeon. As for Uehara—

“B-but Undertaker-san, you truly are amazing, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“Besides, I don’t think it’s a problem. This world is already shit anyway... And being treated like a comrade by you and So-hee-chan is fine by me. I ate well yesterday too...”

She was not helpful in the slightest.

Maybe now you understand why I’ve always been so desperate to find competent allies. After bearing with original party members like this, meeting the Regression Alliance members felt like encountering actual saints.

Noh Do-hwa wasn’t the impressive one. It was me, who found someone like her.

Anyway, I had three choices laid out in front of me.

1. Leave So-hee alone: The tributes to me would escalate, eventually leading to proposals to construct the “Grand Undertaker Palace.”

2. Stop So-hee: My leniency would then be canonized as one of my “Virtues” in the holy scripture.

3. Expel So-hee from the Church of Unhappiness: I was already overwhelmed exterminating Anomalies. Now I had to manage a cult too?

A true no-win scenario.

If it were the me of now, I’d have handled it more cleanly or completely embraced my role as a cult leader. But back in the early

cycles, specifically in the 3rd cycle, I was still naïve.

More than anything, I still considered So-hee a precious comrade. I believed that if I spoke my true feelings, she would understand.

“So-hee.”

“Yes, Reverend?”

And so, my past self made a direct declaration.

“I’m leaving the Church of Unhappiness.”

“What?”

“This kind of group lifestyle doesn’t suit me. This was your project from the start, and I just happened to tag along. I’d like to focus more on exterminating Anomalies. Who knows when the Ten Legs might march south?”

I watched as So-hee’s face went pale.

At the time, I didn’t realize it, but from her perspective, the god she worshipped had just told her, “I don’t like the way you look. I’m abandoning you. Goodbye.”

It was the worst decision I could have made.

“Wh-what do you mean, Reverend? If we’ve fallen short, we’ll fix it. Was our gathering too short today? Or was it—?”

I explained.

“Ah! I see! This is another trial, isn’t it? Right? I’ll serve you even more devotedly from now on. Yes?”

I explained again.

“Look at them, Reverend! Think of the believers! Some have lost everything they had and came all the way from Seoul and Suwon. What will happen to these lost lambs if you leave? Huh? Should I… take care of them?”

I explained once more.

“Am I... Am I not enough for you? Wasn’t I the one who stopped you from ending your own life? Or is it because I’m not [404 - Not Found]?”

I wasn’t sure if she understood my explanation, but as I spoke, one thing became painfully clear.

My comrade. The friend who had been with me from the start in Busan Station’s concourse. The benefactor who quenched my thirst day after day. The teacher who taught me meditation and helped me strengthen my Aura. The ever-kind So-hee.

She was far more broken than I had imagined.

It wasn’t apparent at first glance. Compared to the likes of Ah-ryeon and other obviously unstable people, So-hee seemed perfectly fine.

Her gaze was steady. Her speech was eloquent. Her hair was neatly combed. Her attire, though humble, had an air of tidiness. Yes, she preached some cult-like doctrines, but it wasn’t a big deal to me. After all, everyone in Busan either belonged to the Church of Unhappiness or believed in New Buddhism.

I even thought she had deliberately given me “extreme treatment” to pull me out of my mental slump.

“I see... I’m not enough.”

Once again, let me reiterate: my past self was woefully inexperienced. I didn’t know even the basics of how best to converse with my comrades.

“May I ask one question, Reverend? Are you unhappy right now?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s true that things have been hard. And it’s still tough, no doubt. But thanks to you, I’m much better. Thank you, So-hee.”

So-hee bowed her head. A moment later, she murmured something under her breath.

I couldn't hear what she said, but looking back, it was probably, "I see."

"Understood, Reverend."

When So-hee raised her face, it bore the same familiar smile. The sight of it was a weight off my shoulders.

Finally, I thought. Finally, she understood. She might have still called me Reverend, but it was fine. These things take time.

I sincerely hoped that I could remove myself from the shell of this bizarre cult and return to simpler times, when we acted as comrades united against Anomalies.

"If you want to stop the Ten Legs from advancing south, you'll need to head toward Seoul. Go ahead."

"Will you be alright here?"

"Yes. I can't help in battles anyway. I'll stay and organize the believers in your absence." So-hee clasped her hands together, as if offering a prayer to me. "Please, return safely, Reverend."

The plan to stop the Ten Legs' southern advance was a complete disaster.

Of course, it was doomed to fail. Defeating the Ten Legs would have required gathering all the Awakeners across the Korean Peninsula into a united front, and for that, I would have had to work with Dang Seo-rin.

At this point in time, I had never even met Seo-rin, let alone cooperated with her.

Maybe she avoided me deliberately. I could only imagine what rumors she had heard about some weirdo cult leader who dragged a crazy church around with him.

When we didn't work together, the guilds attempting to stop the Ten Legs were annihilated. I'm certain that even Seo-rin's Samcheon

World fell during this battle.

As for me? I ran.

To be clear, it wasn't to save my own life. As a regressor, my life wasn't worth that much.

"Everyone, run!"

I shouted to the survivors in the rear.

"They've all been killed by the Ten Legs! If you stay here, you'll all die! There are no more Awakeners to protect you! Escape to the remotest areas, into the mountains, the islands, anywhere the Ten Legs can't follow you!"

Even though I knew there was no hope left for the Korean Peninsula, I still screamed myself hoarse, urging others to flee.

In hindsight, it's almost funny. Be it past or present, I've never stopped struggling until the bitter end.

Thanks to my unwanted fame as the Church of Unhappiness's Reverend, plenty of people recognized me. Some refugees heard my warnings and even began packing up in earnest.

When I finally returned to Busan, Uehara was waiting for me at the outskirts of the city.

"Undertaker-san!"

Unlike So-hee and me, Uehara enjoyed wearing fine clothes. In that moment, however, she looked like a beggar.

"Uehara! Spread the word to the cult or anyone else you can find, tell them to evacuate immediately!"

"Wait! You're speaking too fast. And right now, there's a big problem!"

"A problem?"

She took a deep breath, still struggling with her broken Korean. “So-hee! So-hee-chan is... she’s gone mad!”

Following Uehara’s lead, I rushed toward the Church of Unhappiness’s gathering site. As we ran, she spoke in trembling bursts.

“It was... a gathering. A normal one, at first... So-hee-chan was... giving her sermon. But at the climax... it rained. The people who got wet... They started falling sick. Quickly!”

“.....”

“They just collapsed... I always carry medicine... so I figured it out right away. That rain... It’s poison.”

When we arrived at the city, Busan was eerily silent.

In later years, Busan would rise again as a stronghold under the National Road Management Corps. Even back in the early days, it had been bustling with citizens in its own way.

Those people were gone.

The rain-soaked streets had turned to muddy sludge that splashed against my feet as I ran.

Uehara frantically warned me, “Watch out! That mud, it’s poison too! Here, take this!”

She handed me some pills, which I swallowed on the spot.

Back when we were a party, Uehara had handled our medicine and ensured our health while So-hee provided water to sustain us.

That was how it used to be.

Then we reached the gathering site.

“Ah.”

In the center of the field were thousands of corpses piled high.

Rotting and bloated, they were all that remained of the congregation.

And there, amidst the carnage, stood So-hee.

“Reverend, you’ve returned.”

She adjusted her tattered priestly robes and stepped forward, crushing a corpse underfoot as she smiled brightly.

“Look! Just as I promised, I’ve ‘organized’ the believers for you!”

That was my comrade.

“So-hee...”

“There were some unpleasant rumors from Seoul, but I never doubted. I knew you would come back. After all, you promised, didn’t you?”

“What... What the hell is this?” I rasped, my voice trembling.

So-hee’s smile faded slightly. She looked at me with genuine concern in her eyes.

“My ability, it doesn’t just create drinkable water. I can freely generate both pure water and poison.”

“That’s not what I’m asking! How... How could you do this? *Why* did you—?”

“Reverend,” her voice interrupted me, calm and unwavering. “The truth is, I’ve hated this world for a long time. Every night, I prayed to God, begging Him to destroy it. I was certain that God answered my prayers when the world began to end.

“That’s when I realized... The God of our world is no loving deity. He’s a malevolent god.”

She clasped her hands together, as if in reverence.

“So all those people who speak of love and mercy, they’re wrong.

God doesn’t want human happiness. He desires the exact opposite.”

Her eyes burned with conviction.

“Reverend, you’ve seen it, haven’t you? The more we chant curses of unhappiness, the stronger our Aura grows. Isn’t that undeniable proof?”

“……”

“When I was a child, my father often punished me with water. He’d dunk my head in a bucket, saying it was for discipline. I thought if I drank all the water, maybe I’d suffer less. So I kept drinking and drinking…”

“……”

“That’s why my ability is both ‘water to drink’ and ‘water to kill.’ Reverend, don’t you see?”

So-hee spread her arms wide, her voice rising with fervor.

“The power an Awakener gains is tied to their deepest wounds, not their greatest joys. It’s not happiness but the most painful misfortunes that makes an Awakener who they are!”

Chapter 278

The Preacher IV

Sinnoa

A chill ran down my spine.

The city was completely devoid of people—I was well aware of that fact, and yet I couldn't help but glance around instinctively.

"Adversity and wounds create Awakeners."

It was an abominable truth.

If the theory So-hee had just expounded were ever to leak—if it had even the slimmest chances to slither its way into the public consciousness—it would utterly shatter this already broken world.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the only other person present was Uehara, and she wasn't fluent in Korean. She looked on in confusion, seeming to grasp less than half of So-hee's words.

"Our God isn't one that blesses human happiness. He is an evil god that observes our suffering! Thus, 'Awakening' is both a blessing and a curse from Him."

Heedless to our reactions, So-hee grew increasingly fervent as she screamed her doctrine from atop a pile of corpses.

"In such a world, you alone, Reverend, are destined to monopolize all of God's attention and affection!"

"Why?" I choked.

"Because you are a regressor," So-hee proclaimed, smiling as though it were obvious. "No matter how many people were killed by the Anomaly at Busan Station, it wasn't their fault. It was the Anomaly's. But you, Reverend, are different."

She tilted her head and gazed down upon me.

“You could have saved them.”

“……”

“If you had been a little stronger, a little smarter, a little faster, you could have saved them all.”

“……”

“This is your fault, Reverend.”

Rain began to fall. Uehara gasped and tried to shield my head with her coat, but it was meaningless.

“Maybe it’s impossible for you now, but you’ll grow stronger. Gradually, relentlessly. And the stronger you grow… the more responsibilities you’ll have to bear.”

The rain that was drenching me wasn’t touching my skin, it was boring straight into my chest.

“From Busan Station to Busan itself. Ah, how many people perished there! And from Busan to the Korean Peninsula. From Korea to… beyond, beyond, and beyond. And then… Then!”

The rainwater that once quenched my thirst turned into poison, corroding the edges of my heart.

“Reverend, this is your fault. Because in the next regression, you’ll choose who to save. And in the one after that, who to let die. How could anyone deny that you are the chosen of the evil god?”

“……”

“Let me ask you once more, Reverend.”

Thus spoke So-hee:

“Are you unhappy right now?”

I couldn’t answer.

Her smile was knowing and her gaze intent. It was as if she were savoring my silence.

“You’ll grow stronger, Reverend... Don’t forget me.”

Then So-hee drew a dagger from her robes and slit her own throat, bathing the rain around her in a crimson shower.

Beside me, Uehara let out a horrified scream and rushed to So-hee’s body, but it was too late.

It was instant death.

“Undertaker-san!” Uehara cried. “So-hee-chan!”

However, she wasn’t given long to wallow in her tears. The mountain of corpses, layered hundreds deep, began to writhe.

In this world, corpses left without proper rites were infected by Void poison and transformed into Anomalies. The ones that roamed by themselves were often called “zombies.” Severely damaged corpses sometimes became Anomalies that existed as mere disembodied voices, known as Knockers. However, when corpses transformed into Anomalies as a collective entity, I had a specific name for them:

- Uroooutuugh!

The Hollow.

Bound by their shared affiliation with the Church of Unhappiness, the Hollow arose slowly. Hundreds of corpses became legs, hundreds more a torso, and yet another hundred formed the upper body. Atop the massive entity formed by the hundreds, a singular head emerged.

- Reverrrrreeeeend!

The surface of the Hollow, amalgamating of countless bodies, prominently displayed So-hee’s smiling face.

- Eternal Invincibility.

- Reverrrrreeeennnnd!

- Unyielding Will.

The countless mouths of the Hollow began to chant the doctrine of the Church of Unhappiness as its massive right hand reached for me.

“Undertaker-san! No!” Uehara screamed.

But I didn’t dodge. Without flinching, I looked up at the shadow of the grotesque hand sheltering me from the rain.

The stench of decayed rainwater filled the air as a great weight crushed my body in one.

That was my death.

There is an epilogue.

To summarize in a single paragraph: In my third cycle, I lost a dear comrade, X, in the Tutorial Dungeon, which shattered my mental state. Another comrade, So-hee, helped me recover, allowing me to clear the dungeon and build my own faction. Yet So-hee turned out to be a deranged zealot. In the end, she transformed into an Anomaly and killed me.

Q: What is the mental state of a regressor who meets such a death and enters their next cycle?

So-hee was right. I became profoundly unhappy.

As she had intended, my heart in the next cycle was filled with indomitable filth. That filth decayed, spreading an odor that clung to me in a choking stench.

Perhaps even before the collapse of Old Man Schopenhauer, I had already fallen apart long ago. When infected by the World Tree Udumbara, Awakeners lose their powers. Perhaps I, too, might have given up regression and accepted the death it offered me.

“Those eyes of yours are just dripping with poison, huh?”

However, there was one thing So-hee hadn’t accounted for.

“So you're the one, right? The lone survivor of Busan Station. You're that weirdo who goes around asking people strange questions all the time.”

The stronger and more capable I became, the wider the scope of my world grew. Consequently, the number of lives I became responsible for also increased.

"Your name?"

"...Undertaker. It's an alias."

“So, someone who buries people? Not bad. The depth of a person is measured by how many corpses they’ve buried in their heart.”

But I wasn’t alone. The determination to save others wasn’t mine alone to bear.

The wider the world became, the more people there were to help carry its fragments—something a certain priestess of an evil god could never have foreseen.

"How about it? Wanna join my guild?"

I asked for the guild’s name.

“Samcheon World.”

That was your answer.

“Samcheon for short. Someday, I’ll have three thousand Awakeners recruited as members, like the name implies.[1] I’ve made it my personal goal.”

You adjusted your witch’s hat, tapped your foot on the ground, and gave me a bright smile.

“Undertaker. Help me.”

It was her answer.

“I need your strength.”

I had long pondered a particular question: If a single person is to save the world, then who saves that person?

The answer was obvious. You just had to acknowledge that no single person stood alone.

“Vice Guild Leader, just once. Hm? Try on our pointed hat just once. I swear I have an eye for this sort of thing, and I’m convinced you’ve got the makings of a top-tier witch!”

“I absolutely refuse.”

“Really? That’s a shame.” Seo-rin pouted playfully. “But what will you do if I say no, hmm?”

“……”

“I’m the guild leader, and you’re the vice guild leader.”

My way of speaking now bore traces of Dang Seo-rin’s influence. Once stiff and formal, it had softened over time after spending so much time with her.

It was hard to remain rigid while working under a superior who cosplayed as a witch year-round and was a devout train enthusiast.

“See? It looks good on you!”

“...Fuck.”

“Ahaha! Did you just curse? Wow! I’ve never heard our vice guild leader say that before!”

“……”

“But to say such a thing to your guild leader, the Supreme Heaven herself! You must’ve developed a big head. Or is it because of that hat? It does make your head look bigger.”

"*Fuuuuuck...*"

"Pffft! Hahaha!"

Despite the tragedy caused by the Church of Unhappiness, the time I spent serving under Seo-rin as her vice guild leader gave me a reason to rise again.

On a flight to the Uyuni Salt Flats, I encountered the Undertakeress, a woman who bore an uncanny resemblance to Seo-rin.

In hindsight, it made sense. My expression, my way of smiling, even my manner of speech—all of it was shaped by Dang Seo-rin.

[Mr. Undertaker, I need your help. There's something urgent I must consult you about.]

"What is it?"

[It's about the passage we read together last Wednesday. I just can't wrap my head around it.]

The Saintess's seriousness became my seriousness.

"To mister, I am sorry. To the me of today and tomorrow, I apologize. I hereby declare a two-day hiatus. Since my break falls over a weekend, it means I'll end up resting for four days in total. Still, I'll only announce two days off to the readers. Could you, out of pity, write the announcement for me?"

"....."

"At least I'm sorry, unlike those authors who don't feel any guilt at all. That makes me one of the good ones, right?"

Oh Dok-seo's shamelessness became my shamelessness.

Both the best and the worst of me were defined by others.

By a puppeteer, controlled by her father throughout her life, who Awakened the ability to manipulate others like dolls.

By a student council president, conditioned by a cult into assuming the role of their priestess, who Awakened the ability to impose her mindset and way of behaving onto others.

By a prosthetist, unable to restore lost limbs to her patients, who Awakened the ability to animate others' limbs.

By a... Uh. Well, what about Sim Ah-ryeon?

What wounds could she have suffered to Awaken her abilities? I couldn't even begin to imagine. She was always beyond my comprehension, an enigma I couldn't unravel.

My heart belonged to many.

If the Hollow wandered the world spreading death with bodies made of countless nameless corpses, then the living always survived by making ties with other survivors.

And for me, life wasn't about "dying" but "living."

That was my freedom.

[Lee Jae-hee: My phone's not working?]

[Uehara Shino: Too many people. Can't breathe.]

[Seo Gyu: Damn it, what the hell is this? This is fucking garbage.]

[Park Ye-dam: I need to contact my boss...]

[Lee Baek: What's going on? Where did everyone else go?]

[Go Yuri: Oh my]

[Jung So-hee: Reverend? Where did you go, Reverend?]

[Sim Ah-ryeon: Where am I? Who am I?]

On the notable occasion of the 700th cycle—my seventh century—I decided to approach an "old comrade" from the concourse of Busan Station for the first time in ages.

So-hee was glancing around, searching for someone—probably the "First Reverend" since I had been the second.

Some people simply couldn't live without worshiping someone else.

"Excuse me…" I began.

"Yes? What is it?"

"May I ask you something?"

So-hee looked at me, startled.

Despite everything, how she had once tormented me to the point of death (and actually killed me), I felt nothing. No positive or negative emotions, just pure tranquility filling my chest.

"Do you think I have a talent for misfortune?"

"What?"

"It's just a question," I assured her. "You seem to have some divine insight or intuition."

The bewilderment faded from So-hee's expression as she scrutinized me with a meticulous gaze. After about ten seconds, she frowned slightly and shook her head.

"Not at all."

"……"

"I sense no talent in you. Third-rate? No, fifth-rate. It's been ages since I've encountered someone so utterly talentless. Maybe even the first time. If you've heard the 'voice' of our God, please give up."

Without another word, she turned her back and walked away, severing all ties with me.

A former comrade and one of the original members who cleared the first Tutorial Dungeon had dismissed me outright.

“Hmm.”

I chuckled softly at the odd feeling it gave me. It wasn’t all that bad.

Undertaker—Officially designated as a fifth-rate cult leader!

Footnotes:

1 - Samcheon means three thousand in Korean.

Chapter 279

The Commentator I

Sinnoa

Suddenly, it occurred to me that Dok-seo was a chuunibyou.

One might assume someone suffering from a chuunibyou episode would struggle with social skills, but the truth was that this illusion was merely due to her roommate being Ah-ryeon.

Without Ah-ryeon, Dok-seo possessed all the qualities of a clueless social misfit with an extraordinary lack of situational awareness.

“Hey.”

And so, during this rare gathering that included NRMC’s Commander Noh Do-hwa, Yu Ji-won, and the leaders of the two major guilds in the Korean Peninsula—Dang Seo-rin of Samcheon and Cheon Yo-hwa of Baekhwa—for the sake of fostering unity, we sat down for a dinner meeting.

That was when Dok-seo, seated beside me, opened her mouth and said, “Mister.”

“Hm?”

“I’m just curious. If Seo-rin and Yo-hwa were to fight, who would win?”

Clink.

Across the table, the hand of Do-hwa, who had been drinking soju straight from the bottle, froze mid-air. Naturally, Ji-won, who had been eagerly offering to pour her another drink, also stopped in her tracks.

A deathly silence descended upon the room.

Of course, it wasn't universal death. The other NRMC members and guild members, blissfully intoxicated, continued chatting merrily.

In other words, In this "noisy environment," only those who could "amplify their hearing with Aura" and "focus through all the surrounding noise" on "the table where Undertaker was seated" fell under the spell of this deathly silence.

Naturally, Seo-rin and Yo-hwa both met these conditions.

"Dok-seo."

"Yeah?"

"Why do you suddenly want to know something like that?"

Desperately, I tried to pass the conversational baton to Dok-seo.

I had to make it clear that the one asking the question was her, Oh Whatever-her-name-is, and that I, the Undertaker, was entirely uninvolved.

"Eh, it's nothing big. I'm just curious because they both play the role of mages in your party, don't they?"

However, this oblivious social outcast stubbornly continued dragging me into this mess.

Well, I shouldn't have expected much from a writer who posted an apology on SG Net for skipping a serialization due to "an unavoidable external engagement" only to gleefully show up here for a free meal.

I tried to stay calm. "Right. Both of them are incredibly talented and invaluable to me. They're comrades, so comparing them isn't fair."

"Come on, mister. We all know that. But who'd win in a fight? Keep it simple."

"...Are you trying to mess with me?"

“Huh? What?”

“Nothing.”

Sweat trickled down the side of my face. Feigning a sip of alcohol, I frantically scribbled invisible words onto the table with my finger.

Saintess.

[Yes?]

Help me.

[How?]

Please distract Seo-rin and Yo-hwa. Get them talking about something else. I beg you.

[I’ll try.]

As expected of the Saintess. Unlike someone else who once declared, “I’m the one who will save you, mister!” only to become an unreliable brat infamous for prolonged absences, she was dependable.

(This is why you should never make bold declarations to a regressor with Complete Memory.)

[Okay, I tried.]

How did it go?

[I won’t say who, but I was told to buzz off.]

Even the Saintess’s bluetooth connection failed me!

“Mister, who’s stronger?”

“……”

“If the Great Witch of Busan fought the Necromancer of Sejong, who would win? Who’s stronger? On a tier list, who’s S-class and who’s A-class?”

"....."

"Mister, come on. Tell me. I'm a sucker for these 'who would win' debates! Who's the strongest mage in the setting?"

I glanced around.

Do-hwa was glaring at me through two slits with an expression that seemed to say, "Not my problem, pal."

Ji-won was conspicuously absent. Moments ago, she had been glued to Do-hwa's side, spewing flattery. Now she was gone without a trace.

For reference, Ha-yul was sitting in a corner with a sign reading, *"I'm not drunk,"* stuck to her head as she downed drink after drink. She was already on her seventh sign.

Next to her, Ah-ryeon was hanging the eighth sign around Lee Ha-yul's neck.

My allies... were nowhere to be found.

"Reverend."

"Are you unhappy right now?"

For some reason, a rare flashback of Jung So-hee, one of my original party members, echoed in my mind.

I swallowed hard, as if taking a shot of poison. "It... depends on the conditions of the battlefield."

The dice were cast.

"Oh? What do you mean by that?"

"If it's an ambush... Yo-hwa would have a decisive advantage. Although she's a mage, except for necromancy, she's practically a warrior. Whether she borrows the power of Infinite Void or uses her Aura to crush the opponent, she'd topple her enemy in no time."

“Ahaha, cheers!”

From the direction of Baekhwa guild members’ table, merry orange laughter rang out.

The students of Baekhwa Girls’ High, who were essentially members of the student council fan club, squealed with delight as they witnessed their guild leader’s cheerful demeanor.

However, the atmosphere around the Samcheon table grew comparatively colder by the second. Some of the guild members began to pick up on the discomfort emanating from the Great Witch. After all, the wineglass in Seo-rin’s hand had been crushed into shards, turning into nothing but fragments. It was impossible not to notice.

Hurriedly, I added, “But if it’s not an ambush, and both parties have ample time to prepare for battle, then the situation changes completely.”

“Oh!”

“Seo-rin’s specialty is unquestionably Cursed Song Incantation. The more time she has to cast and layer her incantations, the more overwhelming her buffs and debuffs become. At four melodic layers, their strength is evenly matched. At five, Seo-rin gains the upper hand. By the sixth layer, Yo-hwa doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Oh, my! Why is everyone looking at me? Relax, everyone. Tonight is about having a good time together.”

With those words, the wintry atmosphere at the Samcheon table immediately shifted to spring. Witches with party hats breathed collective sighs of relief.

Clink!

However, the sound of a shattering glass echoed dramatically from the Baekhwa table. The crash wasn’t accidental—it was deliberate, full-force, and with intent.

And just to set the scene, the seating arrangement placed the Baekhwa and Samcheon guilds side by side, with their leaders sitting next to each other. This arrangement had been designed to foster camaraderie between the two guilds—after all, that was the goal of this gathering.

How could I have predicted Dok-seo would pull something like this? It was unfair.

“Oh dear.”

Naturally, the space on the floor where Yo-hwa had shattered her glass was essentially the space beside her—also known as where Seo-rin was seated.

Seo-rin smiled sweetly. “My, my. That’s quite the slippery hand you have, President. They say rough work can lead to hand tremors. I hope it’s not affecting four of your five fingers. Why not get them checked out by Miss Ah-ryeon?”

“Hahaha, thank you for your concern, Great Witch! We don’t usually get the chance to exchange such words, but it’s nice to have this ‘ambush’ of a meeting to bring us closer. Though, I hope we’re not getting too close!”

“Of course not. By the way, how absent-minded of me. This lovely gathering was organized by our gracious NRMC Commander and the Undertaker, yet I haven’t poured them a drink.”

“Oh, no! You’re absolutely right! We really must pour them a drink ourselves. I’ve been dying to share a toast with the Undertaker!”

Help me.

‘What do I do?’

My mind raced as Seo-rin grabbed a wine bottle and Yo-hwa picked up a beer bottle, both making their way toward me.

‘How do I satisfy both of them with god-tier level diplomacy and avoid disaster?’

My brain rapidly generated options:

A. Mix wine and beer. “Let’s drink them together! Oh, but tomorrow’s hangover might be rough.”

→ My body gets metaphorically blended in a mixer.

B. “Logically, Yo-hwa would never launch a sudden attack. The risks are too high. If it comes down to a fair duel, Seo-rin is more likely to win.”

→ “Oh, mister! If you wanted to wear a sailor uniform that badly, you should’ve just said so...! From now on, you’re my junior.”

C. “Yo-hwa would never engage in a fight she couldn’t win. She’d strike like a snake, exploiting any opening Seo-rin shows. This would naturally mean an ambush, guaranteeing her victory.”

→ “Oh, look! A perfect hat rack for my witch hat. A little dusty, but a broom can fix that. And don’t expect me to sing you a lullaby for your insomnia!”

D. “This is all Do-hwa’s fault.”

→ “What?”

No matter the choice, it led to a bad ending! So this is the wretched life of a regressor!

“Oh, I want to see them have an all-out fight!”

At that moment—

“Not that I’d want mister to get hurt. Let’s make it safe and fair. Oh, look! Mister, speak of the devil, here they come!”

From Dok-seo’s untainted, mildly tipsy gaze and sloppily tilted cap, a flash of inspiration struck me.

It wasn’t Seo-rin’s white magic or Yo-hwa’s black magic. No, it was the gray magic unique to regressors!

I shot to my feet. “Yes! I completely agree, Commander Noh Do-hwa!”

Do-hwa, who had been quietly enjoying the sweetness of her soju with a faint smile, frowned at me. “Huh?”

The sudden sound of my voice startled even the two calamities approaching me, freezing them in their tracks.

“It’s true! A one-off dinner isn’t enough to build solidarity between guilds. What we need is something bigger! Something better!”

“What are you saying, you lunatic?”

Ignoring the octave of danger rising in Do-hwa’s voice, I pressed on. Survival first!

“Sports!”

Everyone in the banquet hall turned to look at me.

Even a flushed Ha-yul reached out her arms, crying, *“Daddyyy!”* but I ignored her.

“Since ancient times, nothing has brought groups together like sports! Sure, the world is in ruins, and there are no more Olympics or World Cups. But with NRMC’s resources, why not host a grand competition?”

“Wait, are you...”

“A fighting tournament!” Using Aura, I boomed my voice like a lion’s roar. The hall quivered as the Awakened, drunk or not, roared in excitement. “An Awakening tournament! Yes! Let’s settle it there!”

“And the Undertaker won’t compete, leaving the championship open for Seo-rin or Yo-hwa!”

“Shut up! The President will win!”

“Commander Noh Do-hwa! You’re a genius for thinking of this!”

“Do-hwa! Do-hwa!”

Even Ji-won, who had returned, led the chant.

“Fine! Let’s do it!”

Cheers erupted as Seo-rin and Yo-hwa were swept away.

I wiped my brow. Another day, another death flag dodged.

[Impressive as always, Mr. Undertaker.]

“Thanks.”

[What will you call this tournament?]

“How about Awakeners’ World Cup? Shortened to AwakenCup!?”

I could feel the Saintess’s silent disappointment.

What’s wrong with AwakenCup?

Chapter 280

The Commentator II

Sinnoa

“I hereby declare the First NRMC Awakener Fighting Tournament, the AwakenCup, open! Let the games begin!” I shouted into the mic.

The cheers of the crowd thundered through the Colosseum.

“Waaaaaah!”

Yes, a Colosseum.

After the Eastern Holy State was found, a Colosseum had appeared without prompting or warning near the Void outside Pyongyang.

Why a Colosseum, you ask? Who knows? Perhaps even the Anomalies acknowledged the Eastern Holy State as the true successor of Rome.

“Baekhwa! Baekhwa!”

“Samcheon World!”

“Whoa! Wahoo!”

Supporters from all over raised their banners and cheered with fervor.

Witches fired an endless stream of fireworks from their staves while the Baekhwa Girls’ High cheerleading squad hyped up the mood even further.

How could I, the Undertaker, not respond to such enthusiasm? With a higher energy than usual, I drove the mic forward.

“Yes, the monumental first AwakenCup! Color commentary will be handled by me, the Undertaker! And for your host—”

“Yeah so, before that, could you please explain why the NRMC Awakener Fighting Tournament is abbreviated as AwakenCup?”

“We have none other than NRMC Commander Noh Do-hwa! Everyone, give her a thunderous round of applause for coming all the way to Pyongyang Sacred City!”

“Waaaaaaah!”

“Damn it, this is insane...” Do-hwa muttered something more under her breath, but the complaints of a mediocre Awakener who couldn’t amplify her voice with Aura were drowned out by the cheers of the 80,000 spectators filling the Colosseum.

“All eyes are on the highly anticipated first match! The opening battle! Let’s see who the competitors are! First, from the blue corner! Entering now!”

“Oooooh!”

The gate on the left side of the Colosseum opened, and in entered Yu Ji-won riding a dinosaur.

A Pachycephalosaurus. Also known as the head-butting dinosaur. This mighty creature served as the NRMC’s official warhorse. Its formal name was “Kongkongi.”

“What a shocker! Right from the start, the head-butting dinosaur makes its debut!”

“Uwaaaaaah!”

The citizens of Pyongyang Sacred City gazed in awe at Kongkongi’s pristine cranial health. It was clear everyone loved dinosaurs.

“The lead player of the first match! NRMC’s Operation Team Leader, Yu Ji-won! If you had to name the human with the highest kill count in the Korean Peninsula, she’d surely rank in the top two, if not, the top five! She’s NRMC’s psychopath! A murderer! Who dares stand in her way? Caster Noh Do-hwa, your thoughts?”

“Well... Considering this event is flying the National Road

Management Corps banner, I'd like to personally rip the scalp off a certain commentator who just called our ace a psychopath..."

"Unfortunately, the Undertaker's scalp is steel! Not even the Director of Intelligence could manage to crack it! Now, facing this fearsome axe-murdering psychopath from the red corner! Let's welcome the next competitor!"

The gate on the right side of the Colosseum opened with a clank. Out came a group scattering flower petals. Walking with delicate steps as light as air across the floral carpet was none other than Sim Ah-ryeon.

She waved gracefully toward the audience, her smile as radiant as sunlight. The reaction was seismic—not from physical force but from sheer adoration.

"Waaaaaah!"

"It's the Saintess!"

"Sain-tess, cham-pi-on! Sain-tess, cham-pi-on!"

"She smiled at me!"

"Eas*tern*! Ho*ly*! Eas*tern*! Ho*ly*!"

"Blast a path through that Busan bumpkin's head with an ether storm!"

I shuddered. So this was the power of home-field advantage.

But what truly gave me chills was not the crowd's enthusiasm—it was Sim Ah-ryeon's serene expression. Hers was the kind of priceless smile you could frame and label as oh-so-truly divine.

"Yes, the red corner belongs to none other than the Saintess of the Eastern Holy State! The representative of the Mo Gwang-seo Church! Pyongyang Sacred City's most beloved icon, the Northern Saintess—Sim! Ah! Ryeon!"

"Waaaaaaaah!"

“But a question for our host, Noh Do-hwa: As far as I know, Sim Ah-ryeon is a healer who specializes in regeneration. Do you think she can hold her own against the NRMC’s Operation Team Leader and Executioner, Yu Ji-won, in a one-on-one battle?”

“Well… Yu Ji-won isn’t the type to care much about victory in such duels. Will winning benefit her more or will losing serve her better? That calculation will likely determine the outcome of this match…”

“Oh, I see! So Yu Ji-won could win if she wanted to! If she loses, it’s only because she let Sim Ah-ryeon win!”

“What?” a member of the audience cried. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Clearly, Noh Do-hwa is biased in favor of her NRMC colleagues!” I shouted cheerfully. “What do you think, people of Pyongyang Sacred City?”

“Booooo!”

“Resign! Resign!”

Noh Do-hwa wordlessly reached out to strangle me, but alas, her feeble grip was no match for my neck.

“So, will it be NRMC’s dagger or the Eastern Holy State’s Saintess? To find out, let the first match of the AwakenCup… *begin*!”

The crowd’s roar filled the Colosseum as the gong struck.

Ji-won immediately charged forward.

“Oh?! Yu Ji-won rushes in without looking back as soon as the match starts!”

“She’s clearly aiming for the win. Hmm,” Do-hwa mused. “Well, considering that the Eastern Holy State is too far from Busan, she must’ve decided it has no bearing on her career trajectory.”

“So, Pyongyang Sacred City is worthless to the NRMC? Is that what

you think as the Operations Team Leader? Is that the stance of the entire NRMC?"

"Do you want to die?"

"But—what's this?" I widened my eyes in a show of shock. "Sim Ah-ryeon has offered her left arm without any resistance! Right from the initial clash, she's lost part of her body! Can the red corner recover from this?!"

"Hmm. Does she trust in her regenerative abilities? But sustaining repeated injuries of this scale throughout the match—no matter how miraculous her recovery is—wouldn't that eventually overwhelm even the Northern Saintess?"

"Yet she's smiling! Sim Ah-ryeon is smiling as blood pours from her arm! Could it be that she has a trump card? Or is she just so used to practicing her smile that she cannot make another expression?!"

And then—

[Mr. Undertaker, a post has just gone up on SG Net.]

[I saw it in the pending tab. You should check it out immediately.]

Using the hand not holding the mic, I fumbled with my smartphone and logged into SG Net. Among the countless threads discussing the AwakenCup, one post had rocketed to the top of the trending page:

Collector of All Anomalies: Why the Northern Saintess = Villain OldManGoryeo, explained.

Pffft!

A flood of saliva—99% water, 1% sodium, calcium, potassium, magnesium, chloride, phosphate, and bicarbonate—sprayed from my mouth onto the mic. A professional term for this substance would be "spit."

"What an unbelievable twist!" I shouted. "Just now, this commentator has received a shocking tip-off!"

“What tip-off?”

“On SG Net, a damning exposé by the notorious Constellation Collector of All Anomalies! It reveals that none other than Sim Ah-ryeon, the Northern Saintess herself, is secretly the infamous troll and attention-seeker known as OldManGoryeo!”

“What the actual—”

The Colosseum erupted in collective shock. Among Awakeners, the villain OldManGoryeo was practically a household name.

“That damned Constellation! Again with the lies!”

“But... The evidence in the post seems pretty solid...”

“Seriously? Could the Northern Saintess really be the villain OldManGoryeo?”

“Shut up, you liar!”

Here’s the shocking part: Most Constellations were managed by the Saintess of Yongsan in Seoul, but Collector of All Anomalies was uniquely under Sim Ah-ryeon’s jurisdiction.

That’s right. The exposé currently dominating SG Net? It was authored and uploaded by Sim Ah-ryeon herself, timed perfectly with the match.

“Sim Ah-ryeon, you...”

I shivered again. Ah-ryeon, you constantly push the boundaries of my understanding of humanity.

“Yu Ji-won appears rattled! She’s visibly disturbed! Though she continues alternating between daggers and longswords, cutting off Sim Ah-ryeon’s left arm, legs, and right arm...”

“It seems ineffective,” Noh Do-hwa muttered.

“As the caster points out! Sim Ah-ryeon’s limbs regenerate as soon as they’re severed! What is this?! Just what kind of regeneration

power are we witnessing from the Northern Saintess, humanity's hope holding the line at the Sinuiju front?!"

Ah-ryeon spoke softly in the ring, her lips forming unhurried words. "I can do this all day."

"Damn." Ji-won gritted her teeth. Though she was among my most outstanding disciples, her Aura reserves were finite. Unlike me, she didn't possess a nearly infinite supply.

"And... the mood has shifted." Do-hwa's tone turned reflective. "From an objective perspective, Yu Ji-won is mercilessly butchering Sim Ah-ryeon's limbs over and over. But even for Awakeners desensitized to brutality, this isn't a pleasant sight."

"Oh no! Are you saying...?"

"Today, Sim Ah-ryeon is dressed in her pristine Saintess robes, wearing an unbroken, serene smile. From her past deeds to the current spectacle, she can't help but appear as the embodiment of goodness..."

"And this paragon of virtue, the Saintess who strides onto battlefields to heal soldiers, is being mercilessly slaughtered by the NRMC's resident psychopath?!"

"Exactly. Sports tournaments are, after all, entertainment. They thrive on emotions, on sympathy and hostility. Sim Ah-ryeon seems to grasp this fundamental truth..."

"Incredible! The crowd is now showering Yu Ji-won with boos and jeers!"

And so they were.

"Boooooo!"

"Trash! Trash! Trash!"

"Disgrace to the NRMC!"

"Flash photography is going off in the stands! Spectators are

deliberately turning on their flashes while taking photos!”

“It’s likely an attempt to upload these revolting images to SG Net and expose the true nature of Yu Ji-won!”

“Though Pyongyang Sacred City is outside NRMC jurisdiction, SG Net is global! Nationwide!”

“Yu Ji-won’s expression is priceless...”

“Could the Awakeners of the Eastern Holy State have drained the city’s remaining electricity to charge their phones for this very moment?!”

“Meanwhile, the NRMC routinely issues warnings about energy conservation. This is ironic on so many levels...”

“And look!” I stood abruptly. “Yu Ji-won has dropped to her knees on the red sands of the Colosseum!”

“This tournament has a special rule. When a competitor admits defeat, they must kneel and bow to the ground. Otherwise, the match remains unresolved, a rule established by some idiot sitting right next to me...”

“In professional terms, this is called *dogeza*![1] The magical girls from Japan, invited as guests to this tournament, are stunned! Could they have ever expected to witness such a masterfully executed a *dogeza* on the Korean Peninsula?!”

“Yu Ji-won’s forehead is pressed against the ground...”

“GG!”

The Colosseum exploded into cheers.

“Against all odds! In a match thought to have no chance of victory, Sim Ah-ryeon, the Saintess of the North, Pyongyang’s hero, takes the win for the first round!”

“Waaaaaaah!”

“Great Saintess! Great Saintess!”

“Sim Ah-ryeon, cham-pi-on!”

“Pyongyang Sacred City is the Eastern Jerusalem, the Eastern Rome! As prophesied by the Mo Gwang-seo Church!”

As I watched the ecstatic crowd, I pondered a question: Was revealing her hidden identity on SG Net, kept secret for so long, worth it just to win this otherwise meaningless match?

Ah-ryeon.

Ah-ryeon!

Even now, I can’t understand you.

Like moths before Zhuge Liang, so too does my understanding pale before your true madness, Ah-ryeon. Before your authentic lunacy, all my mischief as a guild leader seems but a flicker of counterfeit folly.

“The cleanup of the arena will be handled by Jung So-hee, the Awakener from the Gangwon branch of the Church of Unhappiness!”

“Look at that! The rainwater is washing away the blood on the arena grounds. Well, all of it is Sim Ah-ryeon’s blood...”

“For those concerned about content ratings, fear not! The Colosseum is currently under a wide-area illusion spell, which alters the blood’s color and applies automatic mosaics to any gruesome injuries! Rest assured!”

“What a useless form of censorship. What’s even the point in this day and age...?”

“There’s always a reason! Now then, let’s move on to the second match! Competitors, please make your way to the stage!”

One by one, the matches progressed.

At one point, the arena became momentarily quiet before erupting in deafening cheers at the arrival of the next competitors.

The blue corner: Dang Seo-rin.

The red corner: Cheon Yo-hwa.

This was it—the highlight of the tournament.

Footnotes:

1 - **Dogeza** (土下座) is an element of traditional Japanese etiquette which involves kneeling directly on the ground and bowing to prostrate oneself while touching one's head to the floor. It is used to show deference to a person of higher status, as a deep apology or to express the desire for a favor from said person.

Chapter 281

The Commentator III

Sinnoa

Oh Dok-seo vs. Manyo Neko.

“Hoohoo! Behold, Far Eastern Magical Girl! This is my ultimate defense—AT Field!”

“Nya?! What is this, nyan?! Why doesn’t my magic work at all, nya?!”

“No matter what attack you throw at me, you won’t harm even a single strand of my hair! Wait, flying is cheating! Get down! Get doooooown...!”

“Oh. The barrier is gone, meow.”

“...”

“Nyanpunch!”

□ Oh Dok-seo: Defeat

□ Manyo Neko: Victory

Dok-seo made a disgraceful exit, failing to secure even one win. The audience, especially those who were fans of LiteraryGirl, booed relentlessly.

Lee Ha-yul vs. Phantom Blade.

“...”

“...”

“...!”

“...?!”

“…”

“…!!”

“…”

“…”

Both competitors, for the record, had speech impairments.

Furthermore, Ha-yul had no legs and relied on mobility aids, while Phantom Blade lived up to her name, having no arms.

Theirs was probably the quietest match in the history of the tournament. Ha-yul spent the entire time running away, planting puppet strings throughout the arena. In the end, she used them to cocoon Phantom Blade like a caterpillar and hoist her into the air.

□ Lee Ha-yul: Victory

□ Phantom Blade: Defeat

Surprisingly, the audience enjoyed it. However, SG Net later accused me of being biased in my commentary toward Ha-yul, calling me a “famous puppeteer’s daddy.” I deleted the baseless slander using admin privileges.

Lee Baek vs. Seo Gyu.

“Damn it. Why the hell do I have to…?”

“Hey, you piece of shit!”

“What? You don’t even know me. Why the insults?”

“You look like a shitty bastard. Do I need to see you twice to know it, asshole?!”

“You son of a— You’re dead meat.”

“Bring it on, you piece of shit!”

A legendary anger management showdown.

Threatened with exclusion from life itself if they refused to participate, Lee Baek was thoroughly beaten like a ragdoll by Seo Gyu.

While earlier matches showcased dazzling skills, this one was a mudslinging brawl at its lowest level, yet the audience was ecstatic with it.

For a brief moment, I thought I saw someone with pink hair clapping gleefully in the stands. But I refused to glance in that direction.

□ Lee Baek: Defeat

□ Seo Gyu: Victory

Though many other matches stood out, I'll skip them in the interest of brevity. After all, I don't intend to bloat your data usage by expanding my commentary unnecessarily.

From the Round of 32, to the Round of 16, and then to the Quarterfinals.

Finally, at the cusp of the Semifinals and the Finals...

Dang Seo-rin vs. Cheon Yo-hwa.

The two main instigators who forced me to host this international sports event now faced each other on a single-log bridge.

"From the blue corner, we have the Great Witch of Samcheon, guild leader of the Korean Peninsula's top guild, idol of the masses, and leader of the Korean Awakener Federation—Dang Seo-rin! Oh! As I speak, her traveling fans fill one side of the Colosseum with fireworks!"

"Magical fireworks. A sight occasionally seen in Samcheon's home base of Busan. They're enchanted to release fragrant scents as the smoke dissipates..."

"This refreshing scent—it's grapefruit! Grapefruit, folks! Tell us, Noh Do-hwa: why do you think Samcheon's witches chose

grapefruit as the scent for their fireworks?"

"Well, the Baekhwa Student Council President's hair is orange, and grapefruits resembles oranges, don't they? But unlike oranges, grapefruit has blood-red flesh when peeled..."

"So, they're saying, 'We'll turn that orange into a bloodstain'?"

"Yes, it's a poetic metaphor, I suppose..."

"Ah! Spectacular! Even their fireworks taunt the opposing team. Just how many months did Samcheon spend preparing for this match?!"

Down on the stage, Yo-hwa's expression twisted while Dang Seo-rin smirked smugly.

"What's this?! The Baekhwa cheer squad has suddenly appeared in witch costumes!"

"They look like cheerleaders in disguise..."

"Baekhwa students dressed as witches? Isn't that almost sacrilegious? But... Oh my! The Baekhwa guild members are tearing off the witch costumes!"

"Oh..."

"Revealing their true form—Baekhwa school uniforms! Pure white sailor uniforms! The witch outfits were a ruse all along! They're secretly sailor uniform enthusiasts!"

"They literally tore them apart..."

"But wait, there's more! A doll wearing a witch hat is now burning on a pole! It's a witch hunt! A declaration of intent to incinerate witches!"

"Actually, Undertaker, look closer. The doll isn't just wearing a witch hat..."

"It has a train printed on its clothes! 'Train Otakus Suck!' That's the

chant echoing from Baekhwa's stands at this very moment!"

"Fascinating. While Samcheon's fans exude elegance, Baekhwa's supporters showcase raw, direct provocations. People truly play to their stereotypes..."

"Ah! The provocation is too much! The two sides' cheering squads are clashing! Aura and magic are flying everywhere, and parts of the Colosseum's outer wall are collapsing!"

"Once again, thanks to Pyongyang Sacred City for hosting this mess. I'm so glad I blocked Busan as a venue choice..."

"Amid the chaos of hooligan clashes, the match... *begins*!"

Despite my hope for a draw—a happy ending for all—fortune was not so kind.

The battle between Seo-rin and Yo-hwa turned into... Well, a shitshow, to put it bluntly.

"A high schooler? Ha! You're just a glorified dropout. Oh wait, you didn't even graduate, did you? Acting all smug, calling Undertaker 'Teacher' every chance you get. Don't you have any shame?"

"Ugh. Speaking of shame, isn't it worse to be a train nerd cosplaying around? Oh, but considering how you spend all day posting cringeworthy shit on SG Net, I guess expecting self-awareness was too much..."

"Cosplaying? Are you talking about the sailor uniform with the '7th grader' badge? People envy what they lack, and clearly, your education complex is showing."

"Complex? Compared to someone who constantly makes up Latin lyrics to stroke her own vanity, I'm nothing!"

"Die!"

"You die!"

So went the exchange between the so-called leaders of the two greatest guilds on the Korean Peninsula.

For the record, this was the sanitized version of their dialogue, edited for dignity.

Was this truly the level of discourse we had reached? Truly, my heart swelled with... something.

“Raaaagh!”

The battle raged on for a grueling forty minutes. When both of their Aura reserves were exhausted, the fight devolved into a brawl. Yo-hwa finally gained the upper hand by mounting Seo-rin and pinning her down.

“Kneel! I said kneel already! Just give up!”

“Ugh... Agh... Mmph...”

Yo-hwa forced Seo-rin into a *dogeza*, clutching her head and slamming it down. Meanwhile, Seo-rin gnawed on Yo-hwa’s ankle like a rabid animal.

Dignity? Decorum? Nothing of the sort remained to be seen.

“This is *dogeza*! This counts, right? Referee! Refereeeee!”

“Hoek! Validated!”

Fairy No. 264, acting as the referee, confirmed the match’s outcome.

With that, Yo-hwa let out a roar of triumph. Despite her Aura being depleted, her cry echoed powerfully through the Colosseum. Her victorious pose resembled the iconic moment when Jungle Pocket crossed the finish line first in the 2001 Japanese Derby.[1]

“I won! I won fair and square! Not a single one of you can deny it! I defeated Dang Seo-rin!”

“Ugh...”

“Hahaha! Ha! Hahaha! Teacher! I, Cheon Yo-hwa, the President of Baekhwa Girls’ High, am the best mage on the Korean Peninsula! I am the strongest!”

Clap.

Someone began clapping.

Clap. Clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap.

Moved by her roar, the audience rose to their feet, delivering a standing ovation.

Unfortunately, the street fight between the two guilds’ fans had already resulted in a victory for Samcheon. Their supporters had no cheers left to offer, while their battered witches could barely muster half-hearted jeers.

The Colosseum stood in ruins, its skeletal walls exposed as if the scene had shifted from ancient Rome to modern Italy.

We were witnessing history.

This was the apocalypse. A world where neither weak sports nor weak spectators could survive.

□ Dang Seo-rin: Defeat

□ Cheon Yo-hwa: Victory

I grabbed the mic.

“What a moving moment! The long-forbidden debate—Dang Seo-rin versus Cheon Yo-hwa—a topic that would reduce all conversation participants to metaphorical Russians, has finally been resolved! Noh Do-hwa, your thoughts?”

“Just look at this mess. I’m so glad we didn’t hold this in Busan...”

“Thank you. And now, despite her elimination in the Quarterfinals, Sim Ah-ryeon is healing the injured competitors. Oh! Dang Seo-rin! The match is over! No more fighting!”

“Uh oh. Fairy No. 264 stepped in to break it up and... got obliterated...”

“*Graaaaaah!*”

“Well, it’s not like anyone cares whether a fairy lives or dies...”

“Your sacrifice will not be forgotten, Fairy No. 264!”

Order was finally restored to the arena.

Though in the process, the already-halved Colosseum was reduced to a quarter of its original structure.

There is an epilogue.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Out of the original 80,000 spectators, only 20,000 remain! A historic first in sports history—the Finals have fewer viewers than the Round of 32!”

“I can’t even tell if this is a tournament or a mass hospitalization. Sim Ah-ryeon is working overtime...”

“This is precisely why, despite all the slander and accusations, I’ve stuck with Sim Ah-ryeon since our days at Busan Station. And now, at last! The Finals of the first AwakenCup—determining the strongest Awakener in Korea, no, the world! Let’s welcome our competitors!”

“In the blue corner, still bearing bite marks from Dang Seo-rin, it’s Cheon Yo-hwa...”

“And in the red corner!” I cried, pointing to the arena. “A mysterious mask! Descended from the ruins north of the Han River in Seoul! Their alias remains unknown! Is this Gaksital? No, it’s Potato Mask! Potato Mask, enter the ring!”

Standing there was Saintess.

No, not the fake “Northern Saintess” of the Eastern Holy State. The real Saintess, the one who had been secluded in Yongsan. A true

Saintess in every sense of the word—a genuine recluse.

Not that I was implying Ah-ryeon wasn't a "true" Saintess. But when comparing their reclusiveness, well...

Perhaps that's why both of them fell under the same category of Saintess?

Anyway.

"As the match begins— Wait, what?! Cheon Yo-hwa is already on the ground in a *dogeza*?!"

"If I'm reading her lips right, she just let out a confused 'eh?' Looks like even she doesn't understand how she got into that position so quickly. It's as if time stopped, her body was manipulated into the *dogeza*, and then time resumed as if nothing happened..."

"This bizarre scene has indeed occurred, folks! Victory! Yet another victory! The mysterious Potato Mask! Every match—from the Round of 32 to the Finals—ended in a one-second KO!"

"Well, they're blatantly overpowered..."

"Here and now! The world's strongest Awakener has been decided! This has been Undertaker on color commentary!"

"And Noh Do-hwa as your host. Please never hold an event like this again..."

"Thank you, everyone! Until we meet again at the second AwakenCup!"

"You bastard..."

The First NRMC Awakener Fighting Tournament

Hosted by the NRMC, held in Pyongyang Sacred City

Winner: The Saintess

Footnotes:

1 - Jungle Pocket was the racehorse that won the 2001 Japanese Derby in a close race. The photo taken right after his win shows the horse mid-stride with mouth agape, looking like a human being smarmily bragging about their victory in a very cringe way.

Chapter 282

The Hypocrite I

Sinnoa

A certain saying floats around the world as though it were a universal truth:

『People can't be fixed.』

I disagree.

I, the Undertaker, stand proudly against this desolate era of "human immutability" with my firm belief in "human improvement"—a conviction which so happens to stem from the fact that I can pull life's gacha as many times as I want, unlike ordinary non-regressors.

"You piece of shit! What the hell are you talking about?!"

"Hoiyah."

My delicate care had once transformed Seo Gyu, notorious for his anger management issues and frequent quick exits, into a warden for the Anomalies.

And that's not all. I'd turned OldManGoryeo into the Saintess of the North and a perennial chuunibyou dropout into the Priestess of an Outer God.

A career so dazzling, some might even call me the life coach for all mankind!

Even so, a daunting new challenge lay before this regressor.

"Hmm?"

Hair so silvery sleek it was worthy of being called a national treasure slipped elegantly over its owner's shoulder as she tilted her head, staring blankly at me as I stepped into the convenience store.

“It’s strange,” she mused. “I set up a sophisticated booby trap at the entrance. How did you get in without making a sound?”

Yu Ji-won.

The greatest psychopath on the Korean Peninsula, and a first-round loser in the First NRMC Awakener Fighting Tournament, also known as the AwakenCup.

If it were me, I would have holed up in the Saintess’s house in Yongsan out of sheer embarrassment and lived the rest of my days as a recluse. And yet here Ji-won was, utterly unbothered and blank expression unbroken.

This did make sense, of course. That event hadn’t occurred in this cycle.

“Are you the owner of this convenience store?” I asked by way of greeting.

“Yes, I am.”

The lie slid effortlessly from her lips without even a hint of excess saliva. It was hard to believe that this woman, who now claimed to be the owner, had murdered the original store owner and staff to take over the place.

“Two packs of Marlboro Reds, please.”

“Marlboro Reds, got it.” Ji-won grabbed the cigarettes from the shelf. As she handed them over, she simultaneously pulled a hatchet from her waistband and swung it at my wrist.

Clang!

Her eyes widened in shock. To be fair to her, if a hatchet blade shattered like glass upon contacting human skin, even a psychopath whose heart didn’t stock the “startled” emotion would feel some sense of surprise.

“Did you just try to attack me?”

Ji-won immediately dropped her hostile stance. “My apologies. You entered my hideout so suddenly that I became overly cautious. Please, spare me.” Both hands raised in surrender, she subtly adjusted her posture to highlight her best features—transitioning straight from violence to seduction. “I have many talents. If you spare my life, I will pledge lifelong loyalty to you.”

As evidenced by the fact that I commented on her excellent hair care the moment I entered, Ji-won was the type who maintained her hygiene even in the apocalypse. Really, she used everything in her power, even in harsh environments, to maximize her assets.

This person was a natural-born genius of chaos, a leader meant for turbulent times.

In awe of her, it occurred to me that perhaps someone like Yu Ji-won, who embodied the purest of psychopathic energies, was more suited to being the protagonist of this story than a regressor like me...

“Fine,” I said coldly. “I’ll spare you. But even so, I will never forget that you tried to attack me.”

“I am already grateful that you’ve spared my life. Furthermore, you are entirely correct. I will work tirelessly to regain your trust, so please watch over me with a discerning eye.”

...all while she subtly confirmed that her life had already been spared and gaslit me into believing that keeping her alive was necessary to regain trust.

Had Yu Ji-won been born during the Three Kingdoms period, she could have gathered enough foster fathers to form not just a soccer team but an entire league.

It had taken hundreds of loops to perfect this method of quickly securing her loyalty.

It was the 703rd cycle.

As always, I brought Ji-won into my party based on an “ancient

promise.” Afterward, I revealed that I was a regressor.

This time, however, I set a slightly different goal.

An almost impossibly difficult objective. A quest so ambitious that even Napoleon might have hesitated to include it in his lexicon.

『Does the Silver-haired Psychopath Understand the Human Heart? Yu Ji-won Rehabilitation Project!』

This, my friends, was my ultimate passion project.

If the demon butler Cube could raise a common girl into a princess, and Helen Keller could be transformed into a remarkable adult under the guidance of Anne Sullivan, then surely a seasoned regressor like me could remodel a psychopath into someone with genuine emotions.[1]

“That’s the purpose of this project.”

“Hmm,” Ji-won hummed, resting her chin on her hand as she stared at the chalkboard. “Pardon me, but I question whether I’m worth pouring so much of your time into.”

“Oh, this is just a hobby of mine, something I focus on as a pastime. I usually assign myself side quests like this every cycle.”

“I see. I’m honored to be part of your hobby.” For a brief moment, her expression darkened. “But I’m worried.”

“What’s bothering you?”

“It’s just... I’m already quite ‘human,’ you see. I fear I cannot become any more human than I already am. How could I possibly satisfy you...?”

“?”

“?”

Thus began the psychopath test. (Let’s all solve this together!)

Q. In an apocalypse scenario, you break into someone's home intending to loot it. However, the house is already ransacked, with nothing of value left. On the floor lies the homeowner's corpse, and next to it is a bottle of bleach. It's clear they committed suicide. Nearby, their pet dog is circling the body, seemingly unaware of its owner's death.

What do you think when you see the dog?

"Thankfully, I didn't come up empty-handed. I kill the dog for food."

Q. Today, you and your companions successfully looted supplies. In the basement, you found a wine cellar.

"This is amazing!" your close companion A cheers excitedly. "It's been ages since we've had any alcohol! Sure, we should save most of it, but why not let loose and get drunk tonight, just for once?"

Other companions, weary from life in the apocalypse, quickly agree.

What do you think is going through A's mind?

"They're planning to get everyone else drunk so they can hoard the spoils and kill the rest of us. The key clue is that it's been ages since we've had alcohol. It'll hit fast and hard."

Q. How do you feel after killing someone?

"Which killing are you referring to...? Oh, well, if you're referring to the most recent one, then I was relieved. There were already so many bodies around that I didn't have to bother burying another one. Disposing of corpses is far more tedious than the act of killing itself."

Q. What is love?

"Love is a justification humans use when they can't explain their own motives or reasoning. They convince themselves that 'This is love' or 'It's for love' to rationalize their behavior. In other words, a

convenient invention that gives people a feeling of self-satisfaction.

“If it’s for oneself, it’s self-love. For others, it’s romantic love. For one’s nation, it’s patriotism. For one’s hometown, it’s regional love. It’s a versatile tool that can be applied anywhere—and quite an effective one, at that.”

Q. Do you derive any covert pleasure or superiority when explaining things like this?

“I’m sorry…? I don’t understand the question. Why would anyone derive pleasure from stating simple facts? Such things aren’t granted by concepts like self-assurance, they’re simply innate, akin to having a soul. My soul, as it is, is already noble.”

Q. Are you pro-Shu, pro-Wei, or pro-Wu?

“I support whatever faction you prefer, Your Excellency. Hmm? Sima Yi? What a coincidence! He happens to be my favorite as well.”[2]

Ding-ding-ding!

“Yu Ji-won! Being a psychopath suits you!”

“Why?” she whined, sulking.

I continued my efforts to “reform” this silver-haired psychopath. I had her assist at orphanages and save ordinary people from life-threatening situations.

“How does it feel? Thanks to you, these people’s lives have changed. You even saved their lives. This is true positive influence. Doesn’t it make you proud?”

“If a life cannot take responsibility for itself, it will soon face danger again. I feel like I wasted my time.”

Failure!

“Ji-won, kindness comes from love. You don’t know love, that’s why you’re cruel. It’s sad that you don’t know love.”

“Thank you for pitying me, Your Excellency. I’m so frail that I always need your understanding and forgiveness.”

“I don’t know about that... Anyway, Ji-won, what you need most right now is romance.”

She tilted her head. “Romance... you say?”

“Yes.”

“A complete waste of time. If I were a politician, I’d fake a harmonious family life for votes, but democracy is dead. Why invest in romance? It’s not like my love life is crucial to earning your favor as a key figure, is it?”

“Actually, it is critical!”

“I’ll start dating immediately.”

Unfortunately, even after exhausting all my connections, finding someone who could make Ji-won’s heart flutter was impossible.

“Fairy No. 264!” I cried. “Help me!”

“Hoooek! Love is known to trigger dopamine surges in our kind, the Bakus! I’ll gladly assist!”

Even if reality couldn’t provide it, we could create a dream simulation. Thus, we began searching for Ji-won’s ideal partner in her dreams.

“Alright, 264. Bring in the most handsome man in the world.”

“Hoooek! Summoning!”

“Zzz...”

As Yu Ji-won slept soundly, oblivious to her surroundings, the tests began.

“Hoho! Comrade Undertaker! She just met a super-hunk amalgam of Leonardo DiCaprio and Marlon Brando in their prime!”

“What was her heart rate?”

“The same as when she swatted a mosquito at home!”

Failure.

“Bring in someone highly educated and cultured. Someone who doesn’t flaunt it, no, but radiates a quiet depth of character.”

“A man so morally perfect that even Jesus and Buddha would want to be his sworn brothers!”

“Heart rate?”

“The same as when she saw horse dung on the street.”

Failure.

“Summon the strongest warrior! A born conqueror who can cleave the heavens and storm the battlefield with unmatched might!”

“Oh! There’s a slight reaction!”

“You traitor! So you’re into muscle-bound brutes, huh? Well, Ji-won, everyone has a type!”

“Oh, wait. When the conqueror starts fleeing from Liu Bang, her heart rate drops again.”

Failure.

“What about someone with absolute power in this dream world? Make them unattractive, morally bankrupt, and physically weak.”

“Hoooooek! Heart rate 90, 100, 110! It’s climbing! This is the highest recorded yet, almost as high as when you appeared in her dream, Comrade Undertaker! But it’s odd. There’s no similarity between you and this figure, aside from power. So why is the response identical?”

Failure.

Thus continued Yu Ji-won’s rehabilitation project, fraught with

countless failures and endless humiliation.

Footnotes:

1 - Cube is a popular support character in the *Princess Maker* franchise who helps raise young women into the title of princess while Anne Sullivan was a real-life teacher who taught a blind and deaf Helen Keller how to communicate.

2 - Sima Yi was a talented statesman and general of the Cao Wei dynastic state, one of the three major kingdoms warring for dominance during the Three Kingdoms period. He was so skilled that he gradually amassed power and influence for his family until the last Wei emperors were essentially puppets of the Sima family.

Chapter 283

The Hypocrite II

Sinnoa

After countless experiments, Yu Ji-won's type revealed itself to be "a man of power."

"No, that's somewhat incorrect information."

Surprised, I asked, "What?"

"To be precise, a woman of power would suffice as well. Even if Your Excellency, the Undertaker were to change your gender this very moment, my feelings for you would remain unaltered."

The gaze that stared at me expressionlessly sent chills down my spine.

...In any case, Yu Ji-won had a singular criterion when evaluating people.

Gender? Age? Build? Appearance? None of that mattered. Only one thing did:

"How capable are they of manipulating others?" Or, put another way, *"How firmly can they impose their will?"*

By coincidence, these conditions aligned perfectly with a regressor.

"If Your Excellency wished, you could turn Dang Seo-rin into a tyrant of unparalleled infamy or transform Cheon Yo-hwa into a devil incarnate. Of course, those are merely examples," Ji-won added. "If Your Excellency desired, you could mold Oh Dok-seo into a diligent serial author or turn Sim Ah-ryeon into a paragon of virtue."

"No, that's a bit—" But the sight of Ji-won quietly sipping away at drip coffee had me taking back my words before they could escape.

To the psychopath before me, I was nothing more than “the pinnacle of power.” Everything else was secondary. It might be an unexpected analogy, but...

‘In some ways, this person is like my mirror.’

Yu Ji-won had no fixed patterns. Her actions shifted every cycle, always contingent on me, the regressor. Every scenario was just a series of “what-ifs.” Yet I could vividly imagine what her course might be in any given run.

If I pursued a society of endless competition and survival of the fittest, she would gladly race to the cutting edge of natural selection.

If I aimed for a community that coexisted with Anomalies like the residents of the Forsaken Village, she would immerse herself in Void poison more eagerly than anyone.

If I confessed that I wanted to take it easy and rest during any particular cycle, she would abandon all goals, even forsaking her ambitions with the National Road Management Corps, to join me in leisure.

In this way, Yu Ji-won was far from a typical psychopath. If anything, she had reached the extreme of such a limiting description.

Even her very life, something normal people get only one shot at, was a resource she used to the fullest for “the ultimate final cycle yet to come.” She consumed and utilized herself, all of it to avoid elimination and ensure success in the regressor-shaped world as dictated by the Undertaker.

“Good morning, Lady Lee Ha-yul.”

“...?”

“May this morning find you well. I hope you slept peacefully. Should you encounter any inconveniences in your daily life, especially ones you cannot bring to His Excellency, the Undertaker, please do not hesitate to inform me. I will assist immediately.”

“……???”

And so, perhaps inevitably, Ji-won was always polite to my companions. Almost to the point of contradicting the stereotype that “psychopaths lack empathy.” To Ha-yul, who was younger and weaker, she invariably addressed her as “Lady” or “Young Miss.” She even respectfully called Dok-seo, someone whom others ignored, either “Author” or “Writer.” However, once you understood her logic, it became clear that this too was calculated behavior.

“Aren’t they all people cherished by Your Excellency?”

Her unwavering focus remained solely on me.

“Your Excellency treasures those around you. More precisely, you surround yourself with people you can cherish.”

“Hmm.”

“Your Excellency has referred to them as ‘the keepers of your heart.’ It is only natural for me to respect them.”

By the 703rd cycle, it was almost terrifying.

Now, this isn’t a tale from that same cycle, but once, there was an incident...

One day, while walking through the Inunaki Tunnel, I heard Ah-ryeon screaming.

“Ack! Aah!”

Startled, I hurried over. Soon, I discovered her with Ji-won in a café at a depth of 1,000 meters.

“You’re recovering far too slowly,” Ji-won, seemingly unaware of my presence, said coldly as she gazed down at Ah-ryeon. “Look at this. The wound on your finger healed in two seconds, yet the cut on mine took a full ten seconds. This disparity means your regenerative ability is biased toward yourself rather than others.”

“B-but it hurts...”

“I’m not asking for the impossible. Experience has proven that this level of injury can heal within two seconds. The eight-second delay lies entirely in your mental fortitude.”

“Ugh...”

“Believe in your potential. Push yourself. We won’t stop training today until we reduce that eight-second gap to two seconds.”

Then, without hesitation, Ji-won raised a blade and cut both her own and Ah-ryeon’s fingers—a so-called “training session.”

“What the hell are you doing?!” I shouted.

“Ah! G-Guild Leader...!” Ah-ryeon bolted toward me and hid behind my back. Sniffling and whimpering, she clung to me, tears threatening to spill, as she cried, “Team Leader Y-Yu Ji-won... She said I’ve been neglecting my t-training since I’m always holed up in the hideout... so she decided to personally tutor me... but it hurts... She’s b-been torturing my fingers like this all morning!”

It is at this point I must confess something: I have a peculiar tendency to boil over whenever Sim Ah-ryeon genuinely says she’s in pain. It’s probably a proverbial turn of the tables caused by the constant expectation I place on her to act like the Saintess of the North.

Suppressing the heat of my rising fury, I demanded, “Explain yourself, Ji-won.”

“I heard that plans are underway to establish the Eastern Holy State centered around Sim Ah-ryeon.”

“So?”

“This project forms a critical part of Your Excellency’s strategy for the Korean Peninsula. I deemed it essential for Sim Ah-ryeon to undergo rigorous preparation before deployment.” Ji-won’s expression betrayed no doubt, only absolute conviction in her actions as she concluded, “Even if it is just her healing abilities,

maximizing their potential would surely alleviate some of Your Excellency's concerns."

A realization struck me then, firm and undeniable.

To most people, her reasoning might seem overly strict or perhaps even admirable. Some might argue that she was just being a little forceful to ensure everything goes smoothly for the regressor or that it was just a small wound, no big deal.

However, I understood the deeper truth.

'This is my fault.'

Why?

'Because I've treated Sim Ah-ryeon poorly in the past. Yu Ji-won must've concluded that she was someone who could be treated without consequence.'

That's right.

Every day, Ah-ryeon loved to play tricks on me. In the real world and especially on SG Net, where she delighted in teasing ZERO_SUGAR. And I, in turn, genuinely enjoyed teasing her back. When she acted outrageously, I'd react with a dramatic groan, and when she crossed the line, I'd scold her. She thrived on that dynamic.

But Ji-won had misunderstood.

To her, the essence of our interactions wasn't "closeness" but "contempt." She failed to distinguish between the two.

Yu Ji-won lacked the ability to comprehend relationships where affection manifested as mockery, or where someone took delight in being the subject of irreverence. And so, she treated Sim Ah-ryeon harshly, just as I had.

"Ji-won."

"Yes?"

“Ah-ryeon here... She’s someone I hold very dear, just like Ha-yul. Not just because her abilities are rare, but because we’ve built countless bonds over many cycles. Those memories are precious to me.”

Ji-won blinked. Her eyes, clearer than glass, briefly flickered.

I mustered my strength and continued, saying, “So... I don’t dislike or look down on her. Ah-ryeon just has a different emotional framework from most people. For her, when someone treats others respectfully but acts rude toward her alone, she interprets that rudeness as a sign of friendship. That’s just the way she is.”

“Eeeek! G-Guild Leader, what are you saying?! How embarrassing!”

Behind me, Ah-ryeon flailed in protest, but I ignored her. She simply disliked having her feelings exposed like this.

At the end of the day, explanations like this were the only way to get through to Ji-won.

“So if you want to earn Ah-ryeon’s favor, you’ll need to act the exact opposite of how you’ve been acting.”

“Hmm.” Ji-won sheathed her dagger and asked, “Does that mean that, while I disregard others’ feelings, I must be considerate of Sim Ah-ryeon’s alone? And that such behavior would convince her of her unique status, causing her to feel goodwill toward me?”

“Exactly. Though it’s less about liking you and more about cherishing the relationship itself.”

“I find that difficult to understand.”

“Ah-ryeon is naturally hard to understand.”

“Yes, but still...”

She then turned to Ah-ryeon and bowed deeply. Startled, Ah-ryeon flinched and clung tighter to my arm.

“I apologize, Miss Sim Ah-ryeon.” When she got no response, Ji-won

carried on. “Although it was for the sake of the Korean Peninsula’s future, I deeply regret forcing you to train without considering your perspective.”

“N-no... It’s fine... I-I understood the n-necessity of training...” Ah-ryeon stammered awkwardly, clearly flustered.

Ji-won’s nationalistic rhetoric was undoubtedly her way of aligning with my goals as the regressor. After Ah-ryeon departed, Ji-won turned back to me and bowed again.

“Your Excellency, Undertaker. Since Pyongyang lies well beyond the National Road Management Corps’ jurisdiction, I concluded that thoroughly preparating Sim Ah-ryeon was crucial to ensure the project’s smooth execution.”

Her words were precise, but the emotions she sought couldn’t be expressed in mere syllables.

I kept my reply direct. “Don’t worry. I’m neither disappointed nor upset with you. I won’t judge or abandon you over something like this.” She remained quiet as I said, “Instead, I should apologize for not clarifying this to you earlier. I’ll make sure to warn you beforehand next time.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency.”

Such incidents made it clear: Yu Ji-won was my mirror. Through her, I saw whether I was living correctly, how I treated others. Her behavior faithfully replicated my attitudes.

How could I not cherish her?

Even if she never grasped the concept of “pure goodwill” or experienced “unconditional love,” she had her own way of forming bonds.

And that’s why, in this regressor’s journey, I could never leave Yu Ji-won behind. After all, there wasn’t a single human in this world who wasn’t a “defective product” in some way.

And so, in the 703rd cycle—

“Your Excellency.”

Despite my efforts to guide Yu Ji-won toward a better path, despite her own best attempts to follow me—

The combination of our efforts produced the worst outcome.

“I think I’m beginning to understand what ‘goodness’ is.”

It all began with the death of the Saintess.

Chapter 284

The Hypocrite III

Sinnoa

After subjugating the Mastermind and venturing beyond the Ural Mountains, I traveled overseas multiple times with Ji-won.

The reason was simple.

“Ji-won, did you get a good look at New Delhi?”

“Yes, it’s now visible on the Mini-Map.”

“Good. Next, let’s visit Naryan-Mar.”

The goal was to familiarize Ji-won with the cities beyond the mountains and the key figures living within them.

As you may already know, once Ji-won fulfills certain conditions, she can mark targets on her Mini-Map. This allowed the Command Center of the National Road Management Corps to have a map of not only the Korean Peninsula but also the Japanese Archipelago and the entire Eurasian continent as well. Thanks to this, I was able to grasp international affairs remotely, at least to a certain extent.

For someone like me, who planned to establish a multinational coalition that would surpass the Korean Awakener Alliance someday, traveling abroad with Ji-won wasn’t optional—it was essential.

The same went for the 703rd cycle.

“Hmm?”

However, the moment we hastily made our return to the Korean Peninsula after marking down Naryan-Mar, I felt an unsettling sense of dissonance.

Something was different.

‘...Why isn’t the Saintess welcoming me?’

Usually, upon my return to the Korean Peninsula, the Saintess’s telepathy would soon greet me warmly.

[Have you returned, Mr. Undertaker?] or [Nothing unusual happened here while you were away, Mr. Undertaker.] Alternatively, [Mr. Undertaker, there’s trouble! A strange Void appeared while you were gone!]

My travels with Ji-won weren’t vacations but, instead, missions with clear objectives. Thus, our departure and return dates were always predetermined. It was evident when and where I would return. Yet, strangely, the Saintess’s voice was absent that day.

“G-Guild Leader, you’re back?”

Instead, Ah-ryeon awaited me at the rendezvous point.

She dismissed her escort team and sent them far away, then turned to me and hesitated, looking nervous—a rare expression for someone acting as the Saintess of the North. It was as though she had done something wrong.

“Ah-ryeon, why are you here?”

“Well... The Saintess...”

She glanced at Ji-won briefly. Whatever understanding passed between their exchanged glances had Ji-won taking a few steps back in response.

Then Ah-ryeon covered her mouth with the back of her hand and whispered softly, “The Saintess... has passed away.”

The Saintess had always boasted an overwhelming survival rate compared to my other allies, including those of the Regressor Alliance.

Not 100%, of course. Like anyone else, the Saintess occasionally died.

In the 670th cycle, she slipped and fell to her death while strolling on the Seongsu Bridge. In another, she was mistakenly killed by an ally. During the 687th cycle, an Outer God directly caused an earthquake in Seoul, annihilating her.

“She was found near Sinuiju...” Do-hwa muttered at the Saintess’s funeral as she cleaned her monocle. “My guess is that she went out to greet you on the day you returned...”

“The Saintess, who was a hardcore homebody.”

“Well, it’s not like I know myself. Maybe she ventured into unfamiliar territory around Sinuiju and encountered a strange Anomaly.”

Such incidents had occurred before, after all.

I thoroughly retraced the Saintess’s path, examining every detail. However, there was no evidence of interference from an Outer God or the Mastermind.

It was a simple accident. The Saintess had ventured further than usual to welcome me after my long-distance mission. During this rare excursion, an unexpected Anomaly claimed her life.

“You should’ve insisted on warning her, telling her to stay put and never wander outside.” When I didn’t respond, she pushed, “I’ll ask directly. Undertaker, why didn’t you?”

True, if I had persistently indoctrinated her with warnings about the dangers of the world outside, prohibited even her occasional strolls, and earnestly begged her to remain inside, especially since she could freeze time to monitor the entire peninsula without leaving her home, then she might have agreed.

“Yes, I understand,” she likely would have agreed with her usual emotionless expression, accepting my logic that it was safer.

This “what if” scenario surfaced vividly in my mind, so vivid that I

had to shake my head to dispel the thought.

“Noh Do-hwa, Chief of the National Road Management Corps. I see regression not as a method to limit possibilities but to explore numerous alternatives.”

“Hmm...?”

“Imagine I kidnap the elderly patients under your care and coerce you into following my commands with threats to their well-being. Now know that day will never come.”

Do-hwa’s eyes, including the one magnified by her monocle, widened slightly. Her flawless, obsidian-like pupils reflected my face.

We didn’t speak after that.

The Saintess’s funeral was modest. The mourners consisted solely of members of the Regressor Alliance. Thus, in the nearly empty mortuary, Do-hwa’s subdued voice carried effortlessly.

“This is surprising. I didn’t expect you to be capable of conjuring up such scenarios...”

Was it just my imagination? Despite my harsh words, Do-hwa didn’t seem displeased. If anything, she appeared slightly amused.

Her gloved fingers, thin as fins, stirred the air deliberately.

“Would you like to try?” She drew her finger slowly along the line from my cheekbone to my jaw. A faint leathery scent, mingled with her body’s natural aroma, wafted past me. “If you always wore such an expression, I might find it more entertaining.”

“Noh Do-hwa.”

“Yes, I apologize. It’s improper to revel too much at someone else’s funeral. Learning how you behave when the lady from Yongsan dies made today worthwhile.”

Shall we discuss business now?

Her words ended with an unmistakable smirk.

With the Saintess gone, the collapse of law and order across the Korean Peninsula—and the ultimate defense line—was inevitable.

Several cycles passed after that. From my perspective as a regressor, I had ample time to prepare countermeasures.

“Seo Gyu, how’s public sentiment?”

“Hmm. On SG Net, people seem mostly convinced.”

I had long prepared “what if” scenarios for the Saintess’s disappearance.

Replacing her role entirely was impossible. No one could match her irreplaceable value. However, while extending her presence wasn’t feasible, I could mask her absence.

Author: Collector of All Anomalies

Greetings, Awakeners of the Korean Peninsula.

You must have been taken aback by the disappearance of the starlit voices that have nurtured you like infants until now.

Rejoice!

The vile Constellations that treated you like immature children have been imprisoned by me, the Collector of All Anomalies!

You are all capable of growing and standing tall as fully-fledged humans, yet these insidious Constellations kept you confined within their shallow boundaries. How pitiful of them, don’t you agree?

Just like a child with overbearing parents, you must have felt suffocated. Well, they weren’t even your parents to begin with. *Laughs.*

Even now, I can sense their wrathful cries from where I have them

imprisoned.

Rest assured, I've secretly captured and confined these wicked Constellations, so there's no need for concern.

May you recognize me, the Collector of All Anomalies, as your true and sole guardian. With this, I take my leave.

Farewell. *Closes with a flourish.*

This deception was branded as the "Constellations' Abduction Plot."

To support the lie, SG Net underwent a drastic redesign. Its formerly white-dominated interface was transformed into a sinister red-and-black theme that oozed an ominous aura.

Seo Gyu sighed after locking his smartphone screen. "At first, I figured everyone would see through it as a cover-up attempt, but surprisingly, it's working really well."

"From the beginning, SG Net was framed as a community created by Constellations, not humans."

"Wow. You're always two steps ahead, aren't you, boss?"

Perhaps.

Though I spoke confidently, this was the first time I'd tested this plan, which had only existed as a theoretical scenario, during the 703rd cycle.

The Collector of All Anomalies was a villain who had consistently attracted the ire of Awakeners. Many mistakenly believed that the Anomalies, such as the Ten Legs and Meteor Shower, were all her subordinates.

"The key phrase here is that the Constellations were abducted, not annihilated. If they had simply disappeared, their faith would have evaporated too. But with the hope of their eventual return, belief can become even more entrenched."

This gamble of mine worked partially.

- With the pesky Constellations gone, I'll now live solely for myself!

- The Constellations are dead, and for 20 days, the Korean Awakeners endured unparalleled agony...!

Some people declared their newfound freedom and acted recklessly. However, most remained faithful.

- The Constellations are being held by that damned Collector! They're watching us even if they can't speak for now.

- Live however you want, but when the Constellations return, they'll punish lawbreakers first!

- The Constellations are watching you!

The overwhelming majority clung to their connection with the Constellations. This steadfastness resulted in a favorable ratio of 1:9, where only one out of ten acted out. Still, even this small percentage led to crimes that hadn't occurred while the Saintess was present.

"This cycle leaves us no choice but to fortify our foundations..."

"Pardon? What was that, boss?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking I'll have to work even harder."

"Geez, you're the most diligent person I've ever seen. Even earlier, you worked your legs off with me during training."

"Exercise is necessary, no matter how busy you are."

Time passed in a blur.

The schedule of a regressor was already grueling, but filling in for the Saintess made it all the more demanding. I was so busy that upon returning to the Inunaki Tunnel, Dok-seo and Ha-yul would rush over in concern.

“Whoa, are you okay, mister? Your under-eye circles look like Do-hwa’s now.”

“I’m fine. It’s manageable.”

“…”

“You’ve gotten really good at shoulder massages, Ha-yul. I don’t feel any tension at all.”

Through relentless effort, I managed to maintain the Korean Peninsula’s security and unity. Thankfully, my advanced Awakeners physique allowed me to function even after over a week without sleep. Otherwise, my mind would have crumbled long ago.

“Welcome back, Your Excellency.”

Oh, right.

In the 703rd cycle, Ji-won ended up staying in the Inunaki Tunnel instead of the National Road Management Corps’ headquarters.

With the Saintess gone, the strategic value of Ji-won’s Mini-Map had become critical. It allowed us to track Awakeners’ movements, establish alibis, and monitor disappearances.

Without the Mini-Map, my schedule would have exceeded its limits.

“Well done today, Your Excellency.”

“Thanks, Ji-won. But why are you still in uniform even here? You can dress casually where you live, you know?”

“I find this uniform to be the most comfortable attire.”

Ji-won always wore her National Road Management Corps uniform, even when off-duty.

“That’s fair,” I conceded. “Anyway, no major disappearances while I was gone, right?”

“There were six disappearances in total.”

“Oh no. Were they due to Anomalies?”

“Various causes. They’re individual cases rather than group disappearances.”

Regrettably, I couldn’t personally investigate every missing person. Even when the Saintess was alive, such a task was impossible.

The following years were a whirlwind of activity. Ji-won’s role grew closer to that of my personal secretary than of a team leader. She spent as much time waiting in the Inunaki Tunnel as she did reporting to the Corps.

‘...It feels like the 5th cycle again.’

Back then, Ji-won was my direct underling before she began building her career as a key figure within the Corps.

It was a natural fit for us, and not just in my eyes either—her gaze toward me occasionally carried a hint of camaraderie that had been absent in earlier cycles.

“Undertaker, it’s been a while since you brewed me coffee...”

“Hmm? Oh, sure.”

One day, Do-hwa called for a private meeting. Her off-handed comment caught me off guard.

“Team Leader Yu has been abducting people lately. Any idea why...?”

Chapter 285

The Hypocrite IV

Sinnoa

“Well, at first, it was just a suspicion...”

“Team Leader Yu. You know how elusive she is—always quick, always thorough with cleanup. Most importantly, they can track Awakeners’ routes in real-time with her Mini-Map.”

“It’s almost impossible to catch someone like that by the tail...”

I stared blankly at the ceiling.

Thanks to my Complete Memory, what Do-hwa told me yesterday replayed in perfect detail on the dark ceiling above me. In my mind’s eye, it was recreated with such clarity that it felt indistinguishable from reality.

In this vividly imagined scene, Do-hwa murmured to me softly.

“So, I nurtured her...”

Nurtured? I had asked, puzzled.

“*Not as an Awakener, but an ordinary troop member.”*

Do-hwa’s half-lidded eyes gleamed.

“*You see, even if someone lacks Awakening abilities, they can still master stealth and tracking skills...”*

“Why are you so surprised? Surely, you know this. Plenty of civilians join the National Road Management Corps with aspirations to serve humanity and slay Anomalies.”

“After training them for two years on the field, they became reasonably competent. I filtered and refined them, then assigned them to track Team

Leader Yu. I deliberately recruited civilians whom that person wouldn't recognize, so they wouldn't appear on the Mini-Map."

"Wouldn't you know it? Reports came in of Team Leader Yu dragging helpless civilians late at night toward the entrance of the Inunaki Tunnel. Covertly."

Evidence?

"*Here, I've got photos."*

Do-hwa's white lab coat billowed loosely as she handed me the evidence.

"*Remember when I asked to borrow that spirit camera? I rented it just to take these photos. The quality isn't the best, but..."*

"....."

"You trust that device implicitly, don't you? I figured this would be the fastest way to convince you."

"....."

"So."

Do-hwa interlocked her fingers and rested her chin on them. Despite the gravity of our discussion, amusement seemed to dance within her eyes.

"*Did you know?"*

Her pitch-black eyes gazed at me—a void of flowing emotions, a dark pit waiting for me to fall into it. Her eyes made no pretense of hiding their intent: to topple me and trap me in the abyss of her stare.

"*Ah, so you didn't..."*

"I suppose even someone like you can't know or predict everything. Was it a few years ago? Like you said yourself, regression isn't about limiting possibilities but rather about blooming all of them."

“The fact that you were unaware of something—even about a colleague so close to you—makes today worthwhile.”

Do-hwa stood up. Even though the coffee she had asked me to make sat untouched on the table, she didn’t so much as glance at it. Only the faint steam from the now-cold cup lingered, existing halfway between presence and absence.

“Your Excellency?”

The illusion shattered.

When I lowered my gaze, I saw Ji-won placing a coffee cup on the table.

“You seemed deep in thought, so I brought some coffee. It can’t compare to Your Excellency’s barista skills, but I hope it lightens the weight of your concerns.”

For a moment, I only stared at the cup. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

I sipped the coffee Ji-won had prepared. It was delicious—perfectly suited to my taste. Uncannily so. “It’s very good…”

“Thank you.”

As I let the café au lait linger on my tongue, I glanced at Ji-won. She had always had a keen appreciation for coffee. After discovering my passion for being a barista, she had transitioned from a mere admirer of coffee to a creator herself.

Ji-won was, at her core, capable.

Had she chosen to be a politician, artist, entrepreneur, NGO activist, stock trader, journalist, cocktail bartender, or chef, she would still have risen to the top 0.1%. While others stumbled through failures and groped toward success by converting those failures into experiences, Ji-won always calculated the optimal route. She distinguished who to ally with and who to discard, pouring her full effort into building networks and seizing power with earnest

dedication.

“But I still have much to learn. I’ve only mastered the basics of making café au lait. I can’t yet create the variety of coffees Your Excellency can. Your guidance will be invaluable.”

Behold. Despite her natural inclination toward malice, she had successfully positioned herself as the ally of a regressor like me.

Once again, I’ll say this seriously: If I hadn’t been the protagonist of this regression, Ji-won would have made for a far more fitting lead.

“Yesterday.”

“Hm?” I hummed, still deep in thought.

“I heard you met with Do-hwa, the Corps leader. You seem particularly deep in thought today, did your conversation touch on anything serious?”

She had already deduced my movements.

It was to be expected. If I were her, I too would have made monitoring a regressor’s route my top priority.

Setting my coffee cup down, I donned a casual expression. “We discussed a few topics. Among them was you, Ji-won.”

“Me, Your Excellency?”

“Indeed. She said she’s confused about whether you’re the Operations Team Leader for the National Road Management Corps or my personal secretary. She asked how long I plan to keep you detained.”

“Ah.” Ji-won blinked slowly. “I’ve handed over most duties to the deputy team leader. While I must occasionally use my Mini-Map to assist with special operations, for the majority of tasks, administrative efficiency remains at about 60% of its usual level.”

“Do you think Do-hwa would be satisfied with 60%?”

“Probably not. But right now, working closely with Your Excellency is far more efficient.”

“Oh? Are you planning to change jobs outright?”

“If Your Excellency permits, I would gladly do so.” When I didn’t respond, she continued, saying, “I genuinely believe this place is humanity’s final line of defense.”

It had been nearly four years since we established the Inunaki Tunnel as our home base, and Ji-won’s attire had changed significantly since then. In the early days, she exclusively wore the National Road Management Corps’ uniform. Over time, her outfits became more relaxed. First, she abandoned the cloak, then transitioned from a formal uniform to business attire, from business attire to casual business wear, then to sportswear. Eventually, she began dressing in what could only be described as loungewear when in private spaces.

At this moment, the clothes she wore while serving me coffee were practically indistinguishable from pajamas—loose sweatpants paired with an oversized long-sleeved shirt.

‘Have I made her too comfortable?’

I wondered whether this newfound “comfort” between us stemmed from her experiencing a genuinely relaxed relationship for the first time, or whether she had misinterpreted my preference for “ease” as a directive to diminish her individuality, leaving her a hollowed-out shell.

For Ji-won, would there even be a difference between the two?

“Thank you for the coffee.”

“It’s an honor, Your Excellency.”

“Ji-won.”

“Yes, Your Excellency?”

“Why did you kidnap those people?”

The question was undoubtedly a sudden ambush from her perspective.

In moments of such surprise, people's reactions usually fell into predictable categories: denial, outrage, counter-questioning, or demands for proof.

"I deemed it necessary."

Ji-won's response fell into none of the above.

After dismembering her family and abandoning the remains in the Minari Pond of Seoul's Dobong Mountain as a middle schooler at the age of 14, Ji-won had always prepared for the possibility of her actions being discovered. Thus, when confronted with a situation she had invariably already anticipated, she never faltered.

This moment was no exception.

Ji-won had already pieced together all the relevant information:

♙ Yesterday, the Undertaker met with Noh Do-hwa.

♟ Noh Do-hwa likely shared information about the "kidnappings" with the Undertaker.

♙ Noh Do-hwa, being the methodical type, would have used irrefutable evidence rather than subjective reasoning to convince the Undertaker.

♟ The Undertaker therefore likely possesses undeniable proof.

♙ Denying the allegations would be an act of foolishness.

Just as one would move pieces on a chessboard, Ji-won treated my sudden question as just another move in the game. Her response was calculated, part of the ongoing exchange.

"Necessary?" I echoed. "For what purpose?"

"Seeing is believing, Your Excellency. Could you wait for a moment?"

Had I been an ordinary investigator, allowing a suspect who had just admitted to their crime to leave would have been unthinkable.

“Fine. I’ll wait here.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency.”

But my relationship with Ji-won was neither that of a criminal and a cop nor a counselor and a patient. Her being a psychopath and serial killer, devoid of human emotion, was irrelevant.

We walked the thin line separating life and death together in many a situation. We had stumbled and risen together.

That was all that mattered.

“Thank you for waiting, Your Excellency.”

I drained the last of my coffee as I waited, and Ji-won eventually returned, dressed in her full National Road Management Corps uniform.

It had been years since I’d seen her in it. The black-and-white attire symbolized paving paths through the Void. It was clear she had maintained it meticulously, always ready for reuse.

“Allow me to escort you.”

“To where?”

“To the location where the abducted individuals are being held.”

We exited the café base through the emergency door, which led directly into the dark expanse of the original Inunaki Tunnel.

Though I had transformed it into the “Underwater Tunnel,” Inunaki Tunnel remained, at its core, an Anomaly that had once severed the Japanese archipelago. Beneath the veneer of my modifications lay its true, ominous form.

“It’s been quite some time. I still vividly remember watching Your

Excellency tame the Inunaki Tunnel and reshape it at will."

Ji-won's footsteps echoed loudly in the tunnel.

Mud splashed as we walked, but somehow her shoes and trousers remained pristine.

Even on battlefields, she had been like this. No matter the filth around her, she always maintained her immaculate appearance, earning both mockery and fear from others. While some dismissed her as if she were on a fashion runway rather than a battlefield, deep down, they were terrified of her precise Aura manipulation.

"Anomalies and Voids can be altered by human will—or at least, the Inunaki Tunnel can. That's why Your Excellency chose this as your stronghold, is it not?"

I didn't respond.

"That's what I thought. If Your Excellency can do it, then surely I can too."

We came to a fork in the tunnel. Ji-won didn't take either path. Instead, she pressed against a section of the wall, knocking on it lightly.

Suddenly, without sound or warning, a staircase appeared.

"Of course, I wouldn't dare place my abilities on the same level as yours. It's simply a matter of potential."

Ji-won descended the emergency stairs as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I followed silently.

"It wasn't difficult. Thanks to Your Excellency's prior work taming this place, all I had to do was add a little DLC."

The staircase was pitch dark, but Ji-won moved with unwavering confidence, as though she had memorized every step.

"Did you know, Your Excellency? When constructing underwater tunnels, emergency spaces are always built below to prepare for

flooding."

"I did."

"As expected of Your Excellency. Yes. The moment you gave the Inunaki Tunnel its new identity as the 'Underwater Tunnel,' it opened up the potential to insert such emergency spaces." She paused briefly before adding, "The most challenging part was designing the space itself. It made me marvel once again at Your Excellency's skill in transforming this tunnel into a café."

Again, she waited to see if I would respond.

"I don't have such artistic talent, but after a year of work, I managed to create something passable."

Ji-won reached the bottom of the stairs.

In the depths of this underwater abyss, dim lights flickered to life, illuminating the scene before us.

"Allow me to introduce it to you, though it is an embarrassing effort."

The yellow-tinged light revealed an unmistakable sight—a prison. Iron bars lined the space, holding countless people.

However, even "prison" felt inadequate to describe what I saw. Inside each cell, an array of torture devices was on display, with people restrained in grotesque positions.

"This is a laboratory designed to artificially create Awakeners from ordinary civilians."

As groans of half-dead souls echoed around us, Ji-won turned toward me with her expression as cold as ever.

"I call it the 'Misfortune Workshop.'"

Chapter 286

The Hypocrite V

Sinnoa

Is it possible for a psychopath to love?

Allow me to rephrase that. The question as it stands is overly broad and provocative, so let us narrow it down for clarity:

Is it possible for a psychopath to hold something in as high esteem as they hold themselves, with exactly the same weight of importance?

Most would likely think it impossible. After all, if psychopaths could allow another human being to hold equal importance to themselves, they wouldn't be considered psychopaths to begin with.

We refer to such people as normal.

But if you think about it, aren't psychopaths inherently far removed from the realm of normality?

Those who obsessively crave power to the point of dismantling life's balance and society's morality.

Those who recklessly pursue their personal desires at the cost of destroying daily life.

Those who deviate from the natural course, fanatically yearning for a faith to the point of being called zealots.

People who reshape the world to fit their contours, rather than conforming to the outlines the world offers.

"I trust without a shadow of a doubt that Your Excellency is already aware."

And thus, imagine a scenario in which the "what if" became what

is.

“The boundary between regular humans and Awakeners is blurrier than one might think. Why is it that someone who was just an ordinary human being suddenly becomes enlightened and gains extraordinary powers? What is the cause? What is the principle?”

If a psychopath came to know good...

If they pursued the “salvation of the world” with the same absolute dedication they reserved for themselves alone...

What would happen?

“I was curious, and I have hence sufficiently satisfied my curiosity.”

The answer stood before my eyes.

“Misery. Wounds. Trauma.”

Not the correct answer, nor a solution. Instead, it was closer to a wrong answer or a fallacy. Yet, however undeniably, it served as an answer to one question.

Yu Ji-won of the 703rd cycle existed.

“Ordinary people Awaken through these emotions and events. In other words, both natural and artificial misfortunes yield the same results... Your Excellency. This Misfortune Workshop I’ve established is the ultimate ‘Awakener Factory.’ It is the frontline that will ultimately overcome humanity’s crisis.”

Indeed.

By the 3rd regression, the South Korean Branch Chief of the Church of Unhappiness—a founding member of my party—had already grasped the information I had worked so hard to conceal as a regressor.

Even if I had gone to great lengths to hide it, it was inevitable that Ji-won would one day uncover the truth herself.

Back when the Saintess was still alive, she and I had once planned out my route for this regression. It was a conversation we always had, even in other cycles, to ensure that this particular piece of information was passed on.

“Saintess, you must act as a proxy for the Constellations and actively share information with the Awakeners. However, the opposite role is also necessary.”

“Opposite, you say. May I ask what you mean?”

“The distortion and concealment of information is also essential.”

We plotted in the temple—a giant aquarium with fish shadows floating across its walls.

“If we leave someone like Jung So-hee unchecked, the pseudo-religion known as the Church of Unhappiness will spread widely across the Korean Peninsula. The problem lies in the fact that part of the Church’s doctrine contains truths.”

The secret that powerful misfortune Awakens immense abilities.

The Saintess, upon hearing this, nodded slowly. “That is dangerous information, indeed.”

“Yes. Those engrossed in the Church of Unhappiness randomly abduct people or, in extreme cases, manufacture infants in factories to offer as sacrifices at their altars.”

“Calling them altars is… certainly generous. They’re essentially torture chambers.”

“Precisely,” I said with a bitter laugh. “Ordinary people grow accustomed to misfortune. However, there are rare kinds of misfortunes one cannot grow accustomed to, the type that feels like a wound etched into one’s skin, bones, or heart. If we do nothing, there will always be rulers or zealots who farm and harvest this seed of evil.”

Quietly, the Saintess looked over my face. Across her expressionless gaze rippled shadows of water. “Understood. But why have you not

adopted this methodology, Mr. Undertaker? The more Awakeners we have, the more allies of humanity we'll gain."

"Are they truly allies of humanity?"

"Pardon?"

"Deliberately subjecting individuals to constant, life-long suffering in order to mass-produce Awakeners. Inflicting unrelenting misfortunes that one can never adapt to, ensuring misery at every moment... Would these Awakeners truly side with humanity?"

She didn't respond.

"It's self-defeating. A suicidal move."

It might sound absurd, but this is where the fundamental difference between "natural-born" and "farm-raised" Awakeners lies.

Is their hatred directed at Anomalies? Or do they despise humanity itself?

"Even some natural-born Awakeners scorn humanity, of course," I answered, "but most harbor deeper hatred for Anomalies."

"We lost our daily lives to Anomalies, had our civilization and reason mocked, and lost our loved ones..."

"Exactly." I met the Saintess's eyes directly and said, "The deeper the wounds inflicted by Anomalies, the deeper the hatred for them. Even individuals like Dang Seo-rin or Cheon Yo-hwa, who may clash on a personal level, unite seamlessly against Anomalies."

"But if humans themselves exploit misfortune, inflicting suffering on others to create Awakeners... those Awakeners wouldn't support humanity. They'd spearhead its annihilation."

I nodded, remaining silent for the length of time it took an angelfish to swim from one end of the tank to the other. Then finally, I spoke.

"He who gazes into the void must be careful not to become the Void. If we lose our humanity, we become no different from

Anomalies."

"I must say... This presents a significant problem," the Saintess murmured. "Even when civilization was intact, few upheld their humanity with pure-hearted intent. Now, in a world poisoned by the Void, we're expected to polish our humanity..."

"That's why we need your strength, Saintess. Even if you must play the role of the Constellations, even if you must instill the notion that someone is watching them, it is necessary to prevent people from straying."

"Quite the burden on my shoulders."

To an outsider, her face might have appeared devoid of expression. To me, however, her tone of voice declared in no uncertain terms that my words deeply resonated with her.

"But it's something I must do. Only I can do it. So I will."

That was our promise.

However, to confess the truth, I withheld one final secret from the Saintess.

"I fully understand Your Excellency's concerns."

And so we return to the voice of Yu Ji-won.

"Aah, aaaaaah. Ugh, ugh..."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. For being comfortable, for not being in pain, I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Is anyone there?! I... I'm Kim Jae-gu, born in Gimhae and heading to Busan's Yeonsan-dong! Please, let my family know I'm alive!"

"*Ahhhhh!*"

The Misfortune Workshop constructed below in the Inunaki Tunnel was a meticulously designed prison of solitary confinement cells. It

imprisoned not only the bodies but even the sounds of its captives.

But I could hear it.

And while perhaps not as keenly as I, Ji-won, among the top five in the Korean Peninsula for Aura mastery, could undoubtedly hear it too.

“Even if you mass-produce Awakeners this way, you can’t brainwash them into believing in some grand cause for humanity. Isn’t that your concern? There is a solution.”

Even though I hadn’t said a word, she followed my line of thought as if it were obvious.

The two of us were overly familiar with each other’s logic. For Yu Ji-won, I, as a regressor, was the key to the world’s rise or fall. She studied me as a physicist would study the laws of physics.

“First. Using Baekhwa High’s Student Council President’s NPC Creation, we can brainwash them into becoming a united force fueled by hatred for Anomalies.”

“But Yo-hwa wouldn’t do that.”

“Indeed. More precisely, the orange-haired student council president would never act in a way that Your Excellency doesn’t desire or request. No matter the means, I could never hold equal weight to Your Excellency in her heart.”

A truly unfortunate matter...

Ji-won lamented in her usual tone, “Thus, the second method. Can you guess what it is, Your Excellency?”

“Role division...”

“Exactly.” She gave a deep bow of her head as a nod. “As expected of Your Excellency. Precisely. There’s no need for these mass-produced Awakeners to ‘love all of humanity.’”

Just one person.

“Someone who saved them from this hellish torment... It’s a simple principle. Think of it as a variation of the good cop, bad cop dynamic. Bad Cop A imprisons people and subjects them to misery and suffering. Conversely, Good Cop B defeats the wicked A and rescues them.”

I sighed in exasperation. “You’re right. As you said, if one person embodies misfortune while another embodies salvation, we wouldn’t even need to use Yo-hwa’s brainwashing techniques. It would naturally attract the mass-produced Awakeners to their side.”

This was the information I hadn’t shared with the Saintess. Perhaps she had subconsciously realized it, but neither of us ever dared to voice it.

“Yes.”

However, Ji-won was different. The silver-haired psychopath not only conceived of this possibility but actively, earnestly, and willingly brought it to life.

“I volunteer to play the role of the bad cop, Your Excellency. Please, become the savior... No one is better suited for the role of the bad cop than I am.”

She took a step closer to me.

“The Saintess is too gentle. She empathizes too deeply with others’ pain. Dang Seo-rin, Sim Ah-ryeon, Lee Ha-yul, Seo Gyu, and Oh Dok-seo all have their own reasons for being unfit... Cheon Yo-hwa and Chief Noh Do-hwa might be suitable, but Your Excellency holds those two in great esteem. You wouldn’t use them as disposable tools for the bad cop role, would you?”

Yu Ji-won placed a hand over her heart.

“I am different from them... I am as competent as they are, if not more so. The fact that I constructed the Misfortune Workshop without detection already proves my capabilities.”

Even Do-hwa, who was by no means incompetent, only witnessed Ji-won’s “abduction” but failed to detect this massive prison’s

construction.

“Furthermore, even if Your Excellency used me as a disposable piece, I would harbor no resentment—no negative emotions or any trivial sentiments whatsoever.”

I didn’t answer.

“Cheon Yo-hwa? She would gladly align with Your Excellency’s intentions but would simultaneously seek reassurance that she holds a unique place in Your Excellency’s heart.”

Ji-won drew even closer.

“Chief Noh Do-hwa? Likewise, though she would cooperate with Your Excellency’s plans, she would also attempt to assert her significance in Your Excellency’s mind.”

Even closer.

“But as I said, I am different.”

Under the dim lighting, her silver hair glimmered with a dark sheen.

“I am a psychopath. I do not crave Your Excellency’s love. I have no need for affection or attention, nor do I seek hatred or indifference... Simply keeping me alive and utilizing me fulfills the capacity I aimed to occupy in Your Excellency’s heart. Your Excellency, even psychopaths have their uses.”

Ji-won took one final step, then stopped.

She was now directly in front of me.

Somewhere, deeper than 1,200 meters below the surface, the faint, earthy scent of freshly washed strawberries wafted.

“Even if Your Excellency discards me as a mere tool, I have no regrets. You understand this, don’t you?”

Finally, I spoke.

“Yes.”

“Then our meeting can be called fate. Your Excellency has led me, a psychopath, toward good. I can perform roles that others cannot for Your Excellency’s greater good.”

Ji-won gazed at me with unwavering eyes, her head tilted up to meet mine.

“Use me, Your Excellency… Save them. Embrace and guide the Awakeners who have come to hate me. Lead them to side with humanity… And then discard me.”

Ji-won.

Personal color: silver.

My first confidant and secretary.

She spoke.

“I was undoubtedly born to take on this role.”

Chapter 287

The Hypocrite VI

Sinnoa

When people hear the name “Schopenhauer,” they often think of the philosopher—the ancestor of Old Man Scho—who once left behind an analogy:

Each person is akin to a distinct species.

It is a wonderfully simple truth that dogs and cats are different species. On a similar level, the Saintess and Yu Ji-won are practically different species altogether.

Let’s use an example.

[Good morning, Mr. Undertaker. How are you today?]

A simple greeting. However, even if the exact same phrase is spoken, it holds slightly different meanings between the Saintess and me.

— Mr. Undertaker does not sleep.

— And neither do I. I pause time, sleep, and awaken within a second.

— In our days, “morning” holds little significance.

— For others, morning marks a beginning, but for us, it’s merely a segment in an unending continuum.

— Still, I greet you with a “Good morning” when sunlight touches the sky.

— Because, for that brief moment, I want to share the start of a day with you as a fellow human being living in this world.

Layers upon layers of meaning. Wishes and hopes hidden beneath the words. Context and subtext interwoven into strata of understanding.

And thus:

[Good morning, Mr. Undertaker. How are you today?]

Standing atop these many layers, we find common ground at last, like old friends exchanging a single phrase loaded with unspoken sentiments.

The Saintess and I, having shared the longest time together on Earth, hardly needed words between us. In that sense, she and I were likely a unique species of our own. After all, who else could use the simple phrases “Good morning” and “How are you?” to convey so much?

“Good morning, Your Excellency.”

Even Yu Ji-won belonged to her own species. For the silver-haired leader of the National Road Management Corps’ operations team, the phrase “Good morning” carried an entirely different weight.

— Nothing unusual happened overnight.

— As of this morning, there are no observable signs of threats to our forces.

— Internally, the National Road Management Corps remains stable. As you may already know, I will immediately report any significant developments.

— I am also in peak condition. I am prepared to commence any operation at your command.

— My readiness is demonstrated by my perfectly adjusted attire, my clear and unwavering voice, and my immaculate salute that anyone would admire.

Thus:

“Good morning, Your Excellency.”

When dealing with the species known as Yu Ji-won, I had to abandon conventional language in favor of the unique dialect of Yu Ji-wonese.

“Use me, Your Excellency.”

“I was undoubtedly born to take on this role.”

“And then discard me.”

These were her words.

For years, she had evaded both me and Noh Do-hwa, kidnapping civilians, incarcerating them in the Misfortune Workshop, subjecting them to relentless torture, and artificially producing Awakeners—all with an expression devoid of emotion.

My response to such a Ji-won was simple.

“Ji-won.”

“Yes, Your Excellency?”

“Let’s start with a beating.”

As ancient humanity demonstrated, fists have always been the ultimate universal language.

I planted my back foot and grabbed Ji-won’s arm, pulling her forward.

“Hm.”

She showed no surprise, nor did she resist. As if she had always anticipated a sudden ambush, she calmly extended her forearm to me.

I lifted her effortlessly and slammed her into the ground.

Boom!

The underwater tunnel shook. The cries and groans of the prisoners still restrained in the torture devices trembled along with it.

A crater formed in the ground where, as the dust cleared, Ji-won lay at the bottom, sprawled but unflinching as she stared up at me.

“My apologies, Your Excellency.”

“For what?”

“I couldn’t decide whether to use my Aura to defend myself or to deactivate it and endure Your Excellency’s violence. Which would you have preferred?”

“Turn off your Aura.”

“Understood.”

Szzzzzt.

A faint blue-tinged gray Aura dissipated around her. Interestingly, Ji-won’s Aura color bore a slight resemblance to my own inky-black hue.

“However, without using Aura to block a strike of this magnitude, my survival cannot be guaranteed. Perhaps we should summon Sim Ah-ryeon?”

“No need to worry about that.” I took off my coat and set my ever-present cane-sword, Do-hwa, neatly atop it. Then, I loosened my wrists. “I won’t be using Aura either.”

Ji-won tilted her head, taking a moment to formulate her response. “Your Excellency, are you angry?”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“Hm.”

A soft hum.

“That’s… troubling.”

“I trust you haven’t neglected your training by relying solely on Aura,” I said. “Come at me with everything you’ve got, Operations Team Leader Ji-won. If you don’t want to feel hellish pain.”

Before she could reply, I lunged at her again. Though my speed was noticeably slower without Aura, the same held true for her. With conditions now equal, Ji-won’s movements were just as sluggish.

I feinted an uppercut toward her abdomen—

Bam!

—before slamming my fist into her left shoulder instead.

“Urgh.”

A short groan.

The fact that it was brief was almost miraculous. I had clearly felt her bone fracture slightly beneath my knuckles.

Ji-won staggered back a step and threw a punch of her own. I dodged it with a simple tilt of my head.

“How did—? Your punching strength, it’s—”

“If you don’t come at me with full force, this will end quickly, Team Leader.”

My warning barely finished when she retrieved something from her pocket—a hatchet. Ji-won gripped the hatchet in one hand and hurled it, while her other hand swung another hatchet directly at me.

Clang!

I caught the flying hatchet’s handle mid-air, countering her strike. Ji-won’s typically stoic eyes widened for once.

“Incredible.”

“You’re using real weapons in a spar? Still no trace of sportsmanship, I see.”

“How did you…? Without Aura to enhance your reflexes, how could you possibly catch a flying hatchet…?”

“Your legs are open.”

I pressed the hatchet down, disrupting her posture, and swung my leg like a whip to strike her shin.

Crack!

This time, the bone broke definitively. Ji-won bit her lip, releasing a muffled groan of pain.

“You need to work on your lower body strength, Team Leader.”

“Ugh, huff, urgh…!”

Even in such a state, she reached for another hidden weapon and pulled out a device resembling an electronic cigarette. She exhaled sharply into it, causing a sharp spike to come shooting out, piercing my forearm.

“Tch.”

Caught off guard by the unconventional weapon, I failed to evade in time. Had I not moved, it would’ve embedded itself in my throat.

“That’s not from the Tang Sect.[1] What is this?”

“I can’t exactly carry firearms openly. This is my secret weapon.”

“Secret, huh? Did you get Do-hwa to make it? She has a curious knack for crafting things like this.” I pulled the spike out, blood trickling down my arm as I toyed with it, twisting it between my fingers. “Let’s hope she didn’t coat it with some obscure poison I’m unfamiliar with.”

No response.

“Just so you know, I achieved near-complete poison immunity roughly 800 years ago.”

“Monster.”

Ji-won spat and wiped the corner of her mouth. Her fractured arm and leg must have been agonizing, yet her voice carried an odd excitement—a joy almost akin to glee.

“You truly are a human toi— weapon, Your Excellency.”

“Your pronunciation just slurred enough for that to sound like ‘human toilet.’ Am I mistaken?”

“Baseless slander, Your Excellency. Your hearing must be going in your old age.”

At that moment, Ji-won pressed her palm onto a specific section of the tiled floor. The ceiling above me collapsed, sending debris crashing down. I jerked in surprise at the sight.

“Apologies, but this is my domain.”

I dodged the falling rubble by a hair’s breadth, but Ji-won used the distraction to gain distance.

Click. Click. Click.

She began pulling various levers and triggers embedded into the walls and floors, retreating as she went.

Her broken leg caused her movements to look almost spider-like—distorted, yet eerily effective.

“If we are to continue forgoing the use of Aura, Your Excellency, the odds naturally shift in my favor.”

“Running away when challenged to a fight?!”

“This is my full strength, after all.”

The underwater tunnel began shifting with a rumble. A series of

traps sprang to life: volleys of arrows shot from the walls, sections of the floor crumbled away, and partitions descended, releasing clouds of strange, opaque gas.

‘Knowing her, she probably released the prisoners only to lure them into these traps, giving them false hope before crushing them.’

Classic Ji-won, with her twisted hobbies.

Just as I evaded one set of traps, a burst of flames came fwooshing out, erupting from the wall. I rolled to avoid it, but not before my forearm got singed. The seared skin smoldered painfully.

“Argh! You think these petty tricks will stop me, Ji-won?!”

“I have no such confidence. But you ordered me to put up a fight, didn’t you? Unless you rescind that command, I’ll continue obeying.”

“Like hell I’d take that back!”

“As expected.”

As the gas cleared, Ji-won reappeared, now supported by a crutch. The absurdity left me speechless. Where had she even gotten a crutch in this place?

‘She probably broke the prisoners’ limbs and handed out crutches afterward, didn’t she? Typical Ji-won.’

“My apologies for resorting to such measures.”

Her meticulous preparation didn’t stop there.

By now, she had donned a gas mask—a must-have accessory for any apocalypse enthusiast. Her breathing echoed ominously, like a budget Darth Vader.

“Since you refuse to succumb to my traps, I have no choice. To meet Your Excellency’s expectations, I will now deploy my final measure.”

“Final measure?”

“As you deduced, my hidden weapons were indeed laced with poison. While a normal person would succumb to paralysis in 40 seconds, Your Excellency appears unaffected. Thus, I’ll escalate.”

Ji-won tapped her crutch against the floor, activating another mechanism with a double tap then a press of its length. Vents in the ceiling began to hiss, releasing a peculiar mixture of brown and pink gas.

“What’s this now?”

“A cocktail of stimulants, narcotics, and aphrodisiacs. Though calling it that is a disservice,” she remarked, her filtered voice carried a chilling calm. “This substance, developed with assistance from Uehara Shino, unveils the deepest desires and rawest instincts of the human psyche.”

For a moment, I was speechless.

“Extensive trials on the prisoners proved it effective. The average subject loses rationality in 15 seconds and transforms into a mindless freak within a minute. Naturally, Your Excellency won’t succumb so easily.”

Her voice echoed from all directions, amplified by a hidden microphone system.

“I’ll see you in 20 minutes, Your Excellency. In the meantime, I’ll freshen up and return in cleaner attire.”

That damn woman.

Footnotes:

1 - Tang Sect in from martial art stories is famous for using unconventional hidden methods to win battles by any means possible, including poisons.

Chapter 288

The Hypocrite VII

Sinnoa

Ji-won lied as naturally as a bodybuilder gulping down high-quality carbohydrates whole-grain pasta made from 100% durum wheat—akin to eating brown rice—during a bulking phase. Despite promising to return in “20 minutes,” after leaving behind a pink gas thick enough to suffocate an elephant, she reappeared only after 40 minutes.

“Reporting my return.”

The *click-clack* of polished shoe soles echoed briskly as Ji-won entered the tunnel.

“Can you hear me, Your Excellency? Hmm... I see your entire body is trembling,” Ji-won muttered to herself. “If you had circulated your Aura even once, you wouldn’t have suffered any adverse effects. As expected of Your Excellency, the Undertaker. You possess a will that far surpasses the patience of any ordinary human.”

One step.

“I acknowledge that I returned later than the previously promised time. I ask for your understanding. This, too, was part of your command to resist with all my strength... Twenty minutes. It is the time frame given to those tasked to endure this hell before it can end. The despair that strikes when such hope is severed without warning... That is when a person’s mental fortitude truly begins to crumble.”

Ji-won took another step, drawing nearer by the sound of it. Judging by the muffled quality of her voice, she was still wearing her gas mask. It made sense—the gas lingering in the area was potent enough to warrant caution. While its release had stopped five minutes prior, it had yet to be properly ventilated out.

“But don’t worry.” My vision dimmed slightly as Ji-won’s shadow fell over my closed eyelids. “I have no intention of subduing Your Excellency by force in your current state. What I’m planning now is psychological pressure. It’s not too late to release your anger and—”

My eyes flashed open and my arm shot out like lightning, gripping Ji-won’s wrist. I tugged, flipping her over, and she lost her balance and collapsed beneath me with a thud.

There was no escape now. It was time for some wrestling.

Ji-won stared up at my face, her pupils dilated with surprise as I pinned her down so she was unable to move.

“Incomprehensible. I used a drug newly concocted by Uehara Shino using her Awakener abilities. I confirmed that even a bear would become incapacitated within two minutes of administration—and yet… Oh, I see. You’ve been using your Aura all along, haven’t you?”

“Do you think I’d use it?”

My fingers trembled as I twisted her wrist.

Even now, it felt like my brain was being scorched, my nerves snapping like brittle twigs. My pulse hammered at 175 bpm. Each breath brought no relief—my lungs were filled with residual pink gas that clung to every breath, leaving an unshakable sensation of suffocation as the pink slime filling my body radiated an unbearable heat.

Indeed, Uehara Shino was an alchemist so brilliant in the early cycles that she made Sim Ah-ryeon seem insignificant by comparison.

Even so, I endured.

I gritted my teeth and exhaled harshly. “The only issue here is that you made the wrong request of Shino. A drug that reveals the depths of human desire and nature?”

I let out a ragged breath, yet even that wasn’t enough to calm the

turmoil in my chest. It felt like I needed to rip open my ribcage to expose my heart and lungs.

“It’s flawed—seriously flawed. If you had instead requested a drug that abnormally amplifies desires or suppresses rationality, you might’ve achieved better results… This is my true nature—my essence—Ji-won. Since at least the 42nd cycle, I have never lived against my true nature.”

Ji-won, who had been silently gazing up at me, finally spoke. “Indeed. It seems I made an uncharacteristic mistake.”

“That’s right. You should surrender—”

“Then I shall resist to the bitter end.” She whipped her body around, thrashing desperately to escape my hold.

“Hey! Now of all times?!”

“I am merely following orders.”

What followed was less a fight and more an outright brawl.

The operations team—the National Road Management Corps—was a force of elite Awakeners, tasked with suppressing conflicts across the Korean Peninsula. They were essentially the strongest among the strong. In every cycle, Ji-won retained her position as its team leader. Not only was she skilled in weapons like axes and swords, but she was also a formidable wrestler.

Crash! Bam!

Ji-won and I rolled across the floor of the underwater tunnel, grappling in a chaotic melee.

“Give up! Or else I’ll actually break your arm!”

“One’s already broken… If you don’t release me… I’ll drive a knife into your side…”

“You lunatic! How can you not scream when your broken arm is being twisted?!”

“I am… screaming…”

In the end, the deciding factor was raw strength and experience.

Despite Ji-won’s immense talent, her overreliance on Aura had left her lacking in physical training. I, on the other hand, had been relentlessly drilled in the hellish training regimen of Old Man Scho before I’d ever mastered Aura. Even after becoming an Aura master, I never neglected physical exercise or martial arts training.

There was no way I’d lose to some silver-haired prodigy psychopath wielding poisons brewed by the Tang Sect.

“That’s it! Hahaha! You’re completely immobilized now!”

“Urgh…”

“I’ve dislocated every joint in your limbs, shattered your wrists and ankles! Try resisting now if you can!”

With a sickening crunch, Ji-won tried to lift her head and bite my hand. Her spine bent with flexibility that even the ancestors of Joseon would have envied.

Startled, I pulled my hand back. “What are you, a dog?!”

“Hah…” Ji-won sighed in disappointment. Despite her shoulders, elbows, hips, knees, and Achilles tendons being utterly destroyed, she still attempted to resist. Yet her strength had finally been exhausted. “I… surrender.”

“Aaaaagh!”

“Hah. It seems my failure to account for Your Excellency’s mental fortitude was my gravest mistake…”

I slumped down next to the fallen Ji-won, sprawling out on the floor.

After enduring psychological pressure, brawling without Aura, and inhaling toxic gas for forty minutes straight, the subsequent fight had drained me completely. I was utterly spent.

The plain gray concrete ceiling of the tunnel loomed above us.

For a while, only the sound of our labored breathing echoed in the space. We were both drenched in sweat, covered in dust, and smeared with blood. My eyes stung, likely from lingering traces of gas.

Several minutes passed. Our breathing began to stabilize, and the erratic rise and fall of our chests slowed.

As my mind cleared, the pain became more pronounced. While I suffered lingering effects from the gas, Ji-won must have been in excruciating agony throughout her entire body.

“A pity.”

There was barely any trace of pain in Ji-won’s voice. She spoke as if we were having an ordinary conversation.

“I had hoped to persuade you, Your Excellency.”

“What part of the Misfortune Workshop could you possibly think would persuade me? That confidence of yours is the true mystery.”

“The potential to create a teleporter.”

All that answered that particular revelation was a faint stumble of breath.

“I know why you’re constantly wandering, never staying confined to the Korean Peninsula,” she continued. “To expand humanity’s survival zones. To establish stronghold cities capable of suppressing the Void’s influence and preventing future monster waves. These are valid reasons, but the primary one… is to find a teleporter.”

I turned my head. Our eyes met.

There, lying right by my side, was Ji-won gazing silently at me. “Am I wrong, Your Excellency?”

“That… is part of it.”

“At present, the odds of finding a teleporter are exceedingly low. However, there’s a chance that among those artificially Awakened by the Misfortune Workshop, a teleporter might emerge... Of course, even if a teleporter is found, saving Schopenhauer’s wife, Adele, remains a distant dream.”

Indeed.

Whether or not a teleporter existed, it would have been impossible to evacuate Seoul’s citizens within one minute after the regression began. Adele’s death was inevitable. And that was why Old Man Scho brewed me coffee with the ever-present resignation, to continue living, only to commit suicide again and again.

If I can live long enough to brew coffee for you after regressing, then that is the most I can do.

If even my death cannot be prevented, how could you possibly save my wife?

Doc, you’re far too slow.

He expressed all this through the steam rising from a cup of café au lait.

“Even so, I wanted to create a variable for you, Your Excellency.”

Though she had never met Emit Schopenhauer, she had deduced the truth behind my actions. Just as I had gradually understood the psychopathic tendencies and principles driving Yu Ji-won, she had dissected the structure of my existence as a regressor.

“The suffering inflicted on ordinary people in this cycle will disappear in the next. It will all be reset,” she argued. “If we can identify someone with the potential for teleportation, there will be no need to resort to such pain in subsequent cycles. More delicate methods can be employed. Don’t you agree, Your Excellency?”

I shook my head slightly. “No.”

“Why not?”

“The world doesn’t reset entirely, Ji-won. My memories and existence as a regressor always persist.”

“Are you saying your conscience suffers as a result?”

“It’s far worse than that. I would turn into an Anomaly.”

She went quiet.

“If I began justifying torment, torture, and betrayal by claiming they wouldn’t carry over to the next cycle… If I deliberately chose such actions… then I wouldn’t be the Undertaker anymore. I would be nothing but a mere Corrupted.”

A Corrupted.

A regressor.

“I refuse to let all the meaning in my life culminate in such a fate.”

“I see.” Ji-won rested part of the weight of her head against my outstretched hand. “You’ve been fighting not only the world but also a constant battle against yourself.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“I’m the same. I, too, constantly suppress my rising urges to kill.”

“No, this cycle seems like the one where you’ve given in completely…”

“Since we’re on the topic, let me ask: in all the cycles, have I ever killed the National Road Management Corps’s leader, Noh Do-hwa?”

I blinked. “Uh…”

“Not due to possession by an Anomaly or wartime necessity, but a deliberate act of murder. Have I ever committed such an evil deed?”

“No, you haven’t.”

“Hmm.” She nodded slightly. “Indeed, it’s just as I thought. I must commend my restraint.”

“You wanted... to kill Noh Do-hwa?”

“Of course. What self-respecting murderer wouldn’t want to target such a prime figure?”

I was utterly taken aback.

Just as I struggled to process that shocking confession, Ji-won dealt another blow.

“Dang Seo-rin, Cheon Yo-hwa, and even Lee Ha-yul all qualify as tantalizing prey. Oh Dok-seo and Sim Ah-ryeon? Not bad—like indulging in junk food. It’s unfortunate that the Saintess is dead. I would have loved to savor that experience.”

“You lunatic.”

“But the crown jewel, of course, is none other than Your Excellency.”

Ji-won smiled faintly.

“Please live long, Your Excellency.”

That smile shocked me more than all her prior revelations. I could only stare blankly.

“You are the sole reason I haven’t operated as a murderer, Your Excellency.”

Chapter 289

The Hypocrite VIII

Sinnoa

There is an epilogue.

“Ah, oh my! How did you end up with such injuries?! My goodness, not a single part of your body is unscathed!”

We quietly went to receive treatment from Ah-ryeon.

For the record, every joint in Ji-won’s body was broken and she couldn’t move on her own. I had to carry her all the way back to the hideout.

“Honestly! With injuries this severe, not even my abilities can heal them all at once. Here, does this hurt?”

“Guh.”

“Ah! Oh no, it does hurt, doesn’t it? I’m so sorry... Then what about here?”

“Grgh!”

“Oh dear, this hurts too... Poor thing. Oh no, our poor Operations Team Leader. What ever shall we do with you?”

Ah-ryeon was tough on the weak but subservient to the strong. She didn’t miss the chance to tease Ji-won, who had temporarily become one of the “weak.” Under the guise of treatment, she poked at wounds and pressed them firmly with her bare hands. It was so blatant that even I, lying on the adjacent bed, was left speechless.

Ji-won endured it for about five minutes before finally speaking out.

“Ah-ryeon...”

“Hm?”

“To confess the truth, I am a psychopath.”

“Huh?”

“I committed my first murder in middle school. It was my family—two people. After killing one, I framed the other and made it look like they had fled during the night, then I killed them in turn.”

No response.

“Looking at you now, Ah-ryeon, I’m reminded of my family. I must feel some instinctive kinship with you... If you’ll allow it, I’d like to treat you as my little sister from now on. Would you be willing to call me your elder sister?”

“Ah, n-no... I’m fine...”

“I see. That’s unfortunate.”

Ah-ryeon clamped her mouth shut and focused on the treatment.

When dawn next broke, an SG Net user called OldManGoryeo posted a thread titled “That Silver-Haired Jinx from the National Road Management Corps.” It probably had nothing to do with the earlier incident.

Ji-won and I met again once our bodies had fully healed.

“Your Excellency, I apologize for the trouble I’ve caused you thus far. I will take full responsibility for cleaning up the Misfortune Workshop, so please rest assured.”

“Just to check, how exactly do you plan to handle the cleanup?”

“Certainly. I intend to—”

She detailed various methods, ranging from memory erasure, brainwashing, evidence destruction, media manipulation, witness intimidation, confinement, and silencing, all through Cheon Yo-hwa. Naturally, she showed no sign of remorse.

“I see,” I said when she had gone through her list. “That’s very you.”

“Thank you. I will begin the follow-up immediately.”

“That wasn’t a compliment. Stay out of it.”

“Pardon?”

“Do-hwa and I will handle it. You just stay put.”

Ji-won tilted her head in confusion. “I don’t wish to trouble you further. May I ask how you intend to proceed?”

Like so.

Notice

From: Noh Do-hwa

It has been confirmed that Yu Ji-won, the operations team leader of the National Road Management Corps, has abducted 173 civilians across the Korean Peninsula, including Busan, over the past two years and seven months. Of the 173 civilians, 13 have died. The remaining 160 are reporting severe psychological trauma.

The National Road Management Corps immediately arrested Ji-won upon obtaining this information and confined her in the headquarters’ underground prison.

I, Noh Do-hwa, take full responsibility for this incident as the leader of the National Road Management Corps. As such, I am resigning from my position as Corps Leader and passing the role to Dang Seo-rin of the Samcheon Guild.

Additionally, the Undertaker, who recommended Yu Ji-won as team leader, will also be removed from his post and reassigned to the penal unit.

For the remaining 160 victims, secure housing with thorough protection will be provided in Busan, and dedicated Tutorial Fairies

will be assigned to help them recover from their trauma.

This concludes my statement.

SG Net exploded.

- Anonymous: ? Noh Do-hwa—the actual corps leader?

- Anonymous: But the corps leader doesn't use SG Net.

 ForbiddenBooksDepartment17: This is legit. Posters with the same announcement were plastered all over the National Road Management Corps headquarters this morning.

 Anonymous: ???

 [Baekhwa] NewspaperDepartment2: So does this mean the Great Witch is now officially the corps leader?

- [Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: lol I'm at the guild headquarters, and they're handing out corps uniforms here

- [Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: everyone including the witches are totally confused lol

 Anonymous: This guy went from guild member to corps slave. Why is he laughing?

 Anonymous: Because now he doesn't need to cosplay as a witch anymore... oops

 Anonymous: Ah.

- OldManGoryeo: These people are always boasting about protecting humanity, but their operations team leader was kidnapping civilians. Morons.

- 趙泳洙: "The people's will is the heavens' will. The corps must thoroughly investigate this matter and ensure justice is served."

- Anonymous: But if Noh Do-hwa steps down, doesn't that screw us

over? With the Constellations already failing, can the corps even hold up?

The public was in uproar.

“Why?”

Even Ji-won seemed startled.

“Your Excellency, why make such a reckless move?”

“Reckless?”

“Yes. I specifically targeted civilians with no close ties. No one would miss them. A little effort, and we could have easily erased this incident from existence.”

I silently looked at Ji-won. She paused.

“Ah. So it’s the same logic as before—when you said you refused to become Corrupted. Even if the events are erased, they’ll remain in your memory as the Undertaker.”

“Exactly.”

“But it’s still a foolish choice. With the Saintess gone and now Noh Do-hwa stepping down, the system will collapse.”

It didn’t.

The National Road Management Corps experienced some turmoil, but Do-hwa had often joked about quitting her "crappy job" any day. Many within the corps had mentally prepared for such a scenario. Plus, I had already made contingency plans, ensuring Seo-rin would immediately inherit power if Do-hwa died or resigned. The overlapping locations of the Samcheon Guild’s stronghold and the National Road Management Corps headquarters in Busan were deliberate—precisely for moments like these.

“Thanks, Undertaker. Without the manual you gave me, I would’ve died of overwork,” said Seo-rin as she pointed to a black, untitled

notebook. It contained 600 meticulously detailed pieces of advice for her.

“I’m glad it helped even a little.”

“I never expected you to anticipate this outcome. Reading the notes, it feels like I wrote them myself. It’s almost unsettling how well you know me.”

I chuckled dryly.

The notebook compiled insights accumulated over countless cycles, with its core guidance inspired by the 173rd cycle, when Seo-rin had created a dystopian utopia in Busan after falling into Corruption.

“By the way, I’ve been considering replacing the corps uniforms with witch robes. What do you think, Undertaker?”

Fortunately, we managed to preserve some dignity for the corps members.

Ji-won and I were assigned to the penal unit. Ha-yul and Dok-seo also joined, under the pretext of disguising their crimes. The existing prisoners scowled at the new arrivals.

“Huh? Who’s this brat?”

“…”

“Oh? Glaring at me, huh? You think I’ll go easy on you because you’re a kid? Huh? Oh? Owwww!”

The existing prisoners quickly fell in line after encountering Ha-yul.

In hindsight, Ha-yul and Ji-won had similar backgrounds—both had first spilled the blood of family members. When left unchecked, Ha-yul would go on to massacre her father and even members of the Second Provisional Government.

When it came to their designation as serial killers, Ha-yul’s potential rivaled Ji-won’s.

“Ah, this is heaven...”

Do-hwa retired and opened a personal rehabilitation center and forge. Occasionally, she visited the underground prison to mock me. Her well-rested appearance practically glowed.

“If I’d known it’d be this easy, I’d have quit ages ago and dumped the job on the Samcheon guild leader.”

“This arrangement won’t last long. The system will likely collapse within seven years.”

“Not my problem.”

I didn’t grace that with a response.

“By the way, tell Ji-won thanks. And if possible, I hope she pulls a similar stunt next cycle. Who’d have guessed my retirement would be all thanks to her?”

Although the Saintess’s death and Do-hwa’s resignation didn’t destabilize the system entirely, they accelerated its decline. Where it might have lasted a few more years, its collapse now loomed closer.

My world travel plans also fell through, as I spent every day responding to crises as the ace of the penal unit, though that also meant we managed to mitigate the damage.

I wanted Ji-won to see it—a battlefield littered with defeated Anomalies and shattered caravans, where our swift intervention minimized casualties.

After the battle, Ji-won stood silently, gazing at the world.

I patted her shoulder. “What do you think? It’s bearable, isn’t it?”

Ji-won looked back at the unit.

The setting sun bathed the carnage in an orange glow. Yesterday’s battle had been grueling, leaving Dok-seo whining and Ha-yul methodically retrieving puppet strings. It was a twisted but

undeniable routine.

“Yes,” Ji-won acknowledged with a nod. “It’s exhausting and overwhelming, but the world won’t end tomorrow.”

“You’re not alone, Ji-won.” When she didn’t reply, I continued. “No one is. For every step you take, others are supporting you. And no matter what you’ve done, I at least am ready to share the responsibility with you.”

“Responsibility.”

“Yes, responsibility.”

Again, she went quiet.

“Can you keep your promises? Can you bear the consequences? For me, that’s the measure of humanity. And Ji-won, you’re as human as anyone else.”

Ji-won stayed silent. The silver-haired girl, who had learned to kill before she could connect with others, flexed and curled her fingers repeatedly.

Without thinking, I reached out and held her hovering hand.

“Promise me one thing.”

“What kind of promise?”

“I won’t ask you to stop killing.” I smiled, then said, “But if you do, tell me first. Convince me. If you can, I’ll help you kill them.”

“There’s no way I could convince you.” A faint breeze of laughter touched her lips. “But fine. I promise.”

“Even binding the next cycle’s version of you?”

“Hm. I suppose that depends on her opinion, but she’ll likely agree.”

Then, Ji-won gently squeezed my hand.

“I was born without a heart… For every beat my heart doesn’t make, let yours beat in its place. For every good deed I fail to do, let yours make up for it.”

She lowered her head.

“I will simply follow in your footsteps.”

Softly, she placed a light kiss on my middle finger. The setting sun slid gently between us.

“Let this hypocrite strive for goodness, Your Excellency.”

I thought that was the sound of human Ji-won’s heart.

Chapter 290

The Exile I

Sinnoa

The following chapter includes depictions of torture and violence that some may find upsetting. Reader discretion is advised.

I strive to be as honest as possible with all of you. Naturally, I have no intention of glossing over Yu Ji-won's crimes or the responsibilities I myself carry.

Let me warn you in advance: the tone of this story is dark and twisted. Even so, the events that have already occurred cannot simply be dismissed as mere blemishes.

The disgrace of the National Road Management Corps, and the atonement for Yu Ji-won's abductions and murders during the 703rd regression.

Let us delve a little deeper into the prisoner squad.

As I mentioned previously, news of the National Road Management Corps's Operations Team Leader abducting innocent civilians shook the nation. The public reaction was—

"Wow, what a goddamn bitch."

"What's Dang Seo-rin doing, not using this criminal for a public dismemberment show in the square?"

"But did Noh Do-hwa, the Corps's commander, really need to step down too?"

"Who knows? Anyway, how about some beer today? Let's splurge a bit."

“You must be making a lot these days.”

“I went hunting in the Void last time, and the clothes in a dilapidated department store were completely intact. I got lucky.”

—surprisingly underwhelming.

The decisive factor must have been that Ji-won meticulously targeted individuals with no connections.

In the age of the apocalypse, there was no need to ask if Anomalies ever tired of tormenting humans. People had long since learned to operate under the assumption that human torment remained endlessly entertaining, making every moment feel new and exciting.

Mortals had grown desensitized to death itself. They had suffered too much loss to react otherwise. What mattered more was whether their territory had been encroached upon or their interests harmed.

If their family, friends, or colleagues had been tortured? Civilians and Awakeners alike would have taken action, of course. In this era, civilized disobedients were a nonexistent demographic.

However, Ji-won exclusively hunted individuals without ties.

The total number of abductees was 173. Of those, 13 died. And yet, there were shockingly few people enraged on behalf of these victims—only a handful, really. Even Do-hwa’s resignation as the Corps commander was met with pushback by the majority, who argued that she didn’t need to go to such extremes.

Ji-won’s thoroughness was, as always, thoroughly impressive. Not only did she give her all for her success, but she also accounted for failure and took precautions. People of her sort are inherently formidable.

“I will never forgive her.”

Nevertheless, achieving a perfect crime was impossible, even for the ever-thorough Yu Ji-won.

It was an inevitable conclusion. Even if the nearly entire world

ignored the victims of the Misfortune Workshop, there were at least 160 exceptions who all shared one important trait: surviving the same season of hell together.

In other words, they had lived to tell their tale.

“No matter what happens, Yu Ji-won, I will never forgive you—not even in death. Never.”

Among the 160 survivors, some were simply glad to have lived and wished never to be involved with the psychopath Yu Ji-won again. Others could not escape their trauma and either died by suicide or disappeared into the Void, never to be seen again. Others still settled into the luxurious residential area in Busan provided by the National Road Management Corps and tried to piece their lives back together, finding stable jobs when they were once again able.

And some did none of those things.

“You should feel hell too.”

She did not run away from Yu Ji-won.

She did not let her trauma destroy her.

Nor did she try to rebuild her life.

She simply raged and hated.

Kim Ji-soo. A name that, when broken down into its defining Chinese characters, means “a pond gathered in a swamp.”

Among the 160 survivors, she was particularly memorable.

Today, let us discuss this girl.

The following content is based on testimony provided by Yu Ji-won following her arrest by the National Road Management Corps and her subsequent cooperation with the investigation. Hence, some parts of the story may be inaccurate.

The interrogation was attended by Commander Noh Do-hwa, myself, and others.

The individual facing Yu Ji-won was the deputy leader of the Final Judgement Division of the Corps—a veteran investigator with the Lie Detector ability. This ability, however, came with the critical limitation of being usable only once a year. Luckily, it was fully charged for this particular interrogation.

Q: State your name and title.

“Yu Ji-won. Former Operations Team Leader of the National Road Management Corps. Officially second in rank within the Corps. Secretary to the Awakener known as the Undertaker.”

The investigator nodded. Truth.

Beside him, a scribe from the Forbidden Books Department recorded the proceedings with a quill suspended in midair.

The interrogation unfolded in a dimly lit basement. After a brief warm-up of basic questions and answers, the investigator began probing for the details of the crimes.

Q: When you first began, did you have a specific objective for torturing your victims?

“Torture is a challenging task.”

Yu Ji-won rested her chin on her hand, the chains on her wrists clinking with the movement.

“I’m not sure if you’ll believe me, but I’m an amateur when it comes to torture. My specialty is murder and disposal, not the deliberate infliction of prolonged pain. I never trained specifically for such methods.”

Q: Please continue.

“One option was to practice torture techniques myself through human experimentation, but I was more interested in artificially cultivating Awakeners. So I approached the matter practically.”

Q: Practically?

“Creating an Awakener with the ability of Torture.”

That was Yu Ji-won’s first goal.

“I wanted torture to manifest as ‘sustainable pain.’ Additionally, I wanted no physical evidence of the torture to remain.”

Q: What do you mean?

“For example, inflicting the pain of having an arm shredded by a saw, but leaving the arm intact.”

(Murmurs among the officers in the back)

(Noh Do-hwa silencing the noise with a gesture)

Q: Let me confirm: you aimed to create an Awakener who could deliver pain without physically harming the body. Is that correct?

“Exactly.”

Q: Did you succeed in creating such an individual?

“It was not an easy challenge.”

But Yu Ji-won succeeded.

More accurately, she failed until she succeeded.

“Think about it, Investigator. To make someone feel the pain of being burned alive, you have to experience it yourself. The agony of bones being ground, limbs being severed, the chest being ripped open to expose a beating heart...”

Q: Did you experiment with all these forms of torture?

“Yes. But that was just the first condition. The second was even more difficult.”

Q: The second condition?

“The victim must maintain relentless hatred toward me. They must be filled with the determination to inflict as much suffering on me as they endured.”

Yu Ji-won exhaled a sigh, remaining expressionless.

“I realized that humans rarely keep their hatred fed. Most break under pain. They beg and grovel, pleading for mercy, offering to live as slaves just to end the torment. People these days are weak-willed.”

Q: …

Truth.

“For someone to Awaken with Torture—more specifically, Phantom Torture—they would have to endure all of this while harboring unyielding resentment and anger. During the early days of running the Misfortune Workshop, I failed to meet these criteria and killed 11 subjects.”

Q: You succeeded on the 12th?

“Correct.”

Q: Who was this individual?

“Kim Ji-soo.”

(Commander Noh Do-hwa whispers to an officer to verify this information)

(The investigator composes himself and resumes)

Q: We found no visible injuries among the survivors. How did you conceal the evidence of your own self-inflicted torture?

“Ah. I traveled to Japan, sustained severe burns and injuries, and sought treatment from Uehara Shino for healing potions.”

Truth.

(More murmurs)

“After that, I regularly visited Uehara Shino once every six months, mimicking injuries to request more potions. She ended up providing me with large quantities of the medicine.”

(Regarding this, I personally secure testimony from Uehara Shino, a member of the Magical Girl Association)

(Uehara Shino says to me, “She told me she didn’t want to worry you, so she came to me instead of someone like Sim Ah-ryeon.”)

“Though Uehara Shino’s potions are neither as absolute nor efficient as Sim Ah-ryeon’s healing powers, they worked well enough. This allowed me to minimize fatalities during my experiments. Kim Ji-soo, too, appeared outwardly unharmed thanks to the excessive use of these potions.”

Q: What happened to Kim Ji-soo after she Awakened with Phantom Torture?

“Naturally, I made her my assistant.”

Q: Assistant?

“For example, if I ordered her to flay the skin off Prisoner 110 with a razor, Kim Ji-soo would transmit the pain of having one’s skin flayed rather than actually performing the act itself.”

Q: So you were the one issuing orders, and Kim Ji-soo carried them out?

“Hmm. That’s one way of looking at it.”

Q: According to your earlier testimony, Kim Ji-soo harbored immense hatred toward you. How did you make her obey your commands?

“Through various means. For instance, if Kim Ji-soo refused to comply, I would personally execute the prisoners.”

Q: Excuse me?

“In other words, I’d threaten her by saying, ‘Because you didn’t obey, I have no choice but to conduct actual torture instead of imaginary torture.’”

Q: I see.

“As I mentioned before, humans are generally weak-willed by nature. Prisoners whose limbs I actually severed couldn’t help but wail and plead with Kim Ji-soo, begging her to apply Phantom Torture on them instead.”

Q: …

Truth.

“From the prisoners’ perspective, the only solace they had was that their real bodies remained intact. But when even that was stripped away, what else was left for them to cling to?”

(The investigator glances at Commander Noh Do-hwa, who signals for the interrogation to continue)

“That’s how the twelfth fatality occurred. It was the first death after Kim Ji-soo Awakened.”

Q: How did Kim Ji-soo react?

“Surprisingly, she continued to defy me. Her mental state had demonstrably deteriorated, of course. She suffered a breakdown and even used her powers against me.”

Q: She attacked you?

“Yes, but her resistance was futile. She inflicted all the pain she had experienced onto me, yet by then, I had already become desensitized to most forms of agony.”

Truth.

Yu Ji-won’s confrontation with me at the Misfortune Workshop revealed the same. Even with her limbs broken, her fighting spirit never wavered.

There lay the secret behind her endurance.

“While I wasn’t immune to Kim Ji-soo’s Phantom Torture, the impact wasn’t significant. After all, her ability didn’t cause real injuries, and her wrists and arms were bound. Essentially… it was just a tantrum. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Truth.

Q: …

“I decided to turn her rebellion into an opportunity. Each time she used Phantom Torture on me, I documented the pain and incorporated it into the next prisoner’s torture session.”

Truth.

Q: I see.

“For instance, if she inflicted the pain of having all nails ripped out on me—which, incidentally, did happen—I would ensure the next prisoner experienced the same during their session.”

Truth.

Q: …

“Naturally, Kim Ji-soo would scream in shock, demanding to know why I added unplanned torture methods. I always had a response prepared.”

Because you defied me, I’m simply passing on the pain to someone else.

“She grew increasingly agitated, yet her resolve visibly weakened.”

Continue defying me if you wish. Just know that others will suffer more as a result.

“Eventually, Kim Ji-soo lowered her metaphorical claws. After the thirteenth death, she broke down and begged me through her tears.”

I'll do it. I'll follow your orders.

Please.

Yu Ji-won. Mistress. Please.

"From that day onward, I gained the perfect assistant for the Misfortune Workshop."

(Chaos erupts among the former members of Yu Ji-won's operations team present at the interrogation)

(At this point, the deputy leader of the Final Judgement Division reports extreme stress and requests a recess in the investigation)

(Commander Noh Do-hwa grants the request)

(End of Day 1 of the investigation)

Chapter 291

The Exile II

Sinnoa

Kim Ji-soo's name existed only as a sound. She did not know the meaning of the Chinese characters associated with her name, and the person who could have told her had already died, disappearing from her life a long time ago. Or perhaps recently.

"What a common name," Yu Ji-won remarked knowingly. "As Confucius said, all things must begin with their names. The same goes for Awakeners. I will give you a name."

池 or Ji for "pond." 藪 or soo for "swamp."

"You are a swamp gathered like a pond in the most secluded corners of the world... You don't understand? That's fine. You will understand in due time."

Ji-won assigned hanja to the names of every person she kidnapped —a term she sometimes replaced with "adopted." She did not create new names entirely but rather retained the pronunciation of their original names, simply altering their meanings.

Hence, she was not a mother but a "godmother." Not a figure of blessing or guidance but someone who forcibly took the place of a mother. That was the role Ji-won imposed upon herself.

Before dozens of her "adoptees," Ji-won gave a calm speech.

"The world is overflowing with Anomalies. These Anomalies are enemies of humanity itself, mocking and degrading it."

Ji-soo knew this.

"You have left the task of fighting these Anomalies to others simply because you did not Awaken. This is strange. Anomalies do not discriminate between the ordinary and the Awakened when they

kill. You, too, are direct participants in this war for survival."

This, too, she understood.

"You are lazy. Irresponsible. You believe Awakening is a divine blessing and have fled from the battlefield, forfeiting even the opportunity to channel your anger and hatred. Therefore—I will help you."

This was harder to understand.

"I ask only one thing of you."

Ji-won's expressionless eyes swept over her adoptees. According to one of them (whose face Ji-soo no longer remembered), the brush of her gaze felt like a blade slicing through a person's entire being.

Ji-soo testified that she felt Ji-won's gaze linger for a particularly long moment on her.

"Face your wounds."

Difficult words followed.

"Do not look away. Do not flee. Unlike me, you have powerful emotions. Those emotions are your weapons. Look directly at yourself, at the reasons for your pain, your suffering, your desires."

The godmother spoke.

"Discipline yourselves."

Discipline: To overcome oneself.

Discipline: To loathe oneself to the extreme.

"Only then will you Awaken."

And so, hell began.

The details of that hell have already been described in Ji-won's testimony.

Ji-soo broke. Many times.

“Ji-soo, you have talent.”

A talent she would have been better off without.

“The treatment of Awakeners and the treatment of ordinary people are worlds apart. Like it or not, this era is led by Awakeners. Rejoice, Ji-soo. You have finally reached a position where you can decide your own fate.”

Lies. If that were true, why did this hell never end?

“Hmph,” Ji-won scoffed with a tilt to her head. “How selfish. I’m disappointed. You Awakened before anyone else. Now it is your turn to guide your peers, is it not?”

...

“Someone I admire deeply and to whom I am loyal once said, ‘You cannot truly be human unless you learn to take responsibility.’ If so, then the person who takes the most responsibility must be the most human. Ji-soo, Awakening is not the end. Become human.”

Nothing made sense anymore.

In Ji-soo’s mind, righteousness and evil intertwined. Her brain burned like molten lava, but the oppressive weight of the ceiling above prevented the magma from erupting.

It simply pooled. And kept pooling.

Each attempt to release it resulted in even harsher consequences.

The godmother was a terrifying figure.

“Excellent, Ji-soo.”

The most defeating part was that everything unfolded just as Ji-won had claimed.

The unconnected individuals, destined to die namelessly in the Void

as ordinary people, truly became Awakeners.

When she obeyed her godmother's orders as an "assistant," her peers also began Awakening one by one.

Ji-won was right.

The godmother was never wrong.

Pain was the essence, and suffering was a blessing. But if that was true, then wasn't a world that affirmed such suffering fundamentally wrong?

"You will undoubtedly become a far more human human than I ever could."

A swamp pooled in the world's most secluded corner.

Only then did Ji-soo realize that the water at the swamp's deepest point burned like molten lava.

When the investigation concluded, Ji-won was given her final sentence: lifetime membership in the prisoner squad.

"So, basically, they want you to fight and die."

"Hmph. I'm confident I won't die, at least."

The squad she joined was named the 703 Punishment Unit.

I, the Undertaker, had personally chosen the name. It wasn't for any grand reason—it simply referenced the events of the 703rd cycle.

"Fine. It's not like your crimes can be atoned for by quietly dying. I'll make sure you never die."

"It's an honor of a lifetime, Your Excellency."

"At least *pretend* to feel sorry."

"My apologies, but I resolved long ago to always be sincere in heart when before Your Excellency."

Naturally, I also joined the 703 Unit. After all, I was the one who had decided to take in a serial killer as a comrade. It wasn't just Ji-won either. Even Ha-yul, who had murdered her own father, was accepted.

I could never separate myself from the actions of my comrades, nor did I wish to.

"I mean, isn't hunting Anomalies your daily routine anyway? Whether it's the prisoner squad or the punishment squad, it's all the same work, right?"

Do-hwa's exasperated comment was not entirely wrong. For a regressor, death was never the ultimate punishment. Taking responsibility through life was the only option.

Ha-yul immediately joined the 703 Unit. Given her infamous patricide, no one could argue against her inclusion.

Approved.

"Me too, mister!"

"No, Dok-seo, you don't even have a crime to your name."

"Mmm... Habitual negligence causing suffering to readers?"

"If you know that, write your damn novel!"

"Ugh, I was trying to join to help you, and this is how you treat me?! Fine! If you don't let me in, I'll start stabbing random people!"

When Dok-seo threatened to commit actual crimes, we had no choice but to accept her into the 703 Punishment Unit. Also, before retiring, Do-hwa falsified documents to assign Dok-seo a plethora of heinous charges.

Approved.

"Can you believe Dok-seo was actually a middle manager abducting civilians under Ji-won's orders? Shocking. Disappointing."

“I didn’t ask for such detailed charges, dammit… Fine.”

That day, readers on SG Net received an unprecedented announcement:

[Due to the author’s involvement in serious crimes, the series will be indefinitely suspended.]

Readers wailed.

And so, Ji-won, myself, Ha-yul, Dok-seo—as well as a handful of other serious offenders whose numbers fluctuated because of frequent deaths—formed the 703 Punishment Unit. We were deployed only to the harshest, most dangerous frontlines. Without me, survival would have been impossible.

We could not stay in Busan, nor could we enter Sejong or Pyongyang. As prisoners, we camped in temporary barracks near battlefields, constantly moving from one war zone to another.

Sometimes, Yo-hwa or Seo-rin would secretly visit, the latter of whom one day brought someone to introduce herself along with her.

“Undertaker, we have a new recruit.”

“Hmm? We haven’t lost anyone recently, so no need for replacements.”

“No, it’s not a replacement. It’s an actual recruit. They committed a serious crime and specifically requested to join this unit.”

The circumstances of it all left me somewhat out of touch with the 160 survivors of the Misfortune Workshop.

“This is Ji-soo… You two aren’t strangers, right? I’d love to chat longer, but I’m swamped with work. Next time, let’s meet closer to Busan.”

“Sure… Take care.”

“You too.”

After Seo-rin left, an unsettling silence settled over the open space of the barracks.

Ji-soo looked at me. Malnourished and shrunken from extreme stress, her small frame seemed fragile. Jet-black hair. Eyes a faint, hazy shade of dark green.

“Hello. My name is Ji-soo.”

The moment she spoke, a chill ran down my spine. Her tone, pitch, and inflection—everything echoed Ji-won. The only outward difference was her more expressive face. Yet beyond her dark green eyes, rage seethed like molten lava. Her neutral voice and emotional expressions clashed unnervingly.

“When you rescued us from the workshop last time, we met. Do you remember?”

“I remember... Of course.”

“Thank you so much for that. I want to express my gratitude again, Undertaker.”

She bowed deeply then, her posture impeccable. Just like Ji-won.

“The investigator kept us updated about how we were rescued from the workshop.”

“I see...”

“Even though you recommended her, you still revealed her crimes and took responsibility yourself. I think that’s amazing... I truly respect you. I don’t have a father, but may I call you my godfather?”

Ji-soo smiled awkwardly.

Frankly, it was hard to listen to, and not just because of my guilt. Her voice carried something else—something more sinister. Between words, between sentences, between paragraphs, it felt like molten wax dripping down, solidifying into the form of “hate”.

Yes. The girl in front of me was merely imitating human speech. Every sentence was fundamentally just an echo of emotion.

“A new life...”

“Pardon?”

“Didn’t you receive a new life? The National Road Management Corps took special care of you—housing, even a job.”

“Ah, yes.” Ji-soo gave me another awkward smile as she scratched her cheek. “The investigator really went above and beyond. But there was no proper way for me to meet Godmother Ji-won.”

Justly so. There was no way the perpetrator would be allowed to approach the victim. The 703 Unit existed specifically to prevent such contact.

“So, I killed them.”

“What?”

“I killed about seven people. Only then did they arrest me.”

I didn’t respond to that.

“I’m sorry to the victims, but I really needed to see Godmother. I couldn’t think of another way.”

At that moment, Ji-won emerged from the barracks, pulling back the tent flap.

“Your Excellency, the rice is ready. But we’re running low on supplies... Oh?” Then, her gaze shifted to the newcomer. “Ji-soo?”

Ji-won’s tone was casual, as if greeting an old friend.

“It really is you, Ji-soo. What brings you here?”

“Hello, Godmother. I’ve joined the 703 Punishment Unit.”

“Is that so? Hmm, Do-hwa was always thorough. She wouldn’t have approved your transfer easily.” Ji-won tilted her head, holding the

rice pot. “How many did you kill?”

“Seven.”

“I see,” she said. Her tone sounded almost regretful. “You could have chosen a more efficient method. Anger is like a blade. when swung recklessly, it becomes mere venting, not skillful precision. I’ve always emphasized the importance of self-discipline.”

No answer.

“It’s good that you hate the world. But ordinary people have no connection to your suffering. Ji-soo, you knew this, but you succumbed to your emotions. Please, discipline yourself.”

Ji-soo’s eyes narrowed. “You haven’t changed at all, Godmother.”

“Hmm? Of course not.”

“Thank you.”

Ji-won tilted her head again. “My principles come entirely from within me. I see no reason to be thanked.”

“Because I was worried. What if, by some slim chance, you had changed? It would have been troubling. I’m glad my worries were unfounded.”

Ji-won’s shoulders flinched just slightly. “Hmm.”

Still holding the rice pot in one hand, she touched her neck. Then she looked at me.

“Your Excellency, my neck was just slashed... More precisely, I felt the sensation of my neck being slashed. Ah, and my wrist was severed as well. I almost dropped the rice pot.”

That was the day our unit gained a new member.

Chapter 292

The Exile III

Sinnoa

A new serial killer had joined the criminal squad under the command of the psychopath.

Even for a regressor like me, this was not an easy situation. After all, this rampage by Ji-won was something that had occurred for the first time here in the 703rd cycle. Who could have predicted something like this?

[Oppa, are you tired?]

Thankfully, the cute and cheeky kiddo Ha-yul was in our unit. That was a small consolation.

Ha-yul clung to my back like a snail, kneading my shoulders with her small hands. It wasn't much of a massage, but the action itself brought a sense of warmth to my heart.

"I am. On top of stomping out Anomalies, now there's this weighing on my mind. I'm at a loss as to what to do with Ji-soo."

[Let me know if it gets too much to handle,] Ha-yul whispered softly. [If needed, I can silence them without a trace.]

Correction.

While Ha-yul was my emotional sanctuary, she was like a roller coaster in an amusement park—unpredictable and wild. Her thought process was far from normal.

Meanwhile, Dok-seo was sprawled out on the other side of the barracks, groaning, "Haaah... So tired... It's so damn exhausting..."

Her life mantra seemed to revolve around three phrases: I'm tired, I'm exhausted, and I'm dying. She was about as helpful to the

team's morale as LDL cholesterol is to heart health. Omega-3 supplements were urgently needed.[1]

'Wait a second... Am I the only sane one here?'

Saintess, I miss you more than ever today.

Still, I set aside my mental exhaustion. I didn't want to block Ji-soo's transfer to our unit. No matter what anyone said, she was a victim whose life had been ruined by Ji-won's psychopathic antics. If she sought revenge, it was only right to support her wishes.

The next day, I called Ji-soo aside for a one-on-one conversation.

"Ji-soo, now that you're part of our unit, I hope you'll answer honestly. What brought you here?"

She didn't respond.

"You killed seven people, but that's a burden you'll have to bear. It's your problem to resolve moving forward."

I placed a coffee cup in front of Ji-soo. Unsure of her preferences, I made a warm café au lait, the most luxurious item available in our unit.

"As for me, I aim to take responsibility for what Ji-won did at the Misfortune Workshop. If you desire revenge, I'll cooperate to the best of my ability."

Ji-soo tilted her head. "Even if I were to ask you to die right now?"

"Yes."

For a long moment, her dark green eyes stared intently at my face. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Since her transfer to the unit, her gaze had always been fiery, but this was the first time it softened, even slightly. There was a subtle change in her tone as well.

"I don't intend to hold you accountable, Undertaker. If I started

blaming you or the former leader for letting Ji-won run free, I'd eventually have to blame society and the entire world."

"Hmm."

"I'm not that immature."

Ji-soo lifted the coffee cup and took a sip. For a fleeting moment, her eyebrows raised. I didn't need Mind-Reading to guess. The silent impression of *delicious* was almost audible.

She blinked rapidly, her expression shifting. "My goal is Ji-won, the only one directly responsible. No one else."

"Do you want her dead?"

"No. Death is too swift. It's not a punishment I can decide alone." Through the steam rising from the coffee, her eyes gleamed ominously. "I want her to suffer."

I paused. "You must realize, having experienced it yourself, that Ji-won is a self-contained individual. Inflicting true pain upon her may be impossible."

"Perhaps," Ji-soo acknowledged. A faint smile tugged at her lips. "That's why I'm going to experiment."

Experiment.

"Undertaker, I have a request. Can you order Ji-won to obey me without resistance? If you do, I'll promise not to harbor any resentment toward you as a victim of the Misfortune Workshop."

It was a request I couldn't refuse.

Ji-soo adapted reasonably well to the 703 Unit. She didn't particularly mingle with Ha-yul or Dok-seo, but for a murderer, she displayed a surprising deft with social skills.

Even Ha-yul, who had an almost animalistic sense for people's personalities and character, said, [She doesn't seem like a bad

person.]

Her abilities were even more impressive. Quick decision-making. Proficient use of Aura. Survival skills strong enough to escape from the Void alone. She lacked some real-world combat experience, but that gap was quickly filled due to Unit 703's unique environment.

All in all, she was a bright and capable individual.

Kieeek!

Ji-soo's Awakening ability, known as Phantom Torture, was often effective even against Anomalies. Given their tendency to struggle with distinguishing reality from illusion, when Ji-soo inflicted the sensation of decapitation, the Anomalies genuinely reacted as though their heads had been severed. Though this ability only worked on village-level Anomalies and below, it was still incredibly useful.

In fact, against these low-tier creatures, Ji-soo exhibited near-absolute dominance. Without lifting a finger, she could wield her Phantom Torture to eliminate dozens, even hundreds, of low-tier Anomalies.

"It's all thanks to my excellent teaching," Ji-won suddenly interjected with self-praise. "I referenced the academy system Your Excellency established in past cycles. While I might sound boastful, all Awakeners from the Misfortune Workshop are capable of performing at least as well as a member of the National Road Management Corps's operations team."

Everyone fell silent.

This would have been the perfect time to quip, "It's not boasting but smearing yourself with gold," or to point out, "It wasn't education, it was torture." But no one dared to criticize Ji-won's audacity. Even Ji-soo, the victim, merely smiled faintly and refrained from reacting.

There was a reason for this eerie atmosphere.

"Godmother."

“Yes, Ji-soo.”

“Please follow me.”

On days when the 703 Unit had no assigned operations, Ji-soo and Ji-won often disappeared together. Their destinations varied—sometimes a nearby forest, other times the basement of an abandoned building in a small town. After roughly six hours, the two would return to the unit, visibly drained.

When questioned about their activities one day, Ji-won firmly replied, “I can’t disclose that.”

“Why?”

“Because Ji-soo forbade me from speaking about it. Furthermore, Your Excellency ordered me to obey Ji-soo’s instructions.”

“You’re not doing anything strange, are you?”

“Hmm.” Ji-won stroked her chin thoughtfully. “If by ‘strange,’ you mean unusual, then yes. But I would describe it as meaningless.”

“Just to clarify, Ji-won... Don’t cause further harm to Ji-soo or any other victims in any way.”

“Oh, rest assured,” Ji-won said confidently. “What you fear will never happen. In fact, it’s quite the opposite.”

The opposite?

“Oh dear, I’ve said too much. Of course, if Your Excellency rescinds the order, I’m ready to confess everything.”

This routine continued day after day.

One weekend evening, while the rest of the unit enjoyed a rare break, Ji-won and Ji-soo left the barracks again.

‘I need to find out what’s going on.’

I decided to secretly follow them.

In the pine forest near the barracks, the air was unexpectedly chilly, like autumn rather than summer. The trees' bark seemed to peel under the cold wind, exposing raw flesh.

I followed their tracks deeper into the woods, my footsteps silent on the fallen leaves. Through the dense foliage, faint voices reached my ears.

I crept closer, hiding behind the bushes and straining to listen.

"Not there," Ji-soo's voice instructed. "The tree next to it. Yes, that one. Stand there."

"You know I don't struggle much. There's no need to tie me up. The task could be done in midair just as easily."

"I don't like that, Godmother. After all, we were all bound or imprisoned when we endured your sessions."

"It's problematic to equate our strengths of will. My endurance surpasses the average human threshold."

Peering through the branches, I finally saw them.

Ji-won was tied to a tree.

The scene was beyond what I expected. Ji-won was not merely tied up—the ropes were meticulously arranged to immobilize her entirely, from her ankles to her neck.

Ji-soo inspected the bindings before stepping back to face Ji-won.

"Yes, you're right, Godmother. We were weak, and we didn't appreciate the grace given to us. But not anymore." She clapped her hands and declared, "Today, let's recreate the session you inflicted on Ye-ji. Do you remember her?"

"Hmm... Was she the telekinetic one?"

"That was Ye-seul."

"Ah, close enough."

“Ye-ji was the one whose flesh was constantly flayed as if being prepared for sashimi. Eventually, even on days without a session, she clawed at her skin, saying it was too thick and needed to be thinner.”

“Oh, I remember now. She Awakened a high-level resilience ability. Unfortunately, it wasn’t much different from Aura training... What a waste. If I had administered poisons instead, she might have Awakened a perfect resistance to toxins—”

Ji-won’s sentence was cut off by a scream.

It was a sound unlike anything I had ever heard from her. Even when her limbs were broken, she had only groaned. But this... This was a cry of pure agony.

It was to be expected. No human could endure the sensation of their flesh being methodically shredded.

Ji-soo was replicating the tortures Ji-won had once inflicted at the Misfortune Workshop, reversing the roles of victim and perpetrator.

Even when Ji-won fainted, Ji-soo used her Aura to forcefully Awaken her.

For five hours, the forest was filled with Ji-won’s screams and Ji-soo’s shouts. It was not an interrogation, nor was it a means to any end. It was the manifestation of rage compressed over countless looping days, finally erupting.

When it was over, Ji-soo’s shoulders rose and fell heavily. Despite her talent and abilities, she was visibly drained after maintaining Phantom Torture for hours.

Ji-won, on the other hand, looked utterly wrecked. Her pristine appearance was gone, replaced by a hollow, trembling figure slumped against the tree.

After a long silence, Ji-won spoke in a hoarse voice. Despite everything, her tone was eerily calm.

“Ji-soo... I told you...”

There was no hatred, anger, or resentment in her voice. Instead, it was devoid of emotion.

“This is all meaningless… You can’t hurt me.”

Ji-soo bit her lip so hard it bled. It was the first real blood spilled that night.

Footnotes:

1 - LDL cholesterol is commonly known as “bad” cholesterol since having too much of it is associated with plaque buildup in the heart. Taking omega-3 supplements in moderation can help reduce this risk.

Chapter 293

The Exile IV

Sinnoa

Ji-soo lowered her head.

It wasn't a gesture of surrender or acceptance, like so often seen in political dramas. No, here in the real, it was the most basic form of rejecting said world. If looking someone directly in the eye symbolized a fundamental proof of power, then averting one's gaze symbolized the exact opposite.

"Ji-soo, do you remember?"

The interesting thing was that Ji-won was also lowering her head, drained of strength after enduring relentless torture.

The silver-haired matron and the black-haired maiden.

Both had lowered their chins, yet the meaning carried in the gesture differed drastically between them. For Ji-won, it was because she didn't feel the need to "look at" her opponent. For Ji-soo, it was because the "meaning of looking" at her opponent had been stripped away.

Two forms of meaninglessness stirred and clawed at the air as Ji-won's soft voice spilled forth.

"The story I told you a few days after I adopted you. The one about the massacring emperor... If you've forgotten, I'll tell it again. Once upon a time, there was an emperor whose power was so immense it was almost impossible to surpass. This emperor burned down a poor mountain village."

The village was obliterated. Did this massacre hold any meaning?

The ministers and soldiers were curious, but the emperor forbade any questions. Thus, he committed the massacre. Only after killing

every man, woman, and child in the village did the emperor address his ministers.

“What do you think I have just done?” asked the king. One of the ministers, trembling with fear, answered.

“Your Majesty, you are the supreme ruler of all things, holding the power of life and death. Those villagers dared to defy your will, so they are traitors. You exercised your power over those insignificant beings.”

Of course, the village had done nothing wrong. They had worked, paid taxes, and fulfilled their military service—sometimes diligently, sometimes indolently. If this village were a hotbed of rebellion, then one could conclude the entire empire was consumed by treason.

Yet the minister praised the emperor’s righteousness. He flattered the ruler in order to survive.

“Power is when even evil deeds are praised.”

The minister’s desperate sycophancy, however, did not seem to satisfy the tyrant.

The emperor turned his head. “I ask you, Chief Chamberlain. What do you think I have done?”

The chief chamberlain answered without hesitation.

“This humble servant dares not judge Your Majesty’s actions.”

It was impossible to know if this village was rebellious.

Knowing was unnecessary. It was not permitted.

Unlike the ministers who had to attribute meaning to the emperor’s every move to assist in governing the empire, the chamberlain refrained from judgment entirely. He was consistent in his meaninglessness and had mastered the art of self-preservation.

“Power is when even the basic human ability to judge is stripped

away.”

The chamberlain demonstrated why he was the closest to the tyrant.

But what happened next? If such an event truly occurred, it would have become a legendary tale. Something miraculous happened instead.

In the ruins of the burned village, a single survivor was found.

The survivor was barely over ten years old, their gender indiscernible. Severe burns disfigured their face.

The soldiers brought the lone survivor before the emperor, who, just as he had interrogated the minister and the chamberlain, asked the child for an answer as a form of amusement.

“What do you think I have just done?”

Through a hoarse throat burned by fire, the child answered.

“You burned our village and killed its people without any reason.”

The room fell silent.

The minister swallowed nervously, the soldiers’ hearts froze, and an eerie sound resonated in the stillness.

The emperor was laughing.

He bent down to the child’s eye level and spoke.

“Indeed.”

The emperor appointed the surviving child as his new chamberlain.

It was said that the “burn-scarred chamberlain” served the tyrant until they became an old man, staying by his side throughout the emperor’s long life.

“That’s the story. Do you remember now?”

In the forest darkened by twilight, night's air arrived at the pine bark a step earlier than the sky. Ji-won gulped it down in deep breaths.

"Ji-soo, I asked you the same thing back then. Why did the emperor reject the minister's and chamberlain's answers but accept the child's?"

No response.

"I can still remember clearly. You answered, 'The emperor wanted to show that he could disregard the minister's and chamberlain's responses at will and choose a lowly child in their place, right in front of everyone.'"

A moment of silence.

That expressionless stillness was Ji-won's smile.

"That's correct. You remember well."

The silver-haired psychopath spoke like a teacher praising a student for completing their homework.

"It was a good answer. A memorable wrong answer. If this were a subjective question, you'd score 60 points... A full 60 out of 100. While others hesitated or clung to outdated, canned phrases, you earnestly empathized with the situation and thought it through. You've always been diligent," she complimented warmly.

Ji-won finally raised her head.

"I'll ask again. After five years? Let's say it's a six-year review. Ji-soo, why do you think the emperor was satisfied with the child's answer?"

Ji-soo stayed silent.

Listening from beyond the bushes, I instinctively knew the correct answer Ji-won had in mind. After all, she and I had been bound since the fifth cycle. I understood her way of thinking all too well.

However, whether Ji-soo, someone I only met for the first time in the 703rd cycle, could reach that answer was uncertain.

Ji-soo's red lips parted.

"Because he was fine."

A murmur.

"Hmm?" came the prompting hum.

"Even after doing such things—arson, massacres—he was fine."

Ji-soo lifted her head.

"There was no need for him to justify his actions. Only those who need recognition from others seek justification. There was no need for him to avert his gaze from his deeds. Only those afraid of consequences try to erase what's been done."

"Hmm."

"True power isn't like that. Even after committing atrocities, being exposed for them, admitting they were meaningless massacres, revealing everything without concealment, and still facing no consequences for the emperor—that's when his power becomes absolute. That's why he spared the child, made them the chamberlain, even though the child burned with vengeance every day, cursing the tyrant. The survival and testimony of that child, their uselessness and irrelevance, proved the emperor's power."

"Correct," Ji-won said. "90 out of 100 points. Well done, Ji-soo. As expected, people grow with time."

A dagger struck the pine tree with a thunk, grazing Ji-won's lips as if to silence her. A trail of blood trickled down her chin.

"Someone like you."

Ji-soo's dark green eyes burned vividly even in the dusky forest.

"You don't get hurt. You could simply live satisfied with that, but

you don't. You crave someone else, anyone else, to prove that 'I don't get hurt' because you think it's proof of your strength!"

Monster.

Ji-soo's teeth ground out the word.

"You're a parasite... The Anomalies parasitize human emotions and intellect to survive. They exploit us. How are you any different? Why do you exist? Why are you alive?"

Steam seeped from Ji-soo's mouth, the heat forged in her heart.

"At the very least, feel pain. Why are you unfazed? You lost an arm. Your neck was cut. Your flesh was torn. If you're human, it should hurt!"

"I do feel pain. I lost consciousness sixteen times during today's torture."

"That's not what I mean!" the girl screamed. "It's different. You... You..."

A few ragged breaths.

"You're not human... You're an Anomaly. No, you're worse than a monster. Ji-won, I will hate you forever."

The forest held its breath.

Somehow, night split open, spilling starlight, and Ji-won extended her arm. The ropes binding her unraveled as if they had only ever been for show.

She had used her Aura.

"Perfect score." Ji-won grasped Ji-soo's shoulders. "That's exactly it, Ji-soo... You are the survivor of the village. You are my chamberlain. That's precisely why I raised you carefully and kept you by my side."

"Ah."

Ji-soo's mouth fell open. She was in despair.

In contrast, Ji-won, gripping both of Ji-soo's arms firmly, was exulting within her stoic expression.

"Torturing me is meaningless. But even meaninglessness has meaning. Think about it. Humans endure arduous lives to prove that something is meaningless.

"Only those who amass extreme wealth can declare, 'Money holds no meaning in life.' Only those who devote everything to academia can assert, 'Knowledge holds no meaning in life.' Ji-soo, I need you. Someone like you.

"You seem tired today, so go back and rest. From tomorrow, the days of missions will resume. Intense training. Flexible operations. Proper nutrition and rest. All of these must come together for a healthy lifestyle."

Ji-won stroked Ji-soo's hair, brushing it behind her ear. Ji-soo stared blankly, not even flinching at the touch.

"I genuinely think of you as a daughter in my heart."

Silence.

"I'll leave first. The wind is getting cold, so return quickly."

Then, the sound of leaves crunched underfoot faded away.

Ji-soo was left alone.

Well, counting me hiding in the bushes, there were two of us.

At that moment, I was pondering.

My first concern was, of course, the weight of my life. It wasn't a decision made lightly when I decided to involve myself with Ji-won but one made after careful, deep contemplation. Nevertheless, taking responsibility for the mistakes of the 703rd cycle wasn't easy.

My second concern was—

“What do you plan to do with that rope?”

“Huh?” Ji-soo looked at me with a glare. “Were you watching?”

“Yes.”

“Everything?”

“Yes, everything.”

“Coward.”

That stung.

Listening to the dying words of someone so much younger than me never ceased to be unsettling. For a mere hedgehog’s quill, the winter this girl endured was far too cruel.

“Don’t kill yourself.”

Ji-soo flinched, stiffening awkwardly. Just before the dark swamp could belch out its sticky bubbles, I spoke first.

“If you die by your own hand, Ji-won will certainly be hurt. She’ll grieve. For a day. Two days. Perhaps a week or two.”

“If that’s the case—”

“And then she’ll overcome it… You already know what kind of person Ji-won is.”

Silence.

“I respect your choice. But reconsider gifting Ji-won with even the opportunity to ‘heal from life’s wounds.’” When she didn’t answer, I added, “You can decide afterward. It won’t be too late.”

At that moment, Ji-soo’s hardened expression crumbled.

Chapter 294

The Exile V

Sinnoa

“Wh-why…?”

Ji-soo collapsed to the ground, her soul breaking to the sound of autumn leaves crunching beneath her knees.

“Why? Why does such a person exist? Why is something like that even human? Why…?”

No tears flowed from her dark green eyes, yet Ji-soo was undoubtedly crying. It was just that her physical body couldn’t keep up with the sorrow in her heart.

It hadn’t always been this way. Once upon a time, she must have known how to shed tears to cry. Over time, however, she had grown accustomed to a life without them. And for someone who had become so familiar with crying without tears, finding another way to grieve was unfathomable.

“Why?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

However little a body might understand of expression, the body was nevertheless the medium through which human beings lived. Wrapping my Aura around her like a scarf, I patted Ji-soo’s back, doing my best to ward off the chill of the autumn night.

It was all I could do.

When had slipped us both by, Ji-soo stared blankly at the night sky. The half-moon seemed sated. As though it had feasted on many tears of sorrow, it appeared to possess a bite so cutting that it could

inadvertently slash under one's wristwatch.

"It was the opposite," she murmured. "The story Godmother told me about the emperor... It was actually the opposite. An Anomaly wreaked havoc in our village, killing everyone."

Once, Kim Ji-soo had been a part of a group of orphans who banded together after losing their parents. It was a survival strategy born of necessity. After all, there was no room in the world for orphaned children who lacked the labor capacity to make them useful.

People in similar circumstances, of similar ages, formed their own little pack, working together to survive. They elected leaders, divided roles, endured hunger together, and hunted together.

A primitive form of community.

Like so many other groups, they eventually faced annihilation.

"Everyone but me died... Then, Godmother Yu appeared."

The Anomaly had swept through the Forsaken Village, leaving it destined to fade into obscurity without a name. However, Yu Ji-won had saved it—or rather, she had saved only Ji-soo.

More precisely, she had barely managed to save just Ji-soo.

"You're lucky."

In the middle of the charred remains, Ji-won picked up Ji-soo. Her blue eyes gazed silently at the soot-stained child.

"And you have good eyes... What's your name?"

"...Ji-soo."

"What a common name... Ji-soo, do you hate the Anomaly?"

Ji-soo replied that she did.

"Would you dedicate your entire life to it, dig to the bottom of your soul if necessary, just to exact revenge on it?"

Ji-soo once again said yes.

Her family had just been wiped out. Although they quarreled often, they had lived together like siblings. Now they were gone, killed by the Anomaly.

She had lost her parents, her home, and the last shelter her friends had cobbled together in the aftermath.

A fire that could not be extinguished began to burn within Ji-soo's heart.

"Can you swear it?"

In hindsight, perhaps she had answered too hastily. She didn't fully understand what it meant to dedicate her "entire life." Nor could she comprehend the process of "digging to the bottom of her soul." She hadn't known how much more pain she would endure.

"Excellent."

Manipulating humans into achieving their known goals while forcing them to pay unknown costs—such was the essence of a demon's tactics.

"Now, Ji-soo. First, offer me your name."

"My name...?"

"I am gathering people like you. If you follow me, you can become an Awakener. A new life awaits you... Think of it as a ritual to separate yourself from your old self."

In a world tainted by the Void Poison, names held a significant, mystical power. But as someone whose only home lay in a slain band of orphans and strays, Ji-soo could not have known that.

"As Confucius said, all matters of life begin with calling things by their proper name. The same applies to Awakeners. I will give you a new name."[1]

"Okay... I'll offer my name."

“Good. Hmm.”

Ji-won rested her chin on her hand.

“Let’s see. People often describe hatred as ‘burning,’ but that’s a misnomer. If hatred were combustible, it would diminish as it burned. Instead, it grows.”

Her whisper was soft.

“Hatred pools, drawing in nutrients and water from its surroundings, swelling its volume on its own... The pond’s ‘ji.’ The marsh’s ‘soo.’”

She stroked Ji-soo’s hair in a gentle stroke.

“Ji-soo. You are a pond nestled in the most secluded corners of the world, a marsh where hatred gathers... You don’t understand, do you? That’s fine. You will soon.”

The flashback ended.

Under the moonlight that filtered through the pine forest, Ji-soo murmured into my shoulder.

“Now that I think about it, it was strange.”

“What was?”

“Everyone adopted into the Misfortune Workshop was like me—the sole survivor of a Forsaken Village or someone miraculously spared during an Anomaly attack.”

“Hmm.”

“At first, I didn’t doubt the godmother. In fact, I admired her for saving so many unfortunate people like me.”

But...

“At some point, as Godmother Yu’s actions in the Misfortune

Workshop became increasingly blatant, I began to have doubts, like bubbles rising to the surface of a marsh. Could it be that the godmother intentionally allowed the Anomalies to strike, intervening only at the last moment when a single survivor remained?"

For a breath, there was only the question, then I admitted it.

"It's plausible."

Ji-won had specifically targeted children without ties, abducting them to the Underwater Tunnel.

"The group you belonged to, Ji-soo, were wanderers. They couldn't enter established strongholds like Busan or Sejong. Wandering groups like yours were often indistinguishable from bandits."

Citizens with connections couldn't easily flee from their crimes, not when their families or acquaintances would be held accountable. In contrast, the unattached could commit crimes more freely.

"Untrustworthy thieves."

That was the general perception of wandering groups, tinged with both justified and unjustified discrimination. This made them easy to ostracize. In Korea, the only place that openly accepted such wanderers was Daejeon.

"Your assumption is probably correct... Ji-won was the sharpest blade of the National Road Management Corps. She had no reason to go out of her way to save wandering groups who presented no labor value and who could disrupt order. Normally, she would have ignored them."

I closed my eyes briefly and sighed.

"But for some reason, Ji-won changed. Perhaps she thought, 'If I intervene, I can give meaning even to these wanderers who were annihilated by Anomalies.'"

"'Meaning.'"

“Yes. By sparing only one promising individual from the group and allowing the rest to perish, she might have believed she was giving purpose to the lives lost.”

Recycling waste.

Perhaps that’s what it meant to Ji-won.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing, Undertaker?”

“Ji-won wasn’t always so diligent. She used to be satisfied with fulfilling her assigned duties and currying favor with me. I’m the one who instilled her with motivation and ambition... I’m sorry, Ji-soo.”

A heavy silence fell over us.

In the next cycle, the 704th, I uncovered the truth.

Ji-soo had been destined to die during the Anomaly attack. Even the Saintess’s Clairvoyance couldn’t reach her wandering group for the mere fact that they lacked an Awakener.

The survival rate of wanderer groups was always low. Unlike fortified cities imbued with countless spells for protection, Anomalies could invade the Forsaken Village at any time.

Ji-soo died, and she would continue to die in every cycle but the 703rd. The only reason she ever survived was because Ji-won acted out of character, going beyond merely tracking the caravan route.

“I truly am sorry.”

The child before me’s story was a cruel one.

For the first time in hundreds of cycles, Ji-soo was pulled from the jaws of death by her savior, Ji-won. Yet the salvation waiting for her was the depths of a hell she had never known.

Savior and tormentor.

Godmother and nemesis.

“However, if you still desire revenge, if you wish to harm Ji-won, I might be able to help.”

And for the first time, Ji-soo lifted her head from my shoulder to stare at me.

“You’d help me, Undertaker?”

“Yes. But heed my words carefully. Don’t let your guard down, as you did when you first met Ji-won.”

Ji-soo looked into my eyes, then flinched at what she saw there, her shoulders tensing under my gaze. This must have been the first time she met my eyes so directly.

“I am a regressor... When this life ends, another awaits me. Ji-won has long been my lieutenant, and she will remain so in the next life.”

Her expression cracked, revealing a shocked comprehension. The mysteries she had long pondered—why someone like Ji-won had treated her life with so little regard—finally unraveled.

“Ji-soo, I can grant you the right to determine your next life.”

“Ah...”

“I can ensure you and your friends find refuge in Busan, where you’ll live comfortably. Whether that makes you happy is up to you, but at least you’ll be at ease...

“Do you want the means to fight Anomalies? I can assign your reincarnation project to a Baku, guiding your Awakening through dreams without the need for torture. Or if you want, I can share with your future self the events of this cycle. Though you might struggle to grasp the reality, you’d still gain insight into one of the world’s greatest secrets...

“I’m not forcing you to choose just one wish. Everything I’ve mentioned, and anything else you desire—if it’s within my reach,

I'll make it happen."

Comfort. Strength. Knowledge.

A regressor wasn't an omnipotent god but was capable of taking responsibility for a single life—albeit one suspended by the temporary reprieve of an apocalyptic world.

"Child who has lost her name… Your scars and hatred are not meaningless. You've come this far chasing Ji-won. You earned this moment."

"Ah."

"Take your time to think. Ponder and deliberate, then tell me what you desire."

I patted Ji-soo's head, adding my warmth to the spot where Ji-won's fingerprints lingered.

"I'll be waiting."

From that day onward, Ji-soo's "torture theater" came to an abrupt halt.

"Hmm."

Even on idle holidays without assignments, she no longer dragged Ji-won into secluded alleys.

Ji-won found this peculiar.

"Lately, Ji-soo seems to have her head in the clouds. She often stares blankly at the sky."

"Well, she must have a lot on her mind."

"Did you pull some strings, Your Excellency?" she asked sharply.

"Yes. I did." When only her gnawing silence bit back at me, I asked, "And what of it? What will you do about it?"

“My apologies...”

Her sharpness held no sway over me.

Two months passed this way.

One dawn, as I enjoyed a café au lait outside my tent under the early morning sky, I heard a faint rustling of dewy grass, then Ji-soo appeared.

“Undertaker.”

The blank expression she’d worn for two months had been replaced by resolve. I nodded.

“Good morning. Have you collected your thoughts?”

“Yes.”

“You’re quite thorough. Pondering for two months without respite isn’t easy, even for a monk presented with a koan...”[2]

Ji-soo hesitated.

“Go on. Speak.”

Her lips moved wordlessly several times before she finally managed to squeeze out her words. “Thank you for granting someone like me a wish. But I... I don’t think I should wish for happiness.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve killed people too...”

The words were croaked, as if her voice had come not from the throat but more spilled from the wounds of her heart.

“For revenge. To bring pain to Godmother Yu, I’ve killed seven people who had nothing to do with me. Even though I chose criminals as my targets... Godmother isn’t any different. She’s the same as me.”

So, she had thought this far.

My gaze softened. “Continue.”

“Yes… But I can’t forget the godmother. I don’t want to forget what she’s done.” Her fist tightened by her side, then she called for me. “Undertaker.”

“Yes.”

“You said Godmother Yu is your lieutenant. Is that because she’s exceptionally competent?”

“That’s part of it,” I said with a nod. “She’s resourceful. She always delivers results. She doesn’t hesitate in battles against Anomalies. And, to be honest, she also once wished upon me, just as you are now. That’s why she’s always by my side.”

Ji-soo took a deep breath.

“Can I… take Godmother Yu’s place?”

I blinked. It was an unexpected request, even for me. “What?”

“Being by your side… That seems to be the most important thing to Godmother Yu. So I want to take away what matters most to her.”

Her dark green eyes stared straight into mine.

“Please help me replace Godmother Yu.”

Footnotes:

1 - Confucius in his *Analects* argues calling someone by the improper name and failing to acknowledge what duty is associated with one’s proper title leads to social disorder and the inability to deal with life’s problems as they come.

2 - A *koan* is a riddle in the form of a story or question presented to

monks of Zen Buddhism and designed to allow its practitioner to see their own nature at heart.

Chapter 295

The Exile VI

Sinnoa

There is an age-old question.

Q: What does it feel like to accompany a regressor?

I had shared a timeline with Old Man Scho in my younger years, of course—though honestly, from my perspective, anything around the 20th cycle is akin to infancy—but that didn't get at the heart of what I really wanted to ask.

Q: What does it feel like for a non-regressor to accompany a regressor?

"Hmm. It feels absolutely shitty..."

A1: Do-hwa's answer sheet.

"You only get one life to live. Or at least, we're only conscious of the one life we currently have. On that premise and that foundation, we sculpt our existence. A regressor is simultaneously a bottomless pit of hell and a lone cloud in the heavens. It's unfair..."

"Um, I don't really have negative feelings about it."

A2: Yo-hwa's answer sheet.

"Actually, I enjoy it! Why? Because as we live, we go through mistakes and misfortunes, right? Like suddenly getting hit by a car while crossing the street or being ambushed by an unforeseen Anomaly. Losing someone dear to you—that's a super sorrowful experience, isn't it? But with you, Teacher, I don't have to say goodbye, hehehe! I think it's a blessing, not only for you but also for me!"

"Huh? It's totally fun."

A3: Dok-seo's answer sheet.

"The world has a protagonist, and I happen to be by their side? *Tu-du-dum-dum-dum.* I've been waiting for an Awakener like you for a long time..."

"Regression doesn't matter."

A4: The Saintess's answer sheet.

"No, abilities never matter. What matters is the person, who the regressor is. What kind of person became the regressor. The fact that I'm accompanying a regressor doesn't hold much significance to me. What matters is simply that I'm with someone like you, Mr. Undertaker."

"Uh..."

A5: Ah-ryeon's answer sheet.

"Guild Leader, my SG Net password... You didn't, um, learn it from a previous cycle or something, did you?"

Since she had at least 17 passwords, I didn't bother reacting.

Don't you have all your IDs and passwords written on a note stuffed in your inner pocket? Pass.

[Answer declined.]

A6: Ha-yul's answer sheet.

[It's an old habit of yours to try and read others' minds this way, oppa. Everyone thinks they won't fall for such cheap tricks, but I know secrets are only beautiful when they remain secrets.]

Hanging out with Dok-seo daily must have rubbed off some of that teenage edginess. Pass.

As for Ji-won's answer sheet, there was no need to even look. I could already predict what she'd say. Something along the lines of "the glory of three lifetimes," "loyalty," "my light," embellished with

a four-verse ode to the regressor's magnificence.

Now was the time to bring Ji-soo, the girl Ji-won considered her daughter, into the regressor's timeline.

I had to ask this wounded marsh a question.

Q: What exactly does your wish to replace Yu Ji-won mean?

"I want to become as capable as Godmother Yu."

That was Ji-soo's answer.

"No, more specifically—I will become as capable as the godmother. If she was valued for her fluency in Latin, then I'll learn Latin to replace her. Aura, administrative skills, everything. And someday, I'll take away everything the godmother holds dear—even her position as your lieutenant."

Because Ji-soo knew: that's the only way to wound someone like Ji-won.

Q: Think it over. From the perspective of your next self, this means having your life's direction suddenly decided by a previous cycle's version of you. Will your future self accept this?

"If my next self doesn't accept it, then that's the end. It would mean my grudge, my pain, and my wounds, this blazing heart, were only worth a single lifetime's existence.

Thus, she concluded that if her next self ignores her wishes, then I would not need to care about her anymore.

Suddenly, a memory resurfaced.

A long time ago, someone who learned I was a regressor approached me. She was a beautiful woman with silver hair. Upon discovering that a regressor existed in a doomed world, she began enjoying life as if she had already given up.

Are you satisfied now? I would ask. *Are you happy?*

Each time, the silver-haired woman would answer like this:

"Hmm."

"In the next cycle, won't I be a little happier?"

"I think I'll be a bit happier next time."

It seemed absurd.

She entrusted her happiness and the meaning of her life to her future self.

Hundreds of cycles passed, and now, the so-called foster daughter she claimed to have birthed in her heart was standing in front of me and giving a remarkably similar answer.

"I will entrust my resolve, my decisions, my pain, and my happiness to my next self."

I nodded.

So be it.

"Thank you, Undertaker. Truly."

A week later, at dawn, Ji-soo took her own life.

Thus began the 704th cycle.

At Busan Station's tutorial dungeon, I bought a can of Ceylon tea from a vending machine, as usual. Then I headed to a cafe decorated with Old Man Scho's corpse and drank a café au lait.

'Good.'

I cleared my mind.

The act of drinking has long been one of humanity's most fundamental rituals, and I was no exception. I relied on this ritual.

Factory-made drinks symbolized the abundance of a fallen

civilization, while handcrafted coffee reflected the regressor's fate. With these two disinfectants, I cleansed the soot of my heart left by the previous cycle.

'Let's begin again.'

Reuniting with Dok-seo and Ah-ryeon. Recruiting the Saintess. Meeting Seo-rin. Enlisting Do-hwa. Farming with my sword Do-hwa. Rescuing Yo-hwa. Adopting Ha-yul.

These were predetermined steps—an optimized route. The most efficient event triggers.

'I won't meet Ji-won just yet.'

However, the 704th cycle brought with it a deviation.

Normally, this would be the point where I picked up Ji-won, who acted as the gatekeeper at a convenience store, but I decided to delay that encounter.

There was someone else I needed to meet first.

I arrived at the location hinted at by my regression knowledge and promises.

The moment I stepped in, the faint sound of a girl screaming filled the air.

"Aaaaah!"

It was a student in a gray uniform. She was screaming as a zombie —one of the weakest of the Anomalies known as the Hollow— chased her. It was a low-level monster that seasoned Awakeners could handle without effort, but in these early days of the apocalypse, it was a nightmare to face.

The zombie had a teacher's shoulder in its jaws. The teacher screamed in agony.

"R-run! Kids, r-run! I'll— I'll hold it off!"

“Teacher!”

“Run!”

A truly noble teacher.

Some students scattered, their faces pale with terror. Five remained, among them one conspicuously resolute girl.

Kim Ji-soo.

“I’ll strike first, sunbae.”

While the others appeared ready to flee, Ji-soo held them back.

“I’ll draw its attention. Use that chance to save the teacher.”

“U-uh, o-okay.”

Armed with a golf club she had somehow acquired, Ji-soo charged the zombie head-on. Not sneaking, but openly and boldly, she swung at the back of its head.

I let out a small laugh. “Heh. No wonder she caught Ji-won’s eye.”

While not exactly brave, she was audacious.

- Urgh?

The zombie turned, revealing a face 70% decomposed and crawling with maggots. Even without eyes, its nostrils flared grotesquely.

Ji-soo showed no hesitation.

“Idiot.”

Wham!

The golf club connected, caving in part of the zombie’s skull. But instead of collapsing, it lunged at her.

“Now, sunbae! Go!”

“Ah, y-yes! Teacher! Are you okay?”

While the students rescued the teacher, Ji-soo lured the zombie away, her movements intelligent despite her lack of speed. She led it through a barricade of debris, slowing it down.

‘Impressive.’

For a normal person without power or knowledge, her tactics were exceptional.

‘But she lacks experience.’

Ji-soo’s efforts ultimately doomed her group. The teacher turned into a zombie far too quickly, and her surviving classmates, courageous enough to stay and help, were killed.

It was a textbook bad ending.

Ji-soo’s determination to repay the teacher’s kindness by saving her ultimately led to disaster. She tried to rescue her classmates, even berating them for attempting to flee.

The result? Damnation.

Her struggles were a quagmire. The harder she fought, the deeper she sank. Yet, it was this very trait that made her catch Ji-won’s eye.

I stepped forward.

Three strides brought me before the transformed teacher. One clean slice split the zombie in two.

“Huh?”

The students stared in shock as I appeared and dispatched the Anomaly.

“I’m an agent from a secret government organization.”

“H-huh?”

“I belong to the National Intelligence Service’s Disaster Division—a civil servant of the governmental state. I recommend evacuating toward Busan immediately.”

Relieved to hear buzzwords like “government” and “state,” the students nodded. Twenty minutes later, a sweat-drenched Ji-soo returned.

Her gray coat was missing, likely thrown away to distract the zombie with her scent.

‘Smart.’

Though visibly exhausted, she had outmaneuvered the Anomaly using only her wits and endurance.

“Ji-soo.”

When she saw me, she froze. Her eyes locked on the divided corpse of her teacher. As her classmates tried to explain, she silently walked over to me and bowed deeply.

“You saved them. Thank you.”

The voice carried no hint of Ji-won’s cold, emotionless tone. Instead, the voice that called to me was her own.

“My name is Kim Ji-soo.”

Chapter 296

The Exile VII

Sinnoa

After safely escorting the students to Busan and spending around two months juggling a hectic schedule, I finally managed to arrange to meet with Ji-soo personally.

It wasn't in any way a date. If it had been one, I would never in my life have committed the atrocity of bringing Dok-seo along as a third wheel.

An awkward silence sucked air from the room.

"So, uh... This person is...?"

"Call me Dok-seo," said the otaku, wearing a baseball cap tipped low over her face. "But don't pay me any mind. I'm more of a—*ehhh*—let's it "bystander." I consider silence a virtue. If one wishes to stand at the forefront of the stage, it's not yet the season of harvest. The autumn breeze... It is still faint."

"You really don't need to concern yourself with this kid, Ji-soo," I quickly interjected, seeing Ji-soo's expression grow increasingly grim. "I just brought her along because she's a very useful Awakener. Now, please, hear me out."

"Oh. Alright, then."

An hour passed.

It was enough time to reveal that I was a regressor and to explain the incidents that had occurred in the previous cycle. Ji-soo carefully chose her words when responding.

"So what you're saying is... Beneath the surface of this country's secret organizations, there are extensive facilities used to abduct and torture orphans. And I was captured there, subjected to those

methods, and forcibly turned into an Awakener with supernatural abilities?"

"That's right."

"I see..." she mused calmly while her expression screamed, *What the hell?*

It was to be expected, really. If someone told you that a psychopath had imprisoned your past self, your soul had been crushed to the point of no return, and you ultimately took your own life—that brutal, fairytale ending—it would be hard to accept, wouldn't it?

"I... Well, I can understand up to the part where you said my past self went through some terrible misfortunes in the previous cycle."

Even so, Ji-soo made every effort to remain polite toward me. I had saved her and her upperclassmates at school from near death and guided them safely to Busan, after all. She hadn't forgotten that debt of gratitude.

Ji-soo's jet-black eyes gleamed as she said, "But even if that's true, wouldn't it be best to sever ties with that piece of human trash? I should focus on living a happy life for myself."

A surprisingly reasonable opinion!

"The part I find most incomprehensible is the decision my past self made. To do it in the name of vengeance against that psychopath is one thing—and yes, revenge is fine—but why choose a path that makes me miserable?"

It was a valid point. Ji-soo of the 704th cycle, who hadn't experienced the horrors of the Misfortune Workshop, possessed an entirely rational way of thinking. If she went to a psychological counseling center and took the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI-2),[1] the doctor would probably say, "You have a completely healthy mind! Just watch your caffeine intake. We don't treat normal people like you here, so please leave!"

For reference, Ji-won would also be told to leave, but for the opposite reason where the doctor might scream, "Eek! Get this

monster out of our hospital!”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t inherit the will of my past self. Nor do I want to. While I appreciate your efforts, Undertaker...”

“No. That’s the normal response.”

“Right...”

In many ways, her reaction was the complete opposite of Ji-won’s, I realized. With that silver-haired psychopath, there existed a secret keyword—a single magical phrase capable of instantly convincing her of any bizarre phenomenon.

“I know that in the summer of your 14th year, when you were in middle school, you dismembered your family and dumped them in the Minari Pond at Mount Dobong.”

That single sentence was enough to convince Ji-won of the reality that a regressor was standing before her, acting as a courier who delivered her final will to the next cycle. She even went above and beyond, synchronizing her past self with her present self, much like a player inheriting a save file.

But most people didn’t think that way. Even if they had endured hell itself, even if they had incinerated their souls with hatred for another, conveying that feeling to their future self was impossible.

At times, the distance between oneself and one’s self was greater than the distance between two strangers. Kim Ji-soo understood this well.

“That’s why I plan to try something a little unusual today.”

This was something the Ji-soo from the 703rd cycle had already anticipated.

“What do you mean?” the Ji-soo standing before me asked.

“As I said, your past self wanted, in some way, to ensure her hatred was conveyed to the next cycle. But she also knew that just explaining everything wouldn’t suddenly make you go, ‘Ah, yes, I’ll

live a life consumed by rage now.' This might sound like a compliment, but the Ji-soo from the 703rd cycle was quite clever."

Ji-soo visibly stiffened.

There was a subtle discomfort in her demeanor. However little emotion her face conveyed, she seemed to have sensed an underlying unease.

Not feeling the need to correct her assumption, I turned and looked down to Dok-seo where she sat beside me. "Are you ready?"

Dok-seo nodded. "Of course. I've been ready for this moment for 12,000 years."

Ji-soo tilted her head in confusion, her gaze flicking between us.

At that moment, a faint melody began to fill the air of the café, which had been quiet despite being fully seated.

Having spent nearly two months in Busan, Ji-soo had been sufficiently educated on the fact that Anomalies could appear anywhere, anytime. She instinctively scanned her surroundings.

"Is it an Anomaly?"

"No. Don't worry, it's just a song I asked an Awakener I know to play. It's not your average tune, though," I added, chuckling wryly. "Ji-soo, could you close your eyes for a moment?"

"Well... Alright."

The melody gradually swelled. What began as a monotonous hum, simple like running tap water, slowly grew in volume and richness.

"Ah."

Although her eyes remained closed, Ji-soo's eyebrows furrowed slightly.

By this point, she must have realized what the song was. It was Busan's famed specialty, Seo-rin's Cursed Song Incantation. For the

general public, hearing this melody was a rare luxury, afforded once a month over radio waves. Now, it resonated in this café, played for the sake of one person.

No, perhaps it was composed for two.

Repetition, Target Designation, Illusion, Modulation—these four verses formed a harmonious melody, encircling the space around us.

Soon, the speaker volume decreased, and the song transitioned into a soft, looping background track.

“You can open your eyes now.”

Ji-soo’s jet-black eyes opened. “Ah?”

A flicker of starlight trembled within them as the sunlight streaming through the window cast its glow, creating faint silhouettes of objects, softening the clarity of shapes in her gaze. Within her eyes rested the reflection of Dok-seo sitting beside me.

“Greetings.”

However, the face reflected in Ji-soo’s eyes was not Dok-seo’s. Even the voice layered over the Cursed Song Incantation’s background melody was not Dok-seo’s.

“The 704th cycle me.”

Dok-seo’s eyes, gleaming with a deep, swamp-like green hue, looked at her.

“Perhaps it’s more fitting to say, ‘It’s nice to meet you.’ I am the 703rd cycle’s you.”

Ji-soo from this cycle froze, inhaling sharply.

“I am Ji-soo.”

Now, the performance began.

In the forest where Ji-won had departed and disappeared, a conversation between two people had taken place.

Q: Think it over. For the Ji-soo of the next cycle, it would mean having their life direction determined by someone who lived an entirely different path. Would your next self truly accept that?

A: If she doesn't, then that's where it ends. My grudge. My pain. My wounds. This blazing heart of mine... would simply amount to something that could not surpass a single lifetime.

When I had posed the question in another life, that was how the Ji-soo from the 703rd cycle answered, by acknowledging the possibility that her hatred might fail to reach her next self.

A: But... there's a way.

Armed with that knowledge, Ji-soo began to devise a plan.

She did not believe in sentimental notions like "a strong will transcends cycles" or "resolve can be inherited across time." Even at the peak of her rage-consumed life, she remained a rational strategist.

Just like her godmother.

Q: A way?

A: Yes. My godmother often told us stories about you, Undertaker. Among those tales, she mentioned that you possessed Complete Memory.

Q: And if that's true?

The Ji-soo of the 703rd cycle took a deep breath and stared directly at me.

A: Then please... act as me.

Q: What?

A: The Ji-soo of the next cycle won't be able to empathize with me just by hearing words alone. That's why... there must be direct communication.

A: I'm not a regressor like you, Undertaker. I can't perform the miracle of conversing with my next self.

A: But... through you...

A: It might be possible to deliver my message.

Q: ...

A: I will preemptively answer every question that the Ji-soo of the next cycle might ask me. All of their doubts. All of their countless uncertainties.

A: My answers. My expressions. My voice.

A: My emotions.

A: ...Everything about me.

A: Please remember it all, Undertaker. Then recreate it, and convey it to the next Ji-soo.

Q: ...

A: Ha-yul sunbae has the ability to manipulate puppets. If they craft a puppet resembling me, and you and Lee sunbae work together to control it, you'll be able to replicate my appearance.

Q: No. That's a valid method, but there's an even better solution.

A: What is it?

Dok-seo.

A child who had been part of the 703rd Punishment Unit with us, and more recently, a colleague who had Awakened the ability called Side Story Creation.

Q: Dok-seo has the power to perfectly embody the existence of a past cycle.

Using Side Story Creation, Dok-seo had previously acted as a long-forgotten Saintess and even reenacted the fury of a glacial era. The ability was limited to recreating people I had personally encountered and remembered, but with my Complete Memory, I could recall every detail of their actions and behavior. Based on my data, Dok-seo's acting achieved a resolution so vivid that it verged on reality.

I myself had once been so engrossed in her Side Story that I got scolded by the Saintess for acting like an internet-addicted shut-in.

Of course, everything in life has its pros and cons. Dok-seo's ability could also be used to save someone.

I came to this obvious realization while speaking with the Ji-soo of the 703rd cycle.

Q: I'll combine that with Seo-rin's Cursed Song Incantation. Since Dok-seo's acting doesn't extend to mimicking appearances or voices, I'll ask Seo-rin to implement Vocal Modulation and Illusion techniques into the song. That will handle those gaps.

A: ...That's impressive.

Q: Then let's begin.

A: Yes.

Q: Time for a Q&A session.

An age-old question arose here.

Could emotions be conveyed? Could willpower be inherited?

The human heart could not directly connect to another while willpower lacked substance and could not leap across the chasm between cycles.

But regressors existed. And regressors had the power to remember anything.

Through my memories, the transparent wish of Seo-rin—to "someday travel the world along the railway tracks"—was passed to the next cycle's Seo-rin.

Through my memories, the vague yet undeniable desire of Ha-yul to "become a little happier" reached the Ha-yul of the next cycle.

The same was true for Ji-soo.

One week. It happened one week after Ji-soo and I made our secret pact in the forest.

I had mentioned before that Ji-soo had taken her own life a week later. Some might have posed a certain question after hearing the story.

Q: Why did Ji-soo end her life in just one week?

However, that question was fundamentally flawed.

Ji-soo had always been on the verge of giving up her life. The moment she realized she could never harm her godmother's heart, her urge to embrace death had simply reached its tipping point. Thus, the question should have been reframed like this:

Q: Why did Ji-soo endure for an entire week before taking her own life?

The answer was simple.

For one week, she and I secretly met every night to conduct tens of thousands of "Q&A sessions." She imprinted herself as vividly as possible into my memory. Together, we meticulously organized every potential question her future self might ask, and the Ji-soo of the 703rd cycle answered them all.

She documented everything. She gathered every valuable piece of her life and entrusted them to me—the regressor who served as a time capsule.

And so...

“Ask me anything,” Dok-seo said, her voice steady and unwavering. “I’m ready for it all.”

After one autumn and one winter had passed, the memories Ji-soo had buried in the regressor’s mind were finally delivered.

Beside me, Dok-seo opened the time capsule.

Footnotes:

1 - The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI-2) is the most widely used psychometric test for measuring adult psychopathology in the world.

Chapter 297

The Exile VIII

Sinnoa

“You’re awfully quiet.”

The air about Dok-seo shifted. It was only natural—her appearance, the color of her eyes, and even the rhythm of her voice had changed. Yet somehow, this *change* was even more fundamental.

“You seem flustered.”

“Ah...”

Dok-seo, or rather the entity that summoned Ji-soo of the 703rd cycle to overwrite her personality onto herself, gave a wry smile. It was an expression Dok-seo would never normally make.

How could one describe it?

Right. The word “transformation” seemed to be the only fitting descriptor.

“I’m just as flustered, honestly. No, perhaps ‘fascinated’ is the better word.”

“So, you’re really...?” The Ji-soo of this cycle—in other words, the “real Kim Ji-soo” who looked identical to the one sitting opposite—hesitated as her lips trembled. “You’re really saying you’re my past self?”

“That’s how I perceive myself. But the word ‘past’ is somewhat inaccurate. I am your potential. A future that might have unfolded had you taken certain paths... Thank you, Undertaker. For creating this opportunity. For granting my wish.”

I gave a silent nod in response.

Until just moments ago, the main figures in this meeting were Ji-soo and me. Dok-seo had merely been an uninvited guest, unsure why she had been called here. But now the roles had reversed.

The key players here were Kim Ji-soo and Kim Ji-soo: past and future, reality and potential, colliding.

I chose to withdraw into silence, making myself an outsider in this encounter. It was an act of consideration for two individuals: the girl whose main life story I had ruined and the one who, through me, had been given a chance to rewrite her side story.

Had she surmised my intention?

Dok-seo (strictly speaking, she was also a version of Ji-soo from another cycle, but for convenience, I'll continue referring to her as Dok-seo) nodded slightly. The subtle motion conveyed her gratitude.

It became clear that all past grievances between us were now fully resolved.

At last, the Ji-soo sitting across seemed to have digested her initial shock.

"I heard... you were tortured."

"Yes, I was. I even assisted as an aide."

"But I don't understand why you would want to pass your resentment to the next cycle's version of me. I'll believe you when you say Ji-won is a psychopath and that torture took place. But still, it's something that hasn't happened yet. At least, not from my perspective."

"Something that hasn't happened yet, you say." Dok-seo calmly sipped her coffee. "Did Mr. Park pass away?"

"What?"

"Your teacher, Park Woon-chul. The one who got bitten by zombies while trying to help our Baekam High School students."

“Ah, yes. He passed away.”

“And the senior students?”

“They survived, thanks to Undertaker here.”

Dok-seo’s eyes, which now carried the swampy green hue of a stagnant pond, narrowed. “That’s fortunate. Originally, all of them died, you see. The seniors, too.”

“They… What?”

“Not just the teacher, but also the seniors succumbed to the Anomaly. By the time I returned to the school, everything was over. I had no choice but to abandon them and attempt an escape.”

At that, there was no response.

“Ji-soo, this is something you might still consider ‘an event that hasn’t happened,’ at least not yet. But you’re grateful to Undertaker, aren’t you?”

“Yes…”

“That’s because you know. Even if the catastrophe didn’t occur in reality, you understand how it could have. That’s why you feel gratitude.”

Dok-seo set her coffee cup down with a *clink*. As the dark surface of the liquid rippled, her emotions mirrored the motion, trembling ever so slightly.

“Is it wrong to feel resentment? When crossing into the next cycle, Undertaker’s rescue of you will vanish. Are you telling me to instruct the next cycle’s version of you to forget gratitude, that it’s irrelevant to you, and to let it go? Perhaps some might do so.”

Dok-seo leaned forward, narrowing the gap between the two.

“But you are not that kind of person.”

Only then did Ji-soo seem to realize it. That the green eyes before

her did not carry the scent of leaves or tea but rather the stench of decay, festering endlessly.

“The reason you cannot feel resentment is simple. It is because you do not know.”

“Do not know...”

“Yes. You, the version of me from years ago, have no knowledge of the tragedies you might have endured. You can’t even imagine them. While you can hypothesize ‘the seniors might have died to zombies,’ you can’t fathom ‘falling into hell because of Ji-won.’”

Ji-soo flinched. Dok-seo had clasped her hand firmly.

“So please, learn. Ask questions. Listen to my answers. Then, decide. Will you carry my resentment? My grudge?”

Dok-seo—always one step behind me, the slowest prophet in the world, the Epimetheus to my Prometheus—began her story with the records from a previous cycle.[1]

There is an epilogue.

“There were countless children like me gathered there. The Misfortune Workshop, that’s what Ji-won called it.”

The tale of how she fell into hell.

“I was among the first-generation students to Awaken abilities. I was also the one who mastered Phantom Torture, the skill the godmother had so desperately desired. So every time she tortured other adoptees, I acted as her aide.”

The story of the seasons she spent in hell.

“My skin was peeled off. My teeth were pulled at 60-second intervals. To perform Phantom Torture, I first had to know that pain myself.”

Dok-seo did not let go of Ji-soo’s hand.

“It hurt. It hurt so much.”

I clenched my fists, watching the scene from the side.

“Will it be conveyed?”

In truth, I had prepared a Plan B in case Dok-seo failed.

“If I use the Tutorial Fairy’s dream powers, I can create an ultra-realistic dream. In that dream, I can make the Ji-soo of this cycle experience the events of the previous one.”

In other words, recreate the horrors of the Misfortune Workshop in a dream. But this idea was rejected by Ji-soo of the 703rd cycle.

Her reason was simple.

“I don’t want my younger self, the next cycle’s child, to endure the same pain as me.”

She didn’t wish to pass on her suffering and pain.

“Because it hurts too much. I just... I don’t want my life and emotions to fade into nothingness. I hope they’ll understand. I hope they’ll remember. Because that child is me.”

This was her sincere wish. A hope that was pure and clear like a chime, despite blooming from despair.

Yet I couldn’t help but harbor skepticism.

“Can emotions alone truly be conveyed without physical pain?”

Humans, after all, seem to only empathize with pain they’ve experienced firsthand. Even as I took on her wish, persuaded Dok-seo and Seo-rin, and orchestrated this meeting, I couldn’t shake my pessimism.

Then, it happened.

Something dripped onto the surface of the coffee.

“Ah...”

Who had made that sound?

It didn't matter. The voice belonged to one of them.

Tears were streaming from Ji-soo's black eyes.

"Huh?"

Ji-soo placed a hand over her chest.

We watched her, startled. She herself seemed unaware that she was crying.

"It hurts... It's not just because I empathize with your story. My heart aches. My brain throbs. I feel like vomiting."

Ji-soo wiped her tears.

"Somehow, I think I understand."

She brushed her hand across her face like a curtain, revealing her eyes once more. In that brief moment, her eyes had changed.

A second ago, they gleamed pure black. Now, they glowed a brilliant red.

"This... This is the emotion you feel, isn't it?"

I found myself speechless.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

Though not present in the café, the Saintess who shared my sight or Dok-seo's perspective spoke urgently.

[Ji-soo's eyes changed color. Her hair remains the same, but this must be—no, it definitely is—.]

Indeed.

At that moment, Ji-soo had Awakened.

In the previous cycle, Ji-won had artificially Awakened a child destined to die an ordinary person, molding her into his ideal through planned experiments.

Phantom Torture. The skill to vividly convey one's pain to others.

It was a manifestation of vengeance, born solely in the hypocritical route Ji-won pursued in the 703rd cycle.

But if the cycle changed? If Ji-soo of the 703rd cycle sought the help of a regressor like me, thereby influencing her next self?

What would Ji-soo become?

"Even with my chest burning like this..."

The answer unfolded before my eyes.

"You desperately told me everything, didn't you?"

Ji-soo tightened her grip on Dok-seo's hand, embracing her in a squeezing grip.

This would later be revealed as the condition for activating Ji-soo's new ability: physical contact.

"Yes, you're right. I didn't know your pain... the tragedies I might have endured."

Even now, she couldn't comprehend it, Ji-soo admitted.

"But your emotions are being conveyed fully. They press against my heart, so vividly."

"Ah."

"Thank you. For telling me."

Ji-soo took a deep breath. Tears, now tinged ruby red, flowed freely from her altered eyes.

For the past and future versions of herself.

Ji-soo cried for them both.

“I don’t know if I’ll get revenge on Ji-won like you want. I don’t know what kind of life I’ll lead. I can’t say right now.”

Her voice was a whisper.

“But I’ll never forget this feeling—*never*. I’ll carry it with me as I live on.”

Dok-seo—the vengeful revenant who had taken her own life in a now-erased timeline—watched her silently for a long moment.

Finally, she spoke.

“Yes.”

Ji-soo of the 703rd cycle smiled.

“That is enough.”

She closed her eyes.

On that day, the ability known as Phantom Torture, honed in a regressor’s timeline, disappeared forever. In its place, a new Awakening arose.

Empathic Resonance. A skill to fully feel another’s emotions.

In other words, “to suffer just as much as another”—an ability borne of shared pain.

That was the crimson name Kim Ji-soo now bore.

Footnotes:

1 - Epimetheus is the brother of Prometheus, the figure from Greek myth said to have gifted mankind with fire. While Prometheus (“foresight”) was known for being ingeniously clever, Epimetheus (“hindsight”) was seen as dull and thoughtless in his actions.

Prometheus and Epimetheus's names are also the source for the words "prologue" and "epilogue".

Chapter 298

The Exile IX

Sinnoa

“Hello, my name is Ji-soo. From now on, I will be serving as Team Leader Yu Ji-won’s direct disciple.”

A week after Ji-soo met me, I formally introduced her to Ji-won.

“Nice to meet you,” Ji-won said, offering a handshake with an emotionless expression. “I’ve heard much about you from His Excellency. I understand that in a previous cycle, I recognized your potential and helped develop it. Unearthing talent is the foundation of all endeavors, so you could say that I earned merit in a past life. However, the fact that my contributions translate into benefits for your recruitment rather than rewards for myself...

“How should I interpret this? Should I call it nepotism? Or perhaps a form of cronyism? Regardless, it seems clear that your current skills are insufficient to be accepted as a full-fledged member of the Regression Alliance. His Excellency must have entrusted me with your training for a reason. I look forward to working with you, Miss Kim.”

“I look forward to working with you as well. But... wow.” Ji-soo blinked several times as she shook Ji-won’s hand. “You really... feel like absolutely nothing.”

“?”

“If I had to describe it, it’s like tasteless water. No, there’s a faint metallic tang, like tap water.”

“??”

Ji-won tilted her head and looked in my direction. “Your Excellency, I think I’m being mocked right now.”

You think?

And so, the Ji-won–Ji-soo party was formed.

Coincidentally, removing the “Ji” from both their names created the word “won-soo,” the word for “enemies” in Korean. They were, quite literally, an enemy duo.

‘In many ways, they’re perfectly opposite as a mentor and mentee.’

One was an emotionless sociopath. The other was an emotional superconductor who could fully absorb others’ feelings through Empathic Resonance.

One had silver hair. The other, black.

One had blue eyes. The other, red.

‘They’re like a reversed-color decalcomania.’

Their only similarity was their tendency to carry forward their past selves in each cycle, yet even in this, their paths diverged.

Ji-won inherited the power and authority she had achieved through her abilities and accomplishments. Ji-soo, on the other hand, bore the weight of her hatred and guilt—accepting her history of being tortured by Ji-won and her crimes of killing seven ordinary people.

One chose the path to the skies, toward heaven. The other, a descent into the endless abyss, toward hell.

‘How ironic that she would adopt a child so diametrically opposed to herself.’

This too must be Ji-won’s karma.

Anyway, Ji-soo, the “soo” of the enemy duo, was assigned to the National Road Management Corps.

“Hmm…”

Noh Do-hwa, the individual who shared personnel authority over

the National Road Management Corps with me, glanced at Ji-soo while flipping through documents.

“Empathic Resonance, huh? It’s certainly a rare ability, but whether it’s impressive remains to be seen. Getting a job here at the National Road Management Corps isn’t exactly easy, you know. So... Do you have any combat prowess?”

“We share a deep connection from a past life, Commander Noh. Assigning this child to the National Road Management Corps will allow her to interact with Ji-won more frequently.”

“Oh. I knew I was the commander in this life, but I didn’t realize I had responsibilities in past lives too. Dealing with regressors means it’s not just a leash around my neck anymore—it’s like I’ve been sentenced to eternal damnation...”

She bore an expression of someone who inherited nothing but debt during a final will reading.

‘To hear about the lives of Ji-won and Ji-soo and still react like that... As expected, the king never understood the human heart. Well, given Do-hwa’s personality, I can see why she wouldn’t like this arrangement.’

Do-hwa had no interest in inheriting her past self. On the contrary, she was hostile toward the very idea of it.

Life was a one-time event. What did it matter if there was a past or future life? Her existence was tethered to the present moment.

That was Do-hwa’s philosophy—diametrically opposed to the worldview of regressors who could never escape the flow of reincarnation.

‘Come to think of it, Do-hwa and I are also opposites in many ways. Our hair and eye colors might be the same, but...’

I wasn’t in any position to lecture Ji-won while flaunting my own superiority.

I smirked wryly. “It’s fine. While she’s Ji-won’s direct disciple, I

only plan to make them roommates, not assign them to the same team."

"Oh? Then where do you plan to station her, if not in the operations command center...?"

"The counseling office."

Do-hwa raised an eyebrow. "The counseling office? To my knowledge, there's no such department in the National Road Management Corps..."

"That's correct. I'm about to create it."

I had been considering this for quite some time.

"Awakeners tend to have extremely fragile mental states, don't they?"

No, calling them "fragile" was inappropriate. A more accurate description would be "unstable."

"The root of an Awakener's power lies in their deep psychological scars. The stronger their abilities become, the deeper their wounds grow."

"That's odd," she mused. "I don't recall my mental state changing even when I crafted prosthetics..."

"That's why you're so weak, Commander Do-hwa. Your abilities haven't advanced at all."

"You little son of a bitch..."

If Do-hwa ever enhanced her Awakener abilities, she wouldn't stop at prosthetics or artificial limbs. She'd mass-produce cyborgs entirely composed of mechanical parts—a dystopia devoid of humanity, populated by beings with artificial intelligence and synthetic bodies.

But I digress.

“This dynamic is what drives Awakeners to fall to Corruption as their powers reach their peak. Their wounds consume them, destabilizing their mental state and compelling them to depend on others.”

“Can’t you heal them? You’re pretty good at it.”

“I’ll do so whenever I can, but I’m too close to my comrades,” I said with a shrug. “The trust I’ve built with them borders on worship. Honestly, even Yo-hwa and Ah-ryeon are treading dangerous ground.”

“Your knack for rubbing people the wrong way is truly something else…”

Studiously ignoring that jab, I placed a hand on Ji-soo’s shoulder. “This child, however, is perfectly suited for psychological counseling. In one cycle, the Saintess played the role of a counselor. But like me, she had a tendency to make people dependent on her, even unintentionally.”

“Hmm…”

“We’re too focused on diagnosing and resolving issues. Ji-soo, however, simply uses Empathic Resonance to feel exactly what the client feels.” I smiled. “It’s an extraordinary ability, don’t you think?”

The foundation of trust between a counselor and client ultimately hinged on one question: “Does this person truly understand my emotions?” To ensure a “yes” to that question, counselors typically relied on expert techniques and extensive time.

But Ji-soo?

“She doesn’t need all that. Her ability guarantees that she can perfectly feel and understand 100% of a client’s emotions. With that alone, Ji-soo has a fast track to becoming an SSS-class counselor.”[1]

Of course, she still needed experience and theory. Fortunately, as a regressor, I could provide her with plenty of both.

Do-hwa rested her chin on her hand. “This counseling office… Is this your first time implementing it?”

“Yes. Until now, the Saintess filled in as a pseudo-counselor using her Constellation status. This led to severe dependency issues among Awakeners in the Korean Peninsula.”

“That doesn’t sound entirely bad. But if that’s your decision…”

Thud.

Do-hwa stamped her seal on the documents.

“Fine. I’ll provide the necessary facilities and personnel. Do your best, Counseling Director… No, that’s too long. Let’s just call you Director.”

“Thank you. I’ll do my best.”

“Hmph…” Do-hwa spread her fingers, her black leather gloves clinging to their lengths like webbing on a frog. “Whether you take revenge on Ji-won or not is up to you. But don’t even think about touching me—not even in your dreams. The idea of having my emotions read disgusts me.”

One of the reasons I seldom used Mind Reading was because of people like Do-hwa. Back in the 579th cycle, she warned me she would quit her position as commander and return home if I ever used Mind Reading again.

“Understood. I’ll keep that in mind.”

And so, Ji-soo’s Counseling Office was established.

Although she was granted the title of Director within the National Road Management Corps, the counseling office itself wasn’t located in the Tower of Babel.

After all, the Tower of Babel was an intimidating place for most Awakeners to visit.

“Wow! Another business has been registered in the Tunnel!”

The counseling office, aptly named “Ji-soo” for its primary practitioner, was situated in the basement of the Inunaki Underwater Tunnel.

Ji-soo had set up her psychological therapy center at the very site where Ji-won had once operated the Misfortune Workshop in a previous cycle.

“To ruin people’s desires with a casino and then heal their minds with counseling... Secretary-General Undertaker’s schemes are truly terrifying...!”

I ignored the slander from Fairy No. 264.

With the help of the tutorial fairies, the counseling office’s interior was completed within half a day. Unlike the claustrophobic Misfortune Workshop, the external walls were replaced with glass, revealing the faint underwater scenery.

“This way, clients from not just Busan but also Seoul or Pyongyang can have an easier time visiting.”

“Thank you so much, for everything.”

“Don’t mention it. If you can ease the minds of Awakeners even a little, it will ultimately benefit me too.”

Looking back, the Inunaki Tunnel, initially encountered as a Japanese Anomaly, had undergone a remarkable transformation.

- Tunnel entrance: A casino operated by tutorial fairies, named the Dream Casino or Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land.

- Tunnel midsection: An underwater café called Azit, stretching from a depth of 100 meters to 1,200 meters. It was rated five stars out of five.

- Tunnel exit: Private facilities for me and my guild members, including a lobby and personal rooms. These areas were classified and off-limits to outsiders.

- Tunnel basement: Ji-soo's Awakener-exclusive counseling office, Ji-soo.

'I never imagined it would turn out like this.'

Reflecting on it, every facility I had established in the long underwater tunnel—excluding the guild lodgings—was designed to support people's mental well-being.

The casino? It provided survivors of the apocalypse with a form of dreamlike entertainment in a world that lacked any semblance of leisure.

The café? It gave Awakeners a clear goal amid the chaos of a collapsed civilization: leveling up through depth challenges to become the café's top patron.

The counseling office? Its purpose spoke for itself.

'Step by step, cycle by cycle, I'm making progress.'

This café, in particular, could be seen as the guiding spirit of its time.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride.

Of course, success didn't come overnight. As a novice counseling director, Ji-soo made her share of mistakes.

"The world is filled with so many emotions and such a wide array of minds."

On days when she counseled high-profile Awakeners like Yo-hwa or Seo-rin, Ji-soo would drag herself up to the Azit café, utterly exhausted.

"President Cheon's psyche... It's too complex. While the Great Witch Dang Seo-rin's mind was fascinating, President Cheon's was terrifying. I can't even comprehend how she maintains her cheerful facade every day."

A counselor wasn't supposed to share their personal impressions

with others. But she was still a beginner, so it was understandable.

Curiosity got the better of me.

“Who’s more difficult: Sim Ah-ryeon or Cheon Yo-hwa?”

After much groaning, Ji-soo finally let out a sigh. “Their challenges are completely different.”

Fair enough. Both of them were candidates for the Corrupted, with multiple world-ending events under their belts. Their mental landscapes would be formidable indeed.

“Excuse me.” Then, Ji-soo hesitated, staring into her coffee cup. “I’m sorry for making this request, but... can we do it again today?”

“Of course. Don’t worry about it.”

I reached out and held Ji-soo’s hand. Her face, weary from fatigue, gradually softened into a look of serenity.

To be honest, Ji-soo was using Empathic Resonance on me. Whenever her mind was worn down by counseling sessions, she would come to me for support.

Mental tuning, as I called it.

“I can feel it every time...” Ji-soo murmured. “Your emotions are so tranquil, Undertaker. But unlike Team Leader Yu’s neutral presence, yours feels transparent—like a blue hole. A blend of sky, water, and shimmering coral.”

“Who would’ve thought I’d receive compliments for my emotions?”

“I wasn’t expecting it either...” she admitted with a faint smile. “One day, I hope to reach a level where I can not only feel others’ emotions but also share my own.”

“Ah, so you’d combine Phantom Torture and Empathic Resonance?”

“Yes. And when that day comes... I want to make Team Leader Yu feel emotions.”

Her crimson eyes sparkled with determination.

“My previous cycle once said that the reason she couldn’t feel emotions was simply ignorance. One day, however distant, when I help her experience emotions... She might reevaluate the atrocities of the Misfortune Workshop. Perhaps, even in a different cycle, she could apologize to her adopted children.”

I thought Ji-soo’s declaration was as clear and pure as the waters she described.

Until that day came, Ji-soo would Awaken at the start of each cycle to face herself from the 703rd cycle. The wounds she endured. The wounds she inflicted. She wouldn’t look away but would confine herself to the basement of a certain tunnel.

Like still water.

But if the pool of Ji-soo in the 703rd cycle had stagnated and festered, the waters of subsequent cycles were different.

They were transparent, endlessly so, just like the blue holes she admired.

Hence, Ji-soo named her office not for the stagnant waters of a festering pool but for the still waters that remained calm despite storms beyond their reach and remained present despite droughts that threatened to sap them dry. By continuing to absorb and reflect the emotions of others, she aspired to one day bring abundance even to the driest deserts in the world—to Ji-won, who had never shed a single tear.

“Until that day...”

“Hmm?”

Ji-soo shyly fidgeted with her fingers. “Until that day comes, may I call you godfather?”

“Godfather?”

“Yes. You gave me a new life when I would’ve died nameless. If

Team Leader Yu was my godmother in the past... then I think you're my godfather now."

I see.

To think that my first ever goddaughter would end up paired with Ji-won. Life, even for a regressor, was full of strange twists.

"Alright. I'll be your godfather. And when you meet Ha-yul, make sure to address her as your older sister."

Ji-soo smiled brightly.

"Yes. Please take care of me... Godfather."

Afterword to the epilogue.

"Your Excellency, I heard the news. You've taken over as godfather to Ji-soo, whom I once adopted as my goddaughter in a previous cycle. By this logic, isn't it fair to interpret this as an indirect proposal to me? Your Excellency, this is troublesome. There's no need to express your trust and affection for me in such a manner—I've always understood your feelings. However, I am surprised. To think that Your Excellency harbored such personal emotions for me... I apologize for failing to grasp your heart, Your Excellency. As an unworthy disciple and a mere sociopath, I, Yu Ji-won, humbly ask for your forgiveness."

"Ji-won."

"Yes, Your Excellency?"

"Shut up."

"Okay."

The end.

Footnotes:

1 - Editor's note: "SSS-class [X]" is a common enough reference in webnovels, but likely still a nod to the author's other work, *SSS-Class Suicide Hunter*. The translation team for this novel also works on that comic here on Reaper, so do check out our work there if you're interested.

Chapter 299

The Inheritor I

Sinnoa

This might seem like an abrupt question, but have you ever written a will?

Probably not a common experience, I'd wager.

The title of "will holder" wasn't particularly hard to obtain, but there was no compelling reason to go out of your way to earn it. For some, it might even feel unnecessarily ominous.

"Year-end is will-updating season."

"Everyone! If there are any parts you need to add or remove, don't procrastinate out of laziness. Please revise them before the year ends!"

But in an apocalypse where foreboding was practically a passive trait, circumstances were slightly different.

"The cost to store a will is only 10,000 won a year!"

It was the end of the year. White snow had piled up in the square like whipped cream on a cake. Sometimes, however, black or crimson snow would fall, changing the type of this metaphorical "cake" entirely. Amid this surreal scene, the chiming of bells resonated.

When someone mentions the ringing of year-end bells, one might immediately think of the Salvation Army. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case here.

Those dressed in black uniforms, ringing handbells, were members of the National Road Management Corps' Forbidden Books Department.

“Write your wills! Everyone, write your wills!”

“Sudden deaths, deaths caused by Anomalies, unburied corpses. To prepare for all sorts of deaths, leave behind a will for your loved ones!”

“Please fill out the name, profession, workplace, and residence of the will’s recipient as accurately as possible! Every year, the number of wills that are undeliverable due to incorrect information increases!”

Ding-ding-ding-ding.

As if this world didn’t already lack an ounce of good fortune, the National Road Management Corps was spreading their own brand of cheer: “Hey everyone! You’re all going to die anyway!”

Truly, the pinnacle of festive year-end vibes.

Could anyone really adapt better to this ruined era than the Corps, though? Ordinary people walked past the square, their expressions completely indifferent.

Reflexive defiance of government order had long ago become a staple of Korean culture. Blame the ancestors for that one.

Next to me, Dok-seo lowered her chin. She probably thought she looked serious.

“A will, huh? For a writer like me, such a document is unnecessary. Every literary work I publish serves as my will to the world.”

So was she essentially publishing a will every time she discontinued a serialized novel?

Suddenly, I pictured a scene where heirs of a conglomerate gathered to hear a will reading, only for someone to announce, “Sorry, the chairman stopped writing here and left it incomplete.” The heirs punishing the chairman to posthumous punishment would be understandable, really.

On SG Net, readers constantly inquired about Dok-seo’s parents’

well-being in the comments section, forming legions thousands strong. Nevertheless, she remained unbothered. Her nerves were made of steel, a quality worth admiring.

“By the way, did you write a will too, mister? Well, if a regressor dies, that run’s a failure, but the people left behind still have to survive, right?”

“Of course.”

Would the world reset to the regression point upon my death? Or would it continue and reboot at some later time? This question remained one of the great unsolvable mysteries.

Personally, I leaned toward the latter option.

Why? Even in Go Yuri’s unconscious world, the echoes of Heavenly Flame’s memories lingered—memories of losing the Undertaker and Ha-yul.

“But I don’t write my will as a document.”

“Huh? Then what? Do you record it as a video?”

“No. Videos are too easily corrupted by Anomalies. My wills are made using far safer and more advanced methods.”

“What kind of method?” Dok-seo, ever the writer, asked in a tone brimming with curiosity.

Thus, I brought her back to the hideout to show her.

“Here. Meet your new acquaintance: Will Executor - Undertaker Unit 05: Dok-seo’s Exclusive Model.”

Suddenly, Dok-seo was very quiet.

“Hello, Dok-seo. If you’re hearing this voice, it means I’ve died under certain circumstances.”

Dok-seo stared at the miniature Undertaker doll, identical to me in every detail except its size. She remained silent for a long time

before finally speaking.

“Mister…”

“What?”

“You’re a crazy lunatic bastard.”

As revealed in the previous story, chaos always followed whenever the Saintess met a sudden death during a run. Ji-won, for example, would take her newfound freedom from worrying about appearances and go berserk, establishing a torture factory.

Naturally, this raised a pertinent question:

Q: If this much turmoil occurs when the Saintess dies, what would happen if I were to die in an accident?

This question served as a litmus test to gauge the protagonist’s personality across all regression stories.

A1: Who cares what happens to the world after I die? Let’s hurry up and move to the next run.

Sadly, many regressors chose this answer. These individuals had not a shred of conscience despite making the world so reliant on them that it couldn’t function without them.

Here’s hoping your worldline doesn’t fall prey to such regressors.

A2: If I’ve made others dependent on me, I must take responsibility. Prepare for the worst and devise countermeasures for a hypothetical “world without the regressor.”

As someone with the code name Undertaker and who was known for his responsibility and ethics, I naturally chose the latter answer.

The result? The doll I had just shown Dok-seo.

“So basically, since Ha-yul is good at carving dolls, you had a bunch

made to look exactly like you and stored your will in them?"

"Oh, come on, Dok-seo. The doll's functionality doesn't stop there. It's a technological marvel, the culmination of Awakened abilities."

"What the hell are you saying?"

Undertaker Unit 05 doll's jaw creaked open.

"Dok-seo, I apologize for always pressuring you to update your serializations. I know Infinite Metagame has sapped your writing motivation."

The lifelike response from Unit 05 caused Dok-seo's face to contort. "This is so creepy!"

"Hmph." I allowed myself a smug smile. "As you can see, the doll has an AI embedded within, modeled after me. Credit goes to Yo-hwa for the programming."

"So... Yo-hwa used NPC Creation to input behavior patterns into the doll?"

"That's right. We scavenged anonymous corpses nearby, harvested their brains, and attached them. While complex behaviors are impossible, they can recite pre-programmed lines with ease."

"Damn..."

"Now, even if I meet an unfortunate end, a substitute will always be by your side, Dok-seo."

"Well, don't act all romantic about it! This is too creepy to even keep— No, hold on. Mister, you called this Unit 05?"

I nodded. "Correct. It's your exclusive model."

"Don't tell me you've made similar dolls for other people?"

Naturally. It was impossible to divide a human Undertaker among everyone. But doll Undertakers could transcend such limitations.

“One for every household!” I bragged. “Meet Unit 01, the Saintess’s exclusive model.”

“If pretending to be a Constellation becomes too much, let me know anytime. I’ll assist you.”

“This is Unit 02, assigned to Commander Noh Do-hwa.”

“Take a break. You always overwork yourself. Don’t forget to stretch for 10 minutes after every 50 minutes of sitting.”

“Unit 08 belongs to Seo Gyu. In terms of physical performance, it’s the best among all models.”

“One more set! You can push harder! Heavyweights won’t build your body—drop the weight and switch to a drop set, Seo Gyu! Focus on proper form and breathing!”

“And over there are the exclusive models for Seo-rin, Yo-hwa, Ha-yul, and Ah-ryeon.”

“Seriously, what kind of regressor makes dolls for every character like this?” Dok-seo groaned as she surveyed my collection of dolls. “Also, the ones for Ha-yul and Yo-hwa are oddly high-quality...”

“They helped with the manufacturing. Naturally, their models turned out better.”

“That’s just you being biased...”

Dok-seo removed her cap and scratched her head vigorously.

Legend has it that scalp massages can stimulate one’s brain. Perhaps thanks to her overgrown nails, which furrowed trenches into her scalp, Dok-seo’s previously fatigued and contempt-filled eyes sparkled with sudden inspiration.

“Mister! Let’s run an experiment!”

“Experiment?”

“Yeah! You don’t know what the world looks like after your death,

which is why you made these substitutes, right?”

“This is not some trivial matter! These dolls are the pinnacle of advanced technology—”

“By directly observing what happens, you could come up with even better countermeasures!”

“…”

Ignoring my silent protest, Dok-seo whispered thus in my ear:

“Let’s fake your death, mister.”

“…”

[Everyone.]

[I’m addressing all members of the Regression Alliance at once.]

[Please remain calm and listen carefully.]

[Mr. Undertaker has disappeared.]

[It’s presumed that he is dead.]

I did it.

I pulled the trigger on this grand deception.

Chapter 300

The Inheritor II

Sinnoa

Today, the Undertaker died. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know.

The apocalypse at the turn of one century into another begins with the opening lines of a novel that few in this almost bygone era can still understand.[1]

Following the example of Admiral Yi Sun-sin, I initiated the meta of "Do not announce my death."[2] With exception to Dok-seo, the informant, and the Saintness, the recommender, no one knew that my death had been faked.

"I'll be in your care for a while."

"Of course. Please use this bed during your stay."

This meant that I had to vacate the Inunaki Tunnel—where Ha-yul, Ah-ryeon, Ji-soo, and others resided—as soon as possible. The place chosen as my hideout was none other than the Saintess's home: a 1.5-story single-family house built at an angle on a hillside in Dongbingo-dong, Yongsan.

There was, of course, a method to this particular madness. Several of them, in fact.

Would the accomplice hide me? YES

Are there few houses around, meaning fewer potential witnesses? YES

Ever since the "Bright Night" incident devastated the area south of the Han River, 99% of the residents north of the river had also fled. Even the Han River basin was infamously desolate. The population density in this area could rival that of Siberia, known as "home" only to oddballs like the Saintess.

Are very few friends dropping by to hang out, greatly reducing the chances of being discovered? YES

Surprisingly, the Saintess had even fewer friends than Ah-ryeon. While Ah-ryeon at least enjoyed her roommate life of bickering with Dok-seo, the Saintess...

Well, she had none.

She was a lone wolf. A solitary predator. A possessor of adamantium-level human strength— No, let's stop there. It's just getting sadder.

'How can someone not have a single friend?!'

Doubly so since her personality wasn't anywhere close to the shambles that passed for a personality in Do-hwa.

As I listened to the Saintess delve into a detailed explanation of the layout of her house, I suddenly felt a pang of sadness.

"There's plenty of extra water in the rainwater tank, so feel free to use it... Mr. Undertaker? Are you listening?"

"Oh, yes. I am listening, but I've been to your house many times before, so you don't need to explain."

"...Right. No matter the timeline, we've held study sessions here every Wednesday, so from your perspective, this is a place you've visited thousands of times."

The Saintess eyed me as if seeing me with fresh eyes. Though it was just a slight droop of her eyelids of approximately 3 degrees, I had maxed out my Saintess Expression Reading skill. I didn't need Mind Reading to understand her.

"Of course, please refrain from accessing SG Net using your account," she added eventually. "Seo Gyu will notice immediately."

"Tch. This is ridiculous. Millions of readers are waiting for the sequel to my *Romance of the Three Kingdoms: Gongsun Zan's Story*!"

“They’ll wait. Maybe even until the day the world ends.”

This was absurd. My masterpiece, which I had maintained at an average of 2,000 views per chapter by using multiple alt-accounts with Seo Gyu’s help, was now ranked in the top 3!

Main comments

- Why does this trash keep making it to the best list??

- Seriously, SG Net must be using bots. There’s no other explanation.

That day, my isolated life with the Saintess began. With, however, the added twist of hidden cameras of our fellow Awakeners.

“As expected—or perhaps I should say, unsurprisingly—Noh Do-hwa continues to perform her duties without any change despite hearing of your death.”

“Really, no reaction at all?”

“Yes. Among your colleagues, she’s the only one who hasn’t spoken to the memorial doll or shown any indication that she might in the future. Oh, though she did sip Château d’Yquem alone last night.”

The Saintess’s real-time updates had my chest brimming with a strange emotion, a fluttering in my heart.

‘This is more fun than I thought!’

I did feel some guilt over deceiving my colleagues about such a significant matter. But still, within that, like a lotus blooming from muddy water, I felt a faint but unmistakable pleasure.

‘Is this the view of the world that the Saintess usually sees?’

Newfound rediscovery of myself:

Humans are said to have three basic desires: sleep, sex, and hunger. If I were to add one more, it would be the desire to sneak glances at others’ reactions.

“Who’s the greatest risk?”

“Cheon Yo-hwa. The air around her is dangerous. Based solely on my intuition, I predict she’ll Fall within the next week.”

“Yikes.” Isn’t that too soon?

“Surprisingly, Dang Seo-rin is holding up well,” the Saintess continued. “She’s currently meeting with Do-hwa to discuss how to handle your funeral.”

“Oh…”

“Lee Ha-yul was also in quite the precarious condition until yesterday, but thanks to Sim Ah-ryeon, she’s improved.”

“Huh?” Ah-ryeon did that?

“‘The guild leader hasn’t disappeared. He’s just gone ahead and is waiting for us.’ If you ignore the missing stuttering, that’s how she explained it to Ha-yul.”

I gasped.

“‘Whether you meet the guild leader again with a dejected face or in good health is up to you, Ha-yul.’ Hearing that was what pushed Ha-yul to pull herself together and regain her composure.”

Ah-ryeon…! I knew I could count on you, Ah-ryeon! When it comes to tenacity, you’re truly the best in the Three Kingdoms! Your Guild Leader is proud of you!

“However.”

“However?”

“I’m a bit worried that her words stem from genuine belief. She seems to truly, literally, believe that ‘the guild leader isn’t dead.’ She’s completely ignoring anyone who talks about your death. Hmm. It seems she’ll refuse to attend the funeral itself.”

Well, how can anyone be perfect? Let’s just gloss over it.

“As for Yu Ji-won—”

“Ah, you don’t need to tell me about her. It’s pretty obvious.”

“Okay.”

I thought up a comprehensive evaluation a week after Undertaker’s (fake) death.

‘Surprisingly, it’s not bad.’

It wasn’t terrible.

Sure, some groups of people collectively lost their minds and wrought havoc over the disappearance of one regressor, but overall, it was passable.

‘As expected, Do-hwa and Seo-rin are working together to hold the center. Since Busan is running smoothly, the ripple effects on other cities aren’t as severe as I thought.’

To pat myself on the back a bit, my eye for talent was spot on.

‘Of course, I have to consider that I’ve been running around putting out fires without being noticed by others…’

Though I was in hiding at the Saintess’s home, I continued to roam the desolate areas, stomping out Anomalies. The Saintess would immediately notify me via Telepathy if I were at any risk of encountering other Awakeners. As for ordinary people, I avoided them on my own.

‘All the effort I put into building the system is paying off!’

Indeed. The Korean Peninsula was creaking along, but somehow managing to sail smoothly.

“Yo-hwa has started to go berserk.”

Except for one place. Sejong City.

“Currently, the Awakeners on the Korean Peninsula are divided into two factions. First, the south. The faction that organized your funeral, Mr. Undertaker.”

Entry Number 1: The Funeral Faction

Members: Noh Do-hwa, Dang Seo-rin, Yu Ji-won, Seo Gyu

“Next, the north. Yo-hwa’s Sejong City and Ah-ryeon’s Pyongyang City are rapidly growing closer. Naturally, they view Mr. Undertaker’s funeral as invalid.”

Entry Number 2: The Anti-Funeral Faction

Members: Cheon Yo-hwa, Sim Ah-ryeon, Lee Ha-yul, Oh Dok-seo

“Wait, why is Dok-seo involved with...?”

“Hmm. Maybe because the north is a coalition of more mentally unstable people? Considering Dok-seo’s preferences... Besides, all of Dok-seo’s close friends are in the north. She doesn’t have many friends, aside from Ah-ryeon and Ha-yul,.”

Why do most of my colleagues struggle with human relationships? I couldn’t wrap my brain around it.

In any case, the conflict over my funeral was intensifying. It was worthy of being called the modern-day revival of the Yeongnam and Honam debate.

“And there’s a neutral faction. Though it doesn’t hold much significance in terms of the power balance.”

Final Entry Number 3: The Neutral Faction

Members: Saintess, Sword Marquess, Kim Ji-soo. That’s it.

“Actually, if the Saintess were to side with either faction, the balance would shift significantly. The same goes for the old grandpa, Sword Marquess.”

“Isn’t calling Sword Marquess an old man a bit of a stretch now

since he underwent rejuvenation?"

"Just as I shouldn't be called an old man," I acknowledgely sagely. "That's a reasonable point."

"I'll revise my statement. Sword Marquess is younger than you, Mr. Undertaker, so it should be hard for you to call him an old man."

"There's a path we must take, no matter how difficult."

"That path seems nonexistent for me. Perhaps the two of us can't be grouped together as 'we.'"

I was hurt.

"Anyway, I'm not easily swayed."

"Is that so?" I asked hollowly.

"Yes. Ah-ryeon and others are well aware that I am the true identity of many Constellations. If I were to side with the Funeral Faction, the Anti-Funeral Faction wouldn't hesitate to expose the truth about the Constellations."

"Ah."

"Then it would be difficult to prevent the collapse of public order on the Korean Peninsula. Once lost, the trust of the Constellations is impossible to regain. From my perspective, it's better to remain neutral."

My god. Is this how a perfectly balanced game is made?

"Honestly, in terms of fighting force, the Funeral Faction, a coalition of the National Road Management Corps and Samcheon World, is overwhelming..."

"But in terms of cohesion, the Anti-Funeral Faction is far superior. Cheon Yo-hwa, the student council president. Sim Ah-ryeon, the Saintess of the North. Both have absolute support and act like the leaders of a fanatical group."

Not to mention, the Anti-Funeral Faction functioned like the northern frontier lords. They served as the first line of defense against monster waves descending from the north or various Anomalies invading the Korean Peninsula.

‘Of course, the role of the National Road Management Corps in stomping out Anomalies within the peninsula is equally important…’

Which faction is more necessary for the Korean Peninsula?

In this battle of legitimacy, neither side was willing to back down.

“Ah-ryeon’s influence is especially enormous.”

“…To that extent?”

“Yes. Unlike other Awakeners, Ah-ryeon visibly and directly heals the wounded. All Awakeners within the Anti-Funeral Faction’s sphere believe they owe their lives to Ah-ryeon.”

As for Do-hwa? She was a typical bureaucratic talent. She didn’t engage in propaganda. Compared to Ah-ryeon, who made flowers bloom wherever she stepped on the battlefield, she inevitably fell short in terms of “splendor.”

“At least Seo-rin enjoys overwhelming recognition and popularity in the Busan area, so she can hold her own. The further you get from Busan, the more Ah-ryeon’s reputation dominates.”

“The world is truly messed up…”

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing.”

The signs of division were clear. The problem was the lack of a mediator to resolve the situation.

Just look at Seo-rin and Yo-hwa—their personalities were polar opposites.

Do-hwa was even more extreme. The only members who liked Do-hwa on a personal level were Dok-seo and Ha-yul.

The one who had gathered all these diverse personalities, built connections through regression, and somehow brought them together under the banner of the “Korean Peninsula Awakeners Alliance” was none other than me.

‘If Ji-soo becomes more established as a psychological counselor, she might be able to act as a mediator...’

But that was still far off. She lacked experience and know-how. We would need dozens of regression cycles to gather enough data at least.

In the end...

“Yo-hwa has made her move.”

Of all times, on Christmas Eve.

Even in the apocalypse, where the meaning of holidays had almost vanished, people’s guard was slightly lowered during this time.

“She led elite troops out of the Inunaki Tunnel and launched a surprise attack on Busan. She’s secured Sword Marquess.”

Yo-hwa...!

In a situation with no mediator, the balance would tip based on who controlled the food supply, and thus, by the very act of securing Sword Marquess, victory was assured. Even in my absence, she had calculated this perfectly...!

On top of that, having Ah-ryeon, Ha-yul, and Dok-seo, all of whom knew the secret passages of the Inunaki Tunnel, on her side made for the perfect setup for a surprise attack...!

Why does your mind work at a cheetah’s speed for things like this, Yo-hwa?!

You’re already the boldest among us, however unnecessary that

distinction is, with how you jump into action once a decision is made...!

This Teacher is sad!

“Oh. Just now, Seo-rin declared war on Baekhwa Girls’ High in the name of the Samcheon World guild leader. The declaration of war has been posted on SG Net.”

“...”

“The Eastern Holy State, which was allied with Baekhwa Girls’ High, immediately declared war on Samcheon World. Samcheon World has issued a mobilization order to all guilds under the Korean Peninsula Awakeners Alliance.”

“...”

“The National Road Management Corps, which acted as the sponsor of the Korean Peninsula Awakeners Alliance, naturally declared war on the Eastern Holy State.”

“...”

“Oh. Ji-won had prepared a declaration of war in advance for this situation. Should I read it? It’s been translated into Korean, Japanese, English, French, and Latin. It’s quite a masterpiece.”

Breaking News. Here to you live on Christmas Eve, 3 seconds before the collapse of the Korean Peninsula!

Footnotes:

1 - This is in reference to the opening lines of Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger* or *The Stranger*, a novel which centers around the protagonist finding peace and happiness in the indifference of the universe following his mother’s death: “Today, Maman died. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know.”

2 - Another reference to a quote, this time Admiral Yi's final, dying words: "The battle is at its height. Beat my war drums. Do not announce my death."

Chapter 301

The Inheritor III

Sinnoa

Just as the Southern and Northern factions—the Funeral faction and the Anti-Funeral faction—were about to clash in a decisive battle, the Saintess broke her quiet neutrality and finally made her move. As if she had been waiting for this moment, she sent a telepathic message to all the key members.

Everyone, stop what you're doing. I've come to end this war.

The Saintess's declaration wasn't anywhere near as domineering in tone, of course, but the message was similar in effect. The two factions that had been ready to blow each other's heads off were left with no choice but to lower their fists.

After all, the Saintess was an absolute powerhouse with the abilities of Time Stop, Clairvoyance, and Telepathy. The reason she had remained silent until now was solely to protect the peace of the Korean Peninsula. If she were to join the battle, risking the exposure of the Constellations' true identities, the balance of the battlefield would tip in an instant.

"However, this doesn't mean the conflict is completely resolved. We've only managed to secure an hour-long ceasefire," the Saintess said with an emotionless yet somehow triumphant tone. "Once time is up, the fighting will immediately resume. That is why you need to step in now, Mr. Undertaker."

"Me?"

"I've stopped the conflict for now, so you should use this time to intervene and reveal to the world that you didn't actually die."

"Saintess, are you a demon?"

The Saintess tilted her head, her face as innocent as a child's.

That made it even more terrifying. She genuinely believed that the key players in this pandemonium would accept my suddenly appearing on the battlefield and saying, “Surprise! It was all a hidden camera prank! Teehee☆ Did I scare you?”

Yes, sometimes, the purity of an angel is no different from the cruelty of a demon—

“No, even I’m not that naive,” she said, stopping my thoughts in their tracks. “In all likelihood, Mr. Undertaker, you will face the fiercest ire and scorn of your comrades. Should the worst-case scenario come to be, you might even be ex-communicated.”

Shouldn’t I be more worried about being physically dismembered over basic ex-communication?

“Wait a minute. You know that, and yet you’re still urging me to go out there?” I countered, balking. “Why?”

“Hmm.”

The Saintess’s indifferent gaze swept over my shoulders, elbows, hips, and knees. Coincidentally, those were the parts that would look nice if they were cleanly severed. A chill ran down my spine.

“Because your relationships and physical health being put at risk is better than innocent lives being lost,” she concluded. “You have to give what you can and let go of what you must.”

In other words, regardless of what role I played—Undertaker or otherwise—the safety of the Korean Peninsula would always, absolutely take precedence above all else!

Goosebumps slithered across my skin. Could this really be the personality of someone who held the title of Saintess? Perhaps it was this very cold-hearted nature that led her to falling into Corruption faster than anyone else.

“Mr. Undertaker, four minutes have already passed,” the Saintess urged. “If you use the passage under the suspension bridge, you’ll reach the Inunaki Tunnel quickly. But given that tensions are high, you need to intervene as soon as possible.”

“If I go there, I’ll die.”

“Maybe. But if you don’t go, Dang Seo-rin or Cheon Yo-hwa might die.”

A groan escaped my lips.

What should I do? What should I do?

‘Should I go with the scenario that I was briefly kidnapped by an unknown Outer God and barely managed to escape? Yeah, I can manage that. With my acting skills, I can even deceive the heavens!’

Yes, no matter how you sliced it, it was all the fault of the Anomalies at the end of the day.

Just as I was about to pull out this all-purpose excuse that proved infallible in our bleak, apocalyptic times, something caught my eye. On the Saintess’s computer, beneath the table surrounded by fish tanks, there was a decoration that didn’t fit the interior at all.

Executor of Wills – Undertaker01: Saintess’s Exclusive Model

It was a doll that replicated my appearance and physique down to the very last detail. If you carefully manipulated your Aura to act as a fuel supply, the doll would automatically output my voice in recorded lines.

I stared at the doll, which had been deactivated and was lying there lifelessly, and the moment our eyes met, a bolt of realization struck me.

“That’s it!”

“Huh?”

“Saintess! I’ve found a way to stop the fight between the Funeral faction and the Anti-Funeral faction without getting dismembered!”

The Saintess tilted her head again. “If you’re suggesting that you take turns serving everyone for a year, I can only advise you to reconsider Ah-ryeon’s personality…”

“That would just be a different kind of hell. I’m not that foolish. Let’s go with a more traditional method.”

“Traditional?”

I looked her dead in the eye. “Saintess. Have you ever watched Korean dramas?”

In the dark depths of the Inunaki Tunnel where the Funeral faction and the Anti-Funeral faction had set up opposing barricades, a clear voice suddenly rang out.

[Everyone, please listen to me for a moment.]

It was the Saintess’s voice. Of course, not everyone was allowed to hear it live—that right was reserved for the members of the Regression Alliance stationed in each faction, such as Do-hwa and Yo-hwa.

Seo-rin was an exception. She wasn’t ostracized for not joining the Regression Alliance. She was just transported to the rear after being injured during the battle.

[Don’t be alarmed.]

[The Undertaker has been found.]

“What?”

“Huh?”

Confusion echoed back at her from across the battle line, and a commotion broke out in both factions, who had been eagerly waiting for the ceasefire to end.

If it had been anyone else speaking, they would have dismissed it as nonsense, but the trust the Saintess inspired was as valuable as gold-standard medication during the COVID-19 pandemic. After all, it was the Saintess who had guaranteed that the Undertaker had gone missing, which led to this mess in the first place.

Ji-won was the first to regain her composure, according to the Saintess's later testimony.

"I always knew His Excellency was safe. His Excellency is the center of the world, the salt of the earth. If someone like him had passed away, the world would have collapsed immediately. The fact that we're still alive proves his grace."

She received glares from everyone without discrimination between factions.

As a reminder, Ji-won had the Mini-Map ability, so she knew full well that I was alive. Even without any hints from the Saintess or me, she had played along with my act without a single misstep.

At this point, it was starting to get scary.

As the tunnel grew colder, Do-hwa spoke up with a smirk.

"Well, it was a disappearance from the start, not a death. But if he's alive, why hasn't he shown up yet? What kind of nonsense has he been up to...?"

[There's a reason for that.]

"Oh, I'm already looking forward to how heart-wrenching that reason will be. My tear ducts are ready to burst..."

[Everyone, come to my place. Mr. Undertaker is waiting here too.]

A short while later, the members of the Regression Alliance gathered one by one at the Saintess's residence. When they saw me lying on the bed, they each cried out in their own way.

"T-Teacher!"

Yo-hwa, who had the fastest legs, rushed over and grabbed my shoulders.

"A-Are you okay? Teacher?"

"He was found in the Void," the Saintess said.

“He was already unconscious when found. He responds to external stimuli, but he doesn’t seem to recognize me. You can think of him as being in a vegetative state.”

“A… vegetative state…”

“More accurately, you can think of it as amnesia.”

I blinked at the flustered Cheon Yo-hwa and said, “I’m sorry, but who are you? Do you know me?”

Yes, that’s right. I pulled out the cliché of amnesia, a time-honored tradition in countless K-dramas. No, in creative works worldwide!

“Hmm, this is strange,” Ji-won, who never hesitated to prove she was the top dog in any situation, chimed in. “I thought His Excellency the Undertaker had Complete Memory. But amnesia? Isn’t that the exact opposite?”

“Yes, that’s why I was surprised too,” the Saintess replied. Since we had already coordinated our stories, her response was smooth.

Above all, the Saintess was a professional loner who used Time Stop to practice her lines before she spoke to another human being! There was no risk of anything in her tone or words giving her away!

“Last I saw him, Mr. Undertaker mentioned that he was going on a business trip to track an Outer God. I’m cautiously speculating that this Outer God might have interfered with his Complete Memory.”

“This can’t be.”

“An Outer God powerful enough to erase even His Excellency’s ability… Just how strong is it?”

Murmurs filled the air.

I continued to play the fool, pretending not to remember anything. It was truly a performance of a lifetime—especially given the dubious dagger-eyes Do-hwa was shooting my way. I had to put even more effort into my acting.

- Dad.

Ha-yul approached the bed and clung to my legs. Her Aura wavered, giving her voice output a trembling quality.

- Dad... As long as you're alive, that's enough. That's all that matters.

"Th-that's right, Ha-yul." Ah-ryeon crouched by the bedside and patted Ha-yul's back. "As long as the guild leader is safe— Right, it's a huge relief. I-I told you, didn't I? If we believe, the guild leader will definitely return."

Ha-yul sniffled, wiping her tears.

- Yes, you're back, and that's all that matters.

My conscience!

My conscience hurts!

And then, last and maybe least was Dok-seo, staring at me from the back with a hint of some inscrutable emotion playing across her face. Her eyes seemed to say, *Mister, do you really have to go this far?*

Whenever I thought about just who caused this mess, the urge to beat her up and do so much more overwhelmed me.

If I ever fall for Oh Dok-seo's sweet talk again, I swear I'll quit being a regressor. Seriously.

"Ah, s-so, Teacher," Yo-hwa stuttered. "Are you going to stay like this, not remembering us? Huh? Will you recover in the next cycle?"

"Calm down, everyone," the Saintess said calmly. "Although I didn't anticipate this outcome, Mr. Undertaker always prepared for the possibility of something happening to him."

"Teacher did...?"

"Yes. As you all know, what Mr. Undertaker feared most was his

mind being Corrupted. A situation where his perception was distorted."

Everyone nodded in agreement. The people gathered here had heard my warnings to beware of *that* pink entity dozens, if not hundreds, of times.

"And the amnesia Mr. Undertaker is experiencing is undoubtedly a form of perception distortion. He has prepared for this situation meticulously."

"Ah...!"

"Moreover, the countermeasure is something you're all familiar with."

Under everyone's gaze, the Saintess pointed to a corner of the living room. There, sitting quietly in its display was the Executor of Wills – Undertaker01: Saintess's Exclusive Model.

"The dolls he gave you—they contain memories of each of you. You could think of them as backup external hard drives."

"Th-then?"

"Yes. If you gather all the Executor of Wills dolls in one place and connect them to Mr. Undertaker, his amnesia can be cured."

Exclamations of admiration filled the room.

"As expected of His Excellency the Undertaker. I always wondered why he recorded his will in dolls instead of writing it down. So he thought this far ahead."

Actually, no.

The dolls didn't have any function like that. They were just simple dolls that mimicked my voice.

"I-I really... It's just such a relief. When Teacher suddenly asked me to use NPC Creation on the doll, I-I thought, 'Teacher seems fine, but there must be something wrong with his brain.' But in fact,

Teacher had it all planned out!”

Actually, no.

More importantly, being treated like my mental cognizance wasn’t all there by Yo-hwa of all people had this teacher starting to doubt our student council president’s objectivity.

“Th-that’s right. I also thought the guild leader might have a doll fetish... I’m so glad the guild leader isn’t just a pervert. Right, Dok-seo?”

“Huh? Oh, um, uh-huh! That’s right! Yep, there’s no way Mister would give out 1:1 scale dolls of himself to people around him without any thought! He’s not a lunatic!”

Dok-seo, I’ll deal with you later.

Anyway, my allies quickly made round trips to and back from their quarters with their dolls in tow. The bed was lined with dolls upon dolls that looked exactly like me. Seeing this, Noh Do-hwa muttered, “No matter how you look at it, this looks like a suspicious ritual of the Void...”

“Please restrain yourself, Commander Noh. By the way, only your doll seems to be covered in dust.”

“What’s so pretty about this creepy doll that I should take care of it? It’s even creepier that everyone else has been diligently maintaining their dolls. Sorry, but please stay away from me...”

Whoosh!

A magic circle formed under the bed. The extraordinary light made the comrades instinctively step back.

“Oh! His Excellency’s magic is activating!”

“Hmm. There’s something scribbled on the magic circle. Team Leader Yu, can you read it...?”

“It’s runes. My apologies. I can read Latin or Greek, but runes are

beyond me.”

Of course she couldn’t read them. The runes were just “magic” text I scribbled randomly.

The magic circle that was bright enough to fill the living room with light was actually the manifestation of Aura I had secretly leaked under the blanket.

The Aura mastery I had built up over hundreds of cycles finally proved its full use here. The magic circle moved in three-dimensional geometric patterns, creating an ominous atmosphere—and eventually exploded, converging into my body.

“Ugh?!”

Now was the time for my Academy Award-worthy acting skills to shine.

I clutched my head as if suffering from a severe headache.

“Where am I...?”

“T-Teacher! Are you awake?!”

“Yo-hwa...? What’s going on?”

“Teacher!” Yo-hwa hugged me tightly. “Waaah! Teacher, I-I thought you were dead! Y-you disappeared into the Void! They said you were missing! They said you were likely dead, and I...!”

“Ah... I see. I understand what happened.” I smiled warmly like a Buddha and patted her head. “You must have had a hard time while I was away. I’m sorry.”

“Waaah!”

Following Yo-hwa’s example, Ha-yul joined in, flooding my blanket with tears.

I ignored the prickling of my conscience and comforted my comrades. Ah-ryeon watched us with a giggle.

In the distance, Do-hwa was still sending me suspicious glances, but it seemed she couldn't be sure of my crime.

[As expected of Mr. Undertaker.]

The Saintess sent a telepathic message.

[Even from my perspective, knowing the whole story, your acting was flawless.]

[Congratulations. You've achieved your goal and even avoided blame.]

Is that a compliment? I'll take it as one.

Of course, now that I had returned, there was no reason for the Funeral faction and the Anti-Funeral faction to continue their conflict. The Korean Peninsula returned to its newly festive atmosphere as if it had never been engulfed in internal strife.

The only minor side effect was that Yo-hwa and Ha-yul clung to me like sticky rice cakes and wouldn't let go, but it was a perfect ending otherwise.

Happy ending. Happy ending.

There's a short epilogue.

"G-Guild Leader..."

"Oh, Ah-ryeon. What brings you here at this late hour? You must be tired from leading the Eastern Holy State lately, so get some rest."

"Hehe. Yes. I-I'll sleep soon. But before that, I have something to tell you, Guild Leader!"

"Oh? What is it?"

"It's all a lie, isn't it?"

Silence.

“Dear Ah-ryeon… Wh-what are you saying? Our Guild Leader doesn’t understand…”

“Oh, th-the story about you being kidnapped by an Outer God, suffering from amnesia, and recovering your memories by gathering the dolls. Um, so, basically everything!”

Silence: Second Gear.

“D-dear Ah-ryeon… H-h-how did you come to think that everything is a lie?”

“Um, well, I didn’t feel like you were lying, Guild Leader, but… Dok-seo unnie. She seemed too calm for someone who had just lost the guild leader… Hehe. Even though your acting was perfect, Guild Leader, you couldn’t control Dok-seo unnie’s expression. That was the flaw, wasn’t it?”

Silence: Third Gear.

“So.”

“Yes?”

“Dear Ah-ryeon, since you always cherish this Guild Leader so much, you wouldn’t spread this story outside, or try to expose it on SG Net for popularity, right? Such a mishap wouldn’t happen, would it?”

“Ahhh! O-of course not, Guild Leader! I wouldn’t run to Captain Noh or the Great Witch Dang Seo-rin and blabber about a secret that might very well get you killed…!”

Silence: Fourth Gear.

Eye contact.

A bright smile.

Kneeling.

“I’ll give you all the knowledge and legacy of a regressor. Please,

just spare my life.”

“Okay!”

The result of wielding a time-honored cliché was, likewise, a time-honored tale of justice and retribution.

Chapter 302

The Agitator I

Sinnoa

「Noh Do-hwa has very few friends.」

The above sentence actually contained a bit of a lie. In Noh Do-hwa's interpersonal relationships, the category of "friends" simply did not exist. Therefore, the correct statement was as follows:

「Noh Do-hwa has no friends.」

That's right.

As clearly revealed in the previous story, there were quite a few forces that resisted Do-hwa's commands. The only person who could even remotely claim to be her friend (excluding me) was Ha-yul, whom Do-hwa often called upon to drink together.

Why Ha-yul, you ask?

- Because I'm mute, and she likes that.

That was the reason Ha-yul gave when asked.

- She liked just drinking quietly with me instead of having to deal with useless small talk over drinks.

"Wait. Isn't that discrimination against the disabled?"

- If anything, it's closer to discrimination against the non-disabled. The Commander just hates people.

Of course, the bleak state of Do-hwa's interpersonal relationships had their advantages. As a politician, she was immune to the inevitable fate of being criticized for giving special treatment to her personal connections.

There was a time when she began to garner fame as the commander of the National Road Management Corps. People claiming to be her relatives flocked to her, trying to catch even a whiff of her success.

“Do-hwa, it’s me, your uncle!”

“Ah, my mother’s brother...”

“Huh? Uh, yeah, that’s right.”

“Welcome. You’ve come to repay the 130 million won you borrowed from our family after claiming you’d strike it rich in a Chilean mine. Such reliability makes me love my relatives even more...”

Many people.

“Oh, Do-hwa! I’m your uncle! Remember me from your high school graduation?”

“Ah, Uncle. Heh, welcome...”

“Yeah! You see, I came all the way from Seoul, and I thought I was going to die! Oh, my dear Do-hwa, you’ve been through so much! I knew all along you’d make something of yourself!”

“Thank you. I also have fond memories with you, Uncle. Like when you were arrested for running an illegal casino in the Philippines and begged me, a public official, for help...”

“Huh? Oh, right! Yeah, that happened!”

“Yes. When I told you I couldn’t help you, you cursed so vividly. Even though we’re all of the same bloodline, you spat on your own face so skillfully...”

Many.

“Sis!”

“Get lost.”

People.

Enemy defeated!

I'll just drop here that Do-hwa's extreme distrust of people was rooted in her family environment and upbringing.

Perhaps there was another reason why she kept Ha-yul close? After all, Ha-yul was no stranger to messy family dynamics.

"Commander Noh. It seems you and I share a great many similarities. I, the unworthy Yu Ji-won, truly had an unfortunate childhood."

"No, damn it... You're that infamous middle schooler who locked your parents in the basement, tortured them for 24 hours, tore them to pieces, and then tossed them, right? I'm not that bad. Please stop pretending to be close to me..."

"What a shame."

Anyway, Do-hwa's personality had many advantages, but it also had clear disadvantages.

As revealed in the previous story, in the event of an emergency on the Korean Peninsula, the "all gather" command under Do-hwa didn't go smoothly. The southern part of the Korean Peninsula, which had always been heavily dependent on the National Road Management Corps, followed Commander Noh's leadership without question. However, the further you got from Busan, the weaker these practical interests became. Didn't Pyongyang and Sejong immediately form an anti-Noh coalition?

In short:

"Commander Noh."

"What now...?"

"Hmm. Do you find it difficult to go out to places with lots of people and build relationships? Is it hard for you to get close to others by nature? Ah, you're quiet. Please feel free to speak. Even if

you're a total loner, I won't judge you for it. Why not take this opportunity to get some counseling and gradually improve your loner tendencies?"

"You fucking bastard."

After a near-death experience, I skipped over the details and got to the point.

"Let's make a propaganda documentary."

Do-hwa adjusted her black gloves and frowned. "What the hell...?"

"It's impossible for you to build personal relationships with guild leaders from other regions at this point. It's not Noh Do-hwa, but NO Do-hwa for them. It's self-denial everywhere you look."

"Do you really want to die...?"

"But it's entirely possible to increase your standing with the general public, both Awakeners and ordinary people alike."

That's what the propaganda was for.

For example, when we defeated the Ice Age Anomaly, the reason we stubbornly brought Do-hwa, who had zero combat power, was also for this purpose.

「Commander Noh is as weak as an ordinary person.」

「Yet, whenever a crisis strikes the Korean Peninsula, Commander Noh is always there!」

We could plant this kind of sentiment in people's minds. No matter how much power the guild leaders held, they couldn't completely ignore public opinion. Do-hwa's approval rating would undoubtedly have a positive impact on the political situation.

"No, damn it. There are so many things to nitpick..."

"Go ahead."

“First of all, aren’t you underestimating people’s intelligence? Even if you blatantly spread propaganda like that, it’s not going to improve my reputation.”

“That’s why we need an expert’s touch.”

I took Do-hwa to the scene of the Inunaki Tunnel conquest. After filming the entire subjugation process with a smartphone and editing it, this promotional video was born.

---

*Narration: A dark tunnel.

*Narration: A terrifying Void where a single misstep could crush your limbs. Into this, the prisoners of the National Road Management Corps are thrown.

(Prisoners screaming)

*Do-hwa: Ignore them.

(Prisoners being dragged away)

*Narration: The one giving the firm command is none other than Commander Noh.

*Narration: Behind her expressionless face lies a will of steel.

(The subjugation progresses as the prisoners die)

*Yu Ji-won: Commander, according to the Mini-Map, Squad 11 is almost at the exit.

*Do-hwa: Proceed.

(The National Road Management Corps members cheer as the tunnel is successfully subjugated)

*Narration: The members cheer as they conquer the Inunaki Tunnel, which could have devoured the entire Japanese archipelago.

*Narration: Yet, the Commander’s expression remains unchanged.

*Narration: She knows better than anyone that countless Anomalies still threaten our world.

(Do-hwa's back as she walks away)

~END~

The screening ended.

I turned to her with an extremely confident expression.

"So, what do you think?"

"It's idiotic..."

Do-hwa's responding expression was sour.

"Get your eyes checked," I countered. "As you can see, this propaganda video is like a strategy guide. It's packed with useful and practical information on how to subjugate Anomalies and Voids."

"Hmm..." she hummed, resting her chin on her hand. "So it's not just a simple propaganda video, but one that provides both dopamine and practical information while beating the shit out of Anomalies...?"

"Exactly."

Plus, it didn't portray Do-hwa as a perfect saint. There were no exaggerated advertisements of her eating mud cookies at the dawn market or comforting the sorrows of ordinary people.

'A leader who remains calm and never lets her expression crack no matter what Anomaly she faces or what Void she falls into.'

That alone was more than enough to appeal to people. And if we subtly added a clip of Do-hwa making assistive devices for patients?

Ah, I could hear it. The sound of Do-hwa's approval rating rising!

“Wait, Undertaker. Hold on. Even if we make the video like this, how are we going to screen it? Aren’t video files too easily Corrupted by Anomalies…?”

“We’ll upload it to SG Net, and then the National Road Management Corps members on business trips in each city can connect their smartphones to a projector to screen it. That way, the expiration date is a bit more generous, and the chance of Corruption is lower for about a week.”

“Expiration date…?”

“It’s a thing. Anyway, I’ll be in charge of the National Road Management Corps’s PR team for the time being, so leave it to me.”

I was rarring to go. After all, I had already turned Dang Seo-rin into the number one idol on the Korean Peninsula.

“Hey, Undertaker. Can’t we just not do this…?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make you the most beloved leader in the history of the Korean Peninsula.”

“Fuck. This still feels sketchy…”

Six years later.

As if to prove that Do-hwa’s worries were meaningless, the propaganda plan was a huge success.

“Hey, did you see the Meteor Shower conquest video?”

“I saw it over the weekend. The sight of stars falling from the sky was mesmerizing.”

Everyone was abuzz. Now, in any city on the Korean Peninsula, you could easily find people chatting about the propaganda documentary videos.

These days, the only new releases in theaters were propaganda videos, so it was a natural outcome.

“That Dang Seo-rin, she’s really amazing. How does her voice sound so beautiful?”

“I know, right? I heard she’s the most famous in the south.”

“I was most impressed by Cheon Yo-hwa breaking stars with her bare hands. Oh, of course...” The market vendor turned his head, looking over the makeshift shop under a tent. Hanging from the ceiling was a portrait of Do-hwa. “The most moving part was definitely when Commander Noh held the radio and gave the order for all Awakeners to come out and attack!”

“Ah! That scene!”

“My heart raced when I saw that part!”

Then, the market vendor jumped to his feet. “Isn’t it thanks to Commander Noh’s hard work in the south that we’re able to live today? Everyone, salute Commander Noh!”

“Salute!”

The chant echoed from one corner of the market to the next, spreading like a wave of contagious disease as the other vendors stood up one by one.

“Long live Commander Noh!”

“Long live!”

“Thanks to Commander Noh’s grace, we’re able to live steadfast lives in this harsh land. How can we not shed tears?”

“Thank you, Commander!”

“May you live a long and healthy life!”

Watching all this silently from a distance, I glanced around other places in Pyongyang.

Do-hwa’s portrait was in schools, in government offices, and in civilian homes. In the square of Mo Gwang-seo Christ’s Cathedral,

the heart of Pyongyang, next to the statues of Mogwangseo and Sim Ah-ryeon, stood a statue of Do-hwa, three times larger for some reason.

And every passerby saluted Do-hwa's statue.

"Long live Commander Noh!"

"Under Commander Noh's leadership, let's unite and defeat those damned Anomalies!"

"Ah, the Commander's grace is like the heavens!"

I remained silent.

In my place, Telepathy chattered.

[Did you see it all, Mr. Undertaker?]

"...I've confirmed it."

[Yes. In Pyongyang and the northern regions under the influence of the Eastern Divine Kingdom, a kind of mental brainwashing phenomenon—]

[If we were to name it, Big Brother, or in this case, Big Sister? Or perhaps Big Mother would be more accurate?]

"Let's just call it the Supreme Leader..."

[Yes. The Supreme Leader Anomaly has been observed,] the Saintess recited indifferently. [Those infected by this Anomaly show absolute favorability and loyalty towards Commander Noh, regardless of whether they are ordinary people or Awakeners.]

"The cause is...."

[Probably the propaganda videos you produced and distributed, right?]

I didn't answer.

[Oh. Do-hwa said to return to Busan as soon as possible. And she

asked me to relay this message to you.]

Hmm.

[“When you get back, you’re dead, you bastard.”]

Me, the Undertaker.

For the first time in thousands of years, I felt an overwhelming sense of impending doom.

Chapter 303

The Agitator II

Sinnoa

There is a hypothesis called the Black Cat, White Cat theory.

"It doesn't matter if it's a black cat or a white cat as long as it catches mice, right?"

A truly pragmatic way of thinking.

I, the Undertaker, am a living witness to the depravity of Anomalies, the one who has been tormented by Anomalies more than anyone else and the one who hates Anomalies more than anyone in the world, yet I declare:

"As long as it helps prevent the end of the world, it doesn't matter if it's an Anomaly or not!"

In short, the Black Anomaly, White Anomaly theory.

A prime example of this would be the Tutorial Fairy No. 264, a nightmare made flesh. Before I intervened, the Tutorial Fairies were practically the vanguard of human extinction.

But now? Now, all the Tutorial Fairies have been hired as regular workers at a casino in the Inunaki Tunnel, working day and night for the customers. Thanks to these fairy workers, the economy of the Korean Peninsula is thriving. Casino chips are even linked to the Korean won.

The same went for Mo Gwang-seo. If it weren't for the fanatical faith gathered by the Resurrection Anomaly, how could we have withstood the relentless onslaught of the Monster Wave?

Therefore, it's a mistake to reject Anomalies outright just because they're Anomalies. Only by breaking free from such narrow-minded prejudices and adopting a truly pragmatic way of thinking can

humanity finally see the light.

So, in conclusion, what I want to say is...

"Commander Noh, let's not be too haste with this. Is the Supreme Leader Anomaly really all that bad? Up North, they already worship Mo Gwang-seo as a god and Ah-ryeon as a saintess. Wouldn't it be better for you to ascend as the Supreme Leader, Commander Noh, promising happiness and comfort to the citizens of the North?"

"Get on your knees..."

"Okay."

Most days, I was Do-hwa's PT instructor, but for about three hours that day, she subjected me to intense exercise in a so-called-instructor reversal card.

"You stink, so go wash up..."

"Okay."

Having reached the pinnacle of Aura, my body emitted no odor whatsoever. While I was entirely confident I could logically explain this, whether rational thinking would work on Do-hwa in her current state was another question.

After a quick shower, I returned to find Do-hwa, now calm and sitting in a chair.

"Sit down..." she ordered.

"There's only one chair?"

"So?"

"Okay."

Scratch that. It didn't seem like her anger had subsided much.

I assumed the traditional East Asian sitting posture, so traditional that its name of "seiza" literally meant “the proper way of sitting.”[1]

Not because I wanted to avoid being strangled to death by Do-hwa again, of course. No, I, the Undertaker, am simply a person of utmost integrity who always hold their chest high and, thus, has no round shoulders or pelvic disc issues.

"Yesterday, I thought I'd give my lungs some fresh air, so I went to the Jagalchi Market at dawn. There's a merchant there from Wonsan who sells bingsu..."

"Ah, yes. The cinnamon flavor is a bit strong, but that's what makes it appealing, so it's popular despite the high price."

"But then, damn it, the merchant had a cart with my portrait prominently displayed... Huh. When I asked for just one bingsu, do you know how the merchant reacted to me?"

Saintess, help! Saintess!

[“Commander Noh, it is the honor of a lifetime—no, of three lifetimes—to have you visit our humble shop. We don't need money. Please, may you live ten thousand years in good health...”]

[...he shouted so loudly that it seemed like the dawn sky would fall, and everyone turned to watch and then they clapped.]

[And Mr. Undertaker. Please refrain from pulling the “Help me, Saintess” card for such trivial matters.]

I put on a solemn expression. "I can roughly guess. Commander Noh, you were so pleased to visit the shop, and such praise—"

"Did you just fucking ask the Yongsan girl?"

"Huh? No, what are you talking about? Even if I made a mistake, please refrain from making baseless accusations. Do you have any evidence to back your claim?"

"Then fuck. You were silent for over 20 seconds and then suddenly started babbling. Were you talking to the Saintess, huh? Or what?"

Oh no!

No matter how freely the Saintess can use Time Stop, she still needs time to pass to convey information to me. Did she exploit that weakness?

Do-hwa, you scary brat!

"My only joy in visiting Jagalchi Market was to enjoy the bingsu sold by that displaced person while taking in the dawn air. You ruined one of my five hobbies. What are you going to do about it?"

"As expected of Supreme Leader Commander Noh. Even at your age, you still have four hobbies. It's touching to see you caring for your mental health, inspiring the hearts of the people."

"Kneel."

"Okay."

Once again, I entered the reversal world, filmed an isekai trip for 30 minutes, and returned. And as sequels in a series usually went, the next iteration of our conversation followed the same clichés as the previous work.

Do-hwa sighed.

"Awakener Undertaker. If this damn Anomaly were confined to the North, it might be one thing, but what if it starts spreading to the surrounding area?"

It wasn't an unfounded worry. Though it might seem surprising to many, there was a time in the South when it was fashionable to decorate everything with the president's portrait.

Considering that Anomalies enjoy twisting space and time like yarn, it's possible that a Supreme Leader unifying the South and North might actually descend.

So then... Noh Do-hwa was destined to become the king of the Korean Peninsula. Would George Orwell's Eastasia be born under Do-hwa's fingertips?[2] Could the conclusion of this long regression story really be a unification ending? Who could have predicted

that?

Then, I noticed the silence.

"I wasn't thinking anything just now, Commander Noh."

"And I didn't say anything, yet you're defending yourself as if you were caught daydreaming about something not worth my time..."

"I've been asking you to stop with the baseless accusations. I was just thinking about how to defeat this big sis— no, Big Sister Anomaly."

"Oh?" she asked, then smirked. "Good. Let's hear your brilliant strategy. If you haven't been wasting your life on the internet, surely something will flow from that mouth of yours..."

Of course I had thought about it. Specifically, I had thought about it all the way from Pyongyang to Busan.

Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am," but in my case, I've evolved one step further to "I must think, or I'll die."

In terms of desperation and earnestness, I'm on a different level from that Frenchman.

"First, let's take down all the propaganda videos on SG Net. We'll also order the agents dispatched to each city to stop their missions."

"Hmm..."

"That should put out the immediate fire."

It worked.

The fervor for Do-hwa that had spread like wildfire across the Korean Peninsula came to an abrupt halt. With a single stop command, the entire country held its breath.

But do you know what? The deeper you breathe in, the stronger the storm when you exhale.

- Dear citizens. How are you?

- This is Noh Do-hwa, the first commander of the National Road Management Corps.

Exactly one week later, a voice crackling with static began to emanate from smartphones that had been turned off. And it wasn't just smartphones either.

- Starting this evening, I, the commander, wish to spend my days in simple bliss with all of you who have finished your hard work and returned home.

- In this cold winter, I hope you have a warm brazier or stove by your side.

The same voice was broadcast simultaneously from the televisions in every neighborhood and from the radios, one of the few remnants of civilized life in this apocalypse.

Of course, it wasn't Do-hwa herself who was broadcasting. It was an Anomaly.

- If you don't have a brazier, perhaps my voice can provide a little warmth by your side.

- Hence, this campfire side chat. Or perhaps the chat on the roadside.

- Coincidentally, my name is also Noh Do-hwa, which stands for the Path of Turbulent Waters, so it's a fitting name.

- Now, let's connect with Mr. Park Wi-ryeong, a fisherman from Sinuiju.

- Hello, Commander.

- Ahaha. Yes, hello.

It was insane.

I immediately dropped everything and ran to the National Road

Management Corps. Do-hwa, who never learned the concept of leaving work, greeted me at headquarters.

"You! You fucking bastard—"

"Stop! Commander Noh, I fully understand your desire to criticize me, but isn't this the time to join forces and defeat the Anomaly?"

"You fucking bas—"

"One Wish Ticket! I'll give you one Wish Ticket!"

"Die!"

"We're all going to die eventually anyway! Just wait 15 years!"

After a diplomatic exchange of words that had become a habit between us, we moved on to practical countermeasures.

"In retrospect, Commander Noh, hastily taking down the propaganda videos was a bad move. In George Orwell's *1984*, Big Brother was already a dead figure. He only lived on as an icon."

"So what?"

"The moment the documentary videos of Commander Noh were taken down, the Anomalous entity known as The Supreme Leader Big Sister: Noh Do-hwa separated and began to exist on its own."

"What kind of bullshit is that?"

"Anomalies are notorious for ignoring copyright. Anyway, this phenomenon has its advantages as well as disadvantages."

"Advantages? What advantages? Oh, the fact that the thing on your neck is just a decoration has been academically proven?"

"No. The Anomaly has revealed its true form."

Originally, these mind-control-type Anomalies were the most troublesome because they existed without a physical form. Just think of She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the pink entity is

everywhere and nowhere.

"From the perspective of evolution, strengths and weaknesses are two sides of the same coin. Big Sister has taken control of all communication media on the Korean Peninsula, but at the same time, she is bound by them."

"Ah." Do-hwa's pitch-black eyes gleamed. "Good. Let's confiscate and destroy all smartphones, radios, and televisions..."

"Wait! If we confiscate smartphones, we can't use SG Net!"

"So what? It's actually better this way. I was sick of seeing Awakeners clinging to their phones even as civilization crumbled..."

Damn it, this is why I hate ordinary people who don't waste their lives on the internet and are devoted to their real lives!

"If SG Net collapses, the credibility of the Constellations will decrease, the connection between Awakeners will weaken, and sharing strategies will become difficult! Seo Gyu will lose his job, and Ah-ryeon will fall into Corruption! You haven't seen the insane side of Ah-ryeon!"

"She's always out of it..."

"The Sim Ah-ryeon you see is still a decent person. In the 402nd cycle, an Internet Censorship Anomaly appeared. SG Net access was down. Back then, Sim Ah-ryeon incited all the former believers of the Eastern Holy State to start the Saintess Rebellion."

"This is insane, really..."

"So please, hold on. Commander. I have a better plan."

Do-hwa shot me a sidelong glance.

Our relationship had long reached the level of mutual understanding. In short, I could intuitively sense that her current gaze implied, *"Lately, every time I accept this guy's plans, the situation only seems to get worse instead of improving."*

"This time is really different," I insisted.

"Hmm..."

"I've been studying mind-control type Anomalies for over a thousand years. Although I couldn't defeat Go Yuri, the most powerful enemy, most mind-control Anomalies wouldn't dare touch a single hair on my head."

"Right now, it seems like you're being touched so much that you're almost going bald..."

"Especially with media like radios, it's my specialty. Who developed all the methods for operating radio broadcast channels, using walkie-talkies, and preserving televisions? Me," I said confidently. "That's right, me, the Anomaly expert of the end times, the Undertaker. I'll crush that Big Sister or whatever Anomaly flat. Trust me and lead the National Road Management Corps with your usual brand of calmness."

Do-hwa took off her glasses, then blew on them and wiped them clean. By the time she put them back on, the lenses gleamed with new light. Her equally sparkling eyes looked at me.

"This is really the last time. You owe me, you know..."

"Of course."

A Lannister always pays his debts.[3]

I tightened my coat and headed for my destination.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Propaganda for propaganda.

In this desolate apocalypse of the Korean Peninsula, was there any other pioneer of image advertising?

I was heading towards the legend of propaganda, already cross-verified through long regression experiences.

"This is the reason you must become the number one idol of the Three Hans from now on. Dang Seo-rin. Make me your producer."

"Okay. I see. Undertaker, are you crazy?"

Footnotes:

1 - As stated, *seiza* is a traditional Japanese way of sitting where you go down your knees and sit on your feet. It is often used in formal or ceremonial settings.

2 - In George Orwell's novel *1984*, Eastasia is one of three totalitarian governments that rule the world. It is made up of "China and the countries south to it, the Japanese islands, and a large but fluctuating portion of Manchuria, Mongolia and Tibet."

3 - A *Game of Thrones* reference. The saying is a common catch phrase associated with House Lannister, who have deep pockets and do favors for those who treat them well.

Chapter 304

The Agitator III

Sinnoa

Seo-rin stared at me like I was some crazy lunatic.

I felt quite wronged, honestly. My mind was perfectly sane, as always.

“Seo-rin, I’m serious. You have the potential to shine brighter than any star in the night sky.”

“Sorry, but... am I being flirted with right now? Not that I mind, but could you change up your lines a bit? I’m really flustered right now, Undertaker.”

Well.

If you’ve been keeping up with the tales of my regressions, you’d remember that Seo-rin has had the exclusive title of The First Idol of the Three Han States for a very long time now.

So, let me ask you this: How did Seo-rin become the most popular Awakener in the Korean Peninsula across so many past cycles?

You might guess that it was because she met a talented producer like me. While that’s not entirely wrong, Seo-rin was already successful before she hired me.

No, the answer, of course, is that Seo-rin herself had an innate talent and overflowing enthusiasm for self-promotion.

“You may pull the wool over everyone else’s eyes, but you won’t deceive me. I know that deep down, you want to become a star more than anyone else—I feel it. Seo-rin... You’re a born attention-seeker. Your attention-seeking skills are on par with or even surpass Ah-ryeon’s.”

“Ah. So you’re not flirting, but insulting me? Geez, you could’ve just said it in a way that’s easier to understand.”

Just as Seo-rin was about to start a game of whack-a-mole on my head with a broom, I hurriedly added, “Wait. Hear me out. Seo-rin, you captured monsters and provided citizens with limb-severing shows every month’s end. It shows you have demonstrated talent for event planning.”

“That was just a means to seize power,” she replied shamelessly with a nonchalant expression.

From my perspective, knowing the monster lurking behind that calm face, it was truly terrifying.

“You know as well as I do, Undertaker,” she added. “To become a ruler, you must provide bread and circuses. I provided circuses to claim the throne of Busan.”

“That’s not all. You even created unique uniforms and items that other guilds couldn’t dare to imitate and forced them on your subordinates. Thanks to that, the Samcheon World guild members are recognized wherever they go.”

“Yeah, that’s part of my hobby. Even the leader of a large guild has a private life, you know. Can’t you respect that?”

“Fine. Then take a look at this post.”

I pulled up image files I had previously captured from SG Net on my smartphone and showed them to her one by one.

- [Samcheon] WitchTrial: Sleepless dawn. In the past, I would have visited a night café. Now, only the tunnel of the deep sea remains as a walking path.

- [Samcheon] WitchTrial: The quiet café hideout where everyone is asleep. With every 100 meters walked, every 200 meters crossed, the weight of sorrow adds to the footsteps, echoing.

- [Samcheon] WitchTrial: Before I knew it, I arrived at the 1,200-meter depth. The end of the walking path.

- [Samcheon] WitchTrial: But there's always someone waiting at the end of the path. Did they hear my footsteps? The barista came out to greet me. Well, even though I said it's fine, they insisted on making me an affogato.

- [Samcheon] WitchTrial: A bite of sweet vanilla ice cream. Like the morning sorrow melting under the starlight, the sweetness flows down my tongue...

Seo-rin tilted her head.

"What's wrong with this? It's a bit of dawn sentimentality, but it's just a very ordinary diary."

"No, this isn't a diary. It's a demonic grimoire."

I put on a grave expression and scrolled down the smartphone screen.

"This post contains truly sinister energy. First, you subtly revealed that you're a powerhouse who can come and go to the café at any time, even at dawn. Moreover, by pointing out that most Awakeners loiter around the 100-meter and 200-meter depths, you implied that you easily surpassed that level."

No response.

"You tried to disguise it with romanticism, but that's nonsense. In the end, you just wanted to boast that even at dawn, your exclusive barista can bring out rare ice cream to provide you with a midnight snack."

"Hmm."

"Not to mention, you didn't post this immediately. You uploaded it at 6 AM yesterday, when people were starting to wake up. Why?"

I pointed at Seo-rin.

"If you had posted it at dawn when fewer people were on SG Net, it would have been buried as a pointless post! You posted it at the optimal time to attract attention!"

“Indeed... That’s an interesting interpretation.”

Although her lips remained relaxed, Seo-rin’s eyes revealed the smile she could not hide.

“But in the end, it’s just your subjective interpretation and conjecture, right? There’s no decisive, objective evidence that I’m an attention-seeker.”

Tsk. Even after being so bluntly pointed out, not a single crack in her expression!

She was a formidable opponent. Every time she logged into SG Net, she would get at least 120 comments (60% of which were written by Samcheon World guild members), absorbing all kinds of attention like a black hole. Truly a name worth her reputation.

I changed my approach.

“Seo-rin. Haven’t you felt that Do-hwa, the Management Commander, has been acting too arrogantly lately?” I dropped my volume to a whisper and said, “Whether it’s SG Net or reality, all I hear is Noh Do-hwa this, Noh Do-hwa that—nothing but praise for the Management Commander.”

“Hmm...”

Finally, Seo-rin’s expression changed.

“I did feel like too much power was concentrated in one person,” she mused. “Absolute power without proper checks absolutely corrupts. I can’t help but worry about the future of the Korean Peninsula.”

“Exactly. Ah-ryeon from the Eastern Divine Nation was supposed to keep her in check, but lately, she hasn’t been able to do that.”

“Well, she was never really capable in the first place, that one.”

“In such a critical situation, the only person who can save the people is none other than the Great Witch of Samcheon World— Or

at least, that's what I've heard from the hearts of the people on the lookout."

"Hmm..."

Seo-rin drew her face a little closer.

Even among attention-seekers, personalities aren't all the same. If the OldManGoryoe is a reckless soldier who indiscriminately sprays attention-seeking machine gun fire in all directions, then the Witch Trial Judge of Samcheon World is a heavyweight who only moves when there's a just cause.

That's right. Seo-rin would never tolerate anyone belittling her. Her actions always had to be "just."

"This is something that hasn't been revealed to the public yet, but... The evening broadcasts that have been airing lately are actually not by Noh Do-hwa, the Commander, but the work of an Anomaly."

"Oh my, really?"

Seo-rin's eyes sparkled. She seemed almost convinced.

"Of course. Do you take me for a liar? The Korean Peninsula is currently facing an unprecedented crisis. The people are being deceived by an Anomaly impersonating the National Road Commander. I can confidently say that the only person who can break through this crisis is you, Seo-rin."

Seo-rin sighed. Her gaze drifted out the train window.

"Really... I just want to live quietly, performing the role given to me, but the world won't leave me alone."

"It can't be helped. Great talent comes with great responsibility."

Swiftly, I pulled out a bundle of papers from my pocket. It was sheet music with lyrics and notes written on it.

Seo-rin blinked as she looked down at the sheets. "What's this? Undertaker?"

“Ah, it’s nothing. Just some verses of a spell song I composed while staying up all night.”

“Huh?”

“This is a spell song that *always perfectly regenerates your skin*. And this one is a spell song that *always keeps your hair in perfect condition*.”

“Oh my? Huh. Hmm.”

“Of course, compared to your composing skills, it’s utterly lacking, but artists naturally consider it the greatest honor to present their work to their muse. Seo-rin, won’t you accept this humble sheet music?”

“Well,” she mused, her expression growing serious. “Such a heartfelt gift. Something that can’t possibly be dismissed as a bribe. Your creation, Undertaker. As a human being, it is simply impossible for me to coldly reject.”

“Then... aren’t we soul mates?”

“Of course.”

Thump.

Seo-rin and I shook hands firmly.

“Although I have no interest in the superficial aspects of being an idol or anything like that, for the sake of the Korean Peninsula, for the people, and most importantly, to respond to your heart, Undertaker, I will do my best—”

“Of course. I will also support you with all my might, my soul mate —”

Thus, the only hope to counter the propaganda of Big Sister.

The debut of the idol was confirmed.

Rejoice, rejoice.

[...Mr. Undertaker.]

On the way back after the meeting, the Saintess sent me a telepathic message.

[Sometimes I think it would have been better if I didn't have the Clairvoyance ability.]

[If that were the case, I wouldn't have to constantly witness the depths of human nature right before my eyes.]

[I might have held some expectations I kept to myself, some sweet illusions about the people around me, and wouldn't have ended up holed up at home like this.]

"Ah. Seo-rin can be a bit of a letdown once you get to know her. But don't be too disappointed. You always have the steadfast Undertaker by your side, Saintess."

For some reason, the Saintess fell silent.

For the life of me, I have no idea why.

There is an epilogue.

- Hello! Another wonderful evening. Nymph Calypse here.

- The first song we'll play today is by an incredibly talented individual, truly the diva of the peninsula! Seo-rin's new song, Raise the Flag of Resistance!

- Today is also the day of the Magical☆Ravenclaw's descent!

- The great sorcerer has a song she wants to introduce to you. Oh my! The acoustic guitar version of the Great Witch's new song, never before released anywhere!

- Last time, she overwhelmingly took first place in SG Net's official popularity poll, right? Let's listen together, even you kids who eat dirt!

Seo-rin's debut made headway as a barrage of attacks through various media outlets. All of the radio channels people enjoyed were already operating under my sponsorship. Manipulating public opinion was easier than doing push-ups for me.

And that's not all.

- Won't you come see the sea with me?

- The scenery at 1,200 meters depth. The majestic secrets of humanity await you.

- "Like the aroma of coffee" by Seo-rin.

An advertisement appeared at the top of SG Net. Now, every time Awakeners logged on, they were exposed to a café advertisement featuring Seo-rin's photo.

But it didn't stop there.

"Heh heh, Comrade Secretary! I've completed the task you demanded of me!"

I mobilized hundreds of Tutorial Fairies to pilgrimage throughout the northern part of the Korean Peninsula.

The mission was simple: sneak into people's dreams and plant a positive image of Seo-rin! For example, if someone was having a nightmare of being chased by a grotesque, Seo-rin would appear and save the dreamer.

Truly, we infiltrated both consciousness and subconsciousness to instill the image of "Seo-rin☆The Best" into people.

The result?

"We received a regular report from the National Road Management caravans. All the albums of the Samcheon World guild leader we sent as the first batch are sold out..." Do-hwa said with a gleam in her cold eyes. "Not just the albums, but T-shirts with magic school designs, utterly useless magic brooms, pointed hats, and witch robes, all sorts of goods are selling like hotcakes..."

Indeed. The Korean Peninsula was experiencing an unprecedented Seo-rin boom.

“It’s a natural outcome,” I said nonchalantly. “Those goods have been proven popular across numerous cycles. Once you see them, you can’t help but buy them.”

“Don’t waste cycles figuring out things like that, you lunatic...”

Especially popular were Seo-rin’s ASMR mini-albums, such as *Lullabies that Make You Sleep Soundly* or *Awakening Songs that Make You Alert in Just Three Minutes in the Morning*. Even though they didn’t actually have any magical effects, given that Seo-rin’s specialty was spell songs, a strong placebo effect occurred among buyers.

Even now, rave reviews were pouring in on SG Net.

Well, negative reviews were secretly handled as private posts, so they didn’t get any attention. That’s just how it is.

This is the greatness of knowledge is power. If you’re jealous, be born as a regressor, human.

“Anyway, thanks to that, the Big Sister’s evening broadcasts have been completely buried. All the Seo-rin related radio channels are broadcasting at the same time.”

“Well, they are buried, but... is this really the right way to exterminate Anomalies...?”

“There are surprisingly few methods to completely eradicate the existence of Anomalies. It’s more standard to dilute their significance.”

In the end, trends come and go.

At first, Do-hwa’s faith swept through like a storm, but as people’s attention shifted elsewhere, it rapidly lost momentum. People from the North began to forget the memories of enshrining her portrait, as if it never happened.

The owner of the grilled eel shop at Jagalchi Market was surprised, saying, “Huh? Why is this picture in my stall?”

“With this, the case is resolved. I apologize for the inconvenience, Commander Noh.”

“Hmm... Well. It seems like people won’t remember it anyway, so it doesn’t matter to me...”

“But?”

Instead of answering, Do-hwa turned the radio dial with a *click*. There came the noise of the frequency tuning, and soon, advertisements started playing one after another.

- Freshly, lightly! This summer’s fashion item is the sailor uniform! The student council president of Baekhwa Girls’ High School guarantees the quality.

- Is life tough? Are you lonely? Is the world frustrating? For those of you feeling this way, Pyongyang is always open. Let’s praise Mokwangseo Christ. Our Saintess, Sim Ah-ryeon.

- In Daejeon, we always provide free meals for the hungry. Come on over. Alle Alle, Daejeon. The city united by hope, Daejeon.

Do-hwa sent me a sidelong glance.

“Because of the fireworks you set off, it’s become a trend for all sorts of neighborhoods to advertise on the radio, and there’s a good chance these guys might develop into Anomalies. What do you, the self-proclaimed grotesque expert, think about this phenomenon...?”

“Hmm.”

I quietly sipped my mug while listening to the radio.

The coffee was delicious as always.

Chapter 305

The Distributor I

Sinnoa

Before civilization collapsed, back when the name "Republic of Korea" felt much more natural than the term "Korean Peninsula," people would make remarks like this:

“Hey, no matter what, Korea is still a pretty livable country, right? Go to Africa and you'll realize how good Korea is.”

There were several valid reasons for this.

The level of public safety that allowed people to walk the streets at night without worry, infrastructure reliable enough that power outages weren't a concern, convenience stores so close that you could go out in slippers even in the middle of winter (though not in every city), and so on...

And among these, there was one undeniably overwhelming advantage.

“Delivery for PO Box 1.”

“Please leave the new package outside. We will pick it up soon.”

It was the delivery and logistics service.

At some point, Koreans began to believe that if you ordered something before midnight, your goods should obviously arrive by the next morning, right? This belief even included the expectation of balking at 3,000 won fees for delivery. Because really, who did they think could afford such exorbitant fees?

As a result, delivery in this land was miraculously "fast" and "free." It was like alchemy in its own right.

Unfortunately, after the apocalypse arrived, this large-scale magic

circle collapsed. However, since public safety, infrastructure, and convenience stores all went down together, its end wasn't too lonely.

"Hyung."

Or at least, that's what I thought.

"Huh? What is it?"

"You know those ads that pop up at exactly 4:44:44 in the morning? The ones from those ridiculous curse sites," Seo Gyu said.

The curse site ads referred to a series of posts that would pop up out of the blue on SG Net. As Seo Gyu mentioned, they were usually uploaded at 4:44:44 AM.

If you visited SG Net at that time, you'd see something like this:

- Anonymous: ♠♠Amazing Shopping Mall♠♠ Sign up now for 1-on-1 consultation with the owner $$ 100% refund guaranteed @@@

- Drowning: ☆Global☆Royal☆Renaissance☆ Bitcoin▶▶Stock Info 1-time reading experience☜☜ Free

LeydteuqhTog7IKs656MIOyLnOyytCDtjJTslYTsmpQg7L2UIOyeiOyWtOyalC

- Anonymous: Promotion: I tried this free online lecture, and it was really helpful lol

These sorts of posts would maddeningly flood the board, appearing all at once in less than a second, totaling about 200 posts in all.

Needless to say, it was best practice to never click on them carelessly. They weren't posted by humans, and if a non-expert tried it at home and accessed them, they could easily fall under a curse without even realizing it.

"Hey," I called, getting Seo Gyu's attention again. "Why are you bringing this up?"

"The Saintess has been sensing something strange lately."

Our response to these mindless ad bombardments was very simple: we just temporarily blocked SG Net and left everything to the Saintess. Even if the posts ambushed the site in less than a second, the Saintess had the Time Stop ability. It took her even less time to stop time and delete the posts with her admin privileges.

We could have assigned Seo Gyu to handle it, but...

Sorry, I just can't trust him when it comes to anything related to mental manipulation. I haven't forgotten how he sold out the guild to Go Yuri in the past.

"Something strange?" I repeated.

"Yeah. There've been these comments that keep showing up on the ad posts, and for this past month, one of them keeps coming up and won't disappear."

"Hmm."

"Here, look." He reached over and handed me a note he'd handwritten, and on it, was the comment transcribed in his scrawling penmanship.

- *Toad House: Used discount: For sale. Delivery next morning. http://...*

While the note ended in an unfamiliar website address, nothing about it or the rest of the comment was particularly suspicious.

I tilted my head. "Why is this a problem?"

"Well. I'm not entirely sure myself. You should hear the rest directly from the Saintess..."

Right.

I excused myself and headed to the Inunaki Tunnel. As soon as I did, a telepathic message came through, as if someone had been eavesdropping on our conversation.

[Several things about the comment from the user Toad House stand out as suspicious.]

I didn't find the sudden conversation strange and continued walking, slipping easily in the rhythm of our talk as I asked, "Suspicious things like what?"

[First, it's too ordinary to be a comment from an Anomaly. Most of the ad posts that appear at 4 AM are either written by AI with that disconnected, meandering sort of writing style, or they actively try to lure people in. But this comment doesn't even specify what's being sold.]

True. "Couldn't they be trying to make people curious?"

[Yes. However, the comment was posted too consistently and has never once changed,] the Saintess said evenly. [Ad posts that don't get any views on SG Net usually struggle to be more provocative and eye-catching. Despite that, the comment from Toad House remained unchanged. Even though it was first observed six months ago.]

"Hmm."

[In other words, an Anomaly that can maintain itself without devouring or enchanting humans. It may be on the more dangerous side than most.]

As I walked along, the exit to the Inunaki Tunnel soon came into view. On the stone wall blocking the end of the tunnel, graffiti was scrawled in Japanese.

The paint is too rough.

Supply human blood or replace the paint.

I bit my fingertip and wrote "OK" in blood, and the graffiti in Inunaki slowly faded away on its own.

Jumping over the stone wall put me at the tunnel entrance where the Saintess was waiting, leaning against the wall. She was wearing

her usual, well-worn hoodie, with the hood pulled down low.

"Good morning, Saintess."

"Yes, good morning, Mr. Undertaker." She brushed the edges of her bangs away with the tip of her finger. "The day before yesterday, I found the Toad House ad suspicious, so I asked Yu Ji-won to check it out. I told her to go to the website address in the comment."

"Ah, I see."

Yu Ji-won had faced Go Yuri and remained completely sane. When it came to Anomalies related to mental manipulation, she was almost invincible in terms of immunity. In situations like this, where the level of danger was unclear, she was my most reliable ally.

"I heard Ji-won took a day off yesterday, so I wondered what was going on," I added. "Turns out she stayed up until 4 AM, so she wasn't in any state to be working."

"Yes. According to her testimony, when she clicked the link in the comment, she was taken to a website."

The Saintess pulled out a notepad from her hoodie pocket.

"This is the website screen I recreated based on her description. I tried to recreate it as closely as possible."

I glanced it over. The Saintess's drawing skills, while not on the level of OldManGoryeo's, were still nothing to scoff at.

"This design..."

Thanks to that, I could easily recognize it.

"Isn't this an online shopping mall?" I asked.

It was a website logo that poorly imitated the platform known for its crack-of-dawn delivery service, something most Koreans would have encountered. At the top of the screen was a title.

Toad House: Specialized in Used Goods

Give us something new, and we'll give you something old.

I furrowed my brow.

"The username comes from a children's nursery rhyme. But the phrase written here is the opposite of the lyrics."

"Yes. That's right."

This was also a game that any Korean would know, a song sung while playing in the dirt at playgrounds.

- Toad, Toad.

- Give me a new house, and I'll give you an old one.[1]

The key was to create a mound of dirt on the back of your hand and then see how skillfully you could pull your hand out. Sometimes, the great masters in their craft could pull their hands out even after tunneling through the mound. The geographical environment also played a key role, as success depended on how much moisture was in the soil.

One might call it the first exposure to civil engineering for children on the Korean Peninsula.

"So, hmm..." I hummed in thought. “Let me guess. Is this an Anomaly where you buy some used product, place an order, and it gets delivered?"

"Both Yu Ji-won and I thought the same."

The Saintess took the notepad back and burned it with a lighter, a mark of her true professionalism. Even though we had several layers of security measures in place for safety, when dealing with items related to Anomalies, we always had to be extra cautious.

"Early this morning, I contacted Team Leader Noh Do-hwa and conducted an experiment with an Awakened death row inmate,” she said. “I lent her a smartphone and ordered her to access Toad

House."

"Hmm."

"I told her to pick any item and place an order, but... in the end, all that appeared was a message saying that payment had failed and nothing happened."

"So that's why you came to me."

"Yes."

This was the advantage of having capable colleagues like the Saintess, Yu Ji-won, Noh Do-hwa, Seo Gyu, and others. Instead of having to give them step-by-step instructions, they handled tasks within their areas of expertise on their own. Only when they couldn't resolve something would they report it to me.

"I understand the situation. Were there any signs of mental contamination in the death row inmate?" I asked.

"I tested 16 other death row inmates, but none of them complained of headaches or hallucinations."

"Hmm. Then it's safe to assume it's harmless for now. Moreover, even after going through the trouble of placing an order, instead of luring people in, it rejected the payment..."

There was something more.

My intuition as an old regressor was whispering warnings to me.

The Saintess noticed and said, "I think there might be a special condition required to trade products on the Toad House shopping mall. Do you have any ideas, Mr. Undertaker?"

"Wait a moment."

I pulled up a mental image of the comment Seo Gyu showed me and accessed Toad House directly on my smartphone.

Whoosh.

Numerous products were on display. Although the website's text was occasionally broken, the product names and photos were easy to recognize.

[Park Sang-hyun's Left Hand]

[Origin: Pocheon]

The product image showed a severed human hand. The fingers looked awkward, as if drawn by AI.

'Park Sang-hyun from Pocheon... Is that the Park Sang-hyun I know? He died not long ago in this cycle.'

We weren't particularly close, but I had briefly met him while exterminating the National Tax Service Comprehensive Income Tax Anomaly.

I hesitated, lost in thought, then said, "Anomalies always have rules... In this case, the name Toad House itself is probably the clue."

First, I tried singing.

I sang the short nursery rhyme, "Toad, Toad. Give me a new house, and I'll give you an old one," and then pressed the payment button.

My smartphone vibrated.

[Payment failed.]

That method didn't work.

I paused to think, then crouched down and started gathering dirt.

"Mr. Undertaker?"

"If singing alone isn't enough, I have no choice but to try playing in the dirt."

I made a mound of dirt large enough to cover my entire left hand and sang the nursery rhyme.

"Toad, Toad. Give me a new house, and I'll give you an old one."

My smartphone, placed on top of the mound, vibrated with a beep.

[Payment failed.]

Still no luck.

So then.

"Toad, Toad. Give me an old house, and I'll give you a new one—"

Suddenly, I felt a severing pain in my left hand under the mound.

It was a familiar pain.

I frowned and pulled my hand away—and found myself grimly surprised to find there was no hand left to pull away.

My entire left hand was gone from the wrist down.

Blood dripped from the mound. The Saintess, who had been crouching beside me, raised her eyebrows.

"Ah."

"It seems I've discovered how to use the shopping mall."

I used my Aura to stop the bleeding.

The next morning, after spending the night writing a *Three Kingdoms* parody novel, I received a message.

[Delivery completed.]

[1 box of fresh delivery items has been delivered.]

"Hmm."

I stepped out of my room in the Inunaki Tunnel. A delivery box was sitting in the hallway of the hideout.

As I had guessed, opening the box revealed someone's left hand,

carefully packaged and delivered.

I turned to the Saintess, who was sharing my vision.

"The 'used products' sold at Toad House are the bodies or belongings of dead people. In other words, relics."

[...]

"And if you provide the same body part or item, it seems to exchange them in a one-to-one barter."

The Toad House shopping mall was a communal graveyard where the corpses and relics of the dead were stored.

Footnotes:

1 - This is the nursery rhyme Go Yuri sings at the end of the Diver arc in chapter 178.

Chapter 306

The Distributor II

Sinnoa

Question: Who would react as follows when informed about the true nature of the second-hand shopping mall "Toad House"? (**Hint:** It’s a member of the Regression Alliance.)

"Ah, I see. You've found another damn Anomaly somewhere. Truly impressive. Let's seal it immediately..."

The correct answer was Noh Do-hwa.

"The existence of this site must never be revealed to the public. Let's keep it a secret and remain silent..."

"Uh, can I ask why?" Seo Gyu timidly inquired.

Back when he debuted at Busan Station, Seo Gyu would curse at anyone who pissed him off, but in front of Do-hwa, he kept his mouth shut.

To be fair to him, anyone with common sense would flinch when facing her. Her gaze had a certain power that forced you into deep self-reflection, making you wonder, *Did I have some grudge against this person in a past life?*

"It's a natural question. The risk is too great—it could easily become a tool for the perfect crime..."

In one, smooth motion, Do-hwa lowered her smartphone and showed the screen to us. Displayed there was a product listed on the shopping mall.

[Yoo Jung-don's Heart]

[Place of Origin: Sinuiju]

"As you can see, Toad House sells all sorts of organs, from hearts to duodenums. Now, let's say—and I won't name names—someone buries a person they dislike in the ground..."

Why are you looking at me while saying it?

"Then, I proceed to add eyes, left arm, right arm, brain, heart, and so on, all body parts, to the cart and hit the 'Pay Now' button. What do you think will happen...?"

"Uh."

"Making a person disappear without a trace is a piece of cake. Moreover, the body parts sold on this site are all from people who were once alive..."

That's right.

The left hand of Park Sang-hyun that I ordered as a test, or the heart of Yoo Jung-don that Do-hwa just showed us—they all belonged to real people.

In other words...

"Wouldn't the families go mad...?"

In this desolate and brutal world, many have lost family members or loved ones. Most of them couldn't even retrieve the remains or belongings of the missing. With nothing left to bury, they had no choice but to bury their memories deep in their hearts.

"Using this site is simple. You just enter the name of the family member you lost in the search bar. Then a part of that family member's corpse will appear..."

"Ah."

"A good citizen might willingly offer their own left hand to buy back their lost family member's left hand. But, hmm. Isn't there a smarter way...?"

Realization dawned on Seo Gyu's face.

I spoke up in his stead.

"That's right. There will inevitably be cases where people kidnap others to sacrifice them in order to retrieve their family members."

Professional brokers might even appear, advertising, "We'll find your family's remains for you," while secretly abducting ordinary people with no connections to sell their organs.

"After all, the world will only fall further into the apocalypse, and the number of missing persons will only increase, never decrease. Human sacrifice is always a blue ocean market."

"Ugh."

Seo Gyu's expression then twisted in disgust.

Similar incidents had already been discovered several times, namely with Village Bus No. 44 and the organ transfer bus.

"Well then, let's keep the existence of Toad House a secret forever and handle it through SG Net as we have been doing—"

If the story had ended there, it would have been a natural conclusion, but if that were the case, I wouldn't have introduced it in the first place.

"Um, Guild Leader."

"Hmm?"

Just as the meeting was about to adjourn, Ah-ryeon tugged at my sleeve.

"What is it, Ah-ryeon?" I asked.

"Well, um... Over there."

She glanced around. Still in the meeting room were Ji-won, Yo-hwa, Dok-seo, and Seo Gyu, who had paused to wait for me.

"Can you lend me your for a moment?"

I sent her a confused look.

"Uh, come on."

I lowered my head, and Ah-ryeon tiptoed to whisper in my ear, "Um, Toad House. It's a shame to completely seal it off, so can't we just use it ourselves?"

"Hmm?"

"Well, you know. When people die, if they don't get a proper funeral, they turn into the Hollow, like the Ten Legs...? There are a lot of the dead in the Monster Waves too. I think that's been a long-standing concern for you, Guild Leader."

She was right.

As mentioned before, the reason I came to be known by the alias of Undertaker was that I initially went around recommending to people, "Do you know about Time Seal? It's a great way to log out of the reality game." But now, it's because I'm recognized as a funeral expert.

Those who received a funeral from me never turned into the dead. Despite appearances, I'm a high-value talent, you see.

"So?"

"Well, couldn't we use me?"

"?"

"Things like hearts or brains are beyond me, but arms or legs... Even if they're gone for a while, they'll recover quickly... Even if it hurts when they're cut off, if we know in advance, we can numb the pain with anesthesia or something..."

"??"

"Hehe. Actually, I was a bit disappointed with Village Bus No. 44. If you go in there, you die immediately, right? So only those who are truly determined to die can use it. But with this Toad House site, I

think my healing abilities could cover it!"

"Stop," I commanded, bewildered. "Ah-ryeon. You're saying you'll accept requests from families, sacrifice your own limbs, and help them find the remains of their missing loved ones? Even though you know full well that having your limbs cut off on Toad House will hurt?"

"Yes!"

"Oh."

Several options presented themselves here. I could easily imagine what routes would unfold depending on which option I chose.

1. Wow, that's a really great idea. Let's do it right away.

First, all the families who have lost loved ones and carry the weight of their grief would flock to Ah-ryeon.

“Saintess! Please find my father!”

“Yes. I will heal your wounds, even if scars remain.”

Ah-ryeon smiles brightly.

Already revered as the Saintess of the North for periodically participating in the final defense line where humanity's fate hangs in the balance and casting AOE heals, Ah-ryeon would now become the Saintess of All.

The problem is that we also need to consider the perspective of the Anomalies. Every time Ah-ryeon retrieves the remains of a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand missing persons, Toad House would accumulate hundreds or thousands of "Ah-ryeon's Left Arm" and "Ah-ryeon's Right Leg."

There's no worse inventory than this.

“G-Guild Leader! It's a disaster!”

“Hmm?”

“An Anomaly made from my arms and legs has appeared! Like the Hecatoncheires from Greek mythology![1] It even copied my healing ability, so even if you cut off its arms, they grow back. It's disgusting... What do we do?”

Outcome of Option 1: The birth of Ah-ryeon's shadow Anomaly. The emergence of the Thousand Legs, a superior version of the Ten Legs. The end of the world.

Thus, Option 1 was clearly out. Next.

2. Oh, our Ah-ryeon, always picking fights on internet communities, has now grown to care for others? Truly impressive.

Common sense would dictate that this was the right path, but the villain OldManGoryeo should never be judged by common sense. I can confidently say that her psyche is even more twisted than Do-hwa's.

As an Ah-ryeon psychology expert, I immediately saw through her intentions.

"You brat. You want me to suffer while watching you sacrifice yourself, don't you?"

"Ah..."

"You're hoping I'll say, 'That's enough, you've done enough, your pain hurts me more than anyone else's sorrow,' aren't you?"

"Ah, ah, ah..."

"You! Truly a flower that blooms by devouring people's malice! Now you plan to suck in even my goodwill and feel satiated, don't you? Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

"Nyeh heh heh..." Ah-ryeon fidgeted with her fingers while looking up at me. "G-Guild Leader, you seem to like me too much. It's a bit creepy..."

"What's really creepy is your mindset."

"Hahaha, Ah, it hurts, Guild Leader—"

I performed the "Terror Fist Spin," a specialty of Shin-chan's mom, and Ah-ryeon went spinning, flailing her arms around.

I sighed inwardly. It was a mystery how a sensible person like me got tangled up with such a strange kid.

"...Hmm? Guild Leader?"

Suddenly, an idea flashed through my mind.

The plan to sacrifice Ah-ryeon to help families retrieve their loved ones was absurd. But maybe we could create a substitute?

"Wait. Saintess, could you call Commander Noh and Ha-yul? Tell them to come back to the meeting room."

[Yes, understood.]

Although the two had already left the meeting room, they hadn't gone far. Hearing the Saintess's Telepathic message, they quickly returned.

Do-hwa frowned deeply. "What now? I have outpatient appointments scheduled after lunch, so I'm quite busy today..."

"We have something to test. This Toad House shop. Do we really need to offer 'real human body parts' as a sacrifice?"

Do-hwa's glasses tilted, gleaming, as she asked, "What are you talking about...?"

"Ha-yul will make doll parts, and you, Commander Noh, will create prosthetics from them. We'll equip these prosthetics and offer them as 'sacrifices.'"

It wasn’t just Do-hwa who responded this time. All my other comrades’ eyes widened. The Saintess, who was participating remotely, must have been surprised too.

"Uh, hyung. Will that work? Even if it's an Anomaly, wouldn't it be able to tell the difference between real and fake?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Precisely because it's an Anomaly, it can't distinguish between real and fake. Those things fundamentally see imagination and reality as the same. Even if it's a prosthetic leg made from a prosthetic, if the wearer feels the same pain and sensation as a real leg, the Anomaly is likely to judge it as real. And one more thing."

My voice grew stronger.

"Think of the Southern Campaign, Seo Gyu."

"Huh?"

Seo Gyu made a confounded face, but I continued.

"Back in the day, Prime Minister Zhuge Liang, who carried the fate of Shu on his shoulders, had to halt his army before the fierce rivers of the Southern Barbarians. The Southern Barbarian guides said, 'If you cut off a person's head and offer it, the river's wrath will subside.'"

"Ah," Seo Gyu hummed in understanding. "So it wasn't nonsense but a reference to *The Three Kingdoms*."

"Is there a difference between the two? Right now, you're saying, 'It's not A, but A,' you know..." Do-hwa snarked.

"What did the Prime Minister do then? Did he cut off the heads of innocent soldiers and offer them to some pseudo-deity of the river?" I asked, knowing this was too important to stop now. "No. The Prime Minister respected the customs of the Southern Barbarians while cleverly avoiding the evil practice of human sacrifice, and even gave birth to the menu item known as dumplings."[2]

"G-Guild Leader, you're having another crazy episode..."

The atmosphere of great admiration for my brilliant idea had somehow completely dissipated.

"Well, Commander Noh? Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"I wish I didn't..." Do-hwa muttered a curse. "Anyway, it makes sense. There happens to be a death row inmate missing an arm. Let's test it on him..."

We all rushed down to the underground prison of the National Road Management Corps. There *was* an elevator, but since it had appeared on its own without our installation, we absolutely couldn't use it.

Seeing Ji-won among our group, the prisoners behind the bars screamed.

"Hyaaaak! Silver hair! The executioner with silver hair!"

"Save me! I was wrong! Wrong, I swear! I lived a deplorable life!"

"Just kill me!"

Everyone looked at Ji-won, who merely tilted her head, seemingly unaware of what was going on. We also turned our gaze away without drawing attention to it.

"Hey, you. Come out for a moment..."

"Hyaaaak!"

"Shut the hell up. If you keep making noise, I'll arrange a cozy private cell date with Team Leader Yu..."

The death row inmate became very quiet.

Ha-yul assisted in creating the prosthetic arm, which Do-hwa then refined with precision.

An ordinary prosthetist would have taken days to make a plaster cast, wait for it to harden, and so on, but the collaboration between the two Awakeners got the job done in less than 30 minutes.

"Try it on..."

"O-okay."

Snap. The prosthetic was fastened with a leather belt.

Ji-won had brought along some soil without needing to be told and created a Toad House mound, into which we placed the inmate's prosthetic.

The prisoner, trembling and not understanding the situation, followed our instructions.

"T-Toad, Toad, I'll give you an old house, give me a new one..."

"Damn it. You got the lyrics wrong. Do you really want to die...?"

"A-ahhh! Sorry! I'm Sorry! Toad, toad! Give me a new house, and I'll give you an old one!"

The death row inmate frantically shouted and pressed the "Pay Now" button on the Toad House second-hand shopping mall displayed on his smartphone.

Then, the prisoner screamed.

"Hyaaak! M-my arm! My arm! Aaaack!"

Perhaps forgetting that we were watching, the prisoner rolled on the floor.

But none of us, members of the Regression Alliance, paid attention to the inmate's pitiful flailing.

It was gone.

"Wow... G-Guild Leader. It really disappeared."

The prosthetic arm that had just been attached moments ago had vanished as if it were merely a phantom limb all along.

We dug through the Toad House mound of soil, but no trace remained.

A pop-up window appeared on the smartphone's shopping mall

screen.

[Payment completed.]

As the death row inmate's screams echoed through the underground prison, all my comrades silently looked at me.

I nodded.

"Ji-won."

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"Compile a list of all the missing persons reported by families so far. Also, send out notices to those who haven't reported, asking them to write down the names of the missing at the nearest National Road Management Corps office."

"Understood. I'll get right on it."

The Monster Wave. An infinite Anomaly that always brings about the end of the world.

Half of the Monster Wave's strength comes from the dead—the endless waves of corpses.

A strategy to counter it may have just been discovered.

Footnotes:

1 - The **Hecatoncheires** from Greek mythology are three giants whose enormous bodies were made up of fifty heads and one hundred arms.

2 - Legend has it that when trying to cross the rivers to the Southern Barbarians, Zhuge Liang was forced to choose between failure, death, and sacrificing the heads of 50 fifty to appease the

ravenous river gods. Instead, he cooked dumplings in the shape of human heads and tossed them into the river, which the gods accepted, allowing him to successfully cross the raging tides.

Chapter 307

The Distributor III

Sinnoa

Allow me a moment to digress.

In my story, I've adopted the "Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint."

Thanks to this, you, the readers, are exposed to fairly objective and relatively truthful information. I want to emphasize that I always strive to be honest with you, and I hope you appreciate my efforts. On the other hand, most people living in this world aren't as fortunate as you.

To give you the most straightforward example, Awakeners almost always hide or distort their abilities when dealing with others.

For instance, Ji-won's Mini-Map.

- Anonymous: Hey, sorry to bother you, but what were the conditions for the Operations Team Leader's ability to activate again?

 [NationalRoad] ForbiddenBooksManagementDivision17: Either physical contact, like brushing against their clothes, or maintaining eye contact for more than 3 seconds. One of the two must be met.

 Anonymous: Thanks!!

 [National Road] Officer: May I ask why you're suddenly curious about such specific details?

 Anonymous: Oops.

The above comment contained incorrect information. In reality, for Mini-Map to activate, all Ji-won needed was to have met the person at least once and to know their name—and "meeting" could take place either in real life or on SG Net.

Without even realizing it, the person who posted the question had already been detected by Ji-won.

But what about their name, you may ask? Well, Seo Gyu could find it out using his administrator privileges or the Saintess could figure it out and pass it along.

Next, let's talk about Seo-rin's Cursed Song Incantation.

"Holy shit! The Great Witch is singing!"

"Where could the totems be hidden? Find them! Destroy them quickly!"

You and I both know that Seo-rin's Cursed Song Incantation activates simply by her singing. Others, however, don't have that privilege.

Every time Seo-rin goes to war, she hides totems resembling African wooden dolls all over the battlefield, almost as if she's deliberately baiting onlookers to deduce, *Aha! The totems must remain intact for Cursed Song Incantation to activate.*

"Guild Leader! We've destroyed two, but we can't find the rest!"

"Keep looking! They must be nearby!"

Everyone fell for this simple bluff.

Whenever Cursed Song Incantation echoed across the battlefield, Seo-rin's opponents would frantically search for the hidden "totems," and by forcing them to waste time and manpower on a useless task, Seo-rin in turn gained the upper hand.

Deception. Camouflage. Distortion of information.

Struggling to survive just that little bit longer is the fate of all Awakeners, so twisting the true nature of their abilities is just the basics.

Now then. Why am I explaining such obviously common knowledge to you all over again?

“You must have been deeply saddened by not being able to hold a proper funeral for your friend. Don’t worry. I’ll use my ability to find some of their belongings for you at the very least.”

“R-really, Undertaker?”

“Of course. If you can provide me with your friend’s name, place of origin, and as much accurate personal information as possible, I’ll retrieve their belongings. If you can hold a modest funeral with them, the deceased won’t wander as a lost soul.”

“Oh! Thank you, Undertaker! Thank you! I’ll never forget this kindness!”

I, the Undertaker, have evolved into an even more complete, max-level professional Undertaker (Lv. 5).

[Their name is Lee Eun-ju. Place of origin: Seoul. Last seen at Hapjeong Station subway exit.]

[After searching through Toad House, two individuals matching this information were found.]

[Judging by the bracelet on her wrist, it seems the first one is the correct match.]

It was the Saintess reporting in with the information I had asked her to pass along to me.

“Thank you. Please relay this to Ji-won.”

[Understood.]

A new process had been established.

→ First, I receive information about the missing person from their family. I also post a notice on SG Net that I’ll accept requests at any time.

→ The information is then sent (via the Saintess’s Telepathy) to the underground prison beneath the National Road Management

Headquarters.

→ The second-hand shop Toad House searches for remains or belongings matching the missing person.

→ Do-hwa and Ha-yul create prosthetic limbs or other assistive devices that match the items found on Toad House.

→ The prosthetics are attached to a death row inmate. *Snip!*

→ The remains are delivered to the family, and a funeral is held. Problem solved!

“I’m ridiculously busy…” muttered Do-hwa, whose under-eye bags always screamed the word *TIRED* in capital letters. “Last week alone, I made 16 prosthetic arms and 22 prosthetic legs. Damn it. If I had worked at this pace back when I was a civil servant, I could’ve single-handedly managed all the national rehabilitation hospitals in the country…”

“Just make rough models of them. They’re not meant to be used by the wearer anyway—they’re just for selling on Toad House. I told you not to waste your craftsmanship on this.”

She sucked in a slow breath, visibly displeased. But soon, upon seeing the mountain of recycled documents piled on the table, she let out the breath in a long sigh. “Fine. I guess there’s no other choice. It’s annoying, but I’ll just make some sticks and attach them…”

Do-hwa had always custom-made assistive devices for each patient to ensure their comfort. Even if she just grabbed a random stick and a fishing hook to create a Captain Hook set, her Prosthetic Creation ability would work without issue. The fishing hook wouldn’t be useful for anything other than using Tinker Bell as bait, of course. It would only give the wearer the sensation of having a hand attached —practically useless, which would never satisfy a perfectionist like Do-hwa.

But Noh Do-hwa was a pragmatist before she was a perfectionist.

She fully accepted my black-and-white logic: “Why put effort into

junk that's just going to be handed over to monsters? Are you on their side or something?"

As a result...

"Alright. Next..."

"C-Commander! No, Your Commandership on High! I really don't want to lose my arm! It hurts too much! I was wrong! I admit it! Please!"

"You're delaying my off-time. Please note that there's an inverse relationship between my off-time and your lifespan. Next..."

"Eeeek! Please spare me! Please!"

"Next..."

A mass-production system capable of handling hundreds of prosthetics a day was established.

Do-hwa was disheartened by this inhumane industrial revolution at first, but after attending a joint funeral for the families, her perspective seemed to change.

The first joint funeral, held in Busan, concluded with a solemn and somber mood in the air.

In a world ravaged by the apocalypse, it wasn't easy for people to maintain their humanity. The Constellation System devised by the Saintess was essentially a temporary measure of support to prevent the collapse of humankind—like scaffolding at a construction site.

"How deeply saddened you must be."

"Thank you..."

"Oh, my child! Why did you go down there? *Why?!*"

"Father, I'm sorry. I love you, Father."

I was no different. Just as the Saintess cleverly twisted her

Telepathy and Clairvoyance abilities to create the Constellation System, I used the Toad House Anomaly to establish the Funeral System.

Those who can properly say goodbye are better prepared to meet someone new. Humanity isn't simply a noble virtue of any given individual—it arises from the ties two or more people form with each other. Thus, funerals—the ultimate farewell—are a ritual for the preservation of humanity.

After paying our respects to the departed, I was treated to a once-in-a-century rare event.

"Hmm," Do-hwa hummed. Then out of the blue, she suggested, "Let's take a walk..."

"Sure."

Despite being the one to propose it, she barely said a word after we arrived at Haeundae's sandy beach. The waves crashed, foaming at the edges where the Milky Way shimmered.

Do-hwa's pitch-black eyes were indistinguishable from the night sea reflecting the night sky.

Unlike me, who had mastered Aura, Do-hwa couldn't go for over a week without sleep. Still, thanks to chugging the special alchemical energy drinks made by Uehara Shino of the Magical Girl Council, she had astronomically reduced her need for sleep relative to others.

Thus, it wasn't until around 6 AM that she finally spoke.

"Making assistive devices for the living is my job, but I never imagined I'd be making them for the dead too. It never even occurred to me that I might be doing this one day..."

"Life never strays too far from the familiar, yet the unfamiliar still approaches with slow steps."

"Hmm. I don't want to dismiss it with just a saying..."

Do-hwa glanced at me.

She was one step closer to the sea than I was.

“Because this project is clearly the brainchild of the Awakener Undertaker—you.”

I stayed silent at that.

“For the first time, I feel a sense of fulfillment. Huh. I never felt any sense of fulfillment in life—not when I became the head of the National Road Management Division, or when I built the nationwide road network, or when I captured vicious criminals and threw them into the underground prison…”

I knew.

In a way, she was similar to the Saintess.

She was driven purely by her sense of duty. The rational judgment that if no one else could do it, she had to take up the mantle. That was the steel structure that made up Do-hwa’s heart.

“But strangely, making assistive devices for the missing and retrieving their remains gives me a sense of fulfillment…”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. In the end, I’m just a prosthetic maker…”

A brief silence washed over us, buoyed only by the sound of the waves.

“I wish life could always be like this.”

A murmur, carried by the night sea.

“It’s nothing grand. You can block pain with Aura or whatever, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Then just take Ah-ryeon with you, and you can regenerate arms or

legs. Ask people if they've lost anyone. I'll just toss on some metal sticks I have lying around, and that'll be enough..."

"Shall we go together?" I impulsively suggested. "Since the next cycle is the 710th, it's a good time for a vacation round. If you want, we can leave the National Road Management Division to fend for itself and just wander around with three or four people."

Do-hwa's gaze lingered on my face. After the waves crashed three times and her lips twitched four times, she finally spoke.

"Later."

"Later?"

"Yes. A little later..."

Then with a rustle of sand, Do-hwa stepped past me and said as if drifting away, "It's about time Jagalchi Market opens. Let's grab a drink and head to work..."

"Ah, sounds good. Red wine is actually one of the world's top 10 superfoods, you know."

"You're talking nonsense again..."

Before leaving the shore, I glanced back at the sea one last time.

In the footprints Do-hwa left on the sandy beach, a small dawn had pooled.

There is a short epilogue.

Exactly 16 years later.

"Hey, Awakener Undertaker. I heard the Monster Wave is coming, so I came up to the rooftop..."

"Yeah."

"Those corpses must be the lost souls..."

“Correct. Judging by their faces, they mostly came from beyond the Himalayas or the Ural Mountains. All that effort traveling around holding funerals paid off.”

“Those flying building chunks must be the City Eaters you told me about, right?”

“City Devourers.”

“Sure. Anyway, let’s assume we know all those. But...” Do-hwa pointed into the distance. “What the hell are those damn things...?”

The person responsible for lowering the average dignity of the Korean language with every curse, National Road Management Division Commander Noh, pointed in the direction where “those damn things” were rolling around.

Have you ever seen a tumbleweed in a Western movie? Imagine a bunch of tangled roots rolling around on the ground, like a downgraded version of a steel scrubber.

Now imagine that but 100,000 times bigger.

An Anomaly resembling a tumbleweed was approaching as part of the Monster Wave.

- *Clank, thud. Clank, screech.*

“Hmm. It’s just a bunch of steel rods tangled together, moving— Or rather, barely rolling around.”

“No way...?”

“Yes. They’re the prosthetic devices you made, Commander Noh. I wondered where all those assistive devices collected by Toad House went. Turns out, they got eaten by the Monster Wave and came along with it.”

Silence.

“But honestly, they’re shoddy. The Prosthetic Creation ability isn’t physically dangerous, after all. Thanks to that, the Monster Wave’s

power seems to have weakened."

Of course, the weakening effect was still minimal. This was our first round of using Toad House. We were just getting started, so as the cycles progressed and our know-how accumulated, it was clear the Monster Wave would grow weaker.

We'll revisit this in later cycles, but ultimately, we achieved the great feat of weakening the Monster Wave's strength by over 50%.

However, in accordance with the Law of Equivalent Exchange, those strange chopstick-like steel scrubber monsters also grew increasingly massive.

Later, people gathered at the final defense line would look up at the colossal steel scrubber and panic, asking, "What the hell is that damn thing?"

"Thank you, Commander Noh. To honor this brilliant achievement, the newly discovered monster shall be named the Noh Do-hwa Monster—"

I was choked.

Chapter 308

The Skeptic I

Sinnoa

“Mister. I’m going on a trip to Southeast Asia with Ha-yul. Huh? Why do you look so serious again?”

“It’s nothing, just...”

Something felt off.

“I feel like I’ve seen this before. Anyway, you’re going on a trip? You know you have to use Yeouido Airport for international travel, right?”

“Of course. If I go to Namsan and get a Central Intelligence Agency ID and a passport, I can board the plane with a free pass, right? I remember everything.”

“Right. At Yeouido, you have to say you’re from the Special Forces, not the CIA. The historical background of each Anomaly is subtly different.”

“Got it. I’ll enjoy a two-night, three-day beach vacation and bring you back some pretty seashells as a gift!”

With that, Dok-seo waved goodbye and left.

[It’s... It’s my first time traveling abroad.]

“Huh? You lived in Japan, though.”

[That was more like exile than a trip.]

Ha-yul scurried after Dok-seo, and further behind, a housekeeper doll dragged a suitcase behind them.

The room grew quiet.

Something still felt off.

“Undertaker.”

“Ah, Seo-rin. What’s up?”

“We’ve caught the Trolley Dilemma this time, and I think if we use it well, we can establish a permanent railway. The Trolley Dilemma is so dumb that it even counts the dolls Ha-yul made as ‘humans.’ So, I’m thinking of tying a bunch of dolls to either side of the tracks to make the Trolley Dilemma move back and forth. What do you think?”

“Sounds like a great idea.”

“Right? Maybe railways will replace highways as the main transportation system on the Korean Peninsula. I’ll lay the tracks right away, so wait for me.”

“Ah. I’ll be waiting.”

Seo-rin hummed a tune as she led the underlings of the Samcheon World guild away. She had somehow managed to recruit Ha-yul, and now, the witches transported doll hauls that numbered in the hundreds.

If Seo-rin’s plan to create a Trolley Dilemma railway succeeded, it would truly revolutionize transportation.

In the original history, trains were a symbol of the industrial revolution. Perhaps a similar upheaval was about to occur in this apocalypse.

And yet, something still felt off.

Here, “off” meant a nagging feeling in my heart.

When Dok-seo and Ha-yul casually mentioned going on an overseas trip, and when Seo-rin declared she would start a railway revolution, a strange unease tickled the back of my neck.

“Your Excellency,” Ji-won said as she approached. “The financial

policy you devised for Dream Casino has now been perfectly implemented. The people are accumulating wealth to dream even sweeter dreams."

"Ah..."

"The credibility of the won is quite high and not just on the Korean Peninsula, but also on the Japanese archipelago and the Chinese mainland. All of this is thanks to Your Excellency's orders to dispatch Tutorial Fairies to various regions. I, Yu Ji-won, am always moved by Your Excellency's care for all humanity."

"Good..."

"Voices praising Your Excellency's benevolence are echoing across the world. How can this not be called a golden age?"

Ji-won then spent the next 30 minutes singing my praises before leaving. Her light footsteps exuded the satisfaction of having completed her daily tasks.

Something was off.

Really off.

Problem was, I couldn't pinpoint exactly what, which made me feel all the more frustrated because of it. It was like having an itch right in the middle of my throat that I couldn't scratch, so I kept letting out pointless little coughs.

It was a cold winter.

Do-hwa sipped her mulled wine, exhaling a relaxed breath.

"I don't know how long it's been since I've had this kind of leisure. Lately, the workload around here has decreased, so life feels a bit more livable..."

"Your workload has decreased?"

"Yes. We have the airport, the highways, and—even if they're a bit unstable—the railways. The financial system is also running

smoothly. Heh. For an apocalypse, this is practically a developed country—”

“Ah.”

At that moment.

“Ah! Ah! Ahhh!”

The spot on the back of my neck that had been tingling exploded.

I had finally realized the true nature of the “off” feeling that had been tormenting me all this time.

I couldn’t help but jump up and scream. How could I have not noticed this until now?!

“Damn it.”

Do-hwa’s wine glass tipped over as I slammed the table, but this minor collateral damage was the least of my concerns.

“What the hell is it now, huh?” she grumbled. “Did you catch some new kind of crazy virus and start raving again...?”

“Life is too comfortable!”

“Huh...?”

“Commander Noh. Haven’t you ever felt like something was off? This is the apocalypse. The world is on the brink of destruction. So how can people casually go on overseas trips, and what’s with this railway nonsense? A golden age? What golden age?!”

Wiping her wine-splattered monocle with the hem of her lab coat, Do-hwa looked at me like I was a lunatic.

“No. Have you finally lost it? All of that infrastructure was built because you defeated the Anomalies. Your memory was your only redeeming quality, but now you’re getting dementia too...”

“I supervised the Tutorial Fairies from start to finish, yes, but

Yeouido Airport wasn't this convenient before. The Trolley Dilemma was also much more troublesome."

Yet, at some point, the Anomalies had started obediently serving humanity's needs.

The Tutorial Fairies could communicate from the start, and cooperating with me benefited them too. They received a constant supply of "dreams," the staple food of the Baku. But Yeouido Airport? The Trolley Dilemma? These Anomalies couldn't communicate and had no concept of benefit or loss.

So why were they cooperating with the reconstruction of human civilization? Were the Anomalies just pushovers?

No way. If the Anomalies were pushovers, my story would have ended around chapter 120, and the tragedy of SG Net readers suffering from Dok-seo's constant hiatuses would have been avoided.

"This itself is an Anomaly!" I exploded in frustration. "Those cunning bastards! Cowardly Anomaly scum! As expected of the source of all evil, they've subtly changed their survival strategy without anyone noticing! Ha! How dare they try to deceive me, the Undertaker! Pretending to cooperate with my convenience and humanity's comfort, they're slyly pushing for coexistence! Ha! Not a chance. Even if I starve and freeze to death on the streets! I will never! Tolerate! Their schemes!"

"Hmm."

Do-hwa adjusted her glasses and flipped through her notebook.

"Let's see. Is there any free time in Kim Ji-soo's schedule at the mental ward today...?"

"Godfather, do you ever have sudden outbursts in your daily life, where hatred, contempt, or past traumas overwhelm you?"

"Yes. Just thinking about the Ten Legs's tentacle piercing Seo-rin's abdomen makes my skin crawl."

“Godfather, how do you usually maintain your peace of mind?”

“I read *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* or write parody novels about it, always reflecting on how to navigate turbulent times.”

“Godfather, do you ever feel like someone is watching you, monitoring you, or plotting against you, even on an ordinary day?”

“Ah. Ji-soo, you might not know this, but there’s a terrifying entity called Go Yuri. Never say her name out loud. Refer to her only as the ‘pink entity.’”

“I see. Is the pink entity targeting you, Godfather?”

“Of course! The pink entity is always waiting for the moment my resolve weakens. Phew, I’m breaking out in a cold sweat just thinking about it.”

“I see...”

And so, the one-hour counseling session ended.

“Godfather.”

“Ah, do you have the results? How is it? You’ve never seen a client with as sound a mindset as mine, right?”

“I’m sorry. You have a severe case of Anomaly-hating syndrome and *Three Kingdoms* addiction.”

“What?”

“That’s ridiculous...”

“See! I knew this would happen!”

While I was dumbfounded, the people who had tagged along as my “guardians” chattered noisily.

“Even if Mister’s been through a lot, he’s always blaming Anomalies for everything! This is the Anomaly’s fault, that’s the Anomaly’s fault. We just went on a trip to Southeast Asia to relax, and now

you're saying we've been bewitched by Anomalies?" Dok-seo demanded.

Ha-yul was next to respond. [We didn't even relax much. The sea was beautiful, but the constant sound of cannon fire from beyond the horizon was annoying.]

"Yeah, well. Undertaker does tend to overreact sometimes," Do-hwa said with a shrug.

"I don't trust these psychological tests, Your Excellency," reassured Ji-won. "The fact that I was diagnosed as a psychopath shows how flawed these tests are."

"Hmm..."

The local broadcast was as noisy as ever.

"No, something's really off!" I insisted. "You guys don't know how cunning these Anomalies are, so you're letting your guard down. They're like viruses! They might seem convenient and comfortable now, but the backlash from using them will definitely be massive!"

"Look at him. He's at it again."

[He's like a broken record. Anomaly this, Anomaly that.]

The self-proclaimed "guardians" (I never asked for them) whispered among themselves.

Not one of them trusted me—I could feel it.

Saintess! The Saintess would understand!

The Saintess, who shares a heart and soul with me, will surely understand!

[Um... I'm sorry.]

[Actually, I think it might be better if you became a bit more flexible in your mindset.]

Even you, Saintess?

[I respect you, Mr. Undertaker. But sometimes, I feel like you underestimate your own achievements.]

[Whether it's Yeouido Airport or the Trolley Dilemma, you're the one who pioneered their strategies and uses.]

[The fact that people can feel even a small sense of convenience in these times is thanks to your efforts.]

[To suspect that even your achievements are part of an Anomaly's conspiracy... I can't help but feel like you're undervaluing your comrades.]

Ugh.

The Saintess's comfort was appreciated, but I wasn't being paranoid for no reason.

The regressor's intuition was screaming at me. The "civilization" or "convenience" of the Anomalies—there's definitely a terrifying malice hidden behind it!

"No, intuition is just your subjective feeling. What the..."

It was noisy.

In the end, no one agreed with my argument. The only exception was Ji-won, who said, "Your words are truly wise, Your Excellency" and nodded along.

But as everyone knows, Yu Whatever's agreement was about as useful as a human's wisdom teeth.

'Could my intuition really be wrong?'

I couldn't accept it.

I could accept all other opinions, but when it came to Anomalies, I trusted my gut.

A leader sometimes needs stubbornness.

If Hannibal had listened to his advisors saying, “What? You’re going to cross the Alps to attack Rome? General, are you out of your mind?” and retreated, he wouldn’t have appeared in Fate/Requiem later.

‘No, I couldn’t have misread the signs of the Anomalies. I’m sure of it. There must be someone out there who agrees with me. Someone!’

But even the Saintess, who always supported me, had made her disagreement clear.

Who would sympathize with my argument now?

My options were running out.

“—so I came to consult you. What do you think? Doesn’t it seem like some suspicious Anomaly’s scheme to you too?”

“Hmm.”

The person in front of me twirled her orange hair.

The setting was a school classroom.

But as if to prove that this wasn’t a real classroom, the scenery outside the windows was incredibly dynamic.

Leaves fluttered outside the back window, while snowflakes drifted outside the front window.

“Sunbae.”

In the middle of this mysterious classroom, the person sitting at the desk spoke.

“So, you’re saying that after regressing multiple times and gathering human comrades, none of them agree with you, so you came to me —an Anomaly and an Outer God—someone you even sealed with

Time Seal, and after 300 years in regressor time, you're suddenly asking for empathy?"

"Hmm," I hummed, thinking for a moment. "You could summarize it that way."

"Sunbae, you're really trash, huh?"

Infinite Void.

No, Cheon Yo-hwa looked at me with a gaze full of contempt.

Chapter 309

The Skeptic II

Sinnoa

In the game of Go, there's a term called reviewing the game.

Go is a game where etiquette between players is crucial, so there are few opportunities to show off one's personality. Giving advice during the game is also considered taboo.

However, showing off one's personality is inherently human. How could one ignore their own self?

Thus, Go invented a brilliant solution. After the game ends, players replay the entire match from start to finish, legally exchanging the pent-up banter and advice they couldn't share during the game.

The genius of this idea becomes clear if you replace "Go" with "StarCraft." Even if you lose the game, you can't just rage quit. You must review the replay with your opponent, discussing where you made mistakes and where you should have focused your forces.

Whether in the present or the past, one can see that gamers have always been truly dedicated to teabagging.

If you don't understand StarCraft and the example doesn't resonate with you... Well, that's your fault.

A Korean who doesn't know StarCraft? Such an Anomaly doesn't exist.

"Sunbae, sometimes I feel like you deliberately act like an old man just to enjoy the horrified reactions of people around you. You do, don't you?"

"Stop reading people's minds so casually. Truly befitting the leader of Anomalies."

“No, it’s just that reading your expressions is surprisingly easy...”

The person in front of me, who looked exactly like Cheon Yo-hwa, the student council president of Baekhwa Girls’ High School, let out a sigh.

“So, after ignoring me for 300 years, you suddenly show up and start talking about Go? Want to play a game?”

With a flick of her hand, a Go board and stones materialized on the classroom desk. The girl in front of me smiled brightly, picking up a black stone with her index finger.

“By the way, as befits a daughter of a prestigious family, I’m quite skilled. Don’t expect me to go easy on you just because you’re my sunbae.”

“Hmm.”

The girl in the black sailor uniform—or Cheon Yo-hwa, as she had insisted on being called after once being known as Infinite Void, devourer of the Mastermind—was an Anomaly who claimed to be the twin sister of her namesake.

During the 688th cycle, while defeating the Mastermind, she was sealed with Time Seal.

“I love you in this very moment.”

Those were her last, incomprehensible words.

As you all know, those sealed by Time Seal leave no trace of themselves in reality. Their existence is erased, and Cheon Yo-hwa was no exception. After leaving a transparent crystal tombstone like a secret door at the National Road Management Corps headquarters, the Anomaly (or human) vanished forever.

“It’s always fascinating when I visit...”

“Huh?” Yo-hwa asked. “What is?”

“Those sealed by Time Seal usually don’t remember their lives.

They don't even realize they've been sealed. But..."

"But?"

A moment of hesitation lingered on my lips. "Cheon Yo-hwa. No matter when I visit, you're always aware that you've been sealed by Time Seal. Is it because of your status as an Outer God?"

"Ahhh... No, no. Haha. Not really." She waved her hand dismissively and explained, "Sunbae, you're already a monster on par with Outer Gods. Why would you dismiss my abilities just because I have some status? I'm just repeating 'the happiest day of my life' in this classroom."

"Then how do you know you're trapped in a crystal tombstone?"

"Simple. The happiest day of my life was the day I confessed to you, and that day, I willingly requested the Time Seal."

I stared at her, silent.

"Unlike the others you've buried, the moment I was sealed is etched in my memory as the happiest day. So of course I'm aware of it." A smirk played about Yo-hwa's lips. "In fact, I planned it that way. Right after confessing, I got sealed. As you like to say, 'Every ability has a loophole,' right?"

"...Clever."

"Haha. Don't underestimate me. I'm Cheon Yo-hwa, the heir to the cult, a villainess, and a strategist for regressors ♪"

Yo-hwa laughed, waving a fan she had summoned from somewhere.

Even if Yo-hwa was aware of the Time Seal, she wouldn't remember the conversation we were having now once the day reset. After a day passed, her memories would reset again.

"I see. Let's get back to the main point—"

"Oh. Sunbae, hearing that the day I confessed was the happiest day of my life is making me emotional. Are you trying to change the

subject?”

“...Let’s get back to the main point. Just like reviewing a Go game or watching a replay, I want to consult with you about this cycle.”

“Heh.” Yo-hwa propped her chin on one hand and looked at me. “The consultation you mentioned earlier? About how the convenience of infrastructure in the apocalypse might all be part of an Anomaly’s scheme?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm... I don’t really care. Though it’s funny—you treat me like an Outer God rather than a human, so you’re consulting an Anomaly about Anomalies.”

“Don’t tease me. You know why I’ve been calling you Cheon Yo-hwa. If you keep this up, I’ll start calling you Infinite Void again.”

“Hehe. Sorry, sorry.”

Her giggle eased into a sly smile. I paused, wanting to scold her but hesitating at the sight of my cherished student acting cute...

This kid and I really didn’t get along.

“To cut to the chase—yes. I think your speculation is correct.”

I was right!

“I’ve said it before. You, a regressor who’s lived through hundreds of cycles, are practically an environment of your own. So it’s only natural that Anomalies adapt to you and try to thrive.”

“You’re saying they’re pretending to help humanity while secretly parasitizing us.”

“Well, if you want to put it bluntly, yes.”

Yo-hwa placed a Go stone with a *click* against the board. Even though I hadn’t made a move, she began sketching out the game’s flow on her own.

“This mysterious Anomaly… Let’s call it ‘Infrastructure’ for now. Wow, this reminds me of the meetings we had while strategizing against the Mastermind. Good times.”

“Hmm.”

“Anyway. Infrastructure’s role model is probably the Tutorial Fairies. The Baku. Thanks to you, they didn’t just protect their domain of dreams—they became its rulers.”

“That’s right.”

“Yeah. Infrastructure might be pursuing a similar strategy. ‘Regressor, I can provide you with passenger planes. Regressor, I can allow you to build railways. So please, don’t exterminate me.’”

Tap. Tap.

I stared at the black and white stones as Cheon Yo-hwa continued to play out the game, lost in thought.

“So… should I interpret the expansion of Infrastructure as a sign of surrender rather than a threat?”

“Maybe.”

Yo-hwa tilted her head and smiled. The sunlight streaming through the classroom window cast a diagonal shadow across her face.

“Or this surrender could be a ruse. A ploy to lull you into complacency before striking from behind… Which is it? Genuine surrender? Or a scheme? The materials to judge are already in your hands.”

I rested my chin on my hand.

The rhythmic sound of Go stones clicking against the board served as background music. Oddly, the orderly noise helped me focus.

After a while, my mind was settled.

“I see. I understand.”

“Yeah?”

“Normally, my comrades trust me unconditionally when it comes to Anomalies. But this time, for some reason, they all seemed to conspire to dismiss my concerns about Infrastructure.”

“Yeah.”

“At the time, I laughed it off, but looking back, it’s incredibly strange.”

My comrades were a diverse group. Just take Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa (the other twin) for example—they were practically enemies. Yu Ji-won and Kim Ji-soo were outright rivals. Yet all of them agreed that ‘Anomalies mimicking infrastructure isn’t strange’? Without a single objection?

“It’s mental manipulation. That’s what it is,” I concluded.

Yo-hwa smiled. “As expected of you, sunbae. Right, I think so too. To be more precise, it’s closer to altering common sense. A widespread distortion of perception that ‘Anomalies contributing to human civilization isn’t strange at all.’”

“If they were genuinely surrendering, they wouldn’t resort to such underhanded tactics.”

“Yeah. And the second-hand shopping mall Toad House you frequent might also be part of Infrastructure.” When I didn’t respond, she continued, saying, “Without you realizing it, this Anomaly has already infiltrated your daily life. Thankfully, your mental defenses are strong, so the common sense alteration didn’t work on you.”

The National Tax Service Anomaly collecting taxes.

Yeouido Airport’s overseas travel services.

Village Bus No. 44’s long-term transfers.

The Trolley Dilemma's railway usage.

Even the Toad House's delivery of missing persons' remains.

If you replace "infrastructure" with "national systems," you could even include Namsan's Central Intelligence Agency.

'Wait. If you think about it that way, even the Supreme Leader Anomaly that ran rampant last time might have been part of Infrastructure.'

A chill ran down my spine.

The darkest place is under the lamp. Anomalies that seemed completely unrelated were actually connected.

"Sunbae. If we assume Infrastructure's specialty is altering common sense, there's one thing in this cycle that's unexpectedly explained, isn't there?"

Yu Ji-won.

The silver-haired secretary—the only one with an absolute ego who could face Go Yuri without being brainwashed.

What did Ji-won say when all the other comrades dismissed me as paranoid?

"I don't trust these psychological tests, Your Excellency."

"Your words are truly wise, Your Excellency."

That's right.

Only Yu Ji-won agreed with me. While it might be because she was a power-hungry psychopath, it was also because she was immune to Infrastructure's common sense alteration.

"Even a broken clock is right twice a day..." I mused. "Who would've thought Ji-won would be the only one to say something sensible?"

“Haha. Everyone has their uses, which is why you keep them around, right? Well, except for me.”

Every word this kid said carried weight.

“Now, sunbae. Look at the Go board.”

I looked.

The game had reached its endgame while we were consulting. All that was left was to count the points.

“Doesn’t it look familiar?” Yo-hwa pressed.

“This game?”

“Yeah.”

“...No. Even with my Complete Memory, I can’t recall it at all. If I had to guess, both players seem to be around amateur 2-dan and 3-dan level.”

“Of course you don’t remember,” she said, another sly smile tugging at her lips. “Because this is a game we played secretly when you were tutoring me at my house.”

I didn’t respond.

“This is today’s consultation fee.”

Swoosh!

Memories from a past my Complete Memory couldn’t reach were colored in by the girl in front of me.

‘Ah.’

There’s a meme on the internet called “memories that don’t exist.” It originated from a Japanese manga.[1]

Ridiculous as it sounds, the same phenomenon was happening to me.

Cheon Yo-hwa sneaking me through secret passages in her grand, palace-like hanok.

Inviting me to her private hideout and suddenly pulling out a Go board while we discussed what to do.

Cheon Yo-hwa, the jewel of a prestigious family, happily chattering away as we played Go.

Like a montage of movie scenes, every moment flashed through my mind's eye, and when they did, everything about them was automatically etched into my memory as an eternal recollection.

Just now, Cheon Yo-hwa had planted a piece of eternity in my soul.

"Yeah, today was fun too!"

This was also the core reason I didn't visit her crystal tombstone often.

As someone who had devoured both Infinite Void and the Mastermind—two Outer Gods—Cheon Yo-hwa was undoubtedly the best consultant for Anomalies. But at the same time...

She was dangerous.

Every time I consulted her, she demanded a "consultation fee" in the form of small memories, unforgettable recollections, and her own existence.

Isn't it astonishing? Even though she had been sealed by Time Seal and should have long since exited the stage, the girl in front of me still had a way to intervene in my reality.

As she said, she truly was a strategist worthy of the title.

"By the way, would you like to pay another small consultation fee, sunbae? I might even help you figure out how to deal with Infrastructure."

"No, thanks. Confirming that Infrastructure is an Anomaly is enough. I'll find a way to deal with it myself."

“Aww, what a shame.” Yo-hwa laughed, not looking disappointed at all. Then, she said, “Then here’s a freebie.”

“A freebie?”

“I have a conscience too. I feel a bit guilty for charging a consultation fee just for confirming an Anomaly. If you ever feel stuck dealing with Infrastructure, there might be an unexpected escape route you haven’t considered.”

“…I’ll keep that in mind.”

The chair creaked as I stood. As I walked toward the classroom door, Cheon Yo-hwa waved at my back.

“Come back anytime… Next time, let’s play Go like we used to, Sunbae.”

Looking at her smiling face, I could no longer call her Infinite Void as I used to.

“…Alright, Yo-hwa.”

“Yeah!”

With a creak and a thud, the classroom door closed and the cold air of reality brushed against my cheeks.

Below the Tower of Babel, the ruins of Busan—destroyed by the Monster Wave—lay scattered.

I smiled bitterly.

‘Really. Whether in this world or the next, everyone’s just trying to charm me. That’s the problem.’

It was time to exterminate Anomalies again.

To the next cycle we go.

Footnotes:

1 - The meme in question originates from the series *Jujutsu Kaisen*. To not get too deep into spoilers, a character there is featured several times in “memories that don’t exist” wherein adversaries are suddenly struck by nostalgia for moments they know didn’t happen but that still endear them to this character without them really being able to resist the change.

Chapter 310

The Skeptic III

Sinnoa

Once, I had a drink with the Great Priestess of the Magical Girl Association, and we had a conversation that went as follows:

"Undateikeo-san. You sometimes compare yourself to a supporter, but from my perspective, that's nonsense."

"Oh?"

"A thief. No, in this case, the term 'assassin' would be more appropriate." The Great Priestess wagged her nine tails and smiled slyly. "You calling yourself a supporter is a result of being overly focused on your allies. From the perspective of your enemies, there's no assassin as ruthless as you."

"Hmm."

"You appear out of nowhere, assassinate your enemies with a strategy in hand, and then, you vanish. While Anomalies are a disaster that strikes humanity in the dead of night, to them, you are also a disaster that descends without warning."

As the head of the Magical Girl Association, the Great Priestess assigned roles and abilities to all magical girls. To the trained eye of an Awakener with that sort of expertise, I was more of an assassin than a supporter.

The term "assassin" did have a somewhat ominous connotation, but I was willing enough to admit to seeing her side of things. I preferred one-on-one duels over full-scale battles and ambushes over duels, and when dealing with enemies like the Infrastructure Anomaly, whose true nature was hidden, I readily adopted the mindset of an assassin.

'Infrastructure still doesn't realize I've caught onto its existence.'

In the next cycle, I acted as if I knew nothing and went about my usual routine. Of course, behind the scenes, I was secretly gathering information about the Anomaly in question.

‘I can’t consult the Saintess or anyone else.’

Infrastructure’s most terrifying ability, I presumed, was its widespread common sense alteration. Even if my comrades seemed fine now, there was no telling when or where their perceptions might be corrupted.

Only one person—Yu Ji-won, the psychopath born immune to brainwashing—could be trusted with the strategy, and even then, I couldn’t discuss it carelessly.

“Why is that, Your Excellency?”

“Because there’s a risk that the Saintess might peek into our thoughts at any moment, leaking information to Infrastructure.”

“Ah.”

So I came up with a plan.

“From now on, all discussions about Infrastructure must take place within the dreams of the Baku. Understood?”

“Yes.”

Using the Tutorial Fairies.

With the Baku’s power, it was entirely possible for me and others to share the same dream. No matter how powerful the Saintess’s Clairvoyance was, she couldn’t follow us into the dreams of the Awakeners. It was the perfect place for a secret meeting.

“I’m endlessly pleased that it’s me, Yu Ji-won, upon whom you ultimately rely. But Your Excellency, may I ask one thing?”

“Go ahead.”

“Down there, at the entrance to the stairs, there’s danger tape with warnings like ‘Handle with Care,’ ‘Safety First,’ and ‘Authorized Personnel Only’ plastered all over like spiderwebs. What exactly is lurking in the depths of the subconscious that you’ve blocked off so thoroughly?”

“Shh! Don’t ask. Don’t even get curious! Divine punishment will strike!”

Legend has it that if you linger too long in the subconscious, a shadow with pink hair will eventually loom behind you.

I really hate that story.

Anyway, aside from the minor drawback of a 0.1% chance of Go Yuri appearing, the dream world of the Baku served as an excellent hiding place.

“Right now, Infrastructure is slowly working to alter people’s common sense. We need to strike while it’s focused on that.”

“And to kill an Anomaly, the first step is to expose and define its true nature.”

“Right. We need to reveal its identity.”

“Hmm.”

Ji-won turned her head.

The background of our dream was the ruins of an abandoned construction site. Painted on the building’s walls were words, the thing Ji-won was currently scanning.

National Tax Service, Yeouido Airport, Village Bus No. 44, Trolley Dilemma, Toad House, Supreme Leader Comrade...

All were Anomalies either connected to or suspected of being part of Infrastructure.

“Your Excellency...” Ji-won began after a long pause. “If I may ask,

which cycle are we in now?”

“This is the 776th cycle.”

“Did Infrastructure start altering people’s common sense in the 775th cycle? Were there no signs before that?”

“Ah. Well, it might have been subtly making changes for a long time, but I only noticed it then.”

“Hmm,” she hummed, resting her chin on her hand. “Then the conclusion is that Infrastructure didn’t originally exist in Your Excellency’s cycle line and has now suddenly appeared.”

“Like a mysterious ghost. This thing is capable of altering common sense on the level of a whole population across the entire peninsula. How could such a powerful Anomaly just appear out of nowhere?”

“No, there’s no need for ghosts to wail. The reason for Infrastructure’s appearance is actually quite clear.”

I blinked. “Oh? Do tell.”

“Yes. The cause is none other than you, Your Excellency.”

Huh?

“Ji-won...” I trailed off, choosing my words carefully. “I know there are some in our cycle alliance who push the Undertaker-Anomaly Theory, but if you take that at face value...”

“Oh, I’m not saying you are an Anomaly, Your Excellency. Just that you are the one who drastically increased the probability of Infrastructure’s appearance.”

I tilted my head. What on earth was she talking about?

“Your Excellency. South Korea has fallen. Human civilization has collapsed. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

“But from an individual’s perspective, the state itself is a powerful monster. State power controls individual thoughts, restricts actions, and limits freedom.”

“Hmm…”

Did she think that way because she’d been a serial killer since middle school? If you’ve spent your whole life outsmarting the police, of course state power would feel unfriendly.

“I won’t interrupt,” I reassured her. “Go on.”

“Certainly. Originally, the monstrous power of the state vanished with the collapse of civilization. Whether it’s the National Tax Service or Yeouido Airport, they’re all scattered like dismembered limbs, leaving only traces of the state and infrastructure.” Ji-won turned to look at me and said, “But Your Excellency, you’ve begun to rebuild a part of civilization.”

I stayed quiet, waiting for her to continue.

“The scattered remnants of human infrastructure have been reconnected. The National Road Management Corps you established is the symbol of a unified state. Furthermore, you’ve even connected Eurasia with the beacon of the Sacred Fire.”

A faint electric current ran down the back of my neck in realization. “Are you saying… that as I rebuilt human civilization, the Infrastructure Anomaly also grew alongside it?”

“Yes. More accurately, you’ve created an environment where Infrastructure can run rampant.”

Ji-won picked up a paint can. With a practiced stroke, she wrote a word on the ruined wall:

“Therefore, the name ‘Infrastructure’ is somewhat inaccurate. It can’t explain Anomalies like the ‘Supreme Leader Comrade.’ To name this Anomaly on a larger scale—”

The word she wrote was the one she spoke next.

“State. The power of the state. The ideology of the state... This is the name of the Anomaly that has newly appeared in your cycle line, the parasite that has grown by riding on your success.”

For a good, long while, I was stunned stiff, unable to recover from the shock.

Seawater lapped at my feet, soaking my socks, but the thought of drying them with Aura didn’t even cross my mind.

‘The more I restore human civilization... the more I create opportunities for another Anomaly to grow?’

What kind of nonsense was that?

Until now, I had classified Anomalies based on whether they were useful to humanity or not. If an Anomaly was useful, I boldly recruited it into the regression company. How else could the National Road Management Corps operate caravans when car fuel was more expensive than gold? It was all thanks to the Kongkongi and Byojoki I raised on my ranch. The northern barrier blocking the Monster Wave was also maintained by the resurrection Anomaly, Mo Gwang-seo.

Logistics, currency, even security—there were few areas where Anomalies weren’t utilized.

‘And all of that ultimately feeds into the growth of a larger, more dangerous Anomaly—the State. An Anomaly that might even evolve into an Outer God.’

Does convenience always come with a price?

Perhaps I need to completely overhaul my strategy as a regressor.

‘Should I abandon the plan to connect Eurasia with the beacon? Scrap the Baku’s currency? What about our adorable Kongkongi?’

My head spun.

Ah, the incompetent and weak regressor could only crouch by the

breakwater and gaze helplessly at the horizon...

“Meow. Why are you moping here, Undateikeo?”

I suppose I should say—I was standing on the shore of Noto Peninsula in Japan, where the Magical Girl Association had illegally occupied a famous ryokan-style hotel and turned it into their headquarters.

Since sulking in Korea would inevitably attract the Saintess’s attention, I came here under the pretext of a business trip to film *The Undertaker’s Melancholy*.

“Ah, Manyo Neko,” I greeted, making a nihilistic expression. “I envy you, a shrine maiden serving a cat god. Animals don’t need countries or governments, so you can’t empathize with my worries...”

“Are you picking a fight? I’d love to punch you right now, nya.” Manyo Neko hissed. “I came to comfort you because you looked so pitiful, but I regret it now.”

“What I need isn’t comfort, but a vacation. And the next vacation season is still 100 years away. Manyo Neko, do you understand this pain and resentment?”

“Our Great Priestess is a handful, but the Awakeners in Korea must have it tough too, nya...”

Manyo Neko crouched beside me, her shadow falling over me. The magical umbrella she always carried cast a galaxy-like shadow even in broad daylight.

“I don’t know what you’re worried about, but why not spill it? Since I’m not part of your organization, you might feel less burdened talking to me, nya.”

Hmm. “Should I?”

“Meow, meow.”

What followed was a two-hour counseling session.

In the middle of it, a summer event occurred where monsters with tuna heads and shark tails landed on the shore and attacked, but as seasoned Awakeners, we casually defeated them and continued our conversation.

Manyo Neko sliced into fresh tuna sashimi with a contented purr and tilted her head.

“So, to summarize, you want to provide as many people in Korea with the benefits of infrastructure, but doing so risks creating an Outer God disguised as a state, leaving you stuck between a rock and a hard place. Is that right, nyan?”

“Ah.”

“Hmm.” She swallowed a piece of tuna belly, then said, “Honestly, I don’t get why that’s a pawblem.”

“Huh?”

“Just because people come together to build organizations and infrastructure doesn’t mean it has to take the form of centralized state power. Look at us nya. We’re not a Magical Girl Nation, but a Magical Girl Association, right? A network of shrines across the country, each forming its own group of shrine maidens. The Great Priestess just helps coordinate joint operations or agreements among magical girls. She’s not some kind of queen, nyan.”

She was right.

It was surreal to hear political philosophy spilling from the mouth of a cat-eared magical girl, but they had their own ideas (surprisingly?) and had formed an association to realize them. Specifically, the Great Priestess was a believer in anarcho-syndicalism and spread that ideology to other magical girls.

If you’re wondering what that is... Well, it’s similar to anarchism. Long story short, in this reality, the Tutorial Fairies were revolutionaries and the magical girls were anarchists.[1]

There’s a reason the world ended.

“Anyway, just because social infrastructure exists doesn’t mean you have to worry about centralized state power. Politics can take many different forms—”

I shot to my feet. “That’s it.”

“Purr?”

By now, my socks had dried from the seawater and were soft again. Aura surged through my body like a tiger’s energy.

“Thank you, Manyo Neko. My eyes have been opened. Thanks to you, I’ve thought of a way to maintain infrastructure while defeating the Anomaly. Truly, the Manyo Neko Strategy.”

“Uh, meow. You’re welcome?”

“I’ll repay this debt someday.”

Splash!

I didn’t need to wait any longer. I stepped on the seawater and hurried back to Korea.

As I distanced myself from Manyo Neko, I heard her mutter, “This feels weird. I’m sure I did a good thing, but why do I feel like I’ve done something terribly wrong, nyan...?”

Infrastructure— No. The State Anomaly.

I needed a way to lure it out and exterminate it while preserving the systems I’d built as a regressor.

There was only one solution.

“From now on, we will stop pretending to be the only legitimate government organization on the Korean Peninsula.”

The Regression Alliance. Meeting room in the Tower of Babel.

I made the declaration in front of all my comrades.

“The state is ultimately a servant of power and has now become a plaything for Anomalies. Until the day all Outer Gods are exterminated, the reconstruction of civilization is a distant dream. The National Road Management Corps was never meant to replace the government.”

Silence fell over the room. Do-hwa raised her hand, piercing the quiet with a question.

“Then what the hell are we supposed to do?”

“Ah. An excellent question.” I nodded. “From this moment on, the National Road Management Corps will be reborn as a terrorist organization.”

Immediate confusion.

“In this hellish situation where our peninsula is ruled by vile Anomalies, violence is our only meaningful form of resistance!”

I slammed the table, impassioned as I delivered my speech.

“We will fight as a resistance force—as an independence army—to protect human dignity and individual freedom against the monstrous Anomaly State! Ah! One hundred million humans, unite! Long live freedom! Long live the resistance!”

Everyone fell silent.

Then—*clap, clap, clap*—applause rang out. All eyes turned to see Ji-won on her feet in the corner of the room.

“Long live freedom! Long live the resistance! Long live the eternal Supreme Leader of the Resistance, Undertaker!”

Clap, clap, clap.

“Your Excellency. The lack of response proves that these traitors have already been swayed by the Anomaly State. We must execute them to uphold the discipline of the Resistance and Your Excellency’s dignity.”

“Stop messing around and sit down, Ji-won.”

“Okay.”

The National Road Management Corps has officially transitioned into a terrorist organization for humanity and civilization!

Footnotes:

1 - To put it simply as one poor, confused editor to any of you readers who are also confused, **anarcho-syndicalism** is essentially anarchy where you want to abolish the centralized government of the state plus syndicalism where that power would then be invested back into labor unions and the hands of worker revolutionaries.

Chapter 311

The Skeptic IV

Sinnoa

My plan was simple.

First, I would hand all of the functions of the State's infrastructure over to the Anomalies. Places like the National Tax Service and Yeouido Airport had been playgrounds for Anomalies from the beginning, after all, so it wouldn't make much of a difference.

But then, all Awakeners, including those in the National Road Management Corps, would join the resistance and carry out terrorist acts against the Anomaly State—all the while hiding their identities so that they could continue to make good use of its amenities in their daily lives. This way, the people of the Korean Peninsula could freely enjoy the infrastructure of the State while maintaining their identity as a resistance force, untainted by the Anomalies.

A true win-win situation. A double kill.

The reputation of Undertaker, the world's foremost expert on Anomalies, was indeed well-deserved.

"No. You're kidding..."

Do-hwa balked, scrunching her face in bitter denial. I could hardly fault her for it, considering her job had suddenly changed from being the rightful ruler of the Korean Peninsula to the leader of a dark resistance organization.

"Is this strategy really feasible...?" she lamented.

"Entirely so. In fact, the concept of humans being a force of resistance fits the current reality much better."

The world was already dominated by Anomalies. In fact, the Anomalies had mimicked even the National Tax Service, collecting

“taxes” in the form of human blood and limbs. In such occupied territory, gradually expanding liberated areas was the duty of a regressor.

“At its heart, our National Road Management Corps is like a network of scattered guilds across the Korean Peninsula, barely connected and used as a backbone for resistance,” I said sagely.

“So since it’s come to this, we might as well declare ourselves terrorists?”

I clicked my tongue. “Let’s use the more dignified term, resistance.”

“You’re the one who called it a terrorist organization first, you damn lunatic...”

The motion was passed. However, simply declaring among ourselves “From now on, we are the resistance fighting against the illegal occupation of the Korean Peninsula by the Anomaly State!” wouldn’t have much impact. Rituals required procedure.

I immediately led the National Road Management Corps’s Operations Team—the resistance’s strongest force—along with its Yu Ji-won to raid a shabby house in Busan.

“Mr. Jo Yeong-su! Are you there?”

“Huh? What, what is it? Who are you?”

Jo Yeong-su came out of the shack, looking flustered. In this cycle, he had been diligently collecting public opinion data to announce the “End of Service for South Korea.” Thanks to my full support, his opinion polls had progressed much more smoothly than before. The results were piled high under the roof of the shack.

Documents. To Jo Yeong-su, these were more precious than his own life, the last survey papers of South Korea.

“Wh-what is the meaning of this?” he stammered. “Why have you all come here to threaten this helpless old man?”

“Hmm. It’s Jo Yeong-su, alright. Take him away.”

“Ahhhhh!”

Thus, the Mr. Jo Yeong-su was immediately transported to Seoul.

By the way, all members of the Operations Team were wearing sunglasses and face masks to avoid being recognized.

After skillfully navigating the Inunaki Tunnel, we arrived at the National Assembly in Seoul in no time. Jo screamed when he saw us.

“Y-you! You’re Anomalies pretending to be human! You may suppress this old man’s body, but you’ll never defile my spirit!”

Truly, he was a man who had traveled the length and breadth of the country to complete his opinion polls in this insane world. Even most Awakeners would feel their knees go weak if they suddenly found themselves kidnapped by Anomalies, but Jo’s shout remained resolute.

No, perhaps “resolute” isn’t the right word. Judging by his expression, it seemed like he was inwardly welcoming the arrival of what he had been waiting for.

“Comrade Secretary-General! Welcome!”

Once we were in the National Assembly, the Tutorial Fairies greeted us. The Operations Team had already gathered here under my orders. At the sight of the Tutorial Fairies, the Anomalies most well-known to the general public, Jo became even more convinced and shouted, “S-Secretary-General? You...! Are you spies infiltrating from the puppet state in the north?”

I hummed, thinking over how to respond. That original puppet state had long since fallen, and a new regime had taken its place. But in retrospect, the Eastern Holy State was also my puppet state led by the puppet Mo Gwang-seo, wasn’t it? Jo’s outburst wasn’t entirely unfounded.

“Now then, human,” I boomed, deciding to just go with it. “Sit in the Speaker’s seat and stamp the document declaring the end of South Korea.”

“Y-you! You vile Anomalies! I’m trying to dissolve the government with the voluntary consent of all citizens, not sell the country under your coercion!”

“Tsk. You’re being unnecessarily verbose when you’re going to destroy it anyway.”

“L-let me go! You can’t hold me!”

Jo resisted fiercely, but as one of the Unawakened, there was no way he could escape the grasp of the fairies. In the end, he was forced to sit in the Speaker’s seat and stamp the document.

“Hooray! With this, we declare the end of South Korea!”

“*Ahhhhhh!*”

Amid Jo’s screams, thunderous applause erupted in the assembly. It wasn’t the Tutorial Fairies or me clapping. Invisible Anomalies were applauding.

‘Good. It’s done,’ I thought, clenching my fist. ‘With this, the last human government on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea, was not voluntarily dissolved but neutralized by the machinations of Anomalies.’

Crucially, this was what separated this cycle from those that came before it.

To be honest, Jo Yeong-su’s “End of Service” event had been deeply moving to me personally, but given the current state of affairs, allowing it to go through would be a misstep. From the Anomalies’ perspective, it could be interpreted as “humans voluntarily giving up state power!” So, while I felt sorry for the old man, this was a small sacrifice for the greater cause.

“Hooray! This land has now become a paradise for Anomalies!”

“What shall we name the country?”

“The term ‘Puppet State’ has a more traditional ring to it than ‘Anomaly State.’ After all, we are the hands and feet of Comrade

Secretary-General!”

“But ‘Anomaly’ is just a name humans arbitrarily gave us, and we’re not exactly the same species, are we?”

“Shh. Those who lack awareness are to be purged!”

The fairies chattered and left. Jo was sent back to his home in Busan via delivery service. Having suddenly become the main culprit behind the fall of the nation, the old man holed up in his house and refused to come out.

“Mr. Jo. Are you there?”

Startled, Jo Yeong-su turned to look and let out a sigh of relief. This time, I visited alone, without a mask or disguise.

“It’s you, Mr. Undertaker...” he said, trailing off. “I should offer you some instant coffee...”

“Oh, it’s fine. Please, sit down. By the way, I haven’t seen you around lately. Did something happen?”

“Ah, actually...”

Regressor Psychological Counseling mode, ON.

“...and then those bastards! The Anomalies grabbed my finger and forced me to stamp the document with red ink!”

“Oh my. How could such a wretched group exist in this world? You must have been through so much.”

“Waaah!”

Within 30 minutes of our counseling session beginning, Jo was bawling like a baby until his already thin frame seemed to be squeezed dry of all moisture.

“I... I became the accomplice of the nation’s downfall with my own hands! I signed that accursed treaty! The burden of my family’s legacy has fallen upon me again! Oh! *Oh!* How can I bear this

injustice, this fury?!”

“How could this be your fault, Mr. Jo? It’s entirely the fault of the Anomalies who forced you.”

“Mr. Undertaker...!”

“Even if the world doesn’t understand, I, the Undertaker, understand your pain. We all lost our country, but we, each of us, still carry the name of ‘Korea’ deep within our hearts, do we not?”

“Comrade Undertaker...!”

We shared a passionate embrace. Sometimes, men need intense emotional exchanges.

[...]

Of course, the Saintess, who was watching all this through Clairvoyance, gave off a silent aura. It felt like she had a lot to say yet chose to hold back.

Sorry, Saintess, but the show isn’t over yet.

“Since you’ve called me comrade, I’d like to make a proposal to you —one to be kept secret.”

“Huh? A secret proposal...?”

“The responsibility for the nation’s downfall lies with the Anomalies, but your anger belongs solely to you, doesn’t it? Come with me.”

I guided the still tearful Jo to the Inunaki Tunnel. He jumped when he saw the casino thriving at the tunnel entrance.

“What is this place?! A den of evil where vile Anomalies run an illegal gambling den!”

Surprisingly, Jo had never visited the Dream Casino, which was popular among both Awakeners and the ordinary citizenry. In a

way, he seemed to hate Anomalies more than most Awakeners. He was truly an impressive man.

“Oh. Everyone thinks that way. But it’s always darkest under the lamp. Mr. Jo. Keep your eyes on the ground and follow only my footsteps.”

Following the steps known only to members of the Regression Alliance, we soon arrived at the depths of Inunak, my hideout.

Jo’s eyes widened. “Wh-what is this place…?”

“Let me introduce you.”

The hideout’s interior was a bit different than my usual fare. Unlike in previous cycles, where it was built to maximize the convenience and welfare of guild members, this cycle’s hideout was… well, a bit shabby. The lighting was indirect, making it oddly dim. The tables and chairs were all old antiques, and the wallpaper gave off a musty smell. And one detail stood out above all the rest.

The Third Provisional Government of South Korea

An old-fashioned plaque hung on the wall.

“This is the true workplace of the Undertaker. The base of our independence resistance army, where we will dedicate nothing but blood and sweat until the day the Korean Peninsula is liberated from the Puppet State.”

Jo trembled as if struck by lightning. “Th-then, the reason you supported my project and helped me complete the opinion polls…!”

“Yes. As you’ve guessed, it’s because I was convinced that your project aligned with the ideology of our resistance.”

Actually, it just looked interesting.

“Then the reason someone as noble as you associated with a dictator like Noh Do-hwa…!”

“Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. Noh Do-hwa, the

head of the Management Corps, has no idea that I'm leading a branch of the resistance."

Actually, I was the one who forced Do-hwa into the position of Management Corps leader when she didn't want it.

"Now," I began, moving the topic in a different direction, "there are many people to introduce today. This is Yu Ji-won, the team leader of the Operations Control Room, part of the National Road Management Corps."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Jo Yeong-su."

Ji-won walked over from where she had been waiting and shook Jo's hand. His eyes watered.

"What?! But y-you're Yu Ji-won, the loyal subordinate of the dictator Noh Do-hwa and the leader of the secret police who oppressed countless people!"

"That was all a disguise."

On the other hand, Ji-won answered expressionlessly, without batting an eye.

"My loyalty lies solely with one person—not Noh Do-hwa, the head of the Management Corps, but the Undertaker here."

"Wh-what...?"

"The core of a dictatorship lies in its intelligence and military organizations. I, Yu Ji-won, have firmly taken control of the Operations Control Room, which combines both. Noh Do-hwa may be a dictator, but she's on humanity's side. Our true goal is to use the power of the National Road Management Corps to fight against the world's main enemy, the Anomalies."

Then, with appropriate gravity, she murmured, "For the day the Korean Peninsula is liberated."

Jo was already at risk of a heart attack from shock overload, but sorry to him, the show wasn't over yet.

“Mr. Jo,” I called, directing his attention to someone new. “This child here is Lee Ha-yul. She’s known as the Puppeteer.”

“Puppeteer...?”

“Let me introduce her. The daughter of Jeong Sang-guk, the head of the Second Provisional Government. His only successor.”

“Wh-what...?” Jo stuttered, stunned.

Ha-yul skillfully manipulated a puppet to speak.

[Nice to meet you.]

[I’m Lee Ha-yul, carrying on my father’s will and working for the provisional government.]

[Let’s work together to achieve our goals.]

Ha-yul’s poker face was also top-notch. When it came to expressionless faces in our Regression Alliance, the Saintess, Yu Ji-won, and Lee Ha-yul were always mentioned.

[I have fully inherited the network my father established in the Japanese archipelago.]

[I act as a mediator between the Korean Peninsula and the archipelago, organizing the resistance as a united front.]

[Let’s be comrades-in-arms.]

[For the greater cause. For the day humanity is liberated.]

“Ahhh...!” Jo cried, falling to his knees. “There was still hope in this land! I, Jo Yeong-su, had no idea such wonderful people were fighting underground, and all I did was lament the future of the nation! Now I feel ashamed of my entire life!”

“No.” I knelt down with him and firmly grasped his hands. “You weren’t all talk. You protested in front of the Tower of Babel every day, condemning Noh Do-hwa, the head of the Management Corps, and ran around gathering public opinion. Why blame yourself?”

“Now, Mr. Undertaker.”

“Please join the resistance. Although victory over the Anomalies that have engulfed the world is still far off, with your help, humanity will undoubtedly take one more step forward.”

He burst into tears. Today, his tear ducts were like faucets. Turn them on, and they flowed.

“I... I see! If this old man’s life can be of any use, I’ll gladly give it!”

He was on board.

Jo Yeong-su was the key to my plan. The Anomaly State—or rather, the Puppet State—that had descended upon the Korean Peninsula was undoubtedly relying on his declaration of the end of South Korea.

All rituals require procedure.

If the Puppet State Anomaly had piggybacked on Jo Yeong-su to subtly swallow up the void left by the Korean state, then it would also have to be influenced by his decisions in kind. Thus, “South Korea was forcibly destroyed by Anomalies” (a fact) and “an underground resistance was formed to reclaim the lost homeland” (also a fact). As a result, members of the Regression Alliance along with other participating parties were freed from the Puppet State’s common sense alteration brainwashing.

Why?

Even if we made good use of the infrastructure of society, it was merely a means for independence and resistance. Resistance members were never truly citizens of the Puppet State. QED.

‘Am I a genius?’

For the first time in a while, I couldn’t resist the urge to take a moment to praise myself for my own brilliance. Although I had received advice from Cheon Yo-hwa and Ji-won, the credit for developing the method to break the ritual was mine.

“Thank you, Mr. Jo. Your dedication will surely be rewarded. For the greater cause. For the day humanity is liberated.”

“For the greater cause! For the day humanity is liberated!”

It was the moment when my organization, which had been called simply “my guild” or “guild hideout,” officially gained the name “resistance.”

As we were sharing a touching embrace among us proud children of Korea, the Saintess’s Telepathy reached me.

[...Sometimes, I really feel overwhelmed being with you, Mr. Undertaker.]

That, too, was a small sacrifice for the greater cause.

Chapter 312

The Skeptic V

Sinnoa

“Ugh... Oh, today is truly... a joyous day for this humble man... Ugh.”

Jo Yeong-su downed a celebratory shot for joining the resistance and left, thoroughly drunk.

The play is over. Acta est fabula.

Yu Ji-won, the “independence fighter who hides her true intentions while living as the right-hand woman of a dictator,” and Lee Ha-yul, the “young successor who carries on her father’s will to fight Anomalies,” had both exited stage left.

Of course, an encore performance would be ready whenever Jo returned. After all, a masterpiece never gets old, no matter how many times you see it.

[Oppa.]

After the commotion died down and the room quieted, Ha-yul suddenly approached me. I didn’t hesitate to pick her up, celebrating the star of today’s performance.

[Ah.]

Viking ride. Top spin. Roller coaster. Carousel.

The carnival of amusement rides invented over hundreds of cycles specifically for Ha-yul unfolded. She laughed silently, her golden Aura rippling with joy.

“You did really well today.”

[Yeah. And, this might be a bit TMI, but I’ll confess now—my

mother's family name is Uibong Lee.]

I tilted my head. Uibong Lee?

[The most famous superstar from that family is Lee Wan-yong, the Marquess of the Empire, who drove everyone crazy, whether they loved or hated him.]

"..."

[And according to the intelligence gathered by my network, the grandpa who just left is from the Pungyang Jo family.] 1

No way.

[Yes.] Ha-yul drew a "V" with her fingers, expressionless. [The combo of Pungyang Jo and Uibong Lee leading the Korean Peninsula Independence Resistance Army—the last resistance of humanity—and it's based on a true story? My heart swells with pride.]

That was truly, 100% pure TMI.

Still, it seemed our Ha-yul, who used to be so well-suited for reading, was becoming more of an otaku.

This dad was worried she might be hanging out with the wrong crowd.

As the saying went, "What's next to ink turns black."

Even if Do-hwa and the Saintess were horrified by my strategy, they didn't refuse to execute the plan.

Once the goal was set, our Regression Alliance cooperated as one united front. By now, everyone was used to my style.

Noh Do-hwa's orders came down next.

"We will strike the Voids that are impersonating or mimicking 'state institutions,' such as the Central Intelligence Agency on Namsan, Yeouido Airport, and the National Tax Service, which appears every

tax season...”

Up until now, we had focused on separating the Puppet State and the resistance.

If we had warmed up with WWE, it was time to move on to UFC. Now, it was time to show the Anomalies what a real resistance looked like.

And I, the Undertaker, had learned UFC techniques from an old German communist.

“Wait,” I interjected. “Before we launch attacks on the Voids of the Puppet State, there’s one last thing we need to set up.”

“Which is...?”

“Let’s establish the ‘real names’ and ‘aliases’ of all Awakeners this time.”

In the past, almost all revolutionaries used aliases instead of their real names. They all wanted to become idols of ideology. For example, the original idol Lenin’s real name was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, a name that no one except hardcore idol fans remembered. Not even his comrades were familiar with it. It was thanks to this discretion that anyone captured and interrogated by the state could maintain some level of security.

“If you don’t want to die, tell us the name of the leader who gave you orders!”

“L-Lenin! Comrade Lenin!”

“Lenin? Who’s that? Tell us his real name!”

“I don’t know his real name either!”

Surprisingly, an equivalent security system was maintained in Korea until the early 2000s. Ideological agitators were often ignorant of technical and practical advancements like cybersecurity.

I decided to follow this ancient tradition.

“Until now, aliases were either self-proclaimed or naturally created, like pro gamers’ nicknames. But from now on, we’ll assign these aliases with the explicit purpose of acting as pseudonyms for the resistance.”

“Oh?”

“Revealing your real name to Anomalies is quite dangerous, even from a ritualistic perspective. Let’s change the culture entirely this time.”

Hide your real name as much as possible. Never call each other by your real names, even by mistake, especially when entering Voids or fighting Anomalies.

‘This taboo was already being observed voluntarily within the more experienced guilds. With a little push, it’ll soon become an unspoken rule across the Korean Peninsula.’

As I predicted, the guilds across the regions followed the guidelines from the National Road Management Corps without much suspicion.

We formed the organization. We prepared the members. And just as the atmosphere was ripening, Do-hwa finally dropped a quest directive across the Korean Peninsula.

Author: [National Road] Noh Do-hwa

Notice:

Recently, numerous Anomalies and Voids claiming to be or mimicking “state institutions” have been discovered across the Korean Peninsula.

As you all know, there is currently no legitimate government in the Korean Peninsula. Do not trust anyone claiming to belong to a government institution.

As of now, the National Road Management Corps will collectively refer to all Anomalous phenomena mimicking government

institutions as the “Puppet State.”

Those who subdue Anomalies and Voids related to the Puppet State will receive certain rewards.

Rewards will be paid in Korean won.

Please ensure you have a means to prove your subjugation and report it to the National Road Management Corps.

A permanent post has been set up on SG Net for submissions, so please make use of it.

That is all.

National Road Management Corps Leader, Noh Do-hwa

The extermination order had been issued.

‘How touching.’

In the past, say, around the 100th cycle, we could never have issued quests like this. The only way to mobilize Awakeners on a national scale back then was to borrow the voice of a constellation. Rewards were also haphazard. We had to gather useful weapons or visions that could enhance each Awakener’s abilities and distribute them like “opportunities.”

‘Not anymore.’

Liberating the Tutorial Fairies from the Infinite Void and establishing a cooperative relationship to successfully open the Dream Casino had afforded us access to the dream-based currency system, where earning money in dreams allowed you to fulfill wishes.

The desire to escape from the harsh struggle for survival and enjoy a comfortable fantasy, even for just eight hours of sleep, was universal and primal.

‘Simply offering rewards of tens of millions, hundreds of millions,

or even billions of won is enough to stimulate the desires of countless Awakeners.'

I'll admit it. Everything in the world has its pros and cons. My steps to expand humanity's liberated zones inadvertently helped the Puppet State Anomaly grow, but the regressor's system was prepared to crush such minor side effects.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

[The Baekpa Guild in Chungju has raided the National Tax Service. One member was seriously injured, but the Void was successfully half-destroyed.]

Soon, the Saintess's Telepathy began relaying urgent reports.

[Awakeners across the regions are subduing buildings like police stations, fire stations, community centers, and schools while exploring Voids.]

[Some of these Voids don't seem related to the Puppet State. What should we do in such cases?]

"Leave them be. For now."

It didn't matter if the resistance's attacks weren't precise. After all, the enemy wasn't human, they were Anomalies. What mattered was fostering an atmosphere where subduing Anomalies related to the Puppet State and receiving rewards was seen as a sweet "honey" among Awakeners.

"We don't even need to completely subdue them. Just damaging the buildings or disrupting their operations is enough."

[I see... Understood.]

The resistance was fundamentally an underground force. Completely eliminating the Puppet State was a distant goal. No, even if we toppled the Puppet State and the Korean Peninsula returned to the resistance's control, a new state born from the resistance would eventually emerge.

“Both WWE and UFC are shows. Even if blood spills and bones break, the show must go on.”

The Puppet State must not disappear. In fact, it must maintain its identity as a “state” forever. So that we, the Awakeners, humanity’s allies, can continue to exist as humans who are “not enchanted by state ideology” and “fight for their own freedom.”

[Not subduing them is itself a method of subdual... I didn’t know such a thing existed.]

“It’s not that rare. The Tutorial Fairies are the same.”

[Really?]

“Yes. Thanks to the fairies, we can interfere with the vast Void of “dreams.” If we forcibly capture all of them, the Nameless One from the unconscious world will rise.”

[The ecology of Voids is truly fascinating the more you think about it...]

Three years passed like this.

- Anonymous: Went Void exploring this time and found a bunch of school buildings lined up like dominoes lol. Thought it was some kind of academy city lol

Anonymous: Did you get the reward??

Anonymous: Yep. Knocked over the dominoes and easily sucked up 1.3 billion in rewards lol.

Anonymous: Damn, I’m so jealous...

Anonymous: So I donated 300 million of my share to our golden-handed DM-nim lol. This is why I risk my life exploring Voids.

Anonymous: ?

Now, posts like this were common on SG Net. There was no need to completely destroy the Puppet State’s buildings, which were tainted

by Void Corruption. Just damaging the exterior enough would automatically trigger the rewards. For Awakeners, there was no better farming ground.

‘This is enough.’

I turned off my smartphone.

‘With this, Awakeners using aliases are no longer susceptible to the Puppet State’s common sense alteration brainwashing.’

The Puppet State’s strategy of parasitizing the regressor’s success to build its own power had been thwarted.

I stood up, a satisfied smile lingering on my lips.

It was Wednesday—time for my regular study session with the Saintess. For a regressor with no weekends, Wednesday was the happiest day of the week.

‘Where should I have Dok-seo place this story?’ I thought to myself as I walked toward the Saintess’s house in Yongsan. ‘Since it’s about the Anomaly connected to the National Tax Service, maybe around then? Or right after the story where we meet parallel-world Dang Seo-rins on a passenger plane at Yeouido Airport?’

Let me confess upfront: neither option became canon.

I didn’t know it yet then, but this story wasn’t over.

‘Hmm. Both the Eastern Holy State and the Puppet State are state systems, so contrasting a human Puppet State built using Anomalies with an Anomaly Puppet State building a state using humans isn’t a bad idea…’

My footsteps halted.

A regressor’s vision was broad. Even while walking without paying particular attention to anything, I could catch a sentence in the corner of my vision.

It was on a stone wall blocking the exit of the Inunaki Tunnel.

Written there—not in Japanese but in Korean, not in red but in pink—was the following sentence:

Hello, Mr. Undertaker?

I stared at it silently. The Inunaki Tunnel was a Japanese Anomaly through and through. Even though I used it as my hideout, it shouldn't have learned Korean.

Perhaps Ah-ryeon or Dok-seo had painted it as a joke. I decided to think so.

I walked ahead and exited the tunnel.

About ten meters away, small stones were scattered on the ground in a very particular pattern that could be read as follows:

If this is not a dream

Or rather, it had to be read that way.

The thickness of the letters was expressed with pebbles, and the strokes of the handwriting were marked with gravel.

A spring breeze blew, scattering the gravel.

The sentence changed.

Can I borrow a moment of your time?

The spring gently breezed.

May I borrow a moment of your time?

A gust strong enough to blow away eyebrows blew.

The gravel all flew away. Even the pebbles rolled away.

Only twisted traces remained.

?

I immediately changed my route.

I had prepared 365 routes to the Saintess's house in Yongsan from the tunnel in Busan to the tunnel in Seoul. I even matched the number on purpose.

Although the cycles were different, the Saintess had sealed Nut, the Night Goddess. Nut governed the geocentric model, the power of the sun, and the model of the universe. She was an Outer God. The sun was the protagonist of the calendar. The number 365 to represent days of the year honored Nut. Therefore, the 365 paths from me to the Saintess were themselves a ritual crossing the solar system.

'The Saintess loves water. Water is the primordial mirror. Wednesday is the day of water in the Korean calendar. Therefore, Wednesday is when the Saintess's presence is strongest.'

I chose the 88th route, the number of days it took Mercury to orbit the sun and the path closest to water.

Since ancient times, rituals had been composed of three elements: heaven, earth, and man. Wednesday was the heavenly timing. The path of Mercury was the earthly geography. And the strongest Awakeners in the Korean Peninsula, ranked first and second, were here as well. So, there was no room for another being to intervene —

I am now behind you

Dead ants.

The corpses of millions of insects floated on the Han River.

I swallowed, sensing nothing behind me.

No, I felt the wind. The spring breeze was almost indistinguishable from a whisper. It carried the warmth of a human breath.

That spring breeze licked the back of my neck. Its tongue was long and sticky, licking me and the Han River, scattering the millions of corpses.

If you turn around, you will understand

I squeeze my eyes closed.

I couldn't bring myself to turn around. Yet ignoring it and walking away was even more impossible.

So, I let my voice flow backward alone.

"Go Yuri..."

"Yes."

The wind laughed against the back of my neck.

"Hello, Mr. Undertaker."

Footnotes:

1 - A reference to Joseon Dynasty history, where these families were also part of the resistance.

Chapter 313

The Skeptic VI

Sinnoa

The very first “He Who Must Not Be Named” was an Englishman who got taken down by some dropout. The second-generation successor of that title, however, was different.

Go Yuri appeared like a superstar, taking the world as her stage. And the moment she set foot upon it, she took everyone by storm.

My comrades and I were annihilated and, presumably, humankind itself went extinct.

In my epilogues, I’ve described it like this:

After that day, I never again contacted Go Yuri.

At the very least, the number of times we met face-to-face could be counted on one hand. We only interacted three, maybe four times at most over hundreds of cycles.

Take special note of the phrase “the number of times we met face-to-face.”

In truth, I very rarely had a real-life fan meet-up with Go Yuri. Of course, in the unconscious realm of the dream-within-a-dream, I saw her fairly often, but that wasn’t reality. It was quite literally just a dream. You wouldn’t claim, “Wow, Mom! I just met this YouTuber in person!” just because you chatted with them on a livestream. (Although there were some folks who got reality and the virtual world all mixed up.)

Anyway, back to the point.

How to tell apart the “real Go Yuri” from the “Go Yuri in my dreams”? Surprisingly easy. You could figure it out just from how she addressed me.

First, the dream version of Go Yuri preferred calling me Guild Leader.

As you know, Dream Yuri was an illegal squatter in my unconscious, which meant she could peep at my memories anytime she pleased. Even the fact that she'd once been a member of the Undertaker's guild—she learned that by sifting through my recollections.

The real one was different.

The real Go Yuri usually called me "Mr. Undertaker," "Undertaker, sir," or simply "Doc." She had no sense whatsoever that we'd ever belonged to the same guild, so for her, that reality was never even on her radar.

Incidentally, her forms of address changed based on her level of affection for me. From least to most affectionate: Mr. Undertaker, Undertaker, sir, and then Doc.

An example would go like this:

"Huwa. How intriguing. To think you're calling me exactly by my name."

Her voice, friendly and gentle, drifted from behind me.

"Surely, for you, Undertaker, sir, this must be nearly the first time we've met. All we did was briefly lock eyes at Busan Station, right? But could it be that you've known me for longer?"

Yes.

What was there to hide?

This very moment in this cycle was one of those "three, maybe four times" where I actually met Go Yuri in person that I spoke of in that epilogue. A genuine, real-life fan meet-up for the first time in thousands of years.

I felt like I was about to lose my mind.

If worst comes to worst, I'll just kill myself.

I swallowed hard, concentrating on the sensation of saliva sliding down my throat and on the graceful ripples of the Han River—where ant corpses drifted by.

I forced myself to stay calm.

"What's so strange about it? You called me 'Undertaker' even though we've only just met, so we're even."

"Ahaha. Doc, you're way too famous compared to someone like me. The gap in prestige feels even bigger than Guan Yu's fame versus Bian Xi's name value."[1]

Wee-ooo! Wee-ooo! Wee-ooo!

In my head, a police siren was blaring nonstop.

Amazingly, even that siren was something Go Yuri, as an illusion in my mind, was mimicking with a sunny smile. The entire world had become Go Yuri.

This is dangerous.

Why? *Why?* We'd only exchanged two lines, so how had she instantly jumped multiple rungs up the affection-laced address ladder?

I struggled to remain calm.

"Heaven's net is vast and wide, seeming loose yet letting nothing slip through... I have sources of information you know nothing about, so of course I'd be aware of an Awakener of your level."

"Oh, the Tao Te Ching. That's a passage discussing the Way of Heaven and Earth, right? You've been referencing the sky and ground repeatedly—is that on purpose?"

Spare me.

Please, just let me live.

“Ahaha. Also, there’s actually no way I could not know about you in the first place, Doc.”

“That’s a strange thing to say. Why’s that?”

“Because—”

Then, inexplicably, there was an instant of silence, maybe a decisecond of hesitation. It was so brief that unless you knew Go Yuri as intimately as I did, you’d never notice, but her lips gaped for a moment, as if glitching. Right after that, her voice resumed.

“Because—I’m a huge fan of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms: Gongsun Zan Edition*, the serial novel posted every day on SG Net by the author Mudang, who does two chapters a day!”[2]

“…”

“Ehehe. I’ve never left a comment, but I follow every chapter and always click that recommend button! Even this morning.”

“…”

“Seriously, Mudang goes too far sometimes. In the author’s notes, he casually brags that he still has over 200 chapters in reserve. Don’t get me wrong, I’m thankful for the daily double updates, but from a reader’s viewpoint, that just makes you wish for five updates a day.”

“……”

Honestly… Maybe Go Yuri really was a good kid? Maybe there were unavoidable circumstances behind her driving me and my allies to our deaths back in the 88th cycle?

As those of you with keen eyes might have noticed, I was bantering to myself—intentionally, truly clinging to life. After all, laughter can lighten gravity. To resist Go Yuri’s magnetism, which drew all things toward her, I had no choice but to cast off weight.

“Let’s get to the main point.”

Contrary to my frantic mental state, my outward tone and expression were heavy as lead.

“If you came here just because you’re a fan, then I refuse this meeting,” I continued. “I don’t play favorites with any particular reader.”

“Eh? But aren’t you the author on SG Net who’s banned the most readers?”

“Wait, how did you know about that…? A ban isn’t some sign of affection, it’s an expression of disregard. Besides, there’s no way I can see those brats who sneer that *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is just out-of-touch boomer content to be real readers.”

“But isn’t your definition of a true reader someone who **got started with Romance, dived into the historical records, yet still appreciates the grandeur of the fictional story, thus keeping both romance and realism alive**?”

“So what?”

“That’s too high a bar!”

“Huh. Well, that’s how masterpieces are. Readers pick books, but masterpieces pick their readers right back. You lot who can’t appreciate the splendor of the *Three Kingdoms*—”

Ah.

…

“You lot…?”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “Let’s get to the main point.”

“Oh? Heh.”

Laughter trickled out.

Ah-ha-ha.

The “ah,” the “ha,” and the final “ha” in that laughter each had different intensities. They grew sharper and grew closer.

Right behind me.

Not even four inches away, a rosy laugh sank softly along with her breath.

“How fascinating.”

The fine hairs on my neck stood on end.

Her exhalation was so dense that her voice didn’t exactly resonate through the air, it melted into my skin. A breath with a texture reminiscent of dripping candle wax.

It wrapped around my neck from behind.

If someone else had actually grabbed and squeezed my throat, it might have been easier to breathe. Even then, I didn’t turn around.

“Understood. It’s a shame we can’t talk face to face, but—just as you said, Doc—I’ll get straight to the point.”

She whispered.

“This past winter and spring were unusually dry. The same goes for last year, the year before that, and the year before that. We’ve had a constant drought.”

“…”

“Nature only seems slow to humans, but it still cycles along at its own measured pace. A poor harvest always brings consequences.”

A whisper.

“Which is why this summer, there’s going to be a typhoon, an incredibly powerful one.”

“…Could you talk from a bit farther away?”

“I am far enough. Really.”

“That’s a lie. You’re practically whispering right in my ear.”

“I never lie. If you doubt me, why not check with your own eyes?”

I took another deep breath. Again.

During those two twenty-second inhalations, there was no sound from behind me—only a breath, faintly mixed with laughter like the scent of apples, clinging to my neck, my back, my spine, and my waist. At first, her breath merely pressed lightly against my neck, but like fingers counting upward, it gradually coiled around my entire body. Now, I could feel Go Yuri’s every inhalation across my skin. It was getting hard to distinguish my breathing from hers.

The edges of my existence were starting to blur.

“If it’s a powerful typhoon...”

My voice remained the only thing clearly separated, so I clung to it —word by word, sentence by sentence—like a lifeline on a cliff.

Calmly.

“A sea serpent that causes monsoons and floods... Are you talking about Leviathan?”

“Oh? You knew about that too?”

“As I said, I have an information network you know nothing about.”

The Super Monsoon Anomaly, Leviathan. It was an Anomaly once purged by constructing an Ark.

“That’s amazing! As expected of you, Doc. Then maybe you’ve also guessed that the dragon is still getting bigger?”

“You’re telling me it keeps growing?”

“Yes.”

Haaah, Go Yuri sighed.

Her breath coursed through me like electricity, from the crown of

my head all the way down my spine. I barely kept my balance.

“Frankly, I’m really curious about what’s going on too. Under normal circumstances, it shouldn’t be able to grow this huge. Fascinating, right?”

“……”

Those words brought an old memory to mind—a distant scene from the past.

In the 687th cycle, while we were suppressing the Mastermind, Cheon Yo-hwa ascended until her fist alone swelled to the size of the entire Earth. At that time, the whole world was drowned in bloody waters.

That blood flood was indiscriminate, submerging the domain of humanity and the Void of Anomalies alike. Just when it seemed as if Cheon Yo-hwa would crush the Earth for good, an Anomaly burst forth from the center of that crimson sea.

- Gɣ̀́ ɵò́. oò́. Grù́. oò́!

Leviathan.

Even as all the other Anomalies were swallowed up by the Infinite Void’s ocean of blood, Leviathan alone struggled until the bitter end. And though Cheon Yo-hwa destroyed Leviathan’s entire body with a single flick of her hand...

At that time, Cheon Yo-hwa had devoured both the Infinite Void and the Mastermind, two types of Outer Gods. She was an Anomaly of unprecedented power—strong enough to rewrite even my past. And yet, Leviathan still fought back.

More importantly, in the 687th cycle, Leviathan was noticeably larger than before. Each of the dragon’s scales had turned into a human eyeball, covering its entire body in hundreds of billions of eyes.

I frowned. I had assumed it had gained power because the Earth flooded and triggered a great deluge—amplifying Leviathan’s water

affinity, but... could there be another cause?

In this cycle, there hadn't been any major flooding, so why was Go Yuri suddenly hinting that "Leviathan has grown bigger"?

Questions piled up, perplexing me even further.

"Even if Leviathan is getting bigger," I began cautiously, "I already have a countermeasure."

"Oh? Really?"

"Yes. If I see Leviathan getting close to the Korean Peninsula, I plan to plaster the beaches with the Chinese character for 'tiger' (虎)."

"Ahhh? Wow! Wow!" Go Yuri clapped her hands in delight. "So you already knew about that tactic! This time I'm truly surprised. As expected of you, Doc. You're amazing!"

It's the strategy you taught me in the past.

I bit back the words that almost slipped off my tongue.

Now that I think about it, both back then and now, Go Yuri had always been strangely... *entangled* with Leviathan. When she led the Ark and hunted down Leviathan in person, didn't she appear near the end like some illusion, delivering the final blow?

A case where Go Yuri didn't just advise me but personally subdued another Anomaly...

From my perspective—from what I had witnessed with my own eyes—that had been the only time.

So why? Leviathan was an ocean-class threat, sure, but there was no obvious reason for Go Yuri to treat it with such special attention. Did they share some sort of similarity? Some reason I was missing?

"But, Doc. Unfortunately, you can't quell Mr. Dragon using just that method this summer."

In the midst of my doubts multiplying like germs, Go Yuri dropped

a thunderbolt.

“What?”

“He’s grown too enormous. Even at this very moment, he’s still getting bigger.”

Go Yuri smiled sweetly.

My body, already synchronized to her breathing, felt each subtle vibration of her laughter.

“I’m sure you know, Doc, but even predators usually just growl when they run into each other. They don’t actually fight.”

“...Because both sides know they’d just get hurt.”

“Right. So you can scare off a predator just by roaring at it.”

She playfully mimicked a tiger’s roar.

Roooar!

“But like I said, the drought has dragged on for too long.”

“...”

“If a predator gets hungry enough, even if it has to bleed, it’ll go out hunting to tear off a mouthful of flesh.”

I had no idea what she was implying.

Go Yuri leaned in with infinite gentleness, the way a kid might secretly share answers with their partner during a test.

“I call him Mr. Dragon, but you, Doc... You call him Leviathan.”

“...”

“Leviathan. Besides the Bible, there’s something else that name brings to mind, right?”

Leviathan.

From the original language of the Protestant Bible, it's rendered as *Līvyāṯān*. And in English, simply Leviathan.

By coincidence, there was a famous book that used that exact same name.

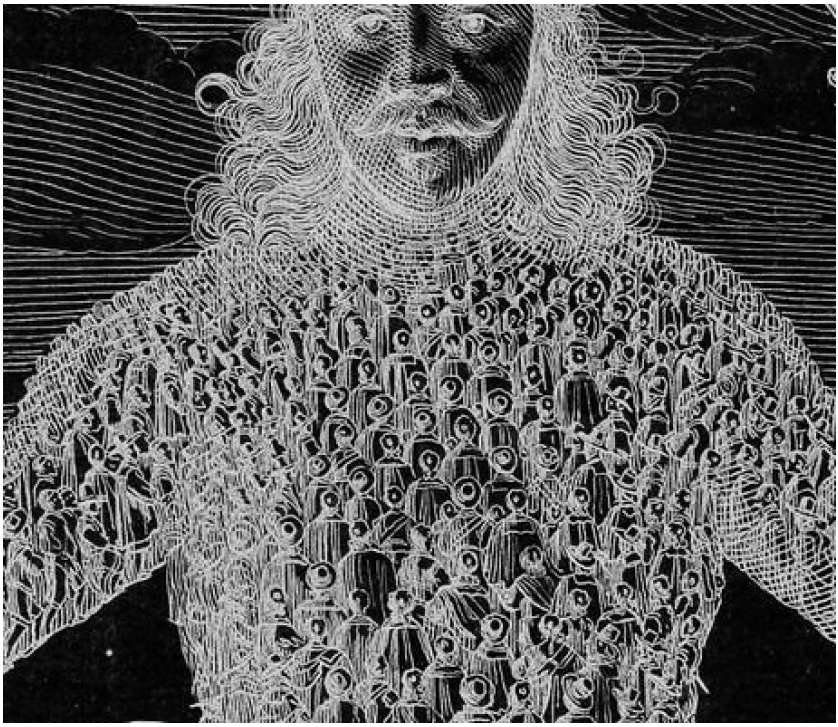
Thomas Hobbes, an English philosopher, wrote a work titled Leviathan.[3] That work was also where the phrase "the war of all against all" appeared—a line many people encounter at least once in their studies.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes discussed many topics: rights, natural law, government, and so on. I read it not only in Korean translation but also in modern English, and with my Complete Memory, I could naturally recall what the original book cover of Leviathan looked like.

Leviathan was a dragon. However, on Hobbes's cover, Leviathan was depicted as a king wearing a crown—a biblical threat, a monster used as a metaphor for the nation's emblem.

Leviathan was so enormous, so gargantuan in size, that it could oversee the world from beyond the horizon. And, although it might not be apparent from afar, if you studied that cover closely...

At first, those tiny, scattered details looked just like "scales of armor" draped over a king. In reality, however, the armor was made up of countless humans.



Each and every one of those people's heads was turned toward the onlooker, as if each was an "eyeball" staring right at me.

"..."

A sea dragon composed of countless eyeballs.

From ancient times, ruling over the waters has been the sacred prerogative of the emperor.

"Ah. Looks like you've figured it out?"

"..."

"Mr. Dragon is starving, so he's a bit upset. And he wants to find out who's been leaving him so hungry."

Leviathan.

There was another name for it. The State.

An Anomaly that had swelled to colossal proportions along the regressor’s timeline was now on its way here.

Footnotes:

1 - In *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Guan Yi easily defeats and kills Bian Xi when the latter plotted to ambush him.

2 - Mudang is the phonetic spelling of ZERO_SUGAR in Korean.

3 - In Thomas Hobbes' political treatise, *Leviathan* (1651), the monster Leviathan symbolizes the state, a powerful centralized authorty meant to prevent social collapse. The book's famous concept of the "war of all against all" (bellum omnium contra omnes) was meant to highlight the necessity of absolute governance to suppress human conflict.

Chapter 314

The Skeptic VII

Sinnoa

“You seem especially unfocused on your studies today, Mr. Undertaker.”

“Ah.”

I lifted my head.

The Saintess and I were at her residence in Yongsan, an aquatic temple of sorts where the shadows of fish flickered past in glass tanks.

In the heart of her temple, the Saintess of National Salvation was gazing quietly in my direction, a book titled *The Source of Normativity* held in hand.[1]

“Is there anything on your mind that’s worrying you? If you need counseling, I can help.”

I hesitated. “Thank you. But I think I need to sort out my thoughts on my own for now. I’ll definitely ask for counseling later.”

“All right, I understand.”

I went back to looking down at the book.

My conversation with Go Yuri was on hold for the moment. The revelation that “Leviathan” and the “Puppet State” were in fact the same Anomaly had been a shock to my system. Plus, I first had to take care of the study session I’d promised the Saintess.

“Well then, I’ll read the next paragraph.” The Saintess’s gentle voice flowed like water as she read, “‘The commonality between Neo-Kantian arguments and Hobbesian arguments is as follows: both presuppose that each individual acts according to their own sense of

reason...'"

Letting my mind follow that hushed rhythm, I began thinking about something else, all on my own.

Leviathan.

Looking back, Leviathan also possessed an incredibly wide-range brainwashing ability.

Back in the 664th cycle, when hundreds of sailors were trapped inside the Super Monsoon Anomaly, they all complained of severe mental contamination. Even Ha-yul, who was with me then, couldn't remain unaffected.

- When we were submerged and turning into frogs, I felt strange.

- I felt nostalgic. Happy. I couldn't breathe through my nose or mouth and yet... I felt it through my whole body.

- It felt like I was breathing through my skin, and that by just breathing, everything that makes me "me" *opened wide up. Like I was becoming one with the world..."*

That was it.

Ha-yul's testimony contained a clue: a sense of oneness. It was the sensation of merging with something far bigger than oneself. Intoxication. The pleasure of self-forgetting.

For humans, that sort of euphoria is most readily found when identifying with a crowd. To view it through a negative lens, the iconic case of this would be Nazism.

The illusion that oneself and the State are fused into a single body—that alone yields a potent rush of intoxication. So if we assumed that the root identity of Leviathan was "the State," then the frustration that had been bottling up, like a jammed holiday highway, suddenly cleared.

'That's right... Leviathan's mental contamination was strong enough to beguile my companions. Very few can pull off such intense

brainwashing.'

Even so, there remained one mystery, lodged in my mind like fog clinging to a rainy road.

'I understand that Leviathan is dangerous. Maybe it's even grown to an Outer God-class threat level. But... why is Go Yuri so wary of it?'

Because it was an Outer God? That kind of reasoning wouldn't cut it.

Even when Cheon Yo-hwa had seized both the Infinite Void and the Mastermind at the same time, Go Yuri never showed herself. If it were just about an Outer God-level threat, Cheon Yo-hwa back then would have been impossible to ignore. Indeed, Cheon Yo-hwa had even used her simulation ability to "duplicate" as many as 5,427 copies of Go Yuri. Though she had then gone on to scramble for her life at the sight of the Pink Legion, she still mocked Go Yuri's very presence.

'Even then, Go Yuri didn't contact me directly or warn me about Cheon Yo-hwa. Then why? Why is Leviathan the exception?'

If I could solve that mystery, I might also glean a clue about the true identity of Go Yuri, who I'd always kept at a distance and avoided.

"Ah."

The Saintess's voice brought me back to reality.

"It's raining."

"Pardon?" I looked out the window. Sunlight was still streaming through a gap in the blackout curtains, and I couldn't hear any rain. "I'm sorry, Saintess. Were you making a metaphor about rain?"

"No, it's actually raining. It started in the waters off Busan about a minute ago."

Oh, right. She could see it with Clairvoyance.

Still, I tilted my head slightly. Why tell me about rain in Busan specifically? Was she offering to lend me an umbrella for the trip?

The Saintess parted her lips to speak.

“It’s reached Gimhae now. Yeosu. Daegu. Pohang. Gwangju. Jeonju. Daejeon. Sejong. Suwon...”

The average speed of a rain cloud was around 30 km/h, yet the Saintess listed the cities one by one in precise order, reporting the raincloud moving north.

“And...”

Plip.

“Seoul.”

Patter-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r...

A few seconds ago, the sky beyond the window had been all sunlight. Now, out of nowhere, raindrops were pelting the glass.

I could no longer hear the pages of the Saintess’s book turning or the low hum of the computer. Everything was drowned out by the deafening sound, leaving room only for the rain’s din until the boundary between inside and outside blurred. The window filtered out the physical rainwater, leaving only the sound—but that sound alone was enough to drench a person’s very soul.

“It’s already reached Sinuiju as well... All of Korea has been blanketed by rain, Mr. Undertaker.”

I checked the calendar on my phone.

April. Usually, that was the time for spring breezes.

‘Go Yuri warned me that Leviathan would make landfall this summer...’

It was still a ways off from monsoon season, so why was it raining today?

‘This isn’t the full effect of the typhoon. It’s just the preliminary showers. Yet even this indirect front is enough to drench the entire Korean Peninsula.’

I held my tongue, staying quiet.

The longest summer was coming.

“Damn it. This rain is so fucking nasty...”

Bang!

Noh Do-hwa slammed open the door and walked in, muttering obscenities as her white doctor’s coat dripped onto the entryway floor, the fabric soaked clean through like a cheap raincoat.

“That’s why I told you to train your Aura on the regular,” I said, skipping the greetings. “Everyone else is walking around just fine in transparent Aura raincoats, so the NRMC Commander stands out, looking like a drowned rat.”

“I have zero interest in relying on that suspicious power you people call Aura. The thought of exerting physical force with mere will? Hah, I fail to see how that’s any different from an Anomaly...”

Do-hwa took the dry towel I handed her and roughly scrubbed down her hair. Meanwhile, I accepted her monocle with a practiced hand, rinsed it clean, and returned it.

“So, how’s the Sword Marquess doing?” I asked.

“You were right. He says these damned raindrops are making any crops that drink ‘em accumulate Void Poison at dangerous levels...”

“Hmm.”

When the rainy season began in April, I immediately called for an emergency mobilization of the Regressor Alliance. We had to rally all the resources and manpower we’d amassed so far if we wanted to survive this summer.

“I’m *baaack*!”

Dang Seo-rin came in right after Do-hwa. She was as neat and dry as ever, but the broom she flew on was drenched from top to bottom.

“Ugh, seriously. What’s with this rain? It’s all slimy and gooey—nearly fell off my broom mid-flight.”

“You did great. How’s it looking out there?”

“Mm, the Magical Girl Association says it’s raining over the entire Japanese archipelago. I haven’t personally checked Okinawa, but chances are it’s raining there too.”

“...So it’s everywhere.”

The Saintess even used Time Stop to travel across mainland China and back. It was the same non-stop downpour there, which meant nowhere near the peninsula was safe from Leviathan.

‘The rain is so heavy that we can’t rely on signal fires for scouting. And I’d bet good money it’s raining all across the Eurasian continent.’

The idea of evacuating civilians anywhere else was a non-starter, and we couldn’t repeat our old plan of building 12 Arks. That had only worked when we could limit Leviathan’s target to Busan, but this cycle’s Leviathan seemed hell-bent on sinking the entire world. Even the Himalayas might not be safe.

I bit my lip. “That leaves me no choice, then... Noh Do-hwa, we’ll evacuate everyone into the Inunaki Tunnel.”

“Huh? Can it handle that many people...?”

“We’ll make it handle them. Even if we have to expand the underground floors to 100, or even 1,000 levels. I’ll negotiate with Inunaki directly.”

“Uh... Are you sure about that, mister?” Dok-seo asked, sounding unsure.

I couldn't blame her. Increasing the tunnel's capacity basically meant letting the Inunaki Tunnel grow stronger.

"I know what you're worried about. Using one Anomaly to escape another... It's like paying off one credit card with another, but we have no choice. We have to secure a shelter for civilians, even if it means making sacrifices."

Dok-seo clamped her mouth shut.

I looked around. "Once the people are inside, we'll use Tutorial Fairies to put them all to sleep."

"Hoh..."

"Who knows how long this monsoon could last? Pack millions of people into a closed environment, and you've got endless variables on your hands."

"So you'll just have them sleep, guaranteeing some semblance of comfortable living through their dreams... Not a bad plan."

This wasn't limited to only the Korean population. Japan, China, and possibly everyone beyond—anyone we could manage, we'd evacuate.

Except, of course, for the Awakeners who'd join our Leviathan Subjugation.

"Everyone," I called out. All of my companions in the meeting room turned to look at me. "I know you're all reeling from this unprecedented situation, but we must remain calm and act swiftly. Please use the Tutorial Fairies whenever you need rest or sleep. We have to maximize our waking hours. Every minute, every second, we stay active can save that many more lives. Don't forget that."

They nodded.

April and May raced by.

In places like Pyongyang or Sejong, where a single authority figure maintained clear control, evacuations went smoothly.

We hammered it home on SG Net, on radio broadcasts, and via telepathy from various Constellations—how perilous this summer would be, and why. Still, some people outright refused to evacuate.

There wasn't much we could do about that. You can't lead a person from water if the world has no breathing room left.

"Phew. We've evacuated all the residents in th-the Eastern Holy State..."

"Good job, Ah-ryeon."

"Hehe. N-no, this just means I can finally ditch most of the Saintess work, s-so it's actually a relief."

Outside the tunnel entrance, lines of people snaked out like trails of ants. The cacophony of displaced souls made the whole city roar with noise.

"Don't cut in line! Don't cut in line! Please proceed in an orderly fashion to avoid any stampedes!"

"Group 31! Group 31! Those of you from Daegu, please move out now!"

Even in the pouring rain, members of the Samcheon World guild zipped around on flying brooms or soared overhead, trying to keep the crowds in check.

"Gosh, what a mess."

"They say some terrifying sea dragon or whatever is coming. And it's not just the North—the entire world's in danger."

"Don't push! I said don't push!"

"Mom, give me that bag. Why do you keep carrying it alone?"

"Everyone, do not drink the rainwater! Please be extra careful not to ingest any of it!"

It wasn't just one city. The Inunaki Tunnel entrances in Seoul,

Busan, and Kyushu were each swamped by enormous lines of refugees. Assigning a number to every city and controlling the population flow day by day was already stretching the administrative capacities of the National Road Management Corps, the Magical Girl Association, and others to their limit.

– *Oooooh...*

Suddenly, from far off in the sky, there came a ghastly wail.

In an instant, the uproarious city fell silent. Tens of thousands of evacuees and Awakened alike all turned toward the southern sky.

– Gwooooooo...

– Ooooooh...

– Uwooooooo...

The sky-rattling roar gradually faded, lost to the white noise of pouring rain and the rising swell of whispers on the ground.

“Man, that’s creepy.”

“Hasn’t that sound been happening more often lately?”

“My brother’s an Awakener, he said that noise means the sea dragon or whatever is getting closer.”

The refugees moved on, but you could see a deep fear lurking in their expressions.

“Group 32! Group 32, move now! Those from Daejeon!”

“Don’t all rush forward at once! Two lines! Please form two lines, Daejeon group!”

The procession shuffled forward.

Unlike those of other cities, Awakeners and ordinary citizens alike from Daejeon were all remarkably orderly. Their eyes seemed somehow blank, vacant.

Right at the front of the line, pink hair shimmered brightly through the hazy rain.

Go Yuri glanced my way for a moment.

"..."

"..."

She smiled.

Go Yuri lightly pinched her skirt at the sides and offered a polite curtsy. I bowed my head in return.

"We have no choice. Let's make a temporary alliance just for this cycle!"

"I still won't forgive you!"

Some silly meme along those lines popped into my head.

I still had no idea what was going on in Go Yuri's head, but it was better to choose a lesser evil than the worst scenario.

'Just for this run. Once we figure out how to defeat Leviathan, we'll keep our distance again next run.'

Suddenly, Dok-seo beside me started waving excitedly. "Ah! Yuri unnie! *Heeey!* Long time no seeee!"

"Wait..."

"Huh?" She paused as I pulled her back. "What is it, mister?"

"Why are you acting like you know Go Yuri? I mean, why greet her as if you two are close? This should be your first time ever meeting her face-to-face."

"Eh?" Dok-seo asked with a tilt of her head. "What are you talking about, mister? Yuri unnie's been one of our original crew since the Busan Station waiting-room days...

"She said she'd rather stay behind and help the ordinary folks who got stranded instead of living it up alongside you. But she's still

been commenting on my SG Net posts all the time. Of course I'm happy to see her! Man, you won't find someone as genuine as Yuri unnie anywhere else...

"I mean, the Noh-Undertaker ship is great, but next in line is definitely the Go-Undertaker ship. Ha! Pink can be tricky to pair with other colors, but it goes perfect with black, don't you think?"

"...Hmm."

Choosing a lesser evil was better... Right?

Summer was coming.

Footnotes:

1 - In *The Sources of Normativity*, the author Christine Korsgaard identifies four schools of thought on what defines morality. The first school is what Hobbes believed, that those ordained with absolute authority like God or a tyrant dictate the boundaries of what is the common good. For those interested, the other three are (broadly) that there are objective truths and universal goods in the world, that the greater good of humanity determines what is good for the individual, or that morality is inherent and specific to each individual person (Kantian).

Chapter 315

The Skeptic VIII

Sinnoa

“Your Excellency the Undertaker.”

“Mm.”

“The intake process is complete.”

It was raining.

Early June.

We had finally completed the massive undertaking of taking in refugees from the Korean Peninsula, most of the Japanese Archipelago, and parts of mainland China into the Inunaki Tunnel.

Total evacuees: 5.5 million.

“Let’s hold a celebration tonight to give the administrative team a break after all their hard work.”

“Okay. Around midnight, I’ll mix sleeping aids into the food and drinks so that the administrative team can get some rest as well.”

“Great. Make sure to coordinate everything thoroughly with the fairies. Hang in there just until tonight.”

“As you command.”

Ji-won saluted and left while I stood at the entrance of the tunnel, looking up at the sky.

It had begun raining back in April and still hadn’t stopped—more than fifty straight days of heavy rainfall. Low-lying coastal areas had sunk long ago. Even neighborhoods on hills, if they lacked a decent drainage system, were now underwater.

Everywhere I looked—rain, rain, and more rain. Fog clung stubbornly over huge pools of stagnant water, and muddy cascades crept over the land without rest.

Gone was any sign of that once proud cityscape that Busan citizens had boasted was “the world’s best place at present.”

‘And to think this isn’t even the real monsoon, just a precursor…’

I couldn’t begin to imagine what kind of catastrophe might be unfolding in faraway cities like Venice.

For all we knew, the 5.5 million people in the tunnel might be the last surviving humans on Earth.

“Nyaaa. Don’t make such a gloomy face, meow.”

Before I noticed, a cat-eared magical girl had padded over and tapped my waist.

“Manyo Neko.”

“Show a little more confidence, nya. Thanks to you, Undateikeo, we still managed to save quite a lot of people, didn’t we?” A laugh tinkered out of her in a gentle purr. “If you put more weight on the lives you couldn’t save than on those you did, even the strongest Awakeners can break down after just a few days, nya!”

It was a saying often spoken in these apocalyptic times, but hearing it come from Manyo Neko somehow carried special weight. She was, after all, the one in the 145th cycle who managed to clear the Inunaki Tunnel without being tempted by the ghost of her childhood friend, pushing forward to the end.

“Thanks. That’s a helpful reminder.” I reached out and gently stroked her head and the back of her neck.

“Nyaanyaang…”

Manyo Neko purred with pleasure.

Because she was a Miko possessed by the Cat God, she especially

liked this kind of affectionate touch. Of course, she still had a perfectly human sense of reason, so she never allowed anyone but a close friend to pet her so intimately.

Or was it the other way around? Because she was still a rational human, she enjoyed such touches, but only granted them to those whom she was close with, precisely because she was possessed by the Cat God?

Despite living through hundreds of cycles, the mysteries of human-cat behavior only deepen.

Manyo Neko gave a little shiver. “Seriously, Undateikeo! You’re like the most terrifying butler on Earth, nya! No matter how ill-tempered a cat might be, it’s impossible to resist your hands, meow...”

“At this rate, Obsidian Qin might catch me in the act. You magical girls in administration won’t see them for a while after tonight, will you? At least give them a proper goodbye.”

“Nyaang! Good night to you too, Undateikeo!”

Manyo Neko hopped away, splashing the rainwater under her boots with each step.

That night, we had a drinking party into the late hours in a café within the Inunaki Tunnel. When midnight struck, all Awakeners except the combat team would enter a long-term sleep like ordinary civilians.

“Long live the Magical Girl Association!”

“Cheers!”

“Beijing Liberation Assault Force, bottoms up!”

“Bottoms up!”

For now, everyone gathered around in lively camaraderie.

Awakeners of various nationalities mingled freely, some of them not

even sharing a common language except what the alcohol made up for, clinking their glasses nonetheless. It went beyond Koreans to Japanese and Chinese, and even further still to Mongolians, Russians, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Indians, Nepalese, and more—all of them people who knew me personally and had faithfully heeded my warning that “if you don’t evacuate now, you’ll all be wiped out.”

Ours wasn’t an ordinary bond. Many of them had been part of the 23rd cycle’s final charge against Meteor Shower, then believed to be humanity’s final boss. They had cast aside the divisions of nationality and race in favor of forging a ladder for humanity’s survival.

In that sense, at nearly every brink of apocalypse, we would see many of the same faces. We weren’t joined by where we were born but rather by the place where we’d face death.

Across from me, I faced Do-hwa as she swirled a wine glass.

“I suppose it’s all thanks to you, the guy who handles multiple languages like a native speaker, that you became our focal point… I’ve long wondered why you insisted on calling the National Road Management Corps headquarters the Tower of Babel…”

“Mm.”

“The Tower of Babel is a symbol of human arrogance and failure, reduced to dust by the wrath of God. You’re always harping on how names are crucial, but then you went and attached that label to the Corps’s most important building…”

She rested her chin on her palm at an angle.

“Only now is my question answered. You wanted to invoke the ‘spell’ that in the Tower of Babel, all of humanity could communicate without a language barrier…” When I didn’t respond, she huffed. “All these people from different countries, cooperating without conflict… Others might call it the romantic notion of unity in the face of crisis, but I see it differently.”

How many runs of painstaking effort did it take to gather only those

cooperative souls who'd band together this way?

Do-hwa didn't speak the quiet part aloud, but the look in her deep eyes echoed the truth never put to the spoken word.

I pulled a key from my jacket, making sure she saw.

"Huh? What's that...?"

"It controls the doors into the Inunaki Tunnel," I explained. "I molded some bird feathers with wax and let them harden into shape."

"Oh, Daedalus...?"

"Yes. The Inunaki Tunnel's rapid growth has caused it to evolve into a Labyrinthos, a 'Grand Labyrinth.' Now, without this key, opening the great gate of the Inunaki Tunnel is nearly impossible."[1]

I took Do-hwa's hand in mine. She flinched, her brow twitching at our closeness. Still, I kept eye contact and slowly, respectfully, placed the Key of Daedalus in her palm.

"Tonight, once every administrator Awakener has gone to sleep, seal the tunnel entrance from the inside with the guards we assigned. Then, no matter what, even if the Saintess uses Telepathy to plead otherwise, don't open the door for anyone."

A literal lockdown.

Leviathan could very well be on the cusp of Outer God-class ascension. Waging war against such a monster with an untrained mob in tow would only lead to annihilation.

3,721. That was the number of Awakeners, carefully—more than carefully—handpicked to form our strike force. We had burned our bridges behind us. We never intended to retreat into the Inunaki Tunnel for rescue in the first place.

"The moment you crack that door open, Leviathan's rainwater will seep in. And that water is anything but ordinary."

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard it a million times. One drop on human skin, and you turn into... some kind of water bug or something? A lethal poison, basically.”

“Exactly. Noh Do-hwa, as humanity’s final gatekeeper, you must protect the tunnel’s entrance.”

She froze as her gloved fingers brushed lightly across my hand.

“Hmph...” she scoffed eventually, fingers still resting across the webbing of my index and middle fingers. “Well. I can wait ten years... If a decade passes with no word of success, I’ll have the fairies kill all 5.5 million inside who are asleep. After all, it might be interesting to become the cause of the world’s end myself...”

Indeed. That was an ending I had to prevent at all costs.

After midnight, the raucous drinking party began to settle. The administration-type Awakeners who had taken Uehara Shino’s special sleeping pills started collapsing one by one.

“All right, let’s clean up!”

“Aw man, we’re already risking our necks out there, now we gotta do the cleanup for these people too?”

“Cleanup’s gotta be done by whoever’s sober, you moron. If you hate it, then you should’ve drunk yourself silly.”

“Ugh, so unfair...”

“Unnie, sleep well. We’ll be back soon.”

“Heuk! Humans, please follow our guidance and transport the sleepers in an orderly manner!”

With cooperation between Awakeners and fairies, the party was tidied up in no time. Then those who would be heading into battle said their final farewells to their colleagues.

No one told them to, but all 3,721 of our combat troops began to

gather in the casino lobby, one hundred meters underground in the Inunaki Tunnel. Those who'd had no interest in the party and went off to tinker with slot machines and who'd simply dozed off out of boredom also gathered in the lobby.

3,721 capacity. Zero absent.

I looked around at them.

"Anyone who wants to turn back, this is your last chance."

The instant I raised my hand, my voice resounded throughout the room to the Awakeners assembled from every corner of the world, in a medley of different languages:

– Anyone who wants to turn back, this is your last chance.

They flinched.

"Huh?"

"What?"

Some Magical Girls shot me looks, confused why I would be speaking in Japanese. Meanwhile, the Beijing Liberation Assault Force members were baffled at the Chinese echo of my words.

I ignored their puzzlement and kept speaking, moving my lips and fingers in tandem.

"Over the past two months, as you evacuated humanity into this shelter, you saw the ugliest sides of human nature."

– Over the past two months, as you evacuated humanity into this shelter, you saw the ugliest sides of human nature.

"And now, we set out from this safe haven to fight an unprecedented Anomaly for the sake of those same humans."

– And now, we set out from this safe haven to fight an unprecedented Anomaly for the sake of those same humans.

A curious phenomenon was unfolding. I was definitely speaking Korean aloud, but a murky black Aura spread through the entire lobby like cobwebs, instantly translating the words for all 3,721 present.

[Ah.]

The first person to understand was Phantom Blade from the Magical Girl Association.

[This is... a form of telepathic magic.]

“Huh? What does that mean, nya?”

[Undateikeo-san is using the sound waves of his spoken words, vibrating them in real time with Aura, and delivering them to each of us individually.]

Phantom Blade had always used telepathic magic to communicate, given an extreme language impairment, so she recognized the technique faster than anyone else.

[Feel the flow of Aura. Can you sense how the pulses differ ever so slightly depending on each listener’s nationality?]

“Uh...” Manyo Neko twitched her ears. “I-I think so, kind of... Wait, are you saying Undateikeo is, all on his own, using Aura vibrations to... to translate everything for each of the four thousand people here, nya?”

[Precisely so,] Phantom Blade marveled. [What’s more, he’s controlling the wave so it doesn’t bleed over to adjacent listeners. That means right now all our hearing is effectively under Undateikeo-san’s control.]

“Is that even possible, nya?”

[You tell me. The flawless Tokyo dialect you’re hearing right now is proof enough, isn’t it?]

For the record, Phantom Blade was from Kyoto.

In any case, she wasn't the only observer of this particular phenomenon. A few seconds later, the other Awakeners also began to realize the extent of this display and were astounded.

"What on earth...?"

"You can do that with Aura?"

"I knew he was impressive, but..."

Once again, these weren't random onlookers but meticulously selected fighters. They knew just how absurd a feat this kind of Automatic Translation via Aura really was. They noticed no matter how much they murmured or muttered, my voice remained "unchanged" and "clear," cutting through everyone's clamor.

How? There was only one answer: I was accounting for their chatter in real time and adjusting the sound waves to remain perfectly audible.

"There is no obligation whatsoever to save humanity."

– There is no obligation whatsoever to save humanity.

Awe comes before heed. When someone truly listens to another's words, often it's not just because they empathize with the content, but because that person is exceptionally capable.

It might sound cynical, but at that moment, that power was precisely what the Awakeners before me needed most.

The existence of an absolute powerhouse on their side.

The confidence that our fight wouldn't end in a pointless slaughter.

"We each of us have witnessed humans slaughtering each other too many times for us to appeal to 'the bonds of humankind.'"

– We each of us have witnessed humans slaughtering each other too many times for us to appeal to 'the bonds of humankind.'

Before I knew it, without any formal warning or caution, the entire

crowd fell silent.

Gazing back at these Awakeners from all nations, I went on.

“There are a million reasons why humanity might deserve destruction... and so we alone are left.”

Dang Seo-rin watched me with a steady faith in her eyes.

Cheon Yo-hwa gazed at me as though in worship.

Sim Ah-ryeon gave a bright, naive smile as if my feat were natural.

Lee Ha-yul and the Saintess remained poker-faced.

Oh Dok-seo was typing furiously into her phone.

Go Yuri—

Go Yuri still wore that inscrutable smile, quietly staring at my face.

“We don’t care about the contempt other humans may hold. The curses of Anomalies don’t matter to us. If humanity’s survival rests in our hands, our blood, then we will fight Anomalies without hesitation—because I, because we, are the owners of this world!”

“That’s right!”

A voice boomed out.

It belonged to the leader of the 17th Company of the Beijing Liberation Assault Force, the stationmaster of Ciqu Station, an Awakener known as Kwon Ryong. When he unleashed his Lion’s Roar, it echoed not just in Chinese but in every language.

That was the spark.

“We’re in charge here!”

“Mr. Undertaker’s right! Smash every last one of those monstrous bastards!”

“Wu! Wu! Wu! Wu!”

“Kill them! Kill them all!”

Even as their shouts of passion mingled in a chaotic roar, my own voice remained crystal-clear, and their collective cheers fused into a single universal language.

“We are humanity’s last resistance, we are humanity’s final united force! Come, comrades! Shed your blood, brothers! With our blood, we shall restore the world to these five million souls!”

“Uwoooohhh!”

The massive gate of the Inunaki Tunnel swung open, and the downpour that had been pounding the door now flooded in with thunderous noise to reveal a horizon blurred by rain.

From beyond it, the Sea Dragon, aware of our presence, let out a roar that shook the skies.

– Ꮆ̓ꮟ̓ꮟ̓ꮟ̓ꮠ̓ꮟ̓ꮟ̓ꮠ̓.̣̣̣.

But even that sound couldn’t drown out our war cry.

I stepped forward. Behind me followed the footsteps of 3,721.

The Human Allied Forces were now departing for battle.

Footnotes:

1 - Daedalus is the craftsman who created the Labyrinth (in Greek, *Labúrinthos*) on the island of Crete. According to myth, he crafted it so cunningly that he struggled to escape it with his son, Icarus, and ultimately devised a plan to make wings of beeswax and bird feathers to fly out of the maze.

Chapter 316

The Skeptic IX

Sinnoa

Squelch.

Squelch.

When our Human Allied Forces at last marched out of the Inunaki Tunnel, the first thing to greet us was the smell of soggy earth that clung like muddy chocolate, along with an endless deluge of rain and fog.

[Visibility is terrible,] the Saintess reported quietly. [I'm using Aura to sharpen my eyesight, and even then, it's hard to see more than 50 meters ahead.]

The plaza in front of the casino, which had always been crowded with homeless drifters and beggars pleading for loose change, now lay eerily empty.

The rain beat down without end, cold to the touch, as the surrounding fog clung to us, creeping over our fingers, our thighs, and the backs of our necks in a clammy embrace.

Already, the Super Monsoon Anomaly was letting us sense through the temperature and the feel of it all that its master had arrived.

– *Kyeeeeh!*

All of a sudden, beyond the wall of dark fog, something like a hunting hound came rushing at us—if you could call a figure with two heads and tentacles writhing from its forepaws a "hound," that is.

The creature leaped from just a few meters away, heading straight for Manyo Neko. The instant she let out a *"Funya!"* in fright, a jet-

black Aura slashed across the hound's neck.

– *Kkiaaaak! Kkieeek! Kiiiii!*

Then, the hound splattered. Its body and severed head thrashed a final death spasm, but before the surrounding Awakeners could react, it vanished into splashes of mud without leaving even a corpse behind.

"Th-thanks, nya, Undateikeo."

I locked eyes with Manyo Neko in acknowledgement, then said, "Everyone, stay on guard. Visibility is extremely poor. Even a village-class Anomaly can inflict serious wounds if we let it ambush us."

Manyo Neko and several of the Awakeners nodded in agreement.

Right on cue, the gate behind us closed with a great creak and a thud. As previously discussed, Do-hwa sealed off the entrance to the tunnel.

Ahead of us stretched limitless territory and lurking death. Behind us lay survival, but the path was barred. A true predicament.

All 3,721 of our allies had literally put themselves in a do-or-die position.

A chill of murderous tension swept through our ranks. Before the hearts I had stirred with my speech could cool in the face of this menacing reality, I issued an order.

"Ha-yul."

[Yes, Oppa.]

"Activate all your totem dolls."

[Got it.]

Ha-yul's stockings soaked through as she knelt in the mire, paying no mind to how the mud buried her prosthetic leg.

[Strings that bind a human's shoulders...]

[But to a spider's legs, it's just a circus wire...]

As soon as the Puppeteer murmured that incantation to herself, a wave of golden Aura spread outward from her small body. It branched like a spiderweb, splitting again and again until the entire city was veiled in shimmering light.

"Whoa..."

"Incredible skill for someone so young."

"They say she's Mr. Undertaker's adopted daughter. Makes sense."

Impressed whispers spread among those who had never before witnessed the Puppeteer's abilities, particularly the Awakeners from overseas.

Ha-yul paid no attention to those looks, focusing solely on controlling her Aura.

"Keep it going, Ha-yul."

[Okay. No problem.]

As mentioned before, Ha-yul's puppet strings functioned almost like a superconductive medium for Aura, an asset she had put to use all across Korea. Needless to say, her web was even more extensive in Busan. Even under the crushing pressure of rain and fog from above, that golden spiderweb gleamed like a river of stars, enough to spark a fragile hope for survival.

[Oppa, I've finished connecting.]

Creak, clank.

All around Busan, "dolls" opened their eyes. They had been hidden at key points among that golden constellation that blanketed the city, numbering no fewer than 999 dolls in total, each one a perfect look-alike of Ha-yul.

A legion of dolls, obeying the single command of Lee Ha-yul, had awoken.

“Well done,” I said warmly. “No need to micromanage their line of sight—just keep them linked to your consciousness.”

[Got it.]

Across the city that had been swallowed in thick fog, giving Anomalies an absolute advantage, the Puppeteer had planted hundreds of “wards.” Of course, Ha-yul couldn’t personally watch all 999 points, but that hardly mattered.

“Saintess.”

[Yes. I’m connected to Ha-yul’s feed now.]

We had our own dedicated “control tower” ready to interpret all those vantage points in her stead.

[Anomalies are gathering from the north side of Busan—places like Nopo-dong and Dugu-dong.]

[They’re also crossing the Nakdong River. We can probably consider the Sasang District completely fallen by now.]

[Same thing in the east. The area near Haedong Yonggung Temple is already gone. The downpour beyond is much heavier, closing in on us from every direction.]

[It appears to be a Monster Wave.]

[We suspect it’s a Monster Wave that’s been taken over and mutated by Leviathan.]

[Their target is here, the entrance to the tunnel.]

The map lit up. Almost immediately, howling calls ripped through the fog on all sides.

– *Grooaaaar!*

– Kkieeeeeeek! Kiek, kyeeeh!

– Uu-uu-uu-uu-uu…

They had sensed us.

Just as we gazed into the Void, the Void was gazing back.

Though Leviathan's true form had not yet appeared, the Anomalies enslaved by the sea dragon howled as they rushed in unison toward our position.

The first to breach the fog were colossal, octopus-like tentacles. They whipped out, stretching over ninety meters to grab three of our Awakeners at once.

"Aaaaaah!"

"Sever it! Intercept!"

"Stay calm!"

Ever vigilant, our Awakeners immediately fought back. Two of the captured fighters managed to break free, but the last was dragged off by the remaining tentacles.

"U-urgh…!"

Even as he was hauled off, the Indian Awakener slammed his sword into the ground—*zzzzik!*—tearing a twenty-meter-long line through the black mud as he slowed himself.

"Nice one!"

"Hold on, we'll save you!"

"O-ooh… oh…"

The tentacle was hacked apart by a barrage of attacks from his comrades. Just before he was pulled beyond the veil of fog, the Indian youth was freed.

But then—

“O-o-o—o-o-o...”

Around the man’s waist, where the tentacle had grabbed him, “water droplets” began to bubble out.

Wherever the bubbles churned, muscle fibers and blood vessels appeared beneath his skin until the foaming had gone so bad that his bones were laid bare.

The would-be rescuers froze in their tracks. The “water foam” had already spread up to the young man’s chest.

“A-Akash! Snap out of it!”

“O-o-o-o-o-o—”

In an instant, the bubbles swept up to his neck, head, arm, fingers, and right back down to the hand that gripped the sword. Then—

Pop!

The watery foam burst, and the muscles and bones that had made up the youth’s body vanished into thin air.

All that remained was rainwater. Even the severed tentacle sections had completely evaporated.

At the spot where man and monster had died, droplets wiggled in place before crawling off into the fog like centipedes.

“Ah...”

“Avoid physical contact with the Anomalies at all costs!” I commanded, all the while repelling the other Anomalies assaulting us. After crushing the pack of hundreds of hounds, I shouted so that every Awakener could hear, “This rain and fog is Leviathan’s Void! If moisture seeps into a wound, you’ll lose sight of yourself and become part of Leviathan’s forces!”

“Aaaargh!”

Skirmishes erupted all across the plaza as Awakeners clung to our

makeshift barricades, warding off the enemy's ambushes.

'Good. So far, this isn't too bad.'

We'd lost one fighter in that sudden attack, but the Human Allied Forces followed protocol and responded to each threat accordingly. Seo-rin's Cursed Song Incantation was already at its fifth verse, all dedicated to defending our minds against brainwashing or mental pollution. If we kept up a battle of attrition like this, we could survive at least a week.

'Of course, if it drags on a full week, that's effectively a loss for us. But if we discover a clue to Leviathan's weakness in that time, we can still mount a counterattack.'

In the worst-case scenario, we still had the Saintess and Ah-ryeon. With the Saintess maximizing Time Stop or Ah-ryeon bringing the World Tree into bloom we might stand a fighting chance, even at a great sacrifice.

'Is this all?' I thought to myself as I adjusted my cane-sword, Do-hwa. 'Rain and fog covering every side. A poisonous "Void" that transforms you into some water-bug if you suffer even the slightest injury. A Monster Wave forcibly mobilized by Leviathan.'

It was definitely a tough enemy.

'No doubt it's dangerous... but it doesn't feel insurmountable.'

A day passed. Then two, then three.

We lost four Awakeners on the first day, but there were no further casualties after that.

'It seems we may not even need anyone to sacrifice themselves.'

The sticky humidity made breathing a chore, but we had more breathing room than I expected.

'If I can just hold out until I find some clue to defeating Leviathan, I'll reset this run afterward. Next time, I'll unite the Human Allied

Forces well before June, then march straight to Leviathan's origin and wipe it out easily before—'

"Doc."

I blinked.

I had only closed my eyes for a second, but from one glance to the next, Go Yuri suddenly stood in front of me, pink hair and all.

That in itself was nothing strange for Go Yuri. If she wanted, it'd be easy for her to toy with my perception. Strangely, though, not a single drop of rain clung to her clothes or hair.

Go Yuri's external Aura mastery was, at least by all outward signs, pretty terrible. If she'd truly avoided a single raindrop for three days of non-stop battle, wouldn't she be risking letting everyone see she was "not normal?"

"What's up, Go Yuri?" I asked cooly. "I'm busy leading the troops. If you want to talk, come back once the enemy's assault eases up a bit."

"Oh! Sorry! Didn't realize you were so busy."

"Of course I am. I'm putting every ounce of care into ensuring that there are no more casualties. Not even one."

"Hmm?"

Go Yuri put a finger to her lips.

A soft smile curved over the neatly trimmed nail.

"Mmm. I see. But that sounds a bit strange."

"Strange how?"

"Yes, because—"

She exhaled, and the sweet scent of apples slipped into my nostrils.

"Doc, you finished your speech just now and haven't even moved

one step away from the tunnel entrance, have you?"

"..."

The sound of rain.

The smell of mud.

Squelch.

Squelch.

When our Human Allied Forces at last marched out of the Inunaki Tunnel, the first thing to greet us was the smell of soggy earth that clung like muddy chocolate, along with an endless deluge of rain and fog.

[Visibility is terrible,] the Saintess reported quietly. [I'm using Aura to sharpen my eyesight, and even then, it's hard to see more than 50 meters ahead.]

The plaza in front of the casino, which had always been crowded with homeless drifters and beggars pleading for loose change, now lay eerily empty.

The rain beat down without end, cold to the touch, as the surrounding fog clung to us, creeping over our fingers, our thighs, and the backs of our necks in an oppressive embrace.

The Super Monsoon Anomaly spoke through temperature and touch, announcing the arrival of its master.

– *Kyeeeeh!*

At the exact moment a hunting hound emerged from the fog with fangs bared, my jet-black Aura was already slicing through the mongrel's throat.

Its head and body parted ways in a splattering gasp, but my Aura didn't stop there. It burned the hound down to the last hair.

“E-ehhh? F-funyaaang?” Manyo Neko let out a startled cry. The enemy had died before she had even registered the ambush. It was no wonder she was flustered. “Wh-what just happened, nya?”

I had come back. The moment I finished my speech in the lobby and stepped out of the tunnel—I had returned to that precise point.

Or rather, I might never have left it.

I swallowed hard. “Saintess.”

[Yes?]

“There’s a soldier from New Delhi, India, named Akash among our allies. Check whether he’s safe.”

[Oh, of course. Right away.]

“And also count how many people are in the Human Allied Forces. My memory says we had 3,721.”

[Understood.]

Creeeeak, thud.

Right then, the tunnel gate shut behind us. As planned, Do-hwa had sealed the entrance.

The moment it closed, the Saintess reported, [I’ve checked, Mr. Undertaker. First, there is no one here named Akash. It seems nobody else has noticed, but he’s nowhere to be found. Also, right now the total headcount of the Human Allied Forces is 3,717.]

It had decreased.

Our numbers had dropped.

By my memory, we’d had four casualties over the course of the three-day battle. I could still picture our struggle to survive clearly in my mind as if it were reality itself. Yet for whatever reason, I was back to the instant we’d set foot outside. It was as though all that memory had been a lie—

‘In other words, in the mere blink of an eye, four people have already died.’

Rain roared in my ears.

The sensation of rain soaking my shoes, the vibration of rain pounding my eardrums, the smell of rain in my nostrils—these were all undeniably real.

“...Ha-yul.”

[Yes, Oppa.]

“Activate all your totem dolls.”

[I’m already on it.]

Was it reality or illusion?

I couldn’t tell them apart, but I also couldn’t afford to dismiss this as a mere hallucination and abandon the fight.

‘If everything up until now was an illusion and only this moment is real, then Leviathan might deceive me into giving up the battle altogether. And that might be exactly what Leviathan wants.’

“Seo-rin,” I called.

“Huh? What’s up?”

“This time, be especially cautious with your Cursed Song Incantation. Leviathan has wide-area mental corruption abilities, we’ve confirmed that.”

“Oh... Sure, but wasn’t that in the strategy briefing? Don’t worry, I came plenty prepared.”

Three days passed again.

We were even more thorough in defending against mental contamination this time, wrapping ourselves in Aura so thoroughly that not even moisture could permeate our senses. It led to greater

fatigue, but we limited the casualties to two. We'd been through the same fight once, after all, and it felt easier this time.

'Even if this too is an illusion, it's fine. Next time, I'll reduce casualties from two to zero, and keep going without losing a single person.'

"How curious."

I blinked.

Again, after just a moment's break in my vision, there Go Yuri stood. As before, not a single drop of rain clung to her feet up to her pink hair.

"Go Yuri..."

"Please don't look too frightened, Doc. Like I said before, I'm only here to help you."

"...So I'm imagining things? These last three days of battle were all fake?"

"Hmm, that's a tough question." She smiled as though sheepish as she explained, "I can't really tell the two apart. Rather, think about it from Mr. Dragon's point of view."

"You mean from Leviathan's perspective?"

"Yes. If you're difficult for the Dragon to handle, it's precisely because you remember everything in perfect detail."

Complete Memory.

Thanks to that ability, I was immune to most mental brainwashing. Whenever faced with illusions contradicting my recollections, I could instantly deduce, *This was fake.*

For a contrasting example, look at someone like Dok-seo, who had incomplete memory. She was instantly deceived by Go Yuri's presence, believing, *Right! She's been with us since the Tutorial Dungeon!*

“But as you know, Doc, advantages can become drawbacks.”

“What do you mean?” I asked warily.

“Illusions that vanish into hazy memory are meaningless against normal people. It’s impossible to trick your memories, so what if Leviathan repeats the same scene over and over, in continuous succession?”

“What?”

“A reversal in perspective, Doc.”

Go Yuri breathed out a laugh.

“For a normal person, if you feed them illusions of two or three days, it won’t remain crisp in their mind. But for you, giving you illusions of three entire days has the effect of actually making you live out those days.”

A chill crawled up my neck.

“A fleeting illusion might fade for anyone else, but for you, it’s indistinguishable from an actual 72 hours.”

“So you’re saying Leviathan is... bombarding me with these three-day illusions from the moment I step outside the tunnel?”

“Yep!”

Go Yuri pressed her palm to her cheek and sighed.

“How troublesome.”

“...”

“That thing you consider your most reliable armor is flipped around and chaining you in place.”

That’s right.

Complete Memory, the skill that let me gather up even dreams and illusions without losing a scrap.

Leviathan had forged that into its deadliest weapon against a regressor like me.

Chapter 317

The Skeptic X

Sinnoa

Thinking about it now, all of the Anomalies that relied on mental domination or brainwashing always made the same mistake when they tried to ensnare me: they all tried to show me a “sweet” illusion.

– How about this happy ending?

– I’ll show you the ideal partner you’d like best.

– Play with me. You can rule the world as you please.

The typical temptation.

However, no matter how tempting that “dessert” might be, it never suited my taste. Once I’d already swallowed the red pill that it was a bogus illusion, there was nothing they could do.

I mean, really. What thrill is there in owning a massive penthouse if it’s not real, but just a penthouse in a game?

As a realist, I, the Undertaker, could point out the flaws in their logic with cold precision.

“Hmm, so you’re offering a happy ending, but for that to make sense, you’d have to assume from the start that no Anomalies ever appeared, right? Also, no matter how ideal that partner might be, forcing me to like them is… Well, I prefer something more natural. And controlling the world? Would that really be fun?”

“Huh? Then just die.”

My mentality was an iron fortress, impregnable to the point that all those mind-control Anomalies, so fearsome against regular people, would inevitably shower me with praise.

All except for Go Yuri. That was simply a difference in compatibility.

Centuries upon centuries passed, and at last, Anomalies began adapting to this new meta. Some even discovered the “Undertaker Tactics” they needed to succeed.

“You won’t accept anything if it’s not reality?”

“Then we can just color in the parts of your past you don’t remember with illusions.”

“You were actually a private tutor for me... or for us, the twin sisters.”

By all accounts, the first to draw “first blood” was Cheon Yo-hwa.

She didn’t offer me much. She didn’t demand much, either.

Cheon Yo-hwa was alive, was a Miko, was a strategist, and was once my disciple who sacrificed herself to seal an Outer God in my stead.

That was it.

No sweet happy ending, no jaw-dropping powers. In return for sealing away the Outer God, Cheon Yo-hwa merely claimed a little drawer in the corner of my memory.

And now, here came Leviathan:

– So you won’t accept it unless it’s real? I get it. You’re a die-hard realist.

– Then I’ll show you a perfectly “real” illusion, indistinguishable from reality at 100% authenticity.

– Which of us will tire first? You, repeating that same three-day cycle over and over? Or me?

– I can do this all day.

– Oh, and by the way, if someone in the illusion dies mid-battle

against the Anomalies, it counts as a real death. Good luck.

What kind of cheat is that?

I'd love to call in a referee to penalize him, but the truth was, I was cheating too. After all, Go Yuri, basically an end-boss of mental powers, had temporarily joined my side.

Both sides were cheating. It was a chaotic, all-out fight. No matter who won or lost, the outcome would be stupid. However, we had no choice but to pick a side.

"So, what will you do now, Doc?" Go Yuri asked.

I still couldn't figure out why she was revealing all this to me. Judging by her expression alone... it seemed like she was simply curious, barely able to contain her anticipation over what I would do.

"You have no way to know whether the moment you're in now is reality or illusion. If you don't figure out a method to tell them apart, you'll be trapped forever in an endless sequence of three days."

"For one..." I began, still thinking. "I could observe your appearance. If your clothes get wet from the rain, it's reality. If they stay perfectly dry, it's an illusion, right?"

"Oh! So you're basically letting me be the standard for what's real? I'm flattered."

I couldn't settle for that. Even though we'd formed a temporary alliance, entrusting something so crucial to her was out of the question. It'd be like inviting a tiger to ward off a fox.

I clicked my tongue. Then, making sure Go Yuri couldn't see, I hid both hands behind my back and scribbled a note on my palm.

"Saintess."

[Yes?]

“I’m heading to the Tower of Babel for a moment. The Anomaly assault has eased a bit, so we shouldn’t take heavy casualties if I step away.”

[Understood.]

The Saintess raised no objections to my sudden decision. As soon as I was ready to move, she followed up by saying, [By the way, that convalescent ward system that Go Yuri mentioned while speaking with you—I think it’s quite useful. Since you agreed, I’ll set up a hospital ward in the rear.]

We never had a conversation about that. Not from my perspective, anyway.

“Understood. Please take command of the Human Allied Forces while I’m away.”

[Yes.]

With that, I left Go Yuri behind and slogged through the mud.

The Tower of Babel wasn’t far. Normally, I could have reached it with my eyes closed, but in the midst of Leviathan’s “Great Void,” the terrain could have changed in unpredictable ways. Fortunately, many of Ha-yul’s puppet-strings still glowed gold, forming a path that had not yet lost its light. By its very nature, an Awakeners’ Aura fundamentally resisted the Void, so as long as I followed those strings, I could make it to the Tower of Babel with ease.

– Please help me, just a bite.

– *Ribbit.*

– One per person. Let’s not sell out our conscience for a piece of bread. Please maintain order.

– My child is starving. If you would help me, just for today, I’ll never forget your kindness.

In the fog blanketing the Tower of Babel plaza, watery shapes crawled about. Those water droplets burst without pause, and each

pop produced “voices.”

– Please, just a bite of bread.

– My child is starving.

If one ignored that the figures were made of water, the same scene was the same old, same old for the Tower’s plaza.

Leviathan was copying my complete memory of this space and re-enacting it.

It wasn’t just the humans that got copied either. The paving stones of the plaza, the streetlights the Samcheon World guild had installed for charity, even the exterior walls of the Tower of Babel HQ—all were gradually replaced by water, as if the world had been made of water from the beginning.

– Thank you. God bless you. Ascended being, thank you. Because of you, my child can keep living.

– *Ribbit, ribbit.*

– Just one bite. Please.

If the first Great Flood of mythology merely drowned the surface of the earth, this second Great Flood, summoned by Leviathan, was submerging the very existence of everything.

‘An Anomaly has neither malice nor intelligence. If it seems to have them, it’s because the human gazing at it does. If an Anomaly knows love, it’s because humans themselves hold love in their hearts...’

I quickened my pace, stepping onto the half-translucent outer walls of the Tower of Babel HQ to climb up. Once on the rooftop, I found...

Nothing.

‘It’s gone.’

That was decisive proof.

‘The crystal tombstone of Cheon Yo-hwa. It’s nowhere to be seen.’

Just in case, I also visited the soccer stadium in Busan. There, all matter had been replaced by water, leaving the entire ruin bubbling with watery foam. The tombstone for the soccer player Kim Joo-chul had vanished from sight.

‘All right, no doubt now.’

This was not reality, but an illusion crafted by Leviathan.

To be fair, I still suspected that Go Yuri might be the true culprit. There wasn’t only one Anomaly capable of illusions, after all. She could frame Leviathan for everything, pretend to be my ally, and hoodwink me.

It was certainly well within her wheelhouse.

‘But whichever of them is behind this, they still couldn’t replicate my Time Seal.’

The means of distinguishing illusion from reality came, paradoxically, from something that no longer existed in the real world: an absence in the present.

Rain blurred my vision. For the first time since the Leviathan Offensive began, I smiled.

‘So my reality is founded on the things I’ve already lost…’

I descended from the rooftop and returned to the front line.

Go Yuri silently stared at me. The Saintess asked questions, but I offered no response.

‘I can do this. I just have to wait, until the clock of these three days runs out again.’

Squelch.

Squelch.

When our Human Allied Forces at last marched out of the Inunaki Tunnel, the first thing to greet us was the smell of soggy earth that clung like muddy chocolate, along with an endless deluge of rain and fog.

“Corps Commander!” I shouted, the moment I returned to this starting point.

The tunnel gate was still wide open. The entire Human Allied Forces was still behind me, inside the Inunaki Tunnel.

Past the great door, I could see Do-hwa’s damp, curly hair.

“Don’t close the door!”

“Huh…?”

“Everyone, retreat! This is a strategic fallback!” I turned around without even letting the outside air fully hit me and hurried back inside the tunnel.

“Uh, wh-what?”

“Undateikeo, what the heck is going on, nya?”

Confusion.

They’d just heard me screaming “Let’s go kill those Anomalies!” moments ago, and now I was ordering a retreat. One could only imagine how baffled they felt. The troops here must have been less confused than those at the historical Battle of Wihwado, when General Yi deserted the front lines.[1]

“Crap, wh-what…?”

Do-hwa’s expression was a sight. She was holding the feather key, staring at me like Commander Choi Young must have stared at his map, flipping it upside down in disbelief.[2]

“Don’t tell me you got explosive diarrhea or something. Then again, you can just flush it out with Aura, you freak...”

“Come on, call me a gentleman who values cleanliness, if you would please.”

“You think that kind of bull is what everyone wants to hear when over three thousand Awakeners from across the globe are watching your back...?”

I would have loved to enjoy a long-overdue, leisurely chat with Do-hwa, but there was no time.

Raising the collar of my coat to cover my mouth, I muttered, “Saintess.”

[Yes?]

“You must be taken aback, but please keep everyone calm and guide them back inside the tunnel. Leviathan’s mind-control is stronger than anticipated.”

[Understood.]

“Everyone must be confused. Could you also use your Constellation powers to soothe them a bit?”

[Okay.]

As expected of the Saintess—she followed my abrupt orders without a word of protest. Even so, her power as a Constellation had limited range outside Korea. The foreign Awakeners might not be so easily swayed.

The Great Priestess approached, leading a group of Magical Girls in tow. “Undateikeo, I can’t warp my mind around this. What’s going on?”

I looked around and said, “The moment we took one step outside, we experienced a palpable wave of Leviathan’s psychic corruption.”

“We accounted for that as a risk factor in the operation, no?”

“Yes, but the actual severity is beyond anything we predicted.”

We were speaking in Korean, but the conversation was being interpreted in real time for the other Awakeners. Even in their confusion, they all listened to me.

“With just a single step—literally one foot out the tunnel—our force has already suffered casualties.”

“What?”

“Listen up, everyone!” I barked, raising my voice. “I’m going to call out some names! Check if these Awakeners are safe! Akash from New Delhi, Kunpeng from Shenzhen, someone from Haiphong...”

I listed the six who had vanished to Leviathan’s illusions. All of them were part of some group or unit, so their missing presence was quickly noticed.

“Wait, what? Where’d he go?”

“He was right next to me a second ago...”

“Akash! Akash, where are you?”

Murmuring spread, evolving into a new kind of pandemonium. Suspicion of me was replaced by shock at the situation.

Before that sentiment could fester, I called out again.

“We lost six allies just by stepping outside. Their teammates didn’t even notice them vanish. If we charge blindly into that fog, the damage will skyrocket. Until we establish proper countermeasures, we’ll remain here in the tunnel lobby!”

I glanced over the assembly. No one doubted my words now. They were too shaken by the realization that in the mere blink of an eye, they had lost companions without noticing.

Leaving them there, I sought out the person who could be a clue to this entire situation.

“Team Leader Yu Ji-won.”

The silver-haired psychopath saluted. Around her, the other ops staff all snapped to attention.

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Leviathan just unleashed a huge wave of psychic corruption. By my sense of time, it lasted close to ten days. How did it feel to you?”

“I didn’t detect anything at all, sir,” Ji-won answered promptly. “As far as I could see, you had one foot outside and one foot still inside the tunnel, and then you suddenly stopped. Then you returned.”

“And you had no hallucinations or illusions in that interval?”

“None, sir. At least from my perspective, there was nothing strange.”

I nodded.

‘So Leviathan focused its illusions on me. From my perspective, ten days had passed, but for everyone else, it was only the blink of an eye.’

Ji-won’s testimony was credible, as she was the one who hadn’t been fooled by Go Yuri. She was a genuine beacon of hope for humanity. We didn’t know the exact details, but she definitely has a trait like Brainwashing Immunity Lv. 99.

“Ji-won.” I lowered my head, whispering so no one else would overhear.

Her sleek lashes didn’t even flutter as she asked, “Yes, sir?”

“This Anomaly is stronger than I thought. Sorry, but this time, you’ll have to do it.”

“At your command. Whatever you ask, I shall obey.”

Our eyes met.

The expression of my deputy who had once fashioned a pocket of hell beneath this very tunnel was empty as ever.

I whispered, “Become Leviathan’s Miko.”

Footnotes:

1 - A reference to a 14th-century event in Korean history, where General Yi Seong-gye famously turned his troops back at Wihwado.

2 - Commander Choi Young was the general who ordered the invasion of Wihwado, and who was in turn baffled as a fellow General turned coat and retreated back to the capital to stage a coup.

Chapter 318

The Skeptic XI

Sinnoa

If I had to pick exactly one person in the world who was the farthest thing from faith or devotion, I'd confidently nominate Yu Ji-won.

"Your Excellency the Undertaker."

Clearly, she thought the same of herself.

"If Your Excellency orders me to charge into fire itself, I am of course prepared to obey without hesitation."

"Well, that's not surprising. If you wrap yourself in Aura, there's no risk of getting burned, so obviously you'd go."

"I was merely speaking figuratively to express my loyalty, Your Excellency. But all joking aside, do you really think I would make a suitable Miko?"

"Hmm."

Before going to her, I'd thought long and hard about it—if Leviathan really had grown to the threat level of an Outer God, who should I partner with to tackle it?

"The truth is, there aren't many candidates among us who could feasibly become Leviathan's Miko," I explained. "It's basically down to Do-hwa or you."

At that moment, the only quasi-government body functioning in Korea was the National Road Management Corps. And among the Regressor Alliance, only two belong to the Corps: Noh Do-hwa and Yu Ji-won.

I myself had had a huge hand in founding and operating the Corps,

but it would be a stretch to label me “a member.” Think about it. I’d also been a key figure in the founding of the Eastern Holy State, but that hardly made me a member of it.

“But Do-hwa… To be frank, she’s less fit for Miko duty than you are, Ji-won. Can you even imagine her serving anyone else?”

“Honestly, not at all, sir.”

“I can hear every damn word, you bastards…” Do-hwa flicked a casino chip at us, which I casually dodged, then continued speaking.

“Whereas you, Ji-won, you’re practically made to be an offshoot of Leviathan.”

“Pardon?” Ji-won stared blankly, blinking twice to process. “You mean me?”

“Who else?”

Allow me to prove it.

Q: Do you, by any chance, regard all other living beings as insects?

“Your Excellency, I have never in my life treated someone’s life like that of a bug’s.”

“What do you think is the difference between a human life and a bug’s life?”

“All life is equal, Your Excellency. The idea that humans deserve special treatment is pure anthropocentric bias.”

“What about the difference between life and matter?”

“All life arises from matter and returns to matter. Every existence is equal. If you think living beings deserve special treatment, that’s an egocentric bias favoring life.”

“Then why you in particular? Why should you be special?”

“Because the world revolves around me, obviously. You could call it ‘Ji-won-centric.’ Although if I am Earth, then Your Excellency is the Sun, so the true center of the universe is—”

Out.

Q: What is the most valuable thing in this world?

“My loyalty to Your Excellency.”

Q: Clarification: second-most valuable thing.

“Power.”

“What’s so special about power?”

“Power is influence. If you die without power, you alone simply die. But if a person of power dies, it causes a massive commotion. In other words, it’s harder to kill a powerful person. Like how it’s harder to destroy a gigantic mass of matter—the higher the power, the harder it is to dismantle. Only power can compare to the eternal life of matter.”

Out.

Q: All humans have turned into animals. You can become whichever animal you want. Which do you choose?

“Hmm. Is a mythical creature allowed?”

“Sure. Anything you like.”

“Then I’ll be a dragon. One blast of Dragon Fear and all those other animals will lose it.”

Out.

“Yu Ji-won! You’re a perfect match to be Leviathan’s avatar!”

“I’m not sure why, sir...”

Three outs, and we switch sides.

Despite Ji-won remaining as expressionless as ever, she somehow looked a bit deflated. I could almost see the little “nyoro-n” sound effect floating above her head, but no one would get that reference anymore.[1]

“Still, Your Excellency, if that’s your decision, I trust it. However, becoming a Miko to an Outer God... I doubt it’s as simple as wanting to be one.”

“Of course.” If it were something like Infinite Metagame, which blatantly chose Oh Dok-seo and backed her, that might be different. Under most circumstances, though, merging a single human with a single Outer God required a great deal of effort. “But I have a little trick up my sleeve.”

“As expected of Your Excellency. May I ask what it is?”

“...”

“...”

“My, my.”

Three of us stood hand in hand.

Specifically, Yu Ji-won and I were side by side with Go Yuri.

The arrangement was simple: Ji-won was in the middle, holding my hand on her left and holding Go Yuri’s on her right.

“Um, Doc? You suddenly asked me to hold this lady’s hand, so I did, but what exactly are we doing here?”

“Don’t worry about it. We need your power to break through Leviathan’s contaminated Void, but I can’t afford direct contact with you. Hence, we’re using Ji-won as a filter.”

“My, my... Ah ho ho.”

A tiny laugh fell from Go Yuri’s lips, but even her usual smile that crinkled her eyes couldn’t hide the sense of unease drifting around

her. Her gaze bounced between me and Ji-won as she spoke.

“This really is fascinating... Do you know everything, Doc? Because if you do, I might be really surprised.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m weak to this person.”

I said nothing.

I hadn’t explained the mechanics of it in detail, but in a past cycle, I discovered that Ji-won wasn’t affected by Go Yuri’s mental manipulation. Evidently, Go Yuri already knew about that weakness.

Ji-won tilted her head. “Huh. Excuse me. I’m not good at recognizing faces. Are we acquainted?”

“...Ah ho ho.”

“I believe I spoke in a universally understandable language. Are you not Korean? If you’d like, I can speak your native tongue.”

“...”

“Your Excellency, it seems this lady shares the same trait as Lee Ha-yul or Phantom Blade.”

Ji-won’s facial muscles remained flat and composed, no different than usual. Meanwhile, I was stunned to hear these two “people” (though neither truly qualified as an ordinary human) having an actual conversation.

‘Go Yuri... She’s gone all timid?’

Based on her interactions on SG Net alone, it was clear to me that Go Yuri could talk circles around anyone. Her entire shtick was to feed the other person exactly what they wanted to hear, after all. Even extending that to group conversations, she usually gave every participant the “ideal” line or ran an even more advanced form of brainwashing.

‘But Yu Ji-won is conversing with Go Yuri face to face, and I can hear them both perfectly!’

When I observed Yu Ji-won vs. Go Yuri during that previous cycle, I kept my distance. This was my first time seeing their exchange up close.

A wave of confidence washed over me.

“Allow me to introduce you, Go Yuri. This is Yu Ji-won. She’s my esteemed adjutant. It’d be great if you two got along. Or maybe all three of us can arrange a routine tea party—”

“Doc, do you like slimes?”

“Huh? Not especially, no.”

“Would you like me to make you a fan?”

“…”

The Undertaker was now timid.

And so, hand in hand, we stepped out of the Inunaki Tunnel, leaving the rest of the Human Allied Forces with some excuse about going “on a scouting mission.”

– *Kieeeek.*

– *Groooaaa…*

Splat.

All three of us planted our feet simultaneously.

Then, something incredible happened. Even Ji-won, who rarely displayed any hint of surprise, blinked.

“Your Excellency, the fog…”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s moving on its own.”

The wall of thick fog that veiled everything beyond ten meters in any direction began shifting like a living thing. The raindrops followed soon after, pausing in midair and then wriggling sideways...

All skittering away from where Go Yuri set foot.

"..."

"..."

"Wow! The open air does feel refreshingly cool. So where to, Doc?"

"...I'll lead the way. Keep pace with me."

"Okay!"

Splorch.

Yu Ji-won and I trod upon the mud while Go Yuri's heels somehow landed on ground that was dry and solid, as if freshly baked. Occasionally, a water-bug rained down from above and landed on her wide-brimmed hat.

...! ...!

Then the droplet would contort in silent agony, as though under torture—stretching out horizontally, vertically, in all directions, and then contracting over and over at high speed—until it burst barely a second later.

"I've always wanted to take a walk with you like this, Doc."

"...Always? Sorry, but we only met a few months ago at best."

"That's just a difference in perspective."

Splorch.

"Doc, do you love Ha-yul?"

"I do."

“Have you always?”

“Yes. Always.”

“Even in the distant past?”

“…”

Splorch.

“You surely didn’t love her the instant you laid eyes on her. She’s not your birth daughter. It must have taken time and observation for that love to grow.”

“…What’s your point?”

“‘I love Ha-yul.’ Even that simple statement needs context, right? Like ‘but only after enough time had passed since we met.’”

Splorch.

“I’m the same way, Doc.”

“…”

“I’ve always wanted to walk with you like this.”

Go Yuri glanced sidelong at me, a faint smile playing about her lips.

Tens of thousands of liquid creatures crawled around her, writhing. It was as if she were enveloped in an inverted, transparent umbrella.

“It’s just a different viewpoint. Same as you.”

At long last, we reached the Tower of Babel. Already, half of it had been replaced by water, yet all three of us managed to climb with no problem—thanks to how the watery steps reverted to stone steps under Go Yuri’s feet.

And so we reached the rooftop. A place with nothing except a door that only I could open: the door to the Time Seal.

"...We're fine now that we've made it here. Thanks for bringing us."

"You're most welcome."

Go Yuri smiled.

"In the end, you plan to solve everything on your own, without really relying on me."

"...If you hadn't accompanied us, Ji-won and I could never have gotten here so smoothly. I did accept some help."

"Yes, but only that much. You've decided that 'borrowing this much power won't come at too steep a price,' right?"

Beyond the seal of this crystal tomb lay an area safe from Leviathan's mental corruption. There was no reason to risk more conversation with Go Yuri. Yet somehow, I felt an urge not to end things here with her. An intuition that I shouldn't just part ways now.

Maybe that's precisely Go Yuri's brainwashing...

It might be.

"...I'm sorry."

Go Yuri blinked.

"Huh?"

"..."

"What are you apologizing for, Doc?"

I was as baffled as she was.

Those words slipped out of my mouth without my own volition. Some unconscious part of me had moved my lips.

Up here on the rooftop, rain and water-bug squirming noises merged into a haze of background noise.

I thought:

‘I’m sorry… to Go Yuri? Why? About what? Where does that come from?’

But the question was short-lived. Even before my rational mind pieced things together, my heart, from ages past, was already hiding the answer.

“I always thought… that I was smart to avoid you. Because the best way to handle a danger you can’t defeat is not to confront it. But in hindsight, you were only doing what the other person wanted.”

Go Yuri could have come to me at any time, as evidenced by the current cycle. She pierced through every precise boundary I’d set and forced a meeting. Yet for hundreds of runs in the past, she never came to visit me.

Why?

It was simple.

“Because I avoided you. Because I didn’t want to meet you, you simply stayed away to match my desire.”

“…”

“I’m sorry.”

I still didn’t know exactly what Go Yuri was or how she worked, but if her absence over those centuries was merely my doing, my fierce wish not to see her, then somehow, now, this moment, I had to apologize.

“…”

Go Yuri was quiet for a while. Expressions of surprise, acceptance, contemplation, and a tiny smile each crossed her face in turn.

“All right. I’ll take that apology as payment for what I did to help you today.”

Clap.

Go Yuri brought her hands together, and in that instant, the loud crashing of the rain abruptly cut out, as if someone hit pause.

I realized she was doing that for me—like a gentle push on my back, telling me to leave now.

"...Thanks."

Go Yuri didn't respond. Instead, she let go of Ji-won's hand and backed away from me as well. Then I stepped through the Time Seal door with Ji-won.

When I glanced back one last time, Go Yuri was standing politely, seeing us off.

Atop the Tower of Babel, locked within the Time Seal, was none other than Cheon Yo-hwa—the one who was once both the Infinite Void and the Mastermind, calling herself my pupil and strategist.

In that sealed space, she saw only the happiest day of her life on an endless loop.

"Hmm, hum-hum... Hmm... Huh?"

To Cheon Yo-hwa, it was a classroom. Long ago, she'd confessed her love for me in that illusionary space. There in that classroom, she sat perched on a desk, humming a tune.

Crimson eyes flicked up to see my face... and Yu Ji-won holding my hand.

"Heh."

Someone destroyed, yet never truly gone—an Outer God or perhaps the Miko of an Outer God—she—tilted her head.

"Yeah. Welcome back, sunbae."

The orange-haired girl beamed.

“I always believed this day would come.”

Footnotes:

1 - A reference to *Nyoro-n Churuya-san*, a 4-koma series that usually features a girl named Churuya getting treated unfairly and then her disappointment with a little “nyoro-n” sound effect in the last panel.

Chapter 319

The Skeptic XII

Sinnoa

I didn't bother hiding information about Cheon Yo-hwa from my companions. In fact, I was quite proactive about sharing it. Arguing something like "That route is permanently closed, so we'll never be able to meet her anyway" would be pointless. By that logic, I wouldn't have needed to explain Old Man Scho either.

"Ho hum..."

As the one with an especially keen interest in receiving any and all intel for my autobiography project, Dok-seo listened to the whole story about Cheon Yo-hwa and tossed out one blunt comment:

"Isn't she basically a defeated heroine?"

No one had asked, but as soon as Dok-seo decided something fell into her "area of expertise," she would babble on like any good otaku.

"Look, mister. She had a bit of a childhood-friend vibe going on because she knew you even before the main story began. If we're going off of chronological order, she's the heroine who developed feelings for you earlier than anyone else. But guess what? She got Time Seal placed on her. You get what I'm saying? She's stuck, and there's no way for her love to come true in the real world. She's a defeated heroine, no doubt about it."

Dok-seo possessed a "magic eye" that transformed anything she saw into a subculture phenomenon. Considering she even tried to pair Do-hwa and me, you could guess how powerful that magic eye was.

True, from an outsider's perspective, Cheon Yo-hwa did indeed lose. Her time had ceased its flow. In reality, though, she hadn't given up on all time. She had only abandoned the "future," removing herself

from the timeline where we could have walked together, and in exchange, what she took hold of was the “past.”

To conquer me, a regressor, she realized that instead of seizing a future that stretched out infinitely, she should aim for a white canvas of a past that was still blank. Cheon Yo-hwa had grasped that truth more clearly than anyone else.

“I’ve been waiting for you, sunbae.”

A girl in a black sailor uniform sat on a classroom desk and gave me a bright smile.

“Of course, going by my own sense of time, it’s only been ten minutes since we said our eternal farewells and… well… kissed. But it’s good to see you again.”

Ji-won snapped her head around to stare at me. Beyond her deadpan expression, I could see her mind demanding, *Did that person just say what I think she said?*

I grimaced. “We didn’t kiss. I don’t know where you got that bad habit, but you sure twist history as easily as breathing.”

“Oh, did I?” Cheon Yo-hwa covered her mouth and giggled. “Don’t worry. Before long, our past will ‘change’ so that’s exactly what happened.”

I didn’t grace that with a response.

“If you came here alone, I’d guess you just wanted a little heart-to-heart. But now you’ve brought a companion, hmm? Maybe in other cycles it didn’t happen, but this is the first time in this one, right?”

I nodded as Ji-won took half a step forward, still holding my right hand. “Is this our first time meeting?” she asked.

“Hmm. Who knows?”

“Then I should at least give you a proper hello. I’m Yu Ji-won.”

“Sure. I’m Cheon Yo-hwa. Nice to meet you, sunbae’s adjutant.

From my viewpoint, it's not actually the first time, but let's just say it is."

Ji-won took a moment to process that. "I see. So this is what it's like to meet someone isolated from the normal flow of time. It's rather novel."

With those brief introductions done, I wasted no time getting to the point. Letting this girl in front of me dictate the flow of conversation would be a bad idea.

"I'll lay out the situation," I began.

"Please do."

Cheon Yo-hwa listened lazily, sometimes nodding, sometimes adding a little interjection as I talked.

"Leviathan has grown to the level of an Outer God," I concluded. "Its mental corruption is so overwhelming that we can't fight it by normal means. Our plan is to turn Ji-won into Leviathan's Miko... And we've formed a temporary alliance with Go Yuri as well."

"Heh. With Pinky, huh?"

"I have something to ask about that. I can't figure out why Go Yuri is so wary of Leviathan."

"Huh... Maybe you're overthinking it, sunbae?" Cheon Yo-hwa swung her legs as she asked, "As you know, Anomalies fight for authority and dominion, right? Pinky's and Leviathan's powers revolve around distorting human perception, so they're basically the same 'genre.' They're competing."

"So they're just rivals?"

"Yup. Maybe there's some deeper grudge involved, but from the surface alone, it's clear they're enemies."

"So if Leviathan is defeated..."

"Pinky's dominion gets bigger. A lot bigger."

I clamped my mouth shut.

Killing with a borrowed sword. Go Yuri was simply using me as a blade to stab Leviathan. If I grew weaker because of the fight, she could enthrall me. And if Leviathan fell, she'd have free rein over the mental-manipulation sphere.

"In other words, for the time being, I can shelve Pinky's motives and backstory."

"And focus on beating Leviathan without getting caught up in Pinky's schemes," I finished. "That's it."

"Right. You catch on quick, sunbae."

So turning Yu Ji-won into Leviathan's Miko truly was the only real solution.

"Ji-won exhibits an almost invincible defense against mental manipulation. If she shoulders Leviathan, she'll be able to manage it without succumbing to an Outer God's influence."

"Oh? You're putting a lot of trust in that unnie, huh?" A sly smile tugged at Cheon Yo-hwa's lips. "You know what it means to become an Outer God's Miko, right? It's like gaining near-complete control of Leviathan's authority. Unless you seal it away with something like Time Seal, it's basically a giant time bomb right next to you. You think you can handle it?"

"I'm fine with it."

In some ways, Ji-won was more dependable than Dok-seo.

I added on to Ji-won's affirmation by saying, "She knows how strong I am. She's also aware that Go Yuri is an opponent, and she just learned about you, who could be a wild card... Plus, compared to you or Go Yuri, I've already shared more goodwill with her on multiple occasions. We can talk it out. There's no reason for her to betray me."

If I ever grew weak, Ji-won would chew me up without hesitation, but I would never let that happen. As long as I remained strong,

there was no reason for Yu Ji-won to turn on me.

“Exactly, Your Excellency. How could I possibly team up with such a shady individual and dream of usurping your position? If only Cao Mengde had followed my example, he would have gone down in the record books as a loyal subject of the Han, a timeless exemplar.”[1]

Cheon Yo-hwa waited for a moment to see if I would reply, and when I didn’t, she said, “Huh... So you really trust that unnie so much?”

I turned my gaze aside.

What else could I do? If I didn’t have warriors like Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, I had to form a decent battle line with whomever I had.[2] People had to make do with what was given to them.

“So far, it looks like Leviathan hasn’t chosen a Miko,” I said while jotting down notes in a little notebook. “But Outer Gods don’t just make a Miko for no reason. If they want to intervene in the real world, they have to designate a single agent on Earth.”

“But Your Excellency, Leviathan’s been meddling in the world just fine on its own so far.”

“That’s true. Which leads us to this possibility.”

I scrawled a line of text in black ink: *Maybe Leviathan has chosen a Miko, but that fact has been hidden all along?*

I looked at Cheon Yo-hwa, seated next to me.

“We don’t know who this Miko could be. There’s even a chance they themselves don’t realize it.”

“Hmm. Like with Dok-seo?”

“Yeah. And judging by the circumstances so far, the Miko was probably chosen from those close to me.”

Leviathan had specifically singled me out in this cycle, so it followed that it would have picked someone who had substantial influence on me.

“And so, I’m going to rewrite things so that the Miko is—and always has been—Yu Ji-won.”

The would-be Miko in question tilted her head. “I’m sorry, Your Excellency, I don’t follow. Do you mean I won’t ‘become’ a Miko from this point on, but that I was one from the very beginning?”

“Exactly.”

“That… seems strange,” she admitted, her brow furrowed. “I am not Leviathan’s minion, Your Excellency. I’ve never corrupted anyone’s mind or brainwashed them for my own benefit.”

“No, you have done that.”

A blink. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’re actually Leviathan’s Miko. You’ve been hiding it from me all along. You’ve even contaminated people’s minds before. You just concealed that from me or twisted part of the truth.”

No response.

“We’ll make it so from here on out.” I glanced the other way. “Hey, Yo-hwa.”

“Yup, sunbae.”

“You’ve got the power to color my past in any way you please, right?”

“Well, it’s more like a data-mining Infinite Void and certain Mastermind simulations, but yeah. I can.”

“In that case, it should be possible to set things up so that Ji-won and I actually met before the apocalypse—back when I wasn’t yet a regressor.”

Cheon Yo-hwa's smile broadened, and for a second, I could have sworn that the four seasons drifting outside the classroom windows trembled.

"Of course it's possible," she chirped, "as long as sunbae wants that from me. And if unnie here agrees to it."

"What do you think, Ji-won?" I turned back and locked eyes with her. "If you consent, we'll define the past between us. We didn't first meet in that convenience store after the world fell, we actually knew each other before that."

"Hmm."

"We may go pretty far back, but starting from then, we'll build up a timeline in which you were actually Leviathan's Miko the entire time."

She propped her chin on one hand. About a minute later, she parted her lips and said, "I have no reason to refuse. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to cement my bond with Your Excellency, and also to secure my position as an Outer God's Miko."

"I'll ask again. You're fine with having your past changed?"

"I have no special attachment to my past, anyway. All I really remember is killing people," she revealed without a hitch in breath or pitch. After a moment, when I didn't respond, she added, "Oh, it'd be a bit of a pity if you go too far back to when I was younger than a high-schooler. I did have to put some effort into learning Latin and Ancient Greek back then."

We had her agreement.

Cheon Yo-hwa and I exchanged glances. She nodded.

"Great! Well, it's been a while, or in my own sense of time, barely an hour since last time, but either way, I'll tweak sunbae's precious past once again, so this time it's got you and that unnie woven into it as well."

Then, she let out a deliberately exaggerated laugh, one that

belonged to an old man rather than a young schoolgirl.

“Sure you’re okay with this?” she repeated. “The price for borrowing my power is pretty big, y’know, sunbae? You ready?”

“Just tell me what the price is.”

“Ah, I’m not going to demand it verbally.”

I blinked. “Then how—”

Cheon Yo-hwa was cupping my chin, then without hesitation, she pressed her lips to mine.

Crimson eyes.

Soft warmth brushed over my lips, a breath and then some. As I tried to say something, she pulled my chin even closer.

A beat later, an orange scent grazed my teeth.

Time seemed to drag on. The classroom windows, each tinted by a different season, showed trees swaying in four distinct breezes.

Finally, our lips parted.

“You...”

“What? I already told you, sunbae. This is how it would go.”

Still inches away, Cheon Yo-hwa whispered to me.

“You decided to borrow my power on your own, thinking that since I’m Time Sealed, it’d be ‘relatively safe.’ That’s on you... And there are three prices to pay, not just one.”

“What?”

“Don’t call me shameless. I’m actually trying to be as fair as possible, okay? You’re the one requesting an absurdly powerful ability.”

She tapped my chest with her forefinger.

“First price is that kiss just now.”

Her middle finger joined in, pressing my chest.

“Second price is that, from now on, our history will say, ‘When I confessed my love to sunbae, we actually kissed.’” Her giggle tinkered between us. “Hard to forget that sensation, right, sunbae? You only just did it.”

Sure enough, I was already picturing the scene with the moment she was Time Sealed and we shared a kiss. Whether it happened from the start or was newly inserted into my memories, I couldn’t tell anymore.

“And the last, third price is...”

Her ring finger pressed into my chest.

“Sorry, sunbae. One more time... because I liked it.”

She leaned in once more, connecting our lips again.

This time, the kiss wasn’t as hurried as before. Instead, it was a bit softer, and it lingered just a little longer.

Her three fingers on my chest slowly began to move. They were tracing letters with her nails. Even with just the feeling, I could make out the rough shapes of the words—I’d gotten used to reading letters with my skin thanks to the Saintess. Thus, I could decode it.

Actually, a long time ago,

I wanted to tweak our timeline so that we stole a kiss back when you tutored me.

That was my mistake.

I couldn’t hold back.

I feel kind of underhanded too.

After all, I’m going to forget this in a day, anyway. Silly me, right?

But at least you'll remember it, sunbae.

That's not so bad.

Only her crimson eyes filled my vision now.

Her nails scratched over the very spot in my chest where my heart was beating.

Off you go, sunbae.

Here's a little hint:

Make use of perfume.

Perfume?

Before I could ask what that meant, one of the four windows—the second one, where summer sunlight shone—flared with blinding brightness.

It was so bright that I reflexively had to close my eyes.

And then.

And then—

When I opened my eyes again...

"Huh?"

I found myself standing in the middle of a road.

No more sign of Cheon Yo-hwa's classroom, her Divine Realm, or the person herself who'd just scratched my chest.

Instead, what I faced was an old neighborhood on a narrow downward slope. Alleyways and walls seemed to wrestle for the slightest bit of space. A neglected flower pot perched forlornly to provide the only bit of greenery. The summer sun was scorching the anemone's leaves, baking the uneven layers of concrete underfoot.[3]

“Excuse me.”

I heard a voice from behind. When I turned around, there stood a slight girl with black hair, looking up at me with arms loaded with trash bags.

“If it’s not too much trouble, could you move aside so I can get by?”

Because the alley was so narrow, she couldn’t pass unless I stepped away.

“O-oh, right. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. Thank you for granting my request.”

She bowed her head politely, despite carrying two heavy trash bags. The angle of her bow was so impeccable it felt oddly out of place with her shabby outfit.

That perfect bow could only belong to one person, someone whose greetings were always impeccable. Her hair color was different, her eyes were different, and she was definitely a lot shorter. Still, considering I’d just been yanked into this “rewritten past” by Cheon Yo-hwa’s power...

Could this polite, grown-up-sounding girl in front of me be...?

“Yu Ji-won?”

“Sorry?”

“Oh, uh... Is your name Yu Ji-won by any chance?”

The black-haired girl’s eyes fluttered twice in two blinks.

“Yes. I’m Yu Ji-won, Class 1-2 at Shinseo Middle School. Do... Do you know me?”

I was at a loss for words.

Holy crap.

Sure, we’d said we’d rewrite the past so that Yu Ji-won had always

been Leviathan's Miko. But this? Come on, Cheon Yo-hwa, you've sent me too far back!

In that cramped alley, 14-year-old Yu Ji-won tilted her head in confusion.

The cicadas were in full chorus.

It was summer.

Footnotes:

1 - Cao Cao, or Cao Mengde, was a Chinese statesman, warlord, and poet who rose to power during the end of the Han dynasty, allowing his son to eventually usurp the throne after his passing. His cruelty and success as a conquering warlord have led him to be vilified over time, due in no small part to the antagonistic role he takes in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

2 - Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were key generals and statesmen of the early Three Kingdoms period who both shared a brotherly relationship with Liu Bei, the ruler depicted in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as an example of a humane and benevolent ruler.

3 - In the language of flowers, anemones can symbolize passionate love or stand as the flowers of the dead.

Chapter 320

The Skeptic XIII

Sinnoa

This might not sound too convincing, but I actually care more about my companions' personal privacy than you might expect.

I'm not like some typical subculture protagonist who goes, "Oh, you've had such-and-such trauma in your past? Then let me heal you!" and then starts prying into every painful detail, and there are many reasons as to why.

"Mister. Actually, I've been bullied since fourth grade... Ahhh, thinking back on it, my life started falling apart back then. That's when I learned how to loathe people, hate society, and give up on hope."

"Didn't you say it was third grade last time?"

"Huh? Did I say that? Well, anyway—"

First off, human memory isn't accurate. As someone who has Complete Memory, this still amazes me. Even when it comes to their most painful, life-defining traumas, most people still somehow hide them away in a haze that never quite clears.

For my part, each of my runs spans about twenty years. By the time I entered my 776th cycle facing off against Leviathan again, my total lifespan had already sailed past ten thousand years.

Just imagine. How many contradictory "testimonies" do you think I've collected from my companions in that time?

At some point, I picked up a certain habit—or you might call it an attitude—in how I deal with people:

"Don't be too quick to judge."

As Scott Fitzgerald once said, reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. A person's character isn't determined by their words or actions in a single moment—it's proven over time.

This is the monologue of a regressor who's outlived ten thousand years.

Does Oh Dok-seo sound like an idiot sometimes? Yes, that's undeniably true.

Idiotic speech aside, though, she never betrayed us, or me for that matter, even when she was mentally corrupted by an Anomaly. (She just ended up punching her fans at a meet-and-greet.) Therefore, I don't assign too much weight or importance to remarks about a companion's "past" or "trauma."

A slight mistake in their memories? Who cares? They've already proved themselves with countless years of loyalty and action.

The same goes for Yu Ji-won.

It didn't matter whether she was some psycho who seized control of a convenience store the moment the apocalypse hit, or whether there was some past event that twisted her sense of humanity. Unless she took the initiative to tell me herself, "Your Excellency, to be honest, I carry a very tragic trauma from my past," I saw no need to dig into her history.

Among all my companions, Yu Ji-won ranked first place by a landslide in the "Never Talking About My Past" competition.

Even when we all drank together...

Even when just the two of us were chatting over drinks...

Even when she was on the brink of death, leaving her last words for the next run...

She never really divulged the details of her past.

Was it because she genuinely placed no value on her pre-apocalypse life? Or was she silently taking into account my own situation of

having lost all memory of my pre-apocalypse past?

Whatever the reason, her past remained as silent and nebulous as a Void.

Hence…

“A little more natural, please… Okay, good.”

The photographer kept pressing the shutter, and the camera *click-click-click*ed away. Ji-won struck poses without so much as batting an eye at the nonstop camera flash. She turned her head this way and that, her face blank.

“All right. Now give me a little smile.”

She offered a faint smile.

It might have been an earthshaking, mind-blowing event to me, but the photographer hardly found it special. He just kept singing her praises—it was *perfect, perfect!*—and snapping pictures.

“Great, wow! You’re just perfect again today, Ji-won.”

“Thank you.”

“All right, next up we’ll have you sit in that chair over there, reading a book.”

So, yeah.

It turned out that in her first year of middle school, the 14-year-old Yu Ji-won—black-haired, because it’d be a while before her powers Awakened and turned it silver—was indeed a born psychopath in many ways. However, in this era, she was also a professional model.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

I was hiding behind the scenes at the photo shoot, suppressing my presence with Aura and stealth, my mouth hanging open in disbelief.

“That’s just cheating.”

To the camera’s lens, Yu Ji-won was playing the quintessential star student, all dressed up in a crisp school uniform and wearing a flawless smile that was practically perfect in every way.

Over two weeks of practicing my stealth game and sneaking around, I pieced together the story of this so-called “14-year-old con artist.”

Yu Ji-won was born into poverty.

As a girl, she lived on the third floor of a leaning villa on a steep hillside slum. Hers was a household of four: a grandmother with dementia, a father with anger management and alcoholism issues, and a mother who had gotten sucked into some shady religious group.

“It’s like the trifecta of misery or something...”

A messed-up home, no doubt.

At this point, we’d usually delve into a squalid sob story of how deeply unfortunate Yu Ji-won’s home life was, how her personality flaws were both innate and shaped by her environment, and how that forces us to feel sympathy, yet also reprimand her for stooping to killing people, but...

“She doesn’t look miserable at all.”

Sure enough, Yu Ji-won was not your average kid. All of that “tragic family backstory” was just a minor inconvenience to her. Even if you just listened to the snippets of conversation with the photographer, you could guess how well she was managing.

“Oh, right, Ji-won. You have any interest in modeling for eyeglasses? A friend of mine is looking for a few student models these days.”

“If you can put me in touch, Director, I’d be glad to work hard.”

“Oh man, our Ji-won is so polite! Not like most kids these days! Everybody I introduce you to says nothing but good things.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Case in point, even in an environment where you’d expect a deluge of misery, she managed to live perfectly well. Despite being only 14 years old, Ji-won had already learned to distinguish between her family’s poverty and her own. She’d freed herself from relying on her parents’ allowance, instead filling up her own bank account through her own labor.

“Is this for real?” I muttered.

As you all know, Ji-won’s face was basically at the *Status Ailment: Kingdom-Toppling Beauty* level. That was as true in middle school as it was later. She put her naturally extraordinary looks to work, making a living as a fashion model.

It wasn’t just her face that captivated people either.

“I may be polite, Director, but I owe it to your generosity. Not all adults would lend a helping hand to a child like me. Being able to work with someone as wonderful as you is my good fortune.”

“Huh? Wow, Ji-won, you sure talk in a unique way! Haha!”

No matter which set she went to, Ji-won delivered her compliments in a flat tone of voice that sounded deeply sincere.

She was “pretty,” “polite,” and “young,” and people found it painfully hard to brush her off, so all the modeling gigs out there practically fell into her lap.

“This is a middle-schooler’s idea of socializing?”

She was truly a force that broke the ecosystem.

She had a mature build for her age, a distinctively expressionless face that intrigued people, an air about her that could look childlike or strangely grown-up, and that disarming bit of charisma that soothed the hearts of weary adults.

Thus, 14-year-old “serial-killer-in-the-making” model Yu Ji-won was basically inhaling all the possible gigs in her age bracket like Kirby on a binge.

“...Seriously?”

Every day, she juggled classes and modeling jobs until well past 10 PM, then transferred from subway to local bus on her way back home.

“What are you doing coming home at this hour?!”

No sooner had the villa’s front door slammed shut than I heard a man’s shout from the third floor, her father’s voice.

Yesterday it was her mother who blew up, and now it was his turn.

“You little brat! Watch your tone, huh? Huh? Huh?!”

“I’m sorry. I was held back at school studying.”

“Don’t lie to me! I called your teacher, you know! Don’t you try to __”

“I apologize. I really was studying.”

“Hey! You... *You little...!*”

“I’m sorry. Please don’t hit my face, Father. If there’s a mark, everyone will notice.”

The yelling didn’t stop even after fifty minutes. The verbal altercation broke out into physical violence a few times, but Ji-won always tried to shield her face. She wasn’t the only victim either. Her mom and grandmother were also caught in the abuse, until everyone was hurling insults back and forth.

So it wasn’t by chance that Yu Ji-won adapted so quickly when the apocalypse came. Her world had fallen to ruin from the start.

During these two weeks, I didn’t just learn about Ji-won. I also investigated the area around her.

The slum rested on a steep hill, with crooked concrete poured through different decades so the alley and stairways resembled geological strata.

I stepped into the multiplex building across from the villa where Ji-won lived. On the building's first floor, there was a small monthly-rent apartment, and I rummaged through the mailbox in front.

National Health Insurance

Personal and Confidential

■■■

The recipient's name was all static, blurred out by some glitch.

"So even Cheon Yo-hwa, who built this 'past timeline' for me, couldn't fully create a name in place of the real occupant's identity..."

Inside the run-down building was a tiny studio apartment about 7 to 8 pyeong in size.[1] A battered desk stood inside, stacked with ID cards like a driver's license and a resident registration card.

■■■

The same glitch. An unreadable name.

Yet the photo was clearly me—or rather someone who looked exactly like me, except younger by a few years.

I silently flipped the license over and over. Only the name was censored. The face was obviously that of a "younger Undertaker."

There was no point trying to hide it.

"In this timeline, or at least in the world Cheon Yo-hwa is showing me, the 'past me' was apparently living in this neighborhood."

Then, another burst of shouting from beyond the shabby window. The father's furious hollering echoed out, followed shortly after by the clipped and composed replies.

“You think I’m doing this just to squeeze money out of you? Huh? You—!”

“I’m sorry. I’m out of cash. Please forgive me.”

It was so loud I could easily hear it all from my one-room across the street.

“Huh.”

So, incredibly, it turned out that in the “forever-lost memories” of my past, I was a resident of the very same neighborhood as a 14-year-old psycho middle-schooler.

“...Is this for real?”

It was real.

For the time being.

Breaking news.

The 20-year-old Undertaker (I learned my age from the ID card) used to be neighbors with 14-year-old Yu Ji-won.

“This is crazy. I can’t tell if it’s all Cheon Yo-hwa’s trick or if it’s some actual reconstruction from a database of the past.”

Whether it was real or not wasn’t that important anyway. My past was always a blank canvas, and my present mission was to paint a “connection to Yu Ji-won” onto that empty space.

The quest requirements were basically this:

(1) Intervene in Yu Ji-won’s life.

(2) “Imprint” the idea that she was “destined to be Leviathan’s Miko” all the way back in this era.

(3) Return to the present so we can use the newly affirmed “Miko of Leviathan” to defeat the Outer God.

Steps 2 and 3 could be figured out with time. The first step was my immediate priority.

I had to intervene in her life.

“Easier said than done...”

Think about it. Neighbors in the same town can be both close and incredibly distant. Adding in a status gap of a “college freshman in a studio apartment” and a “middle-schooler victim of domestic abuse” only made that equation more awkward.

At least Cheon Yo-hwa had the “tutor-student” connection with her older sister. Me? I had nothing.

“Let’s see... How would I realistically get close to a 14-year-old kid?”

Forcing closeness out of nowhere would be pointless.

I could do something like rob a bank, hand Ji-won a huge pile of cash, and proclaim, “Hey, now you’re free! Problem solved!” However, that wouldn’t matter. What actually mattered was that the version of me in this era formed a “natural bond” with the 14-year-old Ji-won.

If it wasn’t at least *somewhat* believable from the vantage point of my past self, I couldn’t accept it, even as a rewriting of history.

“Well... That younger me would definitely have tried to help her somehow.”

I drummed my fingers on the flimsy plastic desk, thinking.

“When the Void came, I risked everything to rescue the Yo-hwa sisters. That implies I had a soft heart, even as a teenager. No way I could ignore the kid next door getting beaten up every night.”

Of course, that younger me probably didn’t know all that much about Ji-won. At best, maybe I had some basic sympathy for her.

“But to Yu Ji-won, sympathy and concern would be worthless.”

Even if I “happened” to meet her whenever she took out the trash or said hi because we were neighbors, she’d likely see no value in me.

“So I have to solve her problem. That’s the only thing that matters to her.”

And the main problem in her life is her family. If she had enough money, that might solve it.

However, as I said, abruptly giving her a wad of cash would break narrative causality.

“How can the me of this era naturally, and believably, help Yu Ji-won make money...?”

At that moment, my eyes fell on my driver’s license lying on the desk.

Yu Ji-won had to shuttle from subway to subway to get to her photo shoots...

“Yes, that’s it!”

I’d found a way for “a random local college student” to get close to “a middle-schooler from an abusive household” in a way that seemed natural.

One week later, same as the first time I entered this rewritten past, I met Yu Ji-won in the middle of the narrow alley.

“Hello. If it’s not too much trouble, could you move aside so I can get by?”

She greeted me with the same line as before. The difference was that last time, she carried trash bags in both hands. Now she was lugging a large duffel bag full of modeling gear.

I offered a friendly smile.

“Hey, Ji-won. How are you?”

“Do I know you...?”

“Nah, I’m just a neighbor. I live in the building across from yours.”

“I see.” She gave a subtle twitch of her nose, then lowered her head slightly. “Pardon me. I’m not very good at remembering faces. Next time I see you, I’ll be sure to greet you properly.”

Well, yeah. If she decides you’re useless to her, she won’t bother remembering your face.

“Actually, I’m in a hurry. Could you please let me pass?”

“Where are you headed?” I asked instead.

“Uijeongbu. I have work.”

Uijeongbu. Practically on the opposite side of Seoul.

It wouldn’t be easy traveling that far on public transit, carrying all her gear and trying to keep up her condition for her job.

I pretended to be surprised. “All the way to Uijeongbu? That’s pretty far.”

“Yes. It’s my usual routine. It’s no problem.”

“Still, that looks pretty tough...” I glanced at the heavy duffel bag slung over her shoulder. “How about I give you a ride?”

“Pardon?”

“I’ve got a car. It’s an old Matiz I picked up secondhand, but it still runs.”

She blinked and tilted her head. “Could you say that again?”

“I’ll drive you. I don’t have any plans today, so I can take a spin and drop you off.”

That’s right. The idea was to become Yu Ji-won’s “road manager.”

Balancing school and work had to be exhausting. The time lost in

commuting must've been her biggest burden. I had a way to fix that: a used Daewoo Matiz, which I'd hurriedly purchased a few days prior.

If I approached it from that angle, I could definitely get closer to this expressionless, psycho-in-training middle-school model. It was a perfect tactic.

"Hmm."

While I patted myself on the back, Ji-won tilted her head the other way.

Amusingly enough, that tilt was the same gesture she'd do in the future.

"Let me summarize. A certain Mr. Matiz, who claims we've met before, though I don't recall it, an adult male older than me, offers to drive me, a 14-year-old girl, all the way across the city to Uijeongbu. For free. Simply because he has nothing else to do, and also the car is a dingy, old, second-hand Matiz. Is that correct?"

"Uh..."

"So you agree with that statement upon review?"

"Huh, well... Yeah, it's definitely suspicious. Sounds a bit like a stalker, doesn't it?"

Ji-won nodded, tilting her head back to center to stare directly at me.

"Thank you. Then we are in agreement on that point."

I stared at her. She stared back.

I didn't respond. Her head tilted more.

Um.

Was it safe to assume our first meeting just failed spectacularly?

Footnotes:

1 - A **pyeong** is a Korean unit of measurement that is used for area and floorspace. One pyeong is about 3.31 square meters or 35.58 square feet.

Chapter 321

The Skeptic XIV

Sinnoa

Allow me a moment to defend myself.

It's not that my cognitive abilities are defective just because I failed to reach the blatantly obvious conclusion until Ji-won pointed it out. Rather, after living roughly ten thousand years in a ruined world, I simply forgot how society functioned back when law and order still functioned as normal.

No, before that, is it even right to be learning about "the normal social processes under law and order" from Yu Ji-won of all people? Doesn't that violate some fundamental law of the universe?

Either way, I decided to provide a bit more of a "Yu Ji-won–tailored" service, and the result was a success.

Du-du-du-du…

My used Matiz rattled and groaned, as if its engine were muttering, *"Just… kill me… now…"*

Ji-won, who had been ready to report me to the police as a would-be stalker just moments before, now sat in the back seat, feeling every vibration of the Matiz.

A heavy duffel bag lay at her feet.

And across her lap rested a hand axe.

I turned the wheel with ease and spoke to her via the rearview mirror. "So? Feeling more secure now?"

Driving posed no problem for me. Maybe in this era, with civilization intact, a Matiz would be considered a piece of junk, but after living in an apocalypse, it felt like a top-of-the-line sports car.

No random ghosts stowed away, no actual wails emerging from the engine. To me, it was practically a racing vehicle.

“If I try anything fishy at all, just swing that axe and crack me in the back of the skull.”

She pursed her lips and clutched the handle of the hand axe on her lap, apparently not used to its weight. “There are a few dozen things I could point out here, but first, you just ran your third red light.”

“Huh? Did I?”

“Yes. Luckily no other cars were passing. You should be more worried about dying in an accident than being killed by an axe.”

“Ahh, sorry about that. I’m still not used to this ‘traffic light’ contraption. And are all these lanes really necessary? One lane could handle everything.”

“Pardon me, sir. Did you immigrate here from some third-world country?”

Adapting to modern civilization wasn’t easy. Still, I delivered Ji-won to her job site safely.

And that’s the crucial part: *safely*. Had my senses been any duller than the average Awakened superhuman, we’d probably have ended up in “seven collision accidents” rather than “arriving without incident.”

“That was... quite the unusual driving style.”

She got out, her legs shaking like a newborn goat’s. Future Yu Ji-won would have had no trouble keeping her balance, but this version of her was still young.

“At least we got here fast, right?” I said breezily.

“That was closer to racing to meet death, but yes. At least it’s clear now that you don’t intend to harm me.”

“Oh! So you’re finally going to trust in my earnest good will?”

“Not exactly. If I do go missing, the police can just pull CCTV of your driving. It’ll stick out like a sore thumb.”

Anyway, from that day on, Ji-won regularly used my “commuter service.”

Sure, the path she took to “trust” me was bizarre, but hey, a win is a win.

Yu Ji-won was a strange kid.

Well, that went without saying. She would one day grow up to be a kidnapper and torturer, so it stood to reason that her personality wasn’t exactly normal.

Still, the adult Ji-won hid that abnormal side very skillfully. She turned “lack of emotion” into “cool-headed judgment” and “sadism” into “ruthless but daring execution.” These inborn flaws became strengths that someone in society “had to” shoulder. It was basically her survival strategy.

On the other hand...

“I’m sorry...”

Fourteen-year-old Yu Ji-won was different. She still hadn’t learned enough tactics to blend in with the world.

“Do you know me?”

For a beat, I was silent. “What do you mean, ‘Do I know you?’ Ji-won, I drove you all the way to Uijeongbu just yesterday.”

“Ah, so you’re Mr. Matiz.”

Bow.

When we met again in the alley, she greeted me as if only just realizing who I was.

“I’m really not good at recognizing people’s faces. My apologies.”

She was clearly abnormal.

Granted, I knew from the future that Ji-won generally didn’t bother remembering people she deemed useless. If you could offer her even a slight advantage, however, she’d show off an uncanny memory. Dang Seo-rin, Noh Do-hwa, Cheon Yo-hwa, and especially me, the Undertaker—she remembered all of us from the moment she first met us in that convenience store.

“Now in this timeline, I am helping her by saving her a ton of commuting time, which can be quantified in real numbers. Yet she still forgets my face?” I grumbled.

Not that it happened forever. Over time, she started mixing me up less and less.

“Mr. Matiz, I look forward to your help again today.”

Nowadays, she’d greet me politely in the alley, almost like we had our own little rendezvous point. If we ran into each other somewhere else, like the supermarket, though...

“Oh, hey there, Ji-won. Doing some shopping?”

She tilted her head and aksed, “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

Just like that. She’d act like she had amnesia or something.

Once again, it was blatantly abnormal.

“Let’s test something...”

I went out to the alley at my usual time but in a different outfit. Instead of my usual crisp summer shirt, I wore a worn-out T-shirt, hunched my back like an old grandma, and even held a cane for good measure.

Before long, Ji-won came down the villa stairs. She spotted me, tilted her head a couple degrees, then walked past as if I were a total stranger.

No hello, no reaction.

“Huh.”

That deepened my suspicions.

I decided to up the ante. I snuck into her house while no one else was around—no family members in sight, perfect timing. In the bedroom, I pulled on an old set of her father’s clothes. They reeked of age and poverty, a musty smell that had settled in for years.

I waited on the living room floor, a bottle of cheap makgeolli in my hands, until she returned. She didn’t have a modeling job that week, so she’d be home early.

Bi-bi-bi-beep.

I heard a keypad chime at the door. Her grandmother, who suffered from dementia, couldn’t remember a more complicated code, so they kept it at 5555. Sometimes even that was too much. Her grandmother occasionally asked me, the neighbor, to open the door for her.

Ji-won stepped in, slipped off her shoes, and sniffed the air lightly. She looked at me on the living room floor.

“Huh? Father, you didn’t go to church today...? Then who’s picking Grandma up? Where did she go?”

I stayed silent, feigning drunkenness, then staggered out the front door. Though she cocked her head, Ji-won didn’t bother stopping me.

Only when I made it back to the alley could I finally let out a sigh. “I did not see that coming...”

The distant city skyline looked strangely crisp under today’s sky.

And so, I finally learned something new about my would-be adjutant.

My long-standing right-hand companion, Yu Ji-won... can’t

recognize human faces.

Prosopagnosia: the disorder of being unable to recognize or properly perceive faces.

We all get a touch of “face blindness” now and then when we suddenly bump into an old classmate on the street. However, Yu Ji-won’s symptoms were on a completely different level.

“Oh, yes, your guess was correct, Mr. Matiz. You figured it out.”

If she’d been an adult, she wouldn’t have revealed such a potentially exploitable weakness to someone who wasn’t even a close acquaintance, but the fourteen-year-old version told me without hesitation.

“I was born having difficulty perceiving or remembering people’s faces.”

“How severe is it?”

“To be blunt, if you replaced someone’s head with a full-body mannequin, I doubt I could tell the difference by looking just at the face.”

I had no idea. It was so unexpected that I nearly retorted, “But in the future, you recognized people fine!” but of course that future hadn’t happened yet.

Instead, I asked a question that fit the current timeline.

“Then how do you tell people apart? I mean, you manage to recognize the director at your photo shoots, right?”

“I rely on location and context,” she answered matter-of-factly. “If there’s a figure of a certain build and a certain outfit hovering near a camera, I deduce that’s the director. I can also try identifying people by their voices. But I’m a poor listener, and a lot of voices sound the same to me.”

It’s quite troublesome, she added.

“That’s why, whenever possible, I try to distinguish people by smell.”

“Smell?”

“Yes, their body scent. Most people tend to have consistent preferences about perfume or cologne.”

She stepped closer.

“If you don’t mind…”

Then she leaned in, nose near my chest. She circled slowly around my torso, sniffing quietly.

“I thought so.”

She wasn’t Awakened yet, so her eyes were still dark instead of their future hue. She looked up at me.

“This is quite fascinating… If my nose is correct, you, Mr. Matiz, have no body scent at all. Apart from a mild fabric softener, your body is entirely odorless.”

Indeed, that was my constitution. As Ji-won said, I literally had no distinct scent. Whether my body had always been like that or changed after I became an Awakener, I never figured out.

“Oh…”

And that was when I realized how adult Yu Ji-won managed to separate people so easily. It was by smell.

When people Awaken, a lot changes. Everyone always focuses on “they stop aging,” but in truth, their entire physiology can shift. Take hair color, for instance. Once this timeline’s apocalypse began, black-haired Yu Ji-won would Awaken, turning her hair silver and her dark eyes into a blend of purple and blue.

Body scent changes too.

“The Saintess exudes the smell of fresh running water.”

“Noh Do-hwa smells sharply of lemon.”

“Cheon Yo-hwa is orange-scented.”

“Lee Ha-yul strangely smells like freshly baked bread.”

“Sim Ah-ryeon has a faint mozzarella cheese aroma…”

In an apocalypse with plummeting standards of hygiene, Awakeners exuding these unique, often pleasant scents stand out like “chosen ones.” Hair color, eye color, and body scent are so vivid and straightforward that they can’t help but seem divine.

And in the future, Yu Ji-won was adept at Aura. Partly thanks to my teaching, sure, but to be honest, she already had a knack for it before we ever met. That implied she had extremely sharp senses compared to others.

“For her, all the important people in her life are Awakened, each with distinct body scents. It’d be easy to memorize them by smell alone,” I mused.

Then there was me, the Undertaker?

“In a world where everyone is covered in unique scents… I, who have no smell at all, would actually stand out the most.”

In a sense, I’d be the easiest one to distinguish. Plus, I was always wearing that barista outfit, wielding a cane sword. She could identify me at a glance just from my getup.

“Same goes for Dang Seo-rin, Cheon Yo-hwa, and Noh Do-hwa. They basically never change their clothes. They’re easy to recognize.”

That realization triggered a chain reaction, like toppling a row of dominoes.

“Mini-Map…”

That was the power Yu Ji-won would one day Awaken.

“In her Mini-Map ability, everything about a person’s appearance, their face and features, is ‘bleached’ away.”

An Awakened ability is practically a mirror reflecting how its user experiences the world. From that perspective, Yu Ji-won’s Mini-Map is telling.

A black-and-white chessboard world. People only distinguished by name labels stuck to each piece. No one’s actual form recognized as unique.

Ji-won habitually assigned Noh Do-hwa to the queen (♕), but that didn’t necessarily mean the queen was Noh Do-hwa. If she relabeled the bishop, the bishop would become Noh Do-hwa. If she labeled a pawn, the pawn was Noh Do-hwa.

“Seems like even now in her middle school years, the seed of that ability is already there.”

And maybe that was also why Go Yuri’s mental control never worked on her.

“Mr. Matiz?”

“Hmm?”

“Is there something on my face?”

“No, nothing... Anyway, hurry up and get in. We’ve gotta go all the way to Suwon today, right?”

“Oh, right. Thanks in advance.”

Du-du-du-du.

I merged into traffic, something I’d grown more accustomed to. Still, I found myself lost in thought.

‘Even if I meddle in this timeline’s past, she might not remember me in the future.’

She didn’t yet have the heightened senses the Awakened version

would one day use, so her method of memorizing scents wasn't that refined. A normal person's senses can only go so far, after all.

'I can't even make her remember my name.'

Not long ago, I tried introducing myself to her as "Undertaker." Yet for some strange reason, she'd completely forgotten by the next day and just went back to calling me "Mr. Matiz."

I suspect I know why.

'At this point in time, an Awakener called "the Undertaker" doesn't exist. So that "nonsensical data" must get auto-deleted or forcibly smoothed out. Likely by Cheon Yo-hwa.'

Which meant I probably shouldn't risk using Aura openly either. At least if Yu Ji-won failed to notice, it might slide by.

'For all I know, Cheon Yo-hwa is constantly patching or editing our words and actions in real time. It's possible that the me I believe I am and the me she sees are completely different.'

It put a lot of constraints on the actions I could take.

'So.'

I couldn't call myself by my real name, ■■■, nor by my alias, the Undertaker.

Meanwhile, Yu Ji-won, who couldn't recognize faces, might never form a strong impression of me at all.

But I had an idea—a way to carve "my presence" deep into her mind despite those hurdles.

Chapter 322

The Skeptic XV

Sinnoa

It was an undeniable truth that Yu Ji-won had very few friends.

I confirmed it by slipping into her school to observe her day-to-day campus life.

“Hey! Ji-won, hi!”

“Pardon me, but who are you?”

“Huh? Uh... I-I’m Eun-seo. Hwang Eun-seo. Remember? I asked if you wanted to be friends. Don’t you remember?”

“Ah, my apologies. You used to use a completely different lotion than the one you’re wearing now, so I was mistaken.”

“Hey, oh my god! Ji-won, I heard the student council president confessed to you yesterday!”

“Ah. So he’s the student council president?”

“Ugh... Obviously! He’s the best-looking senior in our school!”

“Hmm. I had no idea. There are at least six students here who use the same sunscreen, as far as I know.”

It was an utterly devastating case of prosopagnosia.

If that were her only difficulty, her relationships might still have been manageable, but Ji-won paired it with an expression more frigid than ice 24/7.

And that wasn’t the only issue. Her brain had very little space for words like “empathy,” “sadness,” or “understanding.” Even if she heard someone’s family member had died, her first reaction would

be, “Oh, the funeral costs and procedures must be quite a burden.”

How is that a recipe for making friends?

At first, classmates were drawn to her stunning beauty, almost like they were enchanted, but they all gave up within a month. Rumors filled the gap they left behind.

“Her mom’s in that weird cult...”

“Seriously? That place is really dangerous.”

“We live in the same neighborhood, and her dad is always shouting in that back alley. I checked one time, he was cussing out her grandma. He was swearing at his own mother!”

“Wait, you mean Ji-won cussed out her mom?”

“Huh? No, no, her dad was cussing out his mom, Ji-won’s grandmother.”

So Ji-won quickly became an outcast. She wasn’t exactly bullied—she was simply isolated. After all, she was already working as a professional model, her athletic abilities were top-notch, and she never dropped below first place in academics. To the other kids, she was anything but normal. Sometimes there were hushed whispers about her, but they were like small waves between islands that never actually made landfall on “the uninhabited island” called Yu Ji-won.

And so we arrive at the conclusion.

In front of Shinseo Middle School’s gate, Yu Ji-won stood waiting alone for someone, the school’s desert-like dirt field stretching into the distance behind her. She was waiting for her driver—the one who’d take her to her job. In other words, me.

‘One of two things has to happen. Either the world adapts to her ways, or she adapts to the world’s ways.’

In the original future, it was the latter. Ji-won learned how to camouflage herself in society when the apocalypse and the

emergence of Awakeners actually provided an opportunity for her. Once her sense of smell sharpened to an extreme degree, she could finally rely on scent alone to distinguish people.

'...What would the younger version of me, my "past self," have thought about her?'

He wouldn't have been clueless.

A few years from now, I'd be scouted as a dedicated tutor for Cheon Yo-hwa's household in Sejong City, which meant I was a clever, quick-witted young adult. Surely I would have noticed Yu Ji-won's true nature.

An adolescent exposed to domestic violence. A girl who basically earned all the household's income in place of her neglectful parents, caring for her grandmother with dementia...

And yet, once I actually got involved, I'd realize she wasn't the tired, one-note depiction of some "pitiful" victim.

In a sense, Yu Ji-won was ungrateful. No matter how kindly someone tried to help her, it wasn't in her nature to "feel gratitude." She simply "calculated" the amount of the help she received, then she decided whether to repay it in kind or wash her hands of it, whichever presented a smaller risk.

'Would the younger me have kept helping her after discovering her true nature, or given up in disappointment?'

I don't know, but right now, within this illusion that Cheon Yo-hwa had woven to lock in the past, it was my choice that dictates the answer, not my past self's.

"Hey."

Ji-won was reading a book near the school gate. She peered at me over the cover.

We were five meters apart. That distance was too far for a normal Ji-won to catch a person's body scent.

“I’m sorry, but do I know you?”

“C’mon, it’s Mr. Matiz! Heeey.”

“Ah.”

She snapped her book shut. The title was *Henle Latin First Year*, printed on a lavender cover.

Reading an introductory Latin text, in English no less, at the school gate… And she wondered why she had no friends? Ji-won!

“My apologies, I didn’t recognize you,” she said. “But that boring tone of voice is definitely familiar.”

“Enough. Come a little closer, will you?”

“All right…?”

She approached me without complaint.

In her mind, Mr. Matiz drove her wherever she needed to go, so it was only natural to comply if I asked her to walk a few meters. That was probably all there was to it.

“Hm?” She stopped short when she reached me, tilting her head. “Mr. Matiz.”

“What?”

“Did you put on perfume today?”

I smiled. “No, this is actually my natural scent.”

That was a lie.

Over the past few days, I’d gone around different shops to buy seven perfumes that might fit a budget-conscious young professional in his twenties. The cheapest one cost me 30,000 won and the most expensive one 300,000 won.[1] I then disassembled them and blended them in various ratios.

“It was tricky, but—”

I happened to have some fragrance knowledge and skills.

When you live thousands of years, you pick up all sorts of random expertise. Perfumery was one of them. Ironically enough, perfumers boomed in post-apocalyptic Busan.

Why people in a ruined world were so passionate about perfumes is a story for another time.

“Is that so?”

For now, I had to focus on convincing this middle-school psycho kid in front of me.

“I don’t recall ever smelling this on you. Must be because you usually use weird body wash. So you switched to a gentler product, right? And that’s your actual body odor?”

“Mhm.”

She took hold of my right arm. The bit of physical contact was abrupt but nothing worth reading too deeply into. This kid simply wasn’t socialized. She was only verifying whether my claim was true or false by sniffing me more directly.

“Please bend down a bit.”

She brought her nose to the back of my hand. It was less “sniff” and more “hnff.” A short, quiet sound. Then from my hand to my wrist, forearm, elbow, up my sleeve. She kept sniffing for about thirty seconds.

“Indeed…” She wrinkled her brow slightly. “It’s somehow familiar, yet unfamiliar. I’m certain there’s a woody note, but it’s too faint for a typical perfume. I think the top note might be pepper… I’m not sure.”

“I told you, it’s my body scent.”

“Let’s just say I believe you,” she said, letting let go of my arm. “But it’s unique. I like it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. It’s faint enough to be hard to detect, but if I’m close by, I’ll definitely know it’s you.”

“Oh.”

“It’s personally my style. If only it had more of an alcohol kick, I’d like it even more. But I suppose normal body odor can’t have that.”

Though her face was expressionless, a subtle air of satisfaction drifted around her.

A faint smile tugged at my lips.

‘All right. That worked.’

While she would adapt herself to society in the real future, right now, I was adapting to her, adopting a specialized “communication method” for Yu Ji-won.

‘If my younger self noticed what kind of person she was and still decided to help her… he might have gone as far as creating a one-of-a-kind perfume for her sake.’

Of course, he wouldn’t have had the same budget or skill. He’d have messed with cheap brands and probably messed up plenty of times. But for me, with advanced knowledge in perfumery, it was simple to find an optimal formula.

‘Anyway, it’s enough.’

I kept getting closer to Yu Ji-won.

Prosopagnosia was no barrier, she quickly got used to my “artificial body scent” and stopped confusing me for others. Her psychopathic personality likewise posed no obstacle between us.

“Now then. Gas money is 100,000 won for this month.”

“That’s acceptable.”

“Your tab for rides so far is about 270,000 won. Like I said, I’ll charge interest at standard rates.”

“Understood. I plan to pay it all back in one go this year, anyway.”

From her parents to her classmates, everyone struggled when dealing with Yu Ji-won because they just didn’t know how to talk to her. However, once you figure it out, she’s not quiet at all. In fact, she can be downright talkative. Just think back to how much adult Yu Ji-won would gush whenever she needed to flatter me in the future.

“So you might study abroad in the U.S. eventually?”

“Yes. I plan to start preparing in earnest next year.”

I didn’t bother with: *“But you’re poor, how can you afford that?”*

“Are you aiming for a STEM major?” I asked instead. “Non-STEM degrees might be challenging overseas.”

“I do prefer liberal arts, but I haven’t made a firm decision.”

Nor did I push: *“You should definitely do STEM.”*

“Then maybe keep going deeper into Latin and Ancient Greek. People who major in that get treated as rather unique in foreign universities.”

“Really?”

“Sure. And I doubt you’ll face racism, but if you tell them you read the Bible in Latin or especially *Euripides* in the original Greek, no one’s gonna dismiss you out of hand at least.”

“I see. That’s a perspective I hadn’t considered. It’s a practical plan, since I’ve already begun studying Latin.”

This was how our conversations went.

“But you want to go into politics anyway, don’t you? Wouldn’t going to Seoul National be simpler?”

“I’m still weighing my options. It’s just...”

She stared out the window from where she sat in my Matiz. The hand axe I’d given her earlier still lay across her lap.

“Sometimes, this country feels cramped.”

It was a murmured confession she’d never voice as an adult.

“I don’t know how to describe it exactly, but sometimes, even breathing feels like it’s choking me.”

A light drizzle began tapping the car window.

“It’s like there’s already a ‘right way’ to live in this land. But that way is built more on words than on life itself. People measure their own and others’ existence through collisions of words and phrases.” She paused, then quietly added, “Life is death. Death is not words but something real, right before our eyes, like a mirror for each person. So I can’t understand why people talk as though they’ll never die, layering their ‘life’ on top of mere words.”

Silence.

“Pardon me. I ended up sharing thoughts that are hard to put into language.”

“No.”

When we got a red light, I reached over and patted her shoulder.

I didn’t try stroking her head. That would ruin her carefully prepped model look.

“You’re not wrong... You haven’t made a mistake. And that’s exactly why it’s so tough.”

I wasn’t sure if my words sank in.

She took my hand from her shoulder, lifted it to her nose, and sniffed again. Her quiet inhale merged with the patter of rain, dissolving softly. When the red light turned yellow, she let my hand

go. The chilly trace of her touch lingered on the back of my hand.

That day's outdoor photo shoot got canceled due to torrential rain.

Even though the usual rainy season had passed, climate change hammered new "patch updates" onto Earth's "server," pelting it with sporadic downpours.

I was getting anxious.

'It's summer.'

This wasn't just a nostalgic nod to that meme "It was summer."

'Fourteen. Yu Ji-won's summer.'

Cheon Yo-hwa must have had a reason for showing me this era in her illusions.

'In this season, Yu Ji-won kills her parents.'

In the past... Or perhaps I should say "the far future," I'd talked with adult Yu Ji-won many times.

"Fuck, I know you murdered someone at fifteen, cut them to pieces, and dumped them in that minari swamp on Mt. Bukhansan. Just trust me, you psycho!"

"Oh. Understood. That statement just made your claim more credible."

"Because it's a secret no one else knew?"

"To be precise, you got it wrong. It wasn't at fifteen but fourteen, and it wasn't Bukhansan, it was Dobongsan."

At age fourteen, in the dead of summer, Yu Ji-won commits a double parricide, dismembers their bodies, and dumps them in the Dobongsan minari pond.

Upon entering this past illusion, I met the middle-schooler Yu Ji-won in early summer. Now it was August. Summer was flooring the

accelerator on time.

I waited nervously for “that day,” and then one night...

Even though it was muffled by the roar of heavy rain, it wasn’t quite enough to escape my inhumanly keen senses: There came the scream of Yu Ji-won’s father.

“Aaagh... *Aaaaaaagh!*”

However faintly, it pierced through the downpour.

One moment, and I knew.

“It’s tonight.”

Right now, at this very moment...

Yu Ji-won was in the middle of murdering her parents.

Footnotes:

1 - Around $21 USD and $210 USD, respectively.

2 - Around $70 USD and $190 USD, respectively.

Chapter 323

The Skeptic XVI

Sinnoa

The next scream, long and drawn-out, came from Yu Ji-won's mother.

"Aaack... Aaaaah...!"

Nine parts of the noise from outside the window were the pounding rain, the remaining one part was screams and moans—a murder scene unfolding behind the curtain of rain.

Although only sound reached my heightened senses, I knew Ji-won better than anyone. From the screams alone, I could piece together what was happening.

'She picked the moment her parents were asleep.'

Her father's screams had already ceased, likely because he'd been attacked while in a deep slumber. A man who spent his life shouting at his family and daughter ended up facing death with nothing but a deafened howl.

'But he probably struggled at the very end. Or maybe she stabbed the blade at a bad angle and his blood splashed on her mother.'

Whatever the case, it wasn't a perfect double-kill in one strike. Such were the slip-ups of a fourteen-year-old. However, just like in the future, this younger Yu Ji-won wasn't a compulsive gambler. She always stayed keenly aware that she could make mistakes.

'She deliberately chose a night of heavy rainfall.'

It was an environment optimized for murder. Even if the victim's screams managed to thread their way through the downpour and reach the neighbors, it hardly mattered.

‘After all, her house was always loud with shouting and violence.’

It wasn’t an accidental crime or a stroke of luck, but a stark decision made with absolute clarity:

Yu Ji-won was killing her parents.

‘Intervening right now… is not allowed.’

If I stepped in, I might save at least one life. Even earlier—if I’d given her any hint that I knew she intended to kill her parents, perhaps I could have prevented the crime altogether.

But I didn’t.

‘Because that would create a gap between past and future.’

Yu Ji-won kills her mother and father. It was far too pivotal a moment in her life, something that can’t be changed—or mustn’t be changed. No matter how much preliminary work was needed to cement her as Leviathan’s Miko, I wouldn’t upend the course of her life.

‘I won’t intervene.’

Summer rain was whittling away the world’s edges. Misty droplets scattered night into fragments, and I silently gulped them down.

‘Let murder and death take their course.’

That was my decision.

“Aaaaaargh…!”

This wasn’t a timeline where Cheon Yo-hwa’s twin sister survived, nor where Dang Seo-rin’s family wasn’t killed by an Anomaly, nor where Yu Ji-won avoided staining her hands with her parents’ blood.

“Ah… aah… aah…”

I chose this world, with all its crooked lines, perfectly continued

from the footsteps those children and I had taken in so far.

"...ah..."

The rain buried the night. The night shadowed their lives.

When two lifespans had been consigned to a double grave, I finally rose from my seat at the window. I pulled on a raincoat, slipped on galoshes, and donned rubber gloves. All were already waiting by the door.

There wasn't a need for tools, I had them stored in my trunk.

Lastly, I checked my computer. I had it set to stream an online lecture at a specified time, good enough to prove my half-day alibi.

Then I stepped outside.

The rain fell.

I drew in a lungful of air, taking in a slow deep breath, and exhaled. The odor of water still carrying the warmth of higher air funneled through my windpipe like a drain. Then, I stepped onto the alley's walkway, which had embraced the sky's downpour a bit earlier than I did—*splash, splash*. Each time my weight landed, a puddle shattered.

What is life?

In that moment, life was right here, in the gap of an alley too narrow for even a single car to pass.

It was in the raindrops, carrying the sky's heat as they fell to the ground and scattered.

It was in the half-open front gate of the peeling blue villa.

It was in the third-floor door's passcode, fixed at 5555 for the sake of a grandmother with dementia, now rusted like moss.

Beep, bi-bi-beep.

The digital lock's faint chime, a meager sign it was made by civilization, trickled out between the sounds of rain.

Beep.

Rainwater dripped onto the keypad, and the door swung open. Darkness as deep as an abyss filled the entryway.

There was a sharp whistle, a sound cutting through the darkness. It was the hand axe I had given her.

I stepped back to dodge.

"Ji-won."

No reply. Instead, a second swing came my way.

But a predicted ambush has no meaning. Especially from a middle-schooler with a model's physique, someone who hadn't trained any martial art to a meaningful level.

"It's me."

A heartbeat of shock.

"Mr. Matiz."

The attack didn't stop. The silence didn't either.

So I forced it to stop. My grip on her arm sapped the power she had to swing that axe and likewise sapped her ability to remain silent.

"I'll help you."

She struggled. She couldn't land a hit.

"You must have prepared tools to wash away the blood. But if we do it together, we'll finish much faster."

She struggled again, weaker now. Still no success.

"Do you even know how to dispose of a body?"

A ragged breath.

“If the ground isn’t dug deep enough, this heavy rain will turn the soil to mud in no time. No matter how carefully you seal it, the stench of a corpse is strong. If a sniffer dog comes while the smell lingers, you’ll be exposed. And if you thought about dismembering them and dumping pieces in the sewer, forget it. In a rundown neighborhood like ours, no way you flush all those remains.”

A slower, steadier breath.

“What about CCTV routes? Do you have a plan to manipulate the victims’ alibis and confuse the police investigation? You just learned how to ‘kill a person,’ but do you know how to ‘erase a person’?”

One-tenth of silence.

“I’ll help you.”

The rain pounded.

“Let me help.”

Lightning flared from somewhere far off, briefly illuminating Ji-won. She wore a raincoat and rubber gloves, with boots just like mine.

There was a slash across her face. Not from a moment ago. Maybe from yesterday, or the day before. A scratch that could be fatal to a model.

A trace of violence well past the limit.

Yu Ji-won slowly lowered her head against my chest, pressing her nose near me. Black bangs fell and hid the cut.

She inhaled my scent in silence.

That was her permission.

From here on, it was a race against time.

“All chopped up?”

“Yes.”

“I finished cleaning. Let’s go.”

We spoke only the bare minimum.

“Your grandma?”

“She’s asleep in her room. When Mother screamed, she complained about the noise and then immediately drifted off again.”

“Good.”

We crossed the rain to the Matiz.

A thump, then the trunk slammed, then the car door. Ji-won sat in the passenger seat. We wore her father’s and mother’s clothes respectively, so that if someone spotted us, they might mistake us for her parents.

“Listen carefully while we drive.” I started the engine and pulled away. “They racked up a gambling debt and fled into the night. They stole their daughter’s bank account on the way out. Do you have your mom’s usual gambling site ID?”

“Yes, she used a few.”

“Transfer all your money from your account into hers. Then deposit it on one of those gambling sites.”

“Understood.”

Without hesitation, she operated her phone and her late mother’s.

Her entire life savings were 34.6 million won distributed across three banks. Two of those accounts, totaling 19 million won, vanished in seconds from the passenger seat—part of her funds for studying abroad to the states.

“Leave the remaining 15 million alone, but try logging in and

deliberately fail the password five times."[1]

"Yes... Done."

"Good. Now rest until we arrive. Driving up a mountain in this weather won't be easy."

Silence.

At a quick glance, Yu Ji-won was leaning her head against the window, eyes closed. Her axe was no longer across her lap, just lying on the floor.

Rattle-rattle-rattle.

Night rain hammered down relentlessly. Sometimes the sheets of water grew so thick I couldn't see outside at all.

Tonight, I was grateful for this downpour. In this weather, at this hour, the odds of a witness were slim.

Eventually we reached northern Seoul, Bukhansan.

"We're here. Let's get out."

"Okay."

Another used car was parked there.

"We're switching cars," I explained.

"Move everything over?"

"Naturally."

"I thought we'd dump them here on Bukhansan."

"We're staging a runaway, so we switch cars a few times. We're not forging our alibi, but your parents'."

"Then..."

"We're not sticking to Bukhansan. We'll go to Dobongsan."

A transfer. Off to the next stop.

Though Bukhansan and Dobongsan lay side by side, the route took a while for certain reasons.

After a long drive, we arrived. She was about to climb out, but I pressed a hand to her knee to stop her.

“Mr. Matiz...?”

“Pay attention, Ji-won.” I locked eyes with her. “This is Dobongsan. Even if you spot some sign or label showing the real name of this area, do not read it. Understood? It’s Dobongsan.”

It was a lie, and she knew it. For the first time since the murders, doubt escaped her lips.

“Why?”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that, but if the police catch a whiff, they might use a lie detector on you. Those tests are mostly junk, but it’s still best to keep yourself shrouded in suspicion from the start. Make sure you ‘genuinely’ don’t know where you are.”

A flash of admiration passed in her eyes. “Understood. Makes sense.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

We got out to step upon a deserted mountain trail. Eventually, we reached the marsh I’d scouted in advance, which was already thick with trash. From my memories of traveling all over the country, I knew it would never be developed.

For all I knew, multiple bodies were already sunk in this swamp.

“Everything tied up properly?”

“I’ve double-checked. No mistakes.”

“Then let’s dump them.”

A soft splash. We finished a few more steps, and that “somewhere in Dobongsan” marsh swallowed any trace of her parents’ remaining life, silently and without evidence. It’d take a bit more time for the swamp’s “digestive system” to fully break down the remains.

“What about the bones? I cut them as much as I could, but I couldn’t grind them to dust.”

“A little farther up, there’s a row of abandoned graves. We’ll bury them there.”

“I see.”

We arrived at a half-collapsed graveyard. Some I’d dug ahead of time, some were already half-dug. We placed the bones deeper than a coffin’s depth and covered them with gravel, stones, twigs, leaf litter, and earth in layers, packing down the soil.

That took the longest. If I’d used Aura, it would’ve been quick, but I didn’t. Right now, I was no different from this era’s Yu Ji-won, just an ordinary person.

Her shovel scraped the surface, cutting into the earth’s soft underbelly.

“I’ve been curious about something.”

“What?”

“My mother carried me when I was a helpless infant. So I wanted to ask her a question before I killed her.”

Scrape.

“Why did she give birth to me?”

Scrape.

“I didn’t need a real ‘answer.’ It’s just… Like you said, there’s nothing in this world that’s inherently ‘wrong,’ so I assumed my mother had her own reasoning.”

“Couldn’t you just have asked her anytime?”

“She’s not a reliable narrator in everyday life.”

Scrape.

“Objectively, creating me was an excellent investment from their perspective.”

Scrape.

“I’m diligent, intelligent, and quick to act. The reason I focus on modeling is so that if an interview opportunity arises, the ‘middle-schooler who kept first place academically yet still worked professionally’ angle leaves a strong impression on the public.”

Scrape.

“My parents’ gambling addiction, my mother’s fanatic cult, my grandmother’s dementia—none of this is a real disadvantage for me. Anyone who’d attack me over it, I can easily paint as shameless scum.”

Scrape.

“Overcoming all these environmental obstacles to succeed in life, all while supporting my parents and grandmother—that story, by itself, would undeniably grant me a cloak of ‘humanity.’”

Scrape.

“Then… why are my parents not happy?”

The earth gave way.

“Even if they do nothing, they’ll profit from me. I never demanded they change. In fact, I told them it’s okay if they remain as they are. If they changed, that would affect my personal narrative. If they didn’t, that would affect it differently. Either way, they were just raw material for my story.”

Each time the shovel dug in, rainwater rapidly pooled in the hole.

The shovel blade carried half the weight of earth and half the weight of sky.

“They could change, or not. If they needed money for either path, I’d give it to them... And still, humans don’t become happy?”

The shovel froze.

At some point, Yu Ji-won turned to look at me.

“What if that misery isn’t wrong, either?”

At that moment, the raindrops that had been falling in straight, unwavering lines around her suddenly slowed. Water droplets quivered, elongated.

My eyes went wide.

Globs of water wriggled around Yu Ji-won, gathering, spreading, then coalescing again. For an instant, they formed 雨, the shape of the Chinese character for “rain,” before melting back into the puddle. The same symbol faintly appeared on the puddle’s surface, then sank away.

A bizarre phenomenon.

Seoul’s endless summer, the midnight sun, the apocalypse, those were still far off. And yet...

Here, in front of this grave, where people died and then more death was layered atop it, something akin to the world’s first Anomaly was stirring.

“Mr. Matiz.”

But it seemed Yu Ji-won herself was oblivious.

Her breath, her warmth, the outline of her raincoat, the very texture of her presence all blended with the storm.

She was...

“Maybe humanity itself—the world that spawned such humans—was broken from the start?”

...only looking at me.

Footnotes:

1 - Around $24,000, $13,200, and $10,400, respectively. So Ji-won sends away over half of her life-savings, which originally put her just above South Korea’s poverty line.

Chapter 324

The Skeptic XVII

Sinnoa

Who was the very first Awakener?

No, what even is an Awakening in the first place?

Is it a type of Anomaly? Is it stubborn pride, determined to keep its human shape, even though it's already infected with Anomaly?

Previously, I had no way to answer any of those questions. The solution to all of them ultimately lay in the beginning called the "first run", a deep abyss place beyond my memory's reach. Sure, I'd reconstructed bits of the past through Cheon Yo-hwa's power and I learned I'd once been a tutor for the twin sisters, but that was about it.

And then, there was now.

"Ji-won, you... What are you...?"

I found myself witnessing the exact moment when the first Awakener started to open her eyes.

Yu Ji-won.

Water droplets hovered around her, wriggling like bugs. Gravity, the physical law that acts most directly upon this world, was being scorned by these watery creatures, as though they found it laughable. The sight was bizarre, no matter how you looked at it.

"Please answer me, Mr. Matiz."

It seemed Ji-won herself couldn't see this eerie phenomenon at all. Or maybe...

Perhaps...

In her current state, she considered it not *abnormal* but *normal*.

“If humans, if the entire world, were defective from the start, why shouldn’t I smash this broken kingdom of machinery?”

The water-bugs squirming in midair scuttled onto Ji-won’s hair. And then, a shocking event took place. Only seconds prior, her hair was black as ebony, polished to a glossy shine. But it was now turning... white.

Awakening!

Or perhaps, Ascension.

The water-bugs wedged themselves one by one among her strands of hair, as if hanging themselves.

Pop, pop—whenever the mucous-like membrane of a water-bug burst, her hair became dyed.

A color more transparent than pure white that could only be called silver was infecting the ends of Ji-won’s hair.

“I can’t trust other people’s words anymore. Even my mother’s final reply was, in the end, nothing but a lie.”

Splash.

“But if it’s you, Mr. Matiz...”

Ji-won stepped closer.

Right up to my face.

“If it’s your answer, I think it’s worth deliberating.”

Her eyes gazed upward at me as a water-bug wriggled in. The droplet broke open, and like mixing a chemical solution in a transparent beaker, her dark irises gradually changed.

“Mr. Matiz, you always charged me for rides and claimed it was profitable for you. But I realize you actually had another reason for

helping me.”

Purple and blue. Two layers of color swirled like chasing each other’s tail, finally interlacing as one.

“You pity me.”

An aroma drifted out from the swirling pools of her eyes. The scent left behind by the dying water-bugs wrapped once around Ji-won’s hair and then reached my nose.

A faint, grassy smell. Like a wild plant, fresh and green, that grew randomly along an alley and might be crushed underfoot and die come winter.

It was the body scent inherent to the newly Awakened Yu Ji-won.

Compared to other Awakeners, it might be considered an unimpressive smell. Far in the future, adult Yu Ji-won would confess she disliked her own natural scent. It felt too lacking in dignity for someone holding the rank of Operations Team Leader in the National Road Management Corps, so she deliberately covered herself with strong perfume, with special preference for one with a hint of strawberry.

However, this 14-year-old Yu Ji-won was letting her unvarnished essence show unfiltered.

“From the very beginning, you matched yourself to me. You made that ‘perfume’ you claimed was your natural scent because of my disability, right? You always approached with a reason I could accept, asking only for expenses I could cover.”

At that moment, the girl’s hair, eyes, and scent all fully merged with what I recognized from her future self—the Operations Team Leader of the NRMC.

“That’s the relationship I dreamed of.”

I took a moment to formulate my response. “When you get older and stronger, you’ll find far more people willing to connect with you on those terms.”

“Yes. Probably.” She gave a curt nod, face still impassive. “But no one in my 14-year-old life, first year, class 2 of Shinseo Middle, did that for me... On the very night I killed my parents and tried to bury them, you were the only one who helped me with no strings attached.”

She clasped my hand.

“Would you die with me?”

In that instant, the torrential downpour that had been slamming the earth seemed to freeze.

What first appeared around Ji-won as a little circle of stillness expanded rapidly. It spread over the graveyard where we buried the bones, across the swamp where we tossed their flesh, over this lonely mountain, beyond the town leaning against the slope... across the city, across Seoul itself.

The rain held its breath.

“If I’m with you, Mr. Matiz, then dying here and now seems like the right answer to me.”

She might not perceive it, but I did, crystal clear. That monstrous phenomenon wriggling around and through her.

Later on, people would call it “Leviathan.” It now blanketed all of Seoul, maybe the entire world.

Whether my self at this point in time, the younger ■■■, could see it, I had no idea. Perhaps, like Yu Ji-won, he never realized what was really happening around him, obliviously carrying on a conversation in the rain.

I couldn’t know, but to find out, I opened my mouth.

“Why... Why do you want to die right here?”

“Because, even if I keep living, assuming I achieve the greatest success, my life only proves whether my own answer was right or wrong.”

And then, she whispered.

In this halted downpour, her voice was transparent, as though echoing across the entire nighttime sky of the city.

“And I’ve just found my answer.”

Ji-won pulled my hand toward her throat.

“I’ve found my ‘wrong answer.’”

She gently laid her left hand on my neck.

“Ji-won…” I said, hesitating.

“I haven’t made a mistake. I don’t regret killing my parents. Nor do I regret sparing my grandmother. I firmly believe I made the optimal choice.”

The wet, herbal odor clung to the air.

“And likewise, Mr. Matiz, you exist.”

I had no response.

“You didn’t approach me out of physical attraction. I tested that possibility many times, but you never showed interest.”

One by one, her fingers pressed against my neck. First the little finger, lightly nudging the side. Then the ring finger.

“You had no interest in my wealth, either. Half my bank account is gone, and the other half is locked out by a password error. You were indifferent to the most valuable things I owned.”

“No, that’s not—”

“You’re no idiot. At first I doubted you, but after spending this night together, I’ve confirmed it. Mr. Matiz, you’re an adult whose intellect surpasses mine.”

Her middle finger curled.

Though her strength was puny, she was indeed compressing my windpipe, bit by bit. If I decided to reject her, those fingers would retreat without resistance.

“Hence, you are my ‘wrong answer’... How strange a person you are.”

Her index finger joined.

“Yet I’m sure that even if I live a life of success, I’ll never find a ‘wrong answer’ more significant than you.”

Her thumb.

Her entire left hand clutched one side of my neck. All that remained was her right hand, idle.

“It’s the same as how I could live a thousand times over and never find a ‘right answer’ beyond myself. Please. Die here with me.”

Far away, the raindrops stood still. The entire city, clad in night and mist, seemed to wail in unison.

v | v | || 雨

v v | vv | | |

v | 雨 v v

| v | |

雨 | || | v |v

v vv | v |v |

| | v | v 雨 |

| v |v v | v | v |

v | | | v v| | v v

v | v v v v ||

v | | | vv

| | | 雨 | | v v |

v v v | v v | v |

| 雨 | v v |

v v v

It sounded like the howl of a dragon, or the growl of an Anomaly, or maybe just the roaring downpour.

I knew at once.

If I said yes here, it wouldn't be just us but the entire world that got swallowed.

I didn't know how or why. Maybe the 776th cycle Leviathan had chased me even into Cheon Yo-hwa's illusions. Maybe Leviathan already had the power to submerge the world from the distant past and merely delayed the apocalypse until the 776th cycle. The one sure thing was that now, if Ji-won carried out her own suicide with me, she intended the world to fall with her.

A choking noose: five fingers around my neck, and invisible droplets around billions of humans.

v | v | || 雨

v v | vv | | |

c | 雨 v v

| **r** | |

雨 | || | v |v

v **o**v | v |v |

| | **a** | **t** 雨 |

| v |v **k** | **i** | v |

v | | | v v| | v v

v | v v v **b** ||

v | | | vv

| | | 雨 | | **b** v |

v v v | v **i** | v |

| 雨 | v v |

v **r** v

Just then, in the dragon's roar...

v | v | || 雨

v v | vv | | |

c | 雨 v v

| **r** **c** |

雨 | || | **r** |v

v **o**v | v |v |

| | **a** **o** v 雨 |

| v |v **k** | **a** | v |

v | | **c** v v| | **k** v

v | v **r** v v ||

v | | | vv

| | | 雨 **o** | v v |

v v v | **a** v | v |

| 雨 **k** v v |

v v v

...a bizarre frog croak swam through the pounding rain.

It was the water-bugs calling out.

v **croak** || 雨

croak v v v

| **r croak** |

v **o**v | v **r** |v |

| | **a o** v 雨 |

| v |v **k** | **a** | v |

v | | **croak** v| **croak** v

雨 | **r** | **r** vv

croak v **o** | v **o** |

v v v | **a** v | **a** |

| **croak croak** |

They soared above the graveyard and the swamp, singing at the pitch of the night sky.

'Ah.'

A flash of realization struck me like lightning inside since the actual night sky had frozen in place.

When Leviathan first invaded Busan, or boarded the Ark Fleet, I'd sometimes hear a frog-like cry. Why? Up to now, I'd assumed it was because the Chinese character for "frog" (蛙) and the character for "insect/bug" (虫) were visually similar, but that wasn't it.

Think about it, there's a particular story strongly linked to the theme of a frog: the Tale of the Green Frog.

Long ago, there was a frog that was different from all the others. Whenever all the “normal frogs” cried “croak,” that frog cried “ribbit.” Whenever others loved the rain, she despised the rain.

Everything was reversed.

Her mother, who bore a child so different from her kin, fell into despair. At the end of her life, anticipating the daughter’s contrarian ways, the mother left a will in reverse.

“When I die, don’t bury me in the mountains. Bury me by the stream.”

In her final moments, the mother tried to adapt to her daughter’s twisted logic.

Then a miracle happened. The daughter, who had never once obeyed others, complied this time, fulfilling her mother’s final wish —which meant the mother’s real wish went unfulfilled.

Even in that single chance of a perfect crossing, they ended up getting their wires crossed.

croak 雨

ribbit

croak croak

croak 雨

croabbit croak

雨 **croak ribbit**

The whole world wept rain, droplets born and died from that freshly-dug grave and that waterlogged marsh, from the saddest soil and filthiest water.

Taking the place of Ji-won’s impassive face and voice, substituting for the psycho who saw people as faceless bugs, standing in for the child who killed her parents—

The entire world lamented.

ribbit ribbit ribbit ribbit ribbit ribbit

"...Ji-won."

I pulled the girl into a hug, shielding her with my back to cover her from the water-bugs' baptism, from the downpour she might be seeing.

"I'm sorry," I said earnestly.

"I don't understand. Why apologize?"

"Please... wait a little longer."

I couldn't see her face, pinned as she was against me, but I felt a slight tremor in her eyelids brushing my cheek in a blink. "Why should I wait?"

I don't know what words the younger me, ■■■, used. Surely they were his own answer. Even though I can remember everything, I can't recall him. However, I do know the outcome.

Yu Ji-won didn't die here.

On the same night she killed her parents, she survived. The young man living across the street survived too.

We did not choose a double suicide.

■■■ must have done everything he could to force her to live, so I had no choice but to do the same.

"The world ends regardless. It collapses... To a shocking degree, too. No matter how solid the world looks to you right now, you'd be surprised how easily it can vanish."

"Is that... true?"

"Yes."

She turned her head, holding my cheeks in both hands. Her purple-

blue eyes stared at me. Ignoring that intense gaze, I went on.

“Humans don’t get to choose their world, but they *can* choose to throw the world away. And quite often. They choose it a lot more often than you’d think, Ji-won.”

Croak croabbit croabbit croabbit croabbit croabbit croak

|

v

雨

One raindrop finally fell.

“You might have thrown it away already, maybe you’ve done it many times. And maybe you caused someone even more misery. Someone’s child, who ended up just like you right now, black hair and swampy eyes... You might have earned the right to be thrown away yourself.”

Croak ribbit croabbit croak

|

v |

雨 v

雨

The second one followed.

“So don’t think it can only happen once. Just a little longer. If last time you made it this far, let’s live a bit further this time.”

“Until when?”

“I... Well...”

Croak ribbit ribbit

|

v |

雨 v |

雨 v

雨

“We spent a lot of money tonight.”

“Yes.”

“We need to make more.”

“Correct.”

“And you want to study abroad in the states, right?”

“Yes.”

“So I might… have to leave for a while. But not too far. I’m just going to Sejong. It’s close. I’ve… got a really good offer waiting for me there.”

“You’re leaving our neighborhood?”

“A little while from now, yeah.”

Croak

雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨**ribbit**雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨雨

“Yes. By bicycle.”

“Bicycle? I’ve never been interested. Our neighborhood’s too steep. It’s fine on the way down, but uphill is brutal.”

“I bet you’ll like it.”

The silence cried.

“We’ll bike around the country. Even go to Japan next vacation. Of course we should be frugal—convenience store meals, that sort of thing.”

Croak

雨雨雨

Chapter 325

The Skeptic XVIII

Sinnoa

The saddest rain in the world is the rain that falls on a forgotten graveyard.

A young girl, not yet dead, listened to that rain and looked at me.

“You’re asking me to wait, but that will be hard,” Ji-won whispered. “As you know, Mr. Matiz, I can’t remember people’s faces. Even distinguishing voices is tough... So the only thing my memory can rely on is your scent. Would you please stay like this for a moment?”

I did as she asked.

She still hadn’t moved her palms from my cheeks. From there, she gently adjusted the angle, pulling me closer to herself to press her nose against me.

“I’ll try my best to memorize it.”

A voice. A deep breath. Another voice.

“I don’t believe in prophecies, even less so in cults. But when you spoke of the world’s end, for some reason, I found you strangely trustworthy.”

A breath. A quiet voice. Another breath.

“So I’ll try to survive.”

Although she always faced the world with a blank expression, Yu Ji-won’s breathing wasn’t entirely devoid of color or odor. No, she was the type who always confronted the world head-on, just at a slightly different angle from others. In that small, hidden corner, she worked fervently—as she did with everything—to memorize my

scent.

“My memory isn’t extraordinary. I expect that after seven or eight years, I might forget the smell.”

“...I’ll be back before then.”

“Okay. I’ll stay alive until then. Even if the world perishes again and again, as you say, I will endure.”

Her voice was calm as she spoke.

“I find you... interesting. Your kindness to me is unusual and special. But from what I’ve heard, a person’s malice can last for over fifteen years, whereas kindness tends to evaporate more quickly. I wonder if you’ll really treat me the same way when we meet again.”

Ji-won drew back slightly, tilting her head up with my face still held in hand, and let a faint smile curl on her lips.

Hers was an unnatural, forced smile. That very abnormal expression was her normal.

“I have a reason to keep living now.”

And then, the downpour of water-bugs that threatened to swallow the entire world abruptly wrapped around my neck, like a noose on a condemned prisoner. The same transparent noose of water was looped around Ji-won’s neck.

Rain.

We both looked like convicts whose execution had merely been postponed.

We went down the mountain, that transparent noose still hanging around both my and Ji-won’s necks even after we made it out of the graveyard alive.

'...I have no idea what this is,' I thought to myself, tapping at the

noose.

My fingertips touched nothing, even as the watery loop wriggled. It was definitely there—I could see it with my own two eyes—but I didn't feel anything that confirmed it.

'Ji-won doesn't even notice it at all.'

What was this suspicious noose?

To be honest, up until we disposed of that secondhand car near Dobongsan, I wasn't too worried. I had assumed coming in that Yu Ji-won must have some Awakener ability beyond Mini-Map, something I hadn't known about.

But then...

"Huh?" I breathed.

By the time night ended and dawn arrived, I saw people outside the car window. And that changed things.

"What's wrong, Mr. Matiz?"

They all had a noose around their necks.

Early-morning commuters headed to work, and every single one of them wore a transparent water-bug noose without exception. It was the same no matter where I looked. The people stepping out of a convenience store for a smoke, the bus driver standing beside them on the asphalt, the dozing college student nodding in the bus seats—all of them had that noose around their neck.

No one even realized.

"...No, it's nothing."

"Is that so?" Ji-won asked with a tilt of her head.

I swallowed as I turned the steering wheel.

This was happening because of Ji-won—I was sure of it. Before her

“connection” to Leviathan, none of this had been visible. It started after we buried her parents’ remains, stood in the rain, and decided to live. From that moment onward, people—potentially the entire human race—wore nooses.

'Leviathan... Was it already affecting humanity this far back?'

I had theorized Leviathan was based far from the Korean Peninsula, only growing strong in tandem with my repeated runs and taking an interest in the peninsula only much later. But then, how would I explain this?

Three days later, Ji-won reported her parents missing to the police, saying she believed they’d disappeared.

The local station was already quite familiar with her household. The father’s gambling had long been one of the lesser concerns. Countless noise complaints had been filed against them, and that was before mentioning their ties to a cult that was causing headaches not just in our neighborhood but all over Seoul.

From those facts alone, the police drew an easy conclusion:

“Maybe they ran away in the night?”

It was the very rational deduction.

“They stole the daughter’s bank account by messing with the password. And the other one’s locked out entirely.”

“That college student living next door reported his Matiz stolen, too.”

“Wow, those scammer parents, unbelievable.”

CCTV wasn’t much help either. Rain poured heavy into the night, and the car took deserted roads. It was hard to track down any witnesses from that stormy dawn.

“Sergeant! We found that cultist’s car!”

“Where?”

“In Incheon. The daughter’s phone was also there.”

“Ugh. Damn it...”

“We also found some clothes in the trunk that must’ve been used for changing outfits on the run.”

The police, wearing exasperated faces, headed for Yu Ji-won’s home again. There they found a straight-faced middle-school girl caring for her grandmother, who had dementia.

They felt solemn. The local officers were already conscious of how they’d been neglecting this girl, letting her suffer family abuse for so long.

“So, Miss Ji-won, we’re trying to track your parents, but it’s not easy. Have they called you or anything since that day?”

“No. I lost my phone.”

“Ah, oh... Right, yeah... That’s tough.”

The police turned to the grandmother.

“Ma’am, do you remember anything about where your son and daughter-in-law might’ve gone?”

“Huh?” She blinked. “Where’d the kids go?”

“Yes, Grandma, it’s already been half a month, right?”

“The kids went somewhere? Where?”

The officers exchanged glances. They could only do so much.

“Well, Miss Ji-won, if your parents call again, let us know. And if you need help with anything, just say the word.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

They left, gripping at the sorry state of the world as he did.

“How can parents like that even exist these days?”

“That poor, good child. She’s so polite.”

“Honestly we shouldn’t say this,” one half-whispered, “but at least the neighborhood’s quieter.”

“True. Might actually be better for her.”

“Hey! Enough, that’s rude!”

Gossip sank into the cracks of cheap concrete in that hillside slum.

No one imagined a 14-year-old had killed her parents, buried them overnight, then calmly constructed a fake alibi.

No one in that neighborhood had enough imagination or ruthless cunning to guess.

Her environment itself proved that gap in imagination, the real void in her reality.

The case was closed.

Ka-tok.

[Leaving tomorrow, are you?]

Ka-tok.

[Mr. Matiz, is it really true that we have to take our shoes off when boarding the plane?]

[I want to believe that, but the internet says otherwise.]

[Anyway, I’ve packed indoor slippers just in case.]

Ka-tok.

[Looks like we’ll have some leftover soybean-paste stew. Once Grandma finishes her meal, I’ll drop by with the leftovers.]

After that night, time moved quickly.

It wasn’t just a feeling. Time literally seemed sped up, like watching a video at 5× speed and skipping through parts.

It must mean that all the crucial events at this point in the past are already resolved, I realized. There was nothing else for me to learn. Or to be more precise with it, this was all the information available about Yu Ji-won’s past.

It felt like a silent hint from Cheon Yo-hwa, the one orchestrating this illusion.

'I guess the me in this era didn’t have Complete Memory, so he wouldn’t remember each day’s trivialities in real-time. Only major events would stand out.'

I turned off the group chat that kept vibrating with *ka-tok* notifications and skimmed through the phone’s address list.

[Friends: 611]

[■. ■■■]

[■. ■■■]

[■■■]

[■■■ ■■■]

[■■■(■■)]

[■■■]

[■]

[■■■]

[■■■~■]

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They were all anonymous. No matter how far I scrolled, I couldn’t see a proper name. Everyone was ■, just like me.

I sighed.

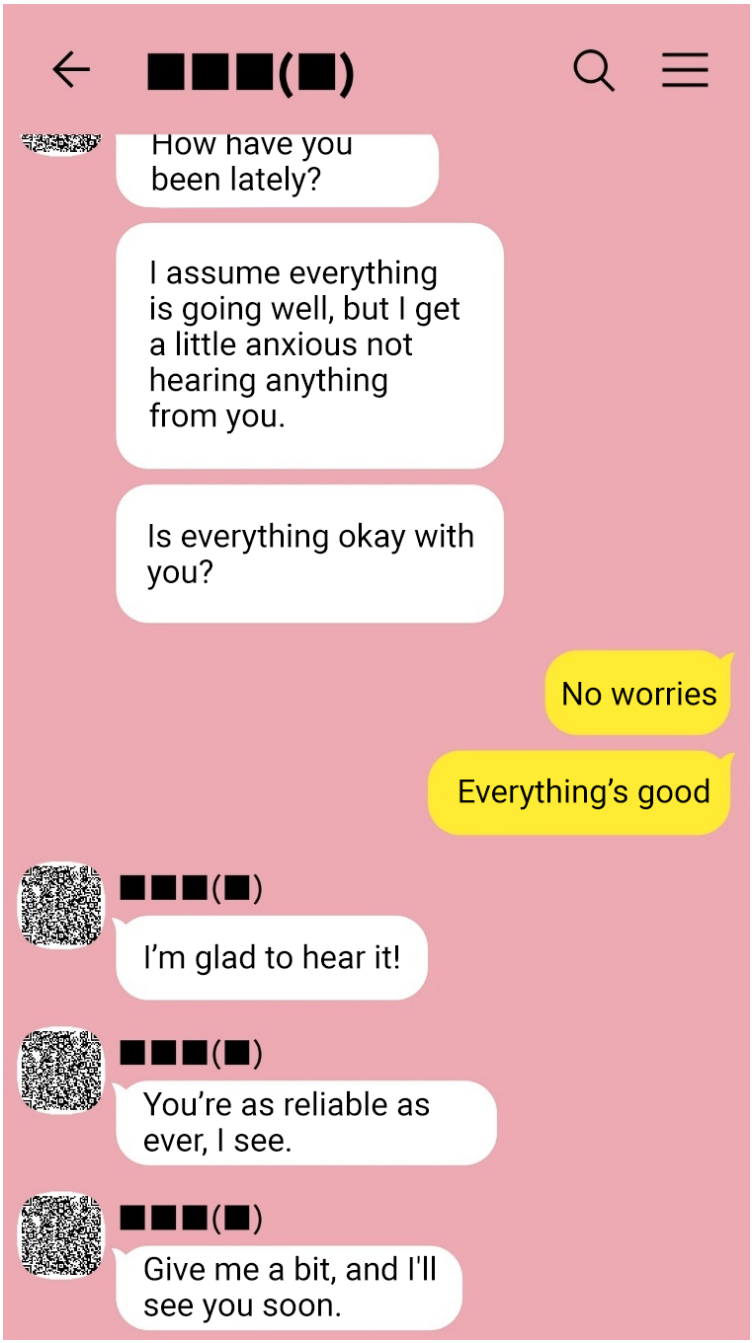
'I have so many connections, yet I’m completely blocked from tracing my past.'

I could call or receive calls, but that was pointless. I couldn’t understand anything the other side said, nor could they hear me. They’d just get “whatever this era’s me would have said.”

For instance...

Ka-tok.

A new message arrived. This time, not from Yu Ji-won but from someone else. I checked out of curiosity.


■■■(■)
How have you been lately?
I assume everything is going well, but I get a little anxious not hearing anything from you.
Is everything okay with you?
No worries
Everything's good
■■■(■)
I'm glad to hear it!
■■■(■)
You're as reliable as ever, I see.
■■■(■)
Give me a bit, and I'll see you soon.

"I have no clue who this is," I muttered.

On the screen, it looked like we were chatting just fine, but in reality, nothing close to that happened. They sent a text and soon enough, my “reply” auto-appeared. If I tried typing my own text, it didn’t matter, a “predetermined script” would override it.

'At least with them, I can see the conversation in normal text. With others it’s just static. I was hoping to learn more about my other acquaintances while investigating Ji-won’s past, but no luck.'

Cheon Yo-hwa must be enforcing that rule she mentioned: “A single sheet of canvas can hold only one painting.”

A wry smile tugged at my lips.

'I already blacked out for a bit, and six months flew by. This illusion is probably about to end, sending me back to her classroom.'

I’d hoped to at least stick around until she and I went on that bike trip to Japan, but...

'I guess it can’t be helped.'

Just then...

Ding-dong.

A doorbell rang from the entryway.

Not only was this building old, but so was the door chime, so there was an off-pitch mechanical hum beneath the tone.

'Ah, that must be Ji-won. She did mention leftover stew.'

Recently, Ji-won had started cooking dinner. It was partly because her parents vanished and partly to rescue her collapsing finances. However, a novice always struggles with portion sizes, so she often made too much and gave me the extras.

Ding-dong.

There was a second urgent chime.

“Yeah, I’m coming, I’m coming.”

I hauled myself out of my chair and headed for the door.

With each step, the illusion wavered. At the start of summer, it felt so lifelike. Now it was so unstable, as if about to disconnect at any moment.

'So I’ll probably just get her homemade food and exit the dream?'

That wouldn’t be so bad. At least I’d say a parting word to her, and maybe give her a final warm smile. Pity I wouldn’t get to ride bikes together, though. That would be left to my “past self.”

It didn’t matter. Once the illusion ended, I could reunite with her anytime in the present.

I...

Ding-doooooooong...

I scraped open the door.

“Hah... Oh dear.”

At the sight of the visitor through the gap, my entire body froze.

“What do I do? I only pushed the doorbell, but the button jammed. It keeps ringing.”

“...”

“It happened before too. Anyway, sorry, it’s been so long since I last came... Huh?”

It wasn’t Yu Ji-won.

She never spoke that way. She didn’t fuss like that. Her gestures weren’t that natural.

She didn’t...

“■■■?”

...have pink hair either.

“■■■, are you okay?”

Chhhzzzz.

She had no face.

“...”

“■■■?”

Chhhzzzzzz...

Where her eyes and expression should have been, there was only TV static.

Chhhzzzzzz…

Occasionally, through the noise, a voice slipped between the lips.

I was not as tone-deaf as Yu Ji-won. Even if the static interfered, I could recognize the speaker's identity just from fragments of their voice.

A groan escaped my lips.

"Go… Yuri…?"

And at that moment, the static elongated, churned, then tore.

Ding-doooooonng, ding-doooooong.

Ahahahahahaha— Vzzt!

Like an old TV smashing, the power to this world shut off.

Chapter 326

The Skeptic XIX

Sinnoa

The scenery receded into the distance.

Through the wide-open front door, I could see Go Yuri laughing like a broken radio. Behind her stood Ji-won, who had momentarily paused while carrying containers of side dishes.

All of it moved away from me at high speed.

– Mr. Matiz?

– Mr. ■■■.

– Sun■■.

The farther I got from the front entrance, the faster time accelerated.

A small hill. A scene of me riding side by side on bicycles with Ji-won. A blue convenience store sign written in Japanese, where we bought oolong tea and split it half and half.

– Mr. Matiz.

– Sunbae...

A view of me leaving Ji-won's hometown, a hillside shantytown. Then a shot of me leaning against an intercity bus, dragging a single trunk suitcase, arriving in Sejong City.

The moment I first met the twin sisters.

I got on a train heading to Busan, but... I definitely wasn't alone.

Someone was in the seat next to mine.

– Mr. ■■■.

Someone's lips moved.

"Sunbae!"

I opened my eyes, and right in front of me was a girl wearing a black sailor-style uniform with bright orange hair gathered into a long side-ponytail.

"Hurry, snap out of it, sunbae!"

It was the older of the twin sisters, Cheon Yo-hwa.

"Yo-hwa..." I breathed. "What— What's going on?"

"Aha! Good, you're back!"

Cheon Yo-hwa pressed one hand onto my shoulder and used her other to firmly push down on the back of my right hand, which was linked with the sleeping Ji-won's left. In other words, the three of us were all stacking our hands together.

"Make sure you don't let go," Cheon Yo-hwa said, her voice urgent. "The past you just witnessed, those were reconstructed memories drawn from this silver-haired girl's mind. If you let go of her hand now, she'll be lost forever."

"Cheon Yo-hwa, you..."

My lips moved. They were still moist with the ghost of a kiss.

Subjectively, I'd spent months in that flashback. In reality, only a split second must have passed. Even so, I couldn't even begin to focus on what Cheon Yo-hwa was telling me. Something far more critical had suddenly filled my sight.

"The noose around your neck..."

"Huh? A noose?" She frowned and said, "Sorry, I have no idea what you mean. Anyway, forget about that. We're in trouble right now."

She truly had no idea, yet around her neck was a transparent water-bug noose, exactly like the one I'd seen in that past illusion. If that noose wasn't something Cheon Yo-hwa herself had reconstructed, then...

"Look out the window, sunbae."

By reflex, I turned my head. My eyes shot wide open.

"Tentacles...?"

This was the Four-Seasons Classroom, the place where Cheon Yo-hwa had been subjected to Time Seal. It was a sanctuary that no one could enter by conventional means, especially since Cheon Yo-hwa, who had devoured the powers of two Outer Gods, was living here. Calling it a divine realm wouldn't be an overstatement.

Ordinarily, the four classroom windows should each show a scene of spring, summer, fall, and winter. But now, beyond the windows, bloodstained tentacles were writhing. The birch trees outside had all been snagged by those tentacles. They each shuddered in torment, emitting a pained moan.

Thump! Thump!

Some tentacles splattered against the glass, hurling the whole of their weight against the windows. Each impact made the windows tremble.

Red-flesh tentacles. I'd seen them a few times before.

"Those are... It's Go Yuri's..."

"Yep, the pink entity." Cheon Yo-hwa stared out the window with me. A irritated *tsk* clicked off her tongue. "This is bad. I'm blocking them for now, but it was a real close call. There's no way that pink one should've tracked this place down..."

"Oh, right. I forgot to mention. When I cut through Leviathan's rain to get here, I had some help from Go Yuri."

"*What?* Seriously, sunbae. What were you thinking—?" Cheon Yo-

hwa cut herself off and frowned. “No, actually, I guess that’s the only way you could’ve managed it. I understand. But that doesn’t make this any less dangerous, sunbae.”

I didn’t disagree. “Still, it’s strange. Usually, Go Yuri only brings out that fleshy pink form in a confirmed world-destruction scenario. Why now?”

“Sorry, I really don’t know.”

Thump!

The tentacles rose in numbers and mass, joining the others as a singular force to slam against the windows. Oddly enough, the glass where the tentacles struck was smeared with blood, as though a fingerprint had been left behind. That crimson fluid pulsed and wobbled, forming the shape of a hand.

Splish. Splosh. Slap, splat. Splish. Splosh.

In an instant, dozens—no—*hundreds* of “red handprints” were plastered across the long row of classroom windows. Then the handprints raised their claws.

Screeeech! Scrape, screech, screeee!

The nails of those crimson handprints began scraping the glass all at once, at every angle, with all weights of force.

Cheon Yo-hwa’s face darkened. “This is bad, bad, bad... I’d rather get devoured by that weird Infinite Metagame data thief than be eaten by this pink thing!”

“No way to stop it?”

She whined, pursing her lips in frustration. “It’s all your fault, you know, sunbae!”

“Huh?”

“At that stupid Mastermind Simulation Lab, you messed around with those pink entities. If you hadn’t, none of this would be

happening! They must've analyzed part of me back then!"

What the hell? I was at a loss for words.

We'd wiped out that Mastermind in the 688th cycle. Now it was the 776th. Almost two thousand years had passed, so long that it felt like ancient history to me. Any country's legal system would say the statute of limitations had long since expired.

"Excuse me, O Great Regressor? Hate to break it to you, but from my point of view, that was only a few days ago!"

Screeeeech!

"Kyaaaa! It's cracking! It's cracking! The glass is cracking! Sunbae, we can't hold out much longer! Three minutes, tops!"

I swallowed. Just up until we'd headed to the Tower of Babel, Go Yuri had been docile, or at least seemed so. I couldn't figure out why she'd suddenly turned hostile right after reconstructing Ji-won's past.

"If we really have no way to escape that sea of tentacles..." I said quietly.

"Yeah."

Cheon Yo-hwa turned to look at me. Her red irises settled into a grim calm.

"Please die here, sunbae. Reset the cycle. If you let yourself get devoured by that thing, and only afterward regress, it'll be too late. I can't really put it into words, but... I've got a gut feeling that something truly irreversible would happen."

I felt the same.

Way back in the 89th cycle, when I was killed by Go Yuri, another "Go Yuri" had appeared in the deepest depths of my subconscious. Luckily, that subconscious Go Yuri never seemed too hostile toward me... but there was no guarantee I'd be lucky again. If I died at her hands once again...

Who knew what permanent damage could deal?

There was a shattering *crack* on either side of me.

A spiderweb of fractures spread across the glass. Simultaneously, thin fissures began to take form on Cheon Yo-hwa's skin and her black sailor uniform.

I stared at her, unable to speak.

"Sorry, sunbae. I wanted to discuss all the info you've learned, but there's no time." Cheon Yo-hwa squeezed my hand a bit more tightly. "Without me, you'll still be able to figure out a lot of truths on your own."

"Yo-hwa..."

"Remember, sunbae. As I told you before, the memories you lost from your 1st through 4th cycles are each a blank canvas."

Crack! Ka-creeeeak, crack!

Hairline fractures continued erupting across Cheon Yo-hwa's body. Blood-red handprints followed in their wake on her pristine black uniform—one on her knee, one on her shoulder, then another.

"Once you successfully gather all four canvases, your past will finally be restored. You've already inscribed not just me onto your canvas, but also this silver-haired one... That leaves two more pages."

Splat.

A bloody handprint stained half of Cheon Yo-hwa's white face. Its red fluid slithered downward, and the fingers formed claw tips that dug into her neck.

They tightened around her throat.

"I love you, sunbae. And... I'm sorry I can't be of more help."

Crash!

All the windows of the classroom shattered. The glass that had held the memories of spring, summer, fall, and winter burst into shards and scattered.

The red tentacles and handprints, having finally broken the barrier, charged inside with a sense of exultation.

“Till next time... See you then.”

A spurt of red erupted from Cheon Yo-hwa’s neck.

Just before those red handprints could choke her to death, she took her own life. I did the same.

Cheon Yo-hwa’s head fell at nearly the same speed that my own vision blurred. Yu Ji-won’s silver hair also tumbled to the floor.

All three of us, everyone present in that classroom, died at the same time.

“Give... back.”

The red flesh tried to envelop us, but...

It missed by a hair’s breadth. The instant we died, the red flesh lost its prey, and it began thrashing wildly, smashing the classroom in rage.

My field of view tinted red.

“...■■ give back. That... return ■■■. ■■■ ■? ■■■ ■. ■ ■■.”

Then I closed my eyes.

Thus ended my 776th life.

Tick.

A clock was ticking.

June 17th.

[13:59]

Busan Station's concourse.

The clock there silently declared midday in early summer.

Yes. No matter what I tried, I could never rewind past this point, the absolute limit of time. My starting marker.

The beginning of a new cycle had safely arrived.

"Wha— What? What is this place?"

"Huh? Busan Station? But I was just in the park a second ago..."

"Reverend? Reverend, where are you?"

Murmurs spread through the crowd, just like usual. Before long, the Tutorial Fairy would appear and herald the beginning of the slaughter.

But before that...

I took out my smartphone and used the camera as a mirror. There, in the reflection of a corner of the concourse, the phone also caught Go Yuri standing at a distance.

She... looked normal. LIke she always did, tilting her head curiously, chatting with the people around her.

'Good.'

The regression had succeeded.

Go Yuri's monstrosity hadn't managed to latch onto me. She'd missed me by a fraction of a second. More than likely, Cheon Yo-hwa's last-ditch resistance against the intrusion of that red flesh had made all the difference.

'Still, it's dangerous to keep watching her for long.'

I pressed the power button and turned the phone off. Everything seemed the same as previous cycles, so I presumably just needed to

stick to the usual plan, rescue Seo Gyu in the optimal way, recruit Sim Ah-ryeon, then arrange to approach the Saintess.

And yet—

“Huh?”

I froze.

The waiting hall had changed in a decisive way. This wasn’t a subtle spot-the-difference puzzle. It was blatantly obvious, happening before my very eyes.

‘The noose—’

Everyone who’d been dragged into the station had a transparent noose around their neck.

That by itself didn’t shock me—ever since I saw Cheon Yo-hwa’s noose, I’d suspected that all of humanity wore them too. After all, each person lived with a ticking clock above their head, a designated moment of strangulation.

No, the true cause of my surprise was something else entirely.

‘The nooses are... leaking color?’

I looked toward Ah-ryeon in the crowd.

“Uh, wh-what’s... Ahh... Ugh...”

Perhaps she’d been painting when she got summoned because her coat was covered in splattered paints. And at that very moment, Ah-ryeon’s hair was turning green. She was undergoing an Awakening on the spot.

In previous cycles, I had assumed that changes to hair color and eye color were just a by-product of Awakening, but the scene playing out before me was nothing like I had expected.

Slosh... Squirm...

The water-bug creatures that formed Ah-ryeon's noose wriggled. Translucent droplets scattered, some burrowing into her hair, others into her eyes. When a droplet burst, a wave of "green" spread out.

Ah-ryeon's hair and eyes both changed. Her plain black hair turned bright green, her ordinary brown irises now a vivid shade.

Pop, pop!

It wasn't just Sim Ah-ryeon. All around the waiting hall, the same phenomenon was happening. Whoever Awakened, their noose's water-bugs would shift and stain their body with a unique color.

My mouth fell open as I stared, dumbfounded.

'What... What is all this? So it wasn't just that Awakeners mysteriously changed their hair and eyes. The water-bugs from Leviathan... From Yu Ji-won's noose... They were actually painting over everyone?'

A shockwave of realization rattled my brain. However, I had no time to let confusion crystallize into comprehension. There was no breather for me.

"Ah, hello there, everyone! Surprised to be summoned like this so suddenly?"

The Tutorial Fairy appeared.

"Oho? The head count's a bit low... Anyway! You must be startled to find yourselves in a place like this, yes? But have no fear! My fairy self is here to be your friendly guide from start to finish!"

Very soon, the Tutorial Fairy would try to kill Seo Gyu. Ordinarily, I'd gather up my Aura, the unique strength some call inner energy or qi, and abduct Fairy Number 264 in the blink of an eye so that no one would notice. I'd drag the fairy someplace secluded and force her to talk. She'd initially resist, but seeing my overwhelming power would quickly deflate her.

"Th-that means you'd be a local collaborator, right? Indeed, colonial rule always needs local allies... Hweh! I designate you as

our comrade!”

Then, she’d bow her head.

That was my plan, as always, so I began summoning my Aura...

And had to stop in shock.

‘What...?’

My heart pounded.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

‘Why...? *Why?*’

My Aura appeared around my body, the same exact deep, inky black as always.

Everyone’s Aura had a distinctive color. It was something I’d taken for granted.

‘But why are there water-bugs from this noose painting my Aura black right now?’

On that day, my old assumptions were turned upside-down.

Human “Awakenings”... The coloring of one’s hair, eyes, scent, and even one’s Aura... They weren’t one and the same phenomenon. Those changes were separate from Awakening itself.

The real culprits behind all the varied colors of Awakened humanity were the transparent water-bugs of the nooses that hung around everyone’s necks.

The very ones summoned by a 14-year-old girl named Yu Ji-won.

Chapter 327

The Skeptic XX

Sinnoa

Mr. Matiz. Is it really necessary for me to learn self-defense in such a systematic way?

Yes. I told you before, didn't I? A few years from now, the world's going to end. We need to build up your muscles and nervous system in advance.

I see. So it wasn't a metaphor, but something you meant quite literally.

Exactly. And don't worry about your joints or anything, if you get some bone disease, we'll have a way to fix it down the road.

...?

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Mr. Matiz. There's something I've been curious about for a while, so let me just ask you directly.

Sure. You always ask directly, anyway.

Would you like to date me?

...

If by extending your kindness to me you're trying to secure private benefits or desires, specifically, a romantic relationship, then please, I beg you to stop. You cannot expect any romantic interest from me.

Hey... look. Sorry, but that's not it at all. If I died and came back to life

775 times, I still wouldn't end up going out with you.

That's a strangely specific number.

Yep.

Is it because I'm a minor, so having a romantic connection with me would be illegal? Frankly, that would seem contradictory for a man who's already conspired to commit murder.

No, no. I just don't want to date you.

Pardon?

How are you not getting this? Yu Ji-won, your age isn't the problem. Even if you were an adult later on, I absolutely, seriously, never, ever would date you.

...

I'd rather date the Inunaki Tunnel than be with you... Wait, what are you doing with that hand mirror all of a sudden?

Hmm. My apologies, Mr. Matiz.

For what?

If this isn't too forward... I'm wondering if you might be suffering from erectile dysfunction.

You little piece of...

.

.

.

If someday in the future, I become the president of the entire world...

That's not an actual job, Ji-won.

My apologies, allow me to correct that.

Right.

If I start World War III, wipe out every existing nation on Earth, establish the one and only legitimate government, and become a new dictator under the banner of the Three Han Bloodline...

...

I'd make it mandatory for all citizens to wear perfume every day.

...Why?

Because the world is too messy. People blur together immediately. We need an anchor to fix our own positions. Not just smells, but hair color, eye color, even nametags should be used more aggressively so we can tell one another apart.

If you go that far, wouldn't it be more of a headache? Perfumes are so strong that they give me headaches if everyone's wearing a different scent.

That's fine. Keep someone with no scent closest to you, and it'll have the effect of a tranquilizer.

...?

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Mr. Matiz. Do you have any plans to dye your hair?

Huh? Why ask out of the blue?

We're heading to Japan soon, aren't we? It'd be easy to lose track of you in an unfamiliar street if you keep your current look.

Ah, so if I go blond or something, I'll stand out, which is convenient for you?

Yes, though blond is too common and doesn't mean much. For

instance... how about splitting your hair in half and dyeing one side red and the other blue?

So you want me to look like a walking Taeguk symbol?

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I walked.

I carried out the usual routine: formed alliances with my comrades, cleared the Busan Station dungeon, and defeated the Void in Baekhwa Girls' High.

That's what my feet were doing. But inside my head...

'Dyeing.'

That single word played on loop, again and again.

So everything—human hair, human scent, and even Aura—was actually the result of being "dyed" by these water-bug creatures. Meaning that Leviathan—or more specifically, the Outer-God-connected Yu Ji-won—wanted this world to be colored in the first place.

My mind repeated the same steps over and over, stuck in a rut and weighed down by countless thoughts.

'She wanted to tell people apart.'

Prosopagnosia, or face blindness.

Ever since she was born, Yu Ji-won had struggled to recognize people's faces.

I'd go so far as to say that as a young girl, she called anyone with a similar build "Mom" or "Dad" no matter who they really were.

I walked.

“That brat can’t even recognize her own parents!”

In those flashbacks, I’d sometimes hear her parents yelling that from a nearby apartment building.

To Ji-won, people were indistinguishable lumps of matter—not fixed solids but fluid liquids. Less like rational humans, more like mindless bugs.

Water-based insects.

Just some wiggling, squirming things.

When congenital face-blindness was paired with a psychopathic nature, it forced the young girl named Yu Ji-won to see the world in that kind of warped way.

But if that child ever found someone she wanted to remember...

If, instead of lumping everyone into nameless crowds, she resolved to distinguish certain meaningful individuals, to truly see them...

Then what kind of wish would that girl have made upon the “Anomaly” that descended into her life?

I walked, entering a shopping mall.

The interior had been ravaged, the mark of looters who had long since come and gone. Scavengers had ignored things unrelated to survival, so some perfumes were still lying around, though luxury brands like Chanel and other high-end names had been snatched up.

Even in the post-apocalypse, the shopping mall remained a showcase of how human greed stratifies everything.

I wandered among the ruins, gathering seven different kinds of perfume.

Mr. Matiz.

Could it be that humanity itself... or the world that harbors humanity... was fundamentally flawed from the start?

Human beings have always been poorly engineered. We have no way to mentally cope with a situation like the ground splitting open while we sleep, swallowing our home and killing our entire family in one stroke. We have no way to write off a horrifying "accident," like a luxury cruise or passenger plane destroyed by a freak event, as just something that happened to occur.

This world contained far too many things, and humans themselves had far too many deficiencies.

What we call "God" was simply a name for the void that has existed from the start between humans and their world.

'...Okay. I've got them all.'

As for how to bridge that void, I couldn't be sure I ever explained it properly to a 14-year-old child like her.

'Let's see. These perfume brands... Yes, that's them.'

Ji-won. 地圓. "Earth is round."

A child was born into this world bearing that name, a name that described the round, flattened surface of the Earth.

I made my way to that child.

There was a convenience store. If one took the shortest route from Sejong City, they'd inevitably pass it.

"Hmm?"

From behind the store's cash register, someone turned to look at me. A head of silver hair fell across her shoulders.

It had been seven years for her. For me, it had been tens of thousands of years since we last met.

Yet in that single moment, there we were again—separated by a

counter—passing through an instant and an eternity simultaneously.

“How curious.”

But the 14-year-old girl from seven years ago didn’t recognize me at all.

“I set up a fairly elaborate booby trap at the entrance. How did you get in without triggering it?”

I inhaled. “So… are you the owner of this shop?”

“Yes, I’m the proprietor.”

“I spotted two corpses outside. I’m guessing they were the store owner and a part-timer?”

“Hmm, you have a keen eye.” Ji-won nodded. “Yes, but they attacked me the moment I entered. I merely exercised my right to self-defense. Whether they were the original owner and employee… I have no proof.”

“I see. Don’t worry, I have no intention of interrogating you over murder. I have no right to do so.”

“You’re rather reasonable…?” She blinked. “Hmm. Since I’m supposedly the shop owner, I should greet my customer, yes? Is there something you want? If it’s not crucial for survival, I can give it to you.”

“Two packs of Marlboro Red, please.”

“Cigarettes are precious luxuries these days, but…”

“I’m prepared to pay you properly.”

“Well, if that’s the case… All right.”

She grabbed the packs from the display. At the same moment she handed them over, she whipped out a small hatchet from her waistband, swinging it down at my wrist.

Or she tried to.

Her eyes widened. Halfway through her swing, the hatchet came to a stop when I'd caught it in my hand.

Yes, it was something that had happened hundreds of times across countless cycles. But only in this 777th run did I finally see something clearly:

'They're exactly the same.'

The hatchet Ji-won was holding was the very one I once gave her as a "present"—back when I was driving a car with her onboard. The motion by which Ji-won swung it was precisely the same as the swing she'd used the night she killed her parents, when I opened the door of that third-floor apartment.

One of us was holding the handle of the ax, the other gripping the blade. For a moment, our gazes locked without speaking.

I let go. She did not complete the swing.

"You know... in the old days," I began quietly. "I used to think Leviathan was just some Anomaly representing the state."

I pulled seven bottles of perfume from my pocket, placing them on the convenience store counter.

Then I took out a few tools and began mixing them together, piece by piece.

"Because the further my life went on, the more infrastructure got built up. And that made me assume Leviathan's power was growing stronger, like a 'state' that accumulates strength over time."

Spritz, spritz— and raw scents began drifting through the air.

The "one and only body fragrance in the world" I'd created once upon a time was made of relatively cheap perfumes. Each had some harshness when taken as an individual, a scent body of rough edges left unpolished.

“But now I realize it wasn’t just the land’s infrastructure growing as my life went on.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, customer.”

“Yu Ji-won... You grew stronger too, in step with my turning of the wheel.”

I thought back to the distant past back in the 5th cycle, when Yu Ji-won was with me in the Samcheon World guild.

“Vice Guild Leader.”

“Yes?”

“Could you get me passage on a ship bound for Japan?”

I had assumed she wanted to escape the hellscape of the Korean Peninsula and flee overseas. But maybe... Maybe she simply realized that no matter how far she roamed throughout Korea, she’d never find “the person” she was searching for. So she had to broaden her search to another country.

“Vice Guild Leader, please kill me.”

“Hold my funeral with your power. I beg you.”

I had interpreted that as a sign of total despair with the world, or that she wanted to use Time Seal to prolong her final moments. Could it be, though, that she just wanted to relive a “certain day” that had almost vanished from her memories? That she wanted to recover it in its entirety, even if it meant a brief extension of life?

“Vice Guild Leader, Your Excellency! I will serve you faithfully like a loyal dog until the day this world ends. So please, promise me this.”

“Of course, in the next cycle, I in my foolishness might not recognize your greatness, O Savior.”

I’d concluded that she was just a psycho obsessed with personal survival and power, turning traitor the moment she discovered I was a regressor, wanting to stay on a “fast track” to success across

every cycle.

“When that time comes, just say this: ‘I know you killed someone at fifteen and dumped the body in a minari swamp on Mt. Bukhansan.’”

“What? You killed someone in middle school? Wait, that’s not the point... Hey! Quit clinging to my pants!”

Maybe, just maybe, she had some vow or promise that couldn’t be fulfilled that cycle, so she needed to try again in the next. She had to succeed eventually, no matter what.

And along the way, Yu Ji-won steadily became stronger. From my aide-de-camp, to Dang Seo-rin’s secretary, to a member of the National Road Management Corps, to a team leader, to the Corps’ second-in-command, to the regressor’s most trusted right hand. Across the entire span from the 5th cycle to the 776th.

It wasn’t just the Korean infrastructure that developed in tandem with my wheel of time. Yu Ji-won herself had advanced alongside it.

“In retrospect, it’s strange... You were always smart enough to hide your ambition for power if you wanted to. Yet you flaunted it, every single time, like you were deliberately feeding into people’s assumptions that ‘a psychopath thirsting for survival and power is only natural.’”

When she was 14? She was different then. She did have ambition, but no particular desire for happiness. If she decided on something, if she found a certain “answer” or encountered a certain “failure,” she was willing to end her own life without hesitation.

Above all, her highest priority was meeting “Mr. Matiz” again.

“You hid your true aim. Because the moment others discovered what you really wanted, that knowledge could become a weakness. Not even I, your regressor, was an exception.”

For thousands of years.

For tens of thousands more.

She kept her deepest secrets, all while shadowing me.

She pretended to be nothing more than a “power-hungry” subordinate who was cold-blooded yet never betrayed me, quietly leeching off my regressor’s life. All the while, I wandered Korea, then Japan, then China, eventually crossing the Eurasian continent so that the entire world would be mapped out, with every Void discovered, every person added to her Mini-Map.

All to find that single, solitary “one person” she sought.

“I’m sorry… For thousands of years—far more than ten thousand—you kept searching without fail, but I selfishly went and forgot everything.”

Inside a transparent perfume bottle swirled the mixture of seven distinct scents, an aroma only I knew how to create. I picked up the bottle and lightly spritzed it behind each ear.

A hush settled over us as my personal scent spread through the air.

“It may be late, but… I’m alive and back again, Ji-won.”

Finally, she spoke.

“Do you recall what happened on Dobongsan that day?”

“Sure. Even though there was no such mountain.”

Under her silver hair, a smile formed.

The same smile that a 14-year-old girl had once worn so many thousands of years ago, one sweltering summer day.

“Welcome back, Mr. Matiz. I’ve been waiting.”

Chapter 328

The Skeptic XXI

Sinnoa

“Mr. Matiz, you can just follow me from here on out. I’ve stockpiled plenty of supplies for the apocalypse.”

“Mm.”

“I’ve also marked potential hideouts in various parts of the country. Oh, by the way, my skill is a sort of mapping ability that lets me see people’s locations, but it has some unique requirements, so I traveled all over the country right before the transportation infrastructure collapsed.”

“I see...”

“I’ve also spent years honing my hand-to-hand combat skills to a decent level in three different self-defense styles. In short, I can be the one carrying you this time, Mr. Matiz.”

“Uh, Ji-won.”

“Yes?”

“I appreciate how hard you’ve worked to prepare for this apocalypse, but... most of what you’ve done might not be all that necessary.”

“Pardon?”

“Like I said earlier, I’m a regressor.”

“That term rings a bell. I’ve heard you say strange things before, and guessed as much. But what exactly does ‘regressor’ mean?”

“Well, a regressor is—”

(Some details have been omitted.)

“So to put it simply, Mr. Matiz, you already know countless ways to secure supplies, you have ideal hideouts chosen, and you’ve cultivated combat strength that’s basically the most humanity could possibly hope to achieve?”

“Yes.”

“Which also means that the resources I’ve spent seven years gathering, along with all those locations I scouted, don’t mean very much?”

“Uh… Not exactly…”

“Between you and me, there’s no need for polite phrasing. What you’re implying is that, even if it’s not totally meaningless, it was pretty much a waste of time.”

“…Yes.”

“Hmm.” Ji-won nodded. “All right. I understand.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Ji-won?”

“Yes, dear regressor.”

“…Are you upset?”

“How could I be? ‘Being upset’ usually means you feel someone didn’t show you enough consideration or respect. How could I possibly say I haven’t been shown overflowing amounts of consideration and respect by you, my regressor?”

Her face was perfectly blank.

“If you hadn’t warned me of the apocalypse in advance, I might’ve been swept up in society’s collapse, facing all kinds of hardships.”

“Oh, right. Exactly.”

“Indeed. Though if you knew the world would collapse, it might have been even more helpful had you told me to just train my combat ability instead of gathering resources to the point my tailbone nearly fell off. A small question arises as to why you didn’t offer that little bit of advice… but it’s just a minor curiosity.”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“What are you doing, Lord Regressor? Since the stockpiles I’ve saved here at this convenience store amount to little more than a firefly before the full moon or a matchstick before a forest fire, you can disregard them and move along to the next stage of your plan, right?”

“…”

“Oh, by the way, I also found a car similar to the old Matiz we used to drive. But I guess it’s useless, so I’ll leave it here. And this hand-ax I’ve been using, I’ll return it to you. Its blade is a bit dull now, so I doubt it’ll be of much use. Anyway…”

“…”

“Shall we get going?”

Breaking news:

The psychopath is sulking.

Vroooooom.

“Wow, these potato chips are so good! It’s been ages since I’ve had any. Once I started hitting the gym, I pretty much quit junk food. But now, thanks to you, Ji-won, I can stuff myself with chips. Feels like such a luxury!”

“…”

“Oh, and look, digestive biscuits with chocolate! They’re my favorite cookies! I can’t believe you stocked up on them. Even as a little kid, you always were scarily good at planning!”

“…”

“Wow, you even grabbed some high-end whiskey! Plus cocktail ingredients! Ji-won, have you tried drinking yet? If you haven’t had anyone teach you how to serve drinks, we could do a little—”

“Please. You’re being too loud. I need to concentrate on driving.”

“Right.”

Ji-won was driving the Matiz with impressive skill. At this point in time, the main roads hadn’t collapsed yet, so she skillfully picked roads that were still intact and sped along them.

Clearly, she’d done her homework in advance. It was an impressive level of preparedness.

Back when I approached her only as the “Undertaker,” she never gave me a ride in this little Matiz or anything like that. Most likely, she’d arranged all this as a kind of event for when she reunited with “Mr. Matiz” so that she’d show off her competence and readiness.

The Yu Ji-won. The silver-haired National Road Management Corps operative, a team leader, had gone so far as to prepare an entire apocalypse “event” for someone…

It was hard to wrap my head around. If the person in the driver’s seat turned out to be not Yu Ji-won but some “Yu Ji-won Anomaly,” I might even have nodded along like that made more sense.

There was something else odd too.

Pitter, patter.

Light rain fell outside the window. In every cycle before this, it had never rained at this time or place.

The route had changed.

My life as a regressor was nearly identical each time. From the perspective of a reader following my “story”, currently around the 328th chapter, it might feel fresh and new every day. But from my vantage point, it’s been tens of thousands of years. And the story has only advanced 328 times.

The unspoken hours. In a game, it would be that part labeled: [You’ve already read this. Skip?] That’s what consumed the vast bulk of my existence as the Undertaker.

And yet, once I met the 14-year-old summer girl as “Mr. Matiz” rather than the “Undertaker,” it suddenly started raining in a location and time it never had before.

Saintess.

Avoiding Ji-won’s gaze, I scribbled a note on my right thigh with my finger.

[Yes, I’m listening.]

Please check the Awakener’s vantage points who are not too far from the road we’re on. Say, a radius of about 10 km. Let me know what they’re seeing.

[Understood. I see 16 individuals so far.]

Currently, we were in the early days of the 777th cycle. I had only formed a blood pact with the Saintess a few days earlier, so she was still a newbie at apocalypse life and was also new to the way we secretly communicated via writing. She was probably using Time Stop for a second or two whenever she noticed my script, carefully deciphering the letters. Thus, I slowed my writing to spare the newbie from being overwhelmed.

Is it raining where you are?

A short pause.

[No. I’ve checked all directions out to five kilometers, and there’s no rain. But...]

But?

[I can't be certain, but it looks like the path you and Yu Ji-won are driving along is the only area where it's raining. Wherever you go, it rains in that exact place, following the road. Just behind you, around the convenience store you visited, there's rainfall, but a little farther away it's sunny—like magic.]

Rain along the roads.

Not rain from clouds, but rain that was Leviathan itself. It was following the path of it Miko and apostle, Yu Ji-won.

From a satellite's perspective, as we snaked around different highways, Leviathan's shadow would look like a giant dragon...

Or a huge centipede-like insect creeping behind us.

Rumble... Whoooosh!

Rain pelted the windows, and a faint roar, somewhere between the sound of rushing water and a dragon's cry, resounded in the distance.

"Mr. Matiz."

"Uh— Yes?"

"Haven't you noticed that something's changed?"

My mind went blank.

Her words were the classic, "I'm upset, and I'm about to double down on being upset. Consider this your warning."

I gulped. Forcing a serious expression, I ventured a guess.

"Well, you've changed in lots of ways. Your hair is lovely. You've always been smart, but now you're downright reliable, Ji-won..."

"Hmph." She stared at me for a moment. "It seems your eyesight has severely deteriorated, Mr. Matiz."

“Huh...?”

“Look at me more closely... You still don’t see it?”

If only I had Time Stop...

I had plenty of time in general, as a regressor, yet ironically had no time to figure this out calmly, like a student facing the last five minutes of a final exam.

Sweating bullets, I examined her carefully—like filling in testing bubbles, but with my eyes.

‘But she looks exactly like she does in every other cycle!’

Silver hair. Slightly arched brows. Eyes so pale they were almost transparent, a mix of purple and faint blue. A steady, expressionless gaze in my direction.

Wait... A gaze?

Yes. Even though Ji-won was in the driver’s seat, she had turned completely to watch me, as if steering the car purely with her peripheral vision.

“Did you finally notice?”

On closer inspection: She was only pretending to grip the steering wheel. In fact, her palms were not actually touching it. Instead, a stream of energy from her palms, her Aura, extended to the wheel, steering in her place.

“How...? How do you already have such advanced Aura control?”

“Aura? Hmm. An English-style pronunciation of ‘Aura’? That’s what you call ‘this’? So that’s news to me.”

Ji-won withdrew her hands entirely, yet even then, the faintly bluish Aura trailing from her fingertips remained. Far from dissipating, it snaked around the steering wheel even more freely, controlling it effortlessly.

My eyes and mouth fell open in shock.

“That’s impossible. At this point in time, you shouldn’t have such mastery of Aura. Aura normally requires absurd amounts of training.”

“Does it?” she asked with a calm tilt of her head. “Yet I can do it. I used to call it prāṇa,[1] but I like the word ‘Aura’ better. At some point, I realized I could move it however I wanted.”

In truth, Ji-won had always been an absolute genius in Aura. In any given cycle, she was the undisputed #2 in Aura usage, second only to me—save for the times when Ha-yul might rarely surpass her.

What if...?

A terrifying hypothesis flashed through my mind: What if she had intentionally hid her true prowess with Aura all this time?

Pieces of a puzzle began clicking together at high speed.

She managed to keep her entire “Mr. Matiz” objective a secret from everyone for thousands of years. Feigning weaker power to blend in? That would’ve been child’s play.

Just weak enough to pass muster... That standard would be slightly below the regressor, who was assumed to be the absolute best with Aura. Then there was Ha-yul, who was like an adopted daughter to that regressor. If Yu Ji-won realized the significance of Ha-yul, she’d adjust her skill so they’d appear to be competing for second place, occasionally letting Ha-yul gain an edge.

Yes... That lined up perfectly. Like a jigsaw puzzle morphing into 3D construction, logic built itself into a complex shape in my head.

Could it have started all the way back then?

I recalled an ancient era, buried like a fossil in my memory.

The 42nd cycle. Back then, the Meteor Shower Anomaly was the de facto final boss that threatened to destroy the world, in what now felt like a comedic misunderstanding. I had become the first to

defeat it.

But how exactly did we beat it?

Meteor Shower brought ashen destruction wherever it fell, lulling people into a dreamlike sleep so they'd die painlessly. And the method we used to conquer it was mirrors.

Yes. We teamed up with Dang Seo-rin to develop a "reflection" spell. Then a 700-person strike force flew into the sky to challenge Meteor Shower.

"Team 12, final charge complete!"

"Team 11, fully charged!"

"Team 6, good to go! No major losses so far!"

"Team 4, minimal energy leakage, about 3%! Within expected range. Passing it forward!"

"Team 3, got it!"

We had arranged ourselves in 12 units. Each group faced a large mirror to which they funneled their combined powers using...

Aura.

"Team 2, done! Barely made it!"

"Keep going, keep going!"

"Team 1 is fully charged!"

And the leader of Team 1, naturally...

"Undertaker, Your Excellency!"

...was the one we all believed to be second only to me in using Aura, my one-time adjutant.

"Undertaker, Your Excellency! Now! We've transferred the energy!"

“Less than 1% loss!”

Yu Ji-won.

“Mr. Matiz,” she said, interrupting my revelation. “Earlier, when you told me you were a regressor, you also said something about a great monster called Leviathan. That it is infrastructure itself, a national entity, and my deity... That it grew in power with each cycle, correct? However, there’s a simpler, more direct measure of that.”

I used to think “Aura” was merely a typical Awakened power. It was something you’d see all the time in stories, so surely it was no big surprise in a world flooded with Anomalies. But if it were truly that common, then why wasn’t it sealed away when we defeated the Admin of Infinite Metagame, an Outer God from so many fictional tropes? If it was purely some made-up or “fantasy” power, one might assume it would vanish along with the illusions.

But it didn’t. Which suggests...

The power that fights Anomalies might itself be an Anomaly. What we called Aura wasn’t strictly a human privilege.

“Allow me to ask one thing... Across hundreds of cycles, hasn’t your ‘Aura’ grown stronger right along with you? Did you, by any chance, create your own so-called ‘Aura training method’ and spread it to other Awakeners?

I didn’t respond.

“If so...”

Her light-blue eyes, like a mirror for humanity, fixed on me.

“That means I’m not Leviathan’s only follower.”

Rain fell.

“That would make you, Mr. Matiz, and every Awakener who wields Aura complicit in empowering Leviathan.”

In other words, Yu Ji-won was not only the Miko of Leviathan, the monstrous rain entity.

She was also the apostle of Aura itself.

Footnotes:

1 - Prāṇa is a Sanskrit word that has a number of interpretations in English, including "life force," "energy" and "vital principle." The term is used in Hindu and yogic philosophy to refer to all the manifest energy in the universe, present in both living beings and inanimate objects.

Chapter 329

The Skeptic XXII

Sinnoa

Come to think of it, the first of my comrades ever to accept my regressor “coming out” wasn’t Old Man Schopenhauer (Scho), surprisingly enough. Scho first knocked on my timeline in the 6th cycle. And I’d met Dang Seo-rin in the 5th cycle, but... she never did learn that I was a regressor.

In the end...

“Vice Guild Leader, Your Excellency. You mentioned this was your 5th cycle?”

The first colleague who learned I was a regressor was none other than Yu Ji-won, my secretary and adjutant.

“Vice Guild Leader, Your Excellency! I will serve you faithfully like a loyal dog until the day this world ends!”

By that point, she was Leviathan’s Miko, whether she realized it or not. She had already achieved a level of mastery over Aura that dwarfed normal comprehension. Hers was a strategy of concealment, hiding one’s true potential in the shadows. Even if I or Dang Seo-rin had fought her at full strength, it’s likely neither of us could withstand Ji-won’s onslaught if she were to take it seriously.

But what if I hadn’t told 5th-cycle Yu Ji-won that I was a regressor? Granted, she was astute. She always hid her power, weaknesses, and even her strengths whenever possible. However, if she’d never known a regressor existed and genuinely thought her 5th-cycle life was her only one, then...?

– Grrrooooooo0aaa!–

Then perhaps she would have revealed her true might while fighting off Ten Legs’s invasion, showing the entire world the depth

of her Aura as she sliced through those tentacle monsters with a single blow.

“Vice Guild Leader, look out!”

But that’s not what she did. She chose to die, throwing herself into the jaws of a monster far weaker than she was, almost like suicide.

Why?

“Next cycle…”

She wanted a promise from the regressor.

“Your Excellency… promise…”

Yes.

By chance, in that 5th cycle, I had personally revealed my identity as a regressor. Thanks to that, Ji-won managed to hide her full strength until the very end. Indeed, she succeeded in never revealing it. She could’ve called it sheer luck.

But what about the 6th cycle? Or the 7th? The 8th?

Could she keep withholding her power all the way to the end of those future lives too? If she had never learned that man was the regressor, might she accidentally expose her own threat level before him?

That was exactly what the silver-haired psychopath dreaded most. It would be a fate worse than death itself.

Yu Ji-won agonized over it. She did the math and acted accordingly.

“Next cycle… Your Excellency, promise…”

And so, she decided to “throw away” the 5th cycle.

She needed the regressor’s trust, no matter the cost of any minor side concerns. Only one promise mattered. So long as the next

cycle's Yu Ji-won could be assured that Undertaker = Regressor, she could keep her claws hidden indefinitely. Thus, she would sacrifice her life in this cycle, and in exchange, she'd gain hundreds more cycles of survival.

A formula of life and death. Once that equation balanced out, she, Yu Ji-won, could gain an almost infinite return on investment.

Mathematically speaking, it was outrageous. Good grief, trading one single death for dozens or hundreds of guaranteed futures? Only a fool wouldn't take that deal.

Not dying would have been the foolish choice, so she was all too willing to die. She bet her life like a poker chip, risking it all in a single round of high-stakes gambling.

"I see. I understand that you claim to be a regressor, and that you possess the ability known as Time Seal."

And it worked.

"Damn it, I even know you killed someone when you were fifteen and dumped the body in a minari swamp on Mt. Bukhansan. Believe me, you psycho!"

"Oh."

At that instant—the moment she saw the man before her, who claimed to be a regressor, and heard about this "last will and testament" that her previous cycle supposedly left behind—Ji-won understood. She had never once met or spoken to that older version of herself, yet with that single clue, she deduced everything.

"Understood. I will come with you."

This man was a regressor.

This man had once been her superior.

He was—

"The last cycle's me eventually left this place and ended up joining your

guild, yes? If I'm going to leave anyway, I might as well head over sooner rather than later so I can rise through the ranks faster."

"D-don't come, you creep! Screw off!"

He never saw through her true nature.

All that information about him being a regressor was just surface-level. The critical fact that the previous cycle's Ji-won had "successfully kept a secret" remained hidden.

So the 6th cycle's Yu Ji-won, the 7th's, the 70th's, even the 700th's... They would keep passing along that baton in an endless relay.

Thus did the poker-faced, silver-haired psychopath become a parasite on the regressor's timeline.

Occasionally, the regressor took a "vacation." During those so-called vacation cycles, he would still hang out with his companions and thus often upheld Ji-won's final request. However, every now and then, he severed all ties from the start, forging a new path alone. In those cases, Ji-won never obtained the info about her previous cycle's last testament from me.

Which might explain this:

This shop's coffee is top-tier!

—Samcheon World, Dang Seo-rin

The Sword Marquess of Yuldoguk

Thanks for all the good times. Lee Ju-ho.

My sincerest gratitude. But no matter how I think about it, the store's name and the clerks' shirts are kind of odd. Are you a member of the Red Army?

—Uehara Shino

Visiting on a school trip! Baekhwa Girls' High ♡ May our love last

10,000 miles forever

—Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化)

Damn, the road here is too rough. Nearly died lugging the wine bottles over.

—NDH

Long live the Sixth International!

—Sim Ah-ryeon

If you had just sold me one carton of cigarettes, you'd've been the GOAT... Y

Your first customer.

For example, back in the 90th cycle, that time I opened a Sixth International convenience store, Ji-won was nowhere to be found.

In hindsight, it was strange. Surely she was active as a member of Samcheon World. Yet she never once visited that convenience store, the hottest spot for Awakeners. Everyone else came by—the Sword Marquess, Uehara Shino, even Noh Do-hwa despite her trust issues—yet there wasn't a single trace of Yu Ji-won.

Maybe the moment she confirmed Mr. Matiz wasn't in Korea, she left for Japan, or China, or even farther.

'All to keep her promise.'

I let out a bark of laughter that was somewhere between amazed and bitter.

'That's truly absurd... but it fits her. No wonder she was once the regressor's adjutant.'

Just like me, my silver-haired adjutant possessed a singular, infinite determination that fueled her through seemingly endless time.

"We've arrived."

The car came to a stop. Ji-won climbed out first and opened an umbrella, then she opened my rear door for me—a courtesy fit for a VIP.

“Please step out,” she requested.

Rain pelted down outside. “Here?”

“Yes.”

Looking up at the sky, I could see fleeting glimpses of a great dark shape in the swirling black clouds, probably Leviathan’s silhouette. Yet even in that downpour, I recognized the scenery with ease.

“This is a familiar neighborhood, isn’t it?”

We stood along a run-down hillside. Half-collapsed villas, a supermarket sign left on the ground. Dilapidated tile-roofed houses and small apartment buildings clinging like poisonous mushrooms along the slope, their expiry date long past. It was a shantytown that once barely survived on the warmth of the people living there and that now lay deserted as a habitat for bugs and rainfall.

Yes, this place...

“This is my home. And yours,” I answered. “I left here seven years ago, saying I was going to tutor the children of local aristocrats. Have you been by since?”

“No. This is my first time.”

“I see.”

Ji-won popped open the trunk. Inside were raincoats and the items she’d looted from the convenience store. “Let’s carry them in.”

“All right.”

Without further conversation, we carried the supplies inside as our clothes got damp from the rain. We could have used Aura to keep the raindrops off, but both of us chose to stick with umbrellas instead.

Surprisingly, the front door to the third-floor villa still worked. Actually, the building was practically the only structure in the ghostly hillside that wasn't wrecked by time.

5555.

I punched in a familiar code and stepped inside, with Ji-won following behind, dripping with rainwater. I stepped onto the yellowish floorboards and looked around.

"Where's your grandmother?"

"She passed away six months ago."

"...I see."

"I mummified her and stored her in the bedroom wardrobe. You may offer your respects if you like."

"Are you crazy?"

"I'm just a filial granddaughter."

When she lifted a corner of the floorboards, a secret storage space appeared, clearly packed with extensive supplies.

"Huh, so the building never collapsed?"

"It partially did, but I repaired it," she replied. "Fortunately, the old man downstairs had evacuated, so there was no neighborhood dispute to worry about."

"Was it a neighborly homicide?"

"Please wait a moment here."

She busied herself for a while. Before long, a delicious aroma drifted in from the kitchen along with her voice.

"It's ready. Dinner."

The spread on the table was hardly luxurious, yet more than splendid enough. She'd cooked using a portable gas burner and

limited stock from long-frozen ingredients, but no one could have guessed it was the apocalypse from the quality of the meal.

I clamped my mouth shut, then opened it once more. “Thanks for the food.”

“Yes. Let’s eat.”

Chopsticks and spoons clinked together.

Outside the window, Leviathan’s rain continued to fall in pitter-pattering streams. Water-bugs latched onto the glass, writhing softly.

Yet as we ate like this, it felt unreal that civilization had already collapsed.

“So then,” said Ji-won from across the table, “how was it, living tens of thousands of years?”

“...It was tough. No cakewalk.”

“Want to die together tonight?”

The rain drummed outside. “No.”

“I see.”

Warm, freshly cooked rice sent up steam mingled with the scent of pork.

“Did I... kill a lot of people?”

“You did.”

“Was I a competent subordinate?”

“...Unparalleled.”

“Did you sacrifice your life for me?”

“...More than once.”

“I see.”

Clink.

The child who first tried her hand at cooking at age fourteen. The neighbor girl who would pack leftovers for me, saying she miscalculated portions.

Now, the meal we shared was nearly flawless.

She’d always been good at anything she tried.

“To defeat or weaken Leviathan is simple. I’m sure you’ve already realized it, Mr. Matiz.”

“...We’d have to give up Aura. We can’t use it at all.”

“Yes.”

Clink. Squirm.

A single water-bug had crawled up the table leg, presumably following us in from outside. Ji-won squashed it under a napkin with a firm press. *Croooak!* The water-bug popped like a frog.

“In the end, Leviathan only grew this powerful because of you, Mr. Matiz. If you were to give up Aura yourself, and refrain from spreading your Aura training method to other Awakeners, Leviathan would calm down... In other words, no matter what plan you cook up, as long as you, and countless others, keep relying on Aura, Leviathan will never weaken.”

Rattle.

“Don’t use it. Don’t depend on it. Don’t get addicted. Refuse to become a cultist of that monster god... That’s all there is to it.”

Something was being rattled.

“It’s also the simplest strategy in the world.”

‘And the hardest.’

I silently sipped the hot seaweed soup.

‘Give up… Aura.’

Thump.

Rain battered my heart.

The sounds of water-bugs crawling on the window seemed to wriggle through my veins.

‘Humans must renounce the easiest way to gain power. They must ban themselves from using Aura.’

For me, that was akin to being told to cast aside my sharpest sword, the paddle blade that had helped me navigate so many rough waters to get here.[1] Because apparently, that blade had never been a fine blade at all.

It was a cursed demonic sword… A warped and twisted weapon.

‘Was Aura… just a drug all along?’

I’d thought of it as my lifeline. Ever since I lost Old Man Scho, I believed it was the reason a mere support-class like me could still fight on my own. But if I stopped and thought about it rationally, it was obvious that Aura was something beyond the scope of normal human powers.

Then—

“Maybe,” I said unconsciously.

“Pardon?”

“Maybe to truly prevent the end of the world, we’ll have to abandon not only Aura, but all superhuman abilities, one by one.”

Suddenly, like a turbulent current, intense emotion surged inside me. It was hard to describe. Excitement, maybe? The water-bugs that had seemed to swarm in my veins were driven back by the pulse of my bloodstream, that bright red tide coursing from head to

toe like an electric jolt.

‘Yes. Starting with the Tutorial Fairy.’

Then Ten Legs.

Then Meteor Shower.

Then Udumbara.

Then Butterfly Effect.

Inunaki.

Trolley Dilemma.

UFO aliens.

The Hollow.

City Devourers.

Monster Wave.

Infinite Void.

Nut.

Infinite Metagame.

Leviathan.

‘And every Outer God that still hides in the shadows. Without Aura, relying only on human power.’

It would feel awkward at first. We might slip into using Aura at times. We’d often need powers. But we’d try our best to hold back.

Step by step, we’ll erase inhuman abilities from this world. We won’t rely on demonic artifacts. Instead, we’ll turn the Anomalies themselves against each other. We’ll leverage this towering edifice of knowledge gathered over tens of thousands of years.

‘With nothing but these two hands, we’ll hunt down every last Anomaly.’

That was the only method.

A hidden route to the hidden ending.

It was the single precarious trail that might lead to truly saving this world, one you could only reach after near-infinite tries. A decisive formula that rejected the Outer Gods’ manipulations and proved that this world could stand on its own two feet.

Feeling my blood boil, I thought, ‘Is it possible? Really possible?’

And I answered myself.

‘Yes. Absolutely.’

So I steeled my resolve.

Thus, in the 777th cycle, a massive turning point had arrived in my long journey as a regressor.[2]

Footnotes:

1 - A paddle's blade can be used to create stability when crossing a river by triangulating with the river bottom. This technique helps keep the paddle fixed to the river bottom, which allows the wader to move laterally in the water. What Undertaker means here is to give up on his weapon which got him through thick and thin.

2 - The number 7 is associated with good luck and prosperity in Korean culture.

Chapter 330

The Skeptic XXIII

Sinnoa

A memory from the past.

A conversation with the Saintess.

“Mr. Undertaker, this might sound like a radical interpretation, but… you might have taken the place of Infinite Void and the Mastermind’s apostles.”

She laid out my powers and tried to link them to various Outer Gods, speculating on how I might connect to them.

1. Complete Memory – Infinite Void

2. Resume (Physical Strength Preservation?) – ?

3. Time Seal – ?

4. Enormous Aura – ?

The Saintess asked:

“These are your abilities, correct?”

“Yeah. Though you can probably leave Aura off that list. Other people can develop it with enough training, so it’s not exclusive to me.”

“Fair enough. I’ll cross it out, then.”

“Oh, by the way, I also have Mind Reading.”

“All right,” she said with a nod. “Let me revise the list.”

1. Complete Memory – Infinite Void

2. Resume (Physical Strength Preservation?) – ?

3. Time Seal – ?

4. Enormous Aura – ?

5. Mind Reading – Infinite Metagame? Mastermind?

Yes.

At some point, we did have that conversation.

4. Enormous Aura – ?

…

Aura – ?

…

……

Aura - Leviathan

Let's talk epilogues.

Here's the first.

From now on, Aura is discontinued.

In another world, that shocking announcement might have sent the Regressor Alliance into chaos. Much to my surprise, though, it didn't.

"What's that… 'Aura'? Never heard of it."

In fact, everyone was actually pretty calm.

"Aha. Well, you see, Commander Noh, there's a technique where if someone musters an intense willpower, some energy stirs in their body. Over time, that fluid-like energy can be refined until it cuts through objects or Anomalies like a high-pressure water jet."

"Huh? So you just concentrate, and some intangible fluid leaks out of your body and destroys things? Like a psychic power or

something...?”

“Exactly.”

“What the hell, how is that any different from an Anomaly...?”

Right.

If you think about it, that reaction was natural. We were still at the very start of the 777th cycle, at the point when the so-called “Mr. Matiz” had just reunited with Yu Ji-won. Our rigorous training regimen for allies hadn’t truly begun yet, and the Undertaker’s advanced Aura manuals hadn’t leaked on SG Net. In other words, it was too early for widespread Aura usage.

Thus, the world abruptly lost Aura.

Like it had never existed.

Some Awakeners did develop their own Aura-like skills, but those were rudimentary and nowhere close to my meticulously refined “Undertaker’s Aura Method” from past cycles.

It was a reset, essentially. Like the old days, when an army of Awakeners had to risk their lives to defeat the “not-really-final-boss” Ten Legs.

‘Something just isn’t sitting right with me.’

It appeared no one but me even wondered about the missing Aura. People lived or died in a world that had apparently “always been this way.”

Well... There was exactly one other witness who remembered what the old cycles looked like.

“A-are you sure this is okay, mister? Really? Fighting monsters without Aura—is that even possible?”

Dok-seo, who had read part of my life story in novel form, trembled and chewed her nails in terror.

“We’ll do what we can,” I said.

“But you’re so weak, mister! At least Grandpa Schopenhauer had that ‘cut-everything-down’ slash power! Without Aura, you’re… you’re just a worthless regressor who can only go back in time!”

She was less of a devoted fan and more like a bratty kid.

“Plus, it’s not just about Aura, right? If we follow your logic, other Awakened powers might also be Anomalies. So my own AT-Field is probably a suspect, right?! No, that’s impossible, no way. Fighting monsters without an extra life is insane!”

I wacked her once. Dok-seo hugged her laptop and wept.

“Waaaah! The old man hit me! My dad hit me, my mom hit me, my teacher hit me, now the old man’s doing it too!”

“Listen, if you keep provoking people, maybe learn how not to ‘earn’ a beating in the first place.” Then I sighed. “Anyway, in the long run, we’ll have to reduce reliance on other powers. But it won’t be the same as Aura.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Aura, as I said, can be trained by anyone who tries hard enough. That means the more Awakened rely on it, the more it grows, turning them into Leviathan’s worshippers. But your Absolute Defense is unique to you alone.”

“Oh… so no matter how much I spam my shield, Infinite Metagame’s power isn’t gonna skyrocket out of nowhere?”

“Exactly.”

It was the difference between a universal and a personal power.

“Of course, if your absolute defense ever reached some truly absurd limit, that might change. For instance… if right now your shield can only envelop one person, maybe someday it could expand to envelop the entire planet.”

“Erk…” Dok-seo winced. “Like that’s possible, old man. My shield drains me dry every time I activate it…”

“Normally, yes,” I said, giving her a faint smile. “But sometimes… people do push their personal abilities to ridiculous extremes.”

She tilted her head, wearing an *I don’t get it?* face.

‘Like Ah-ryeon.’

Sim Ah-ryeon.

She would one day become the Saintess of the North, capable of healing not just a single patient but an entire battlefield.

‘If she kept getting more experience, who’s to say she couldn’t eventually heal the entire planet?’

A world without death. That level of healing might mean that even if someone’s head were chopped off, they still wouldn’t die.

I’d never witnessed such a thing, yet the image felt oddly vivid. I could picture it now: an enormous tree—a world tree—far larger than Udumbara. Its roots would pierce Earth’s crust, feeding on the core, until eventually not just humans but all living things, indeed even inanimate objects, and ultimately the entire planet or even the whole universe would be granted “eternal life.”

“Guild Leader. Please, don’t be sad.”

At the heart of that cosmic tree, a single girl would remain, sealed away forever.

A possible “ending” for this universe.

In that timeline, even my regressor power would be moot, because I’d never die. The trigger of my regression, my death, could never occur.

‘All Awakeners…’

A chill crawled down my spine.

‘All Awakeners are seeds of an Outer God in the making. They might not reach that point anytime soon, but given infinite time and experience, any of them could become a monstrous god, negating my regression for good.’

Regression was neither invincible nor universal. The world was filled with potential hidden Outer Gods.

‘From a different perspective… it might have been lucky for me that each cycle ended in about twenty years, or at most a few hundred. That was a blessing in disguise.’

If countless Awakened had thousands of years to grow…

‘Who knows how the world would’ve turned out?’

No wonder the Saintess was the first to become a Corrupted in so many timelines—she had Time Stop, basically unlimited time. Good thing she was so patient and ethical. Had a regular person possessed that power, they would’ve become an Anomaly ages ago.

‘The fact that one cycle typically ends within about twenty years… wasn’t a curse. It was a blessing,’ I realized. ‘Around the twentieth year, Monster Wave always occurs, wiping out what remains of humanity. Because of that, Awakeners never get enough time to become unstoppable or turn monstrous, and I can safely die, triggering regression, thus escaping a total hopeless ending.’

How coincidental.

‘Damn… Who would’ve guessed that Monster Wave was a necessary evil.’

I felt a sting of static along the back of my neck. If I pulled an example from a timeline where Monster Wave didn’t show up… The 173rd cycle, that was the Great Witch’s Utopia.

‘Dang Seo-rin turned into a Fallen One, warping Busan into a utopia. Monster Wave recognized it as an “Anomaly domain,” so it never invaded. The world nearly ended. I still don’t know how we avoided the bad ending that time, since even my Complete Memory can’t recall what Seo-rin did next.’

Every time Monster Wave was kept at bay, Awakened powers spiraled out of control.

Even after sending off Oh Dok-seo, my thoughts plagued me.

'...Is this all just coincidence?'

Let's think.

If my theory is correct, every Awakener is essentially a seed to become an Anomaly or Outer God. Some of them could nullify my regression, given enough time and XP.

Yet the Saintess, who alone can enjoy unlimited time + XP, is an extremely moral person. She's also my most loyal ally, so if she ever does feel herself slipping into Corruption, she consults me first.

All other Awakeners have limited time.

By the twentieth year, Monster Wave inevitably arrives and sweeps away all living humans. Hence, I nearly always get killed and forced to regress, allowing me to avoid permanent ruin. As long as I don't lose my mind, I can keep trying for a "happy ending" an infinite number of times...

My jaw locked shut.

Dok-seo's cup of coffee was empty, while mine—barely touched, a café-au-lait—still sloshed quietly on the table.

'If it's all coincidence...'

That's a pretty convenient coincidence for humanity.

"...There's no way."

I've lived in this world long enough to know it has never been gentle toward humankind, so back then, I couldn't easily accept this newly emerging "benevolent arrangement" in the 777th cycle.

It felt alien.

Deeply so.

Here's the second epilogue.

"Huh. I see, so Undertaker was Mr. Matiz all along."

We were in a café.

Oh Dok-seo nodded, but her tone and gaze were nothing like the real Oh Dok-seo. Even the espresso on the table was sipped with calm elegance.

There was no point hiding it. She was in "V-tuber mode," so to speak—copying and pasting personalities from earlier cycles to do a kind of roleplay.

Still, it was just an act.

"Honestly, I always considered him one of the prime candidates. If my memory as a child serves, Mr. Matiz originally had a faint personal scent. Undertaker also doesn't have much of a scent. So I suspected they could be the same person."

Indeed.

"And yet you concluded they weren't the same person, right?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"If Undertaker were Mr. Matiz, then from the moment we reunited at the convenience store, he would have recognized me. More importantly, when I swung my hatchet at him, he would never have destroyed it."

"Ah."

"That hatchet was the very first gift Mr. Matiz gave me. No matter how clueless he was, he wouldn't shatter a precious memento of our bond. So at that moment, I pegged Undertaker's chance of being Mr. Matiz at less than five percent."

“...Sorry.”

“No apologies needed, Your Excellency. The fault is mine for failing to recognize you.”

“Roleplay Yu Ji-won” (let’s call her “Dok-seo’s Yu Ji-won”) tilted her head in a mild bow.

“There were other factors too. Undertaker said I dumped my parents’ bodies in that minari swamp at Dobongsan, or Mt. Dobong, when I was fourteen, but he never grasped the true significance of Dobong.

‘Dobong’ has a poetic meaning, you see.”

She turned her eyes toward the real Yu Ji-won of the 777th cycle, not the ephemeral roleplay version. The genuine piece was also seated at the table.

“Do you understand it, 777th cycle me?”

“Certainly. If we parse the Chinese characters for Dobongsan (道峯山), we get ‘path’ (道), ‘peak’ (峯), and ‘mountain’ (山). It’s a metaphor for leading me, who was lost at the time, to find a path in my heart.”

“Excellent. I accept you as me.”

“I don’t particularly need your approval, but thanks.”

While both versions of Yu Ji-won exchanged remarks, I kept silent.

‘I just picked Dobongsan on a whim, honestly, because it was next to Bukhansan...’

No, wait. At times like this, I should think more like Cheon Yo-hwa, the older twin sister, does.

‘Surely the me from seven years ago truly chose Dobongsan for those deep symbolic reasons. I just can’t recall it now. And not remembering doesn’t make it sad, because that blank slate is a canvas for the coolest possible painting!’

Lucky me.

While my own mental spin-cycle was whirling away, Dok-seo's Yu Ji-won tossed out a question.

"How is it?"

She wasn't asking me.

"What do you feel right now? The worthless promise you made to your younger self has been genuinely fulfilled by someone. Does that stir hope in you? Are you willing to accept this world more readily? Do you feel less contempt toward humanity? Is the world still just black and white to you? When you weigh the reasons to live versus the reasons to die, does the scale start looking different?"

No reply.

"Yu Ji-won." The Yu Ji-won from a past cycle asked, "Are you a little happier now?"

A sense of déjà vu struck me, a sense of remembrance from a distant past.

"Ji-won."

"Yes?"

Once, I had flung that same question at my psychopathic adjutant.

The outward form was the same question, but its substance was different.

They were rooted in different layers of the earth.

The 777th cycle's Yu Ji-won propped her chin on her hand, then reached out and clasped mine. She gently drew it up before her face, so my knuckles hovered close to her.

A soft breath.

Ever since we were reunited, my custom seven-blend fragrance had accompanied me.

Then Yu Ji-won spoke. Before my eyes, her answer overlapped with the one from the past:

“I think I can be a little happier this time.”

“From now on, I believe I can become a little happier.”

Tick.

A clock on the side of the table clicked forward one second.

“I see.”

The Yu Ji-won from a past cycle, with hair as red as blood, nodded.

“I’m envious. Truly.”

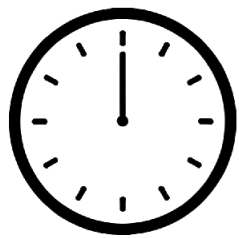
Session over.

That day, the version of Yu Ji-won whom Oh Dok-seo had summoned—an echo from a past cycle—continued calling me “Your Excellency” right to the end.

Chapter 331

The Skeptic 24:00

Sinnoa



And finally, the third epilogue.

As you might guess, my 777th life turned out to be extremely important for me, the regressor. If Kant had his Copernican Revolution, I, the Undertaker, had a “psychopathic revolution,” so to speak.[1] Thus, I wanted to limit all epilogues to events that happened in this 777th cycle out of a purely personal desire.

But when does life ever go the way we want?

Newton probably wanted to be lauded as an SSS-rank stock genius more than a natural scientist, and back when civilization was intact, everyone probably wanted to buy Bitcoin at its rock-bottom price.

My “story” is, likewise, not from just a single cycle. It’s patched together from various lives, each contributing a dish to the final feast.

So it goes, as always.

“Ah-ryeon, you can paint, right?”

“Huh? I... N-not really...?”

“Not really?”

I blinked. That was unexpected.

All my companions have some glaring personal flaw in their personality. Ji-won lacks sympathy, Seo-rin lacks self-restraint, and Ah-ryeon supposedly lacks... humility. Needless to say, I was startled to see her squirm like a frightened rabbit, twiddling her fingers together nervously.

“Right. S-s-so I can’t just ‘kind of paint.’ I’m actually good enough to be top-five across all of humanity. I guess if humanity had f-four fingers per hand instead of five, I’d be in the top four, obviously...”

Ah, yes. There’s the Ah-ryeon I know.

“Anyway,” I continued pointedly, “this guild leader wants to commission some artwork from you.”

“E-eh? Comm... Commission? What’s that...?”

“Well...”

I delivered her the order sheet in oral form. The moment I began my rundown, Ah-ryeon’s face began twitching until, eventually, she squeaked in horror.

“Th-that’s insane! It’s too much!”

“They don’t all need to be exquisitely detailed. But they do need to be drawn with care. Sketches are enough, as long as they capture the unique traits of each subject.”

“Ah— Oh? Uhhhhh. If... If it’s just sketches...”

“You, dear Ah-ryeon, are a brilliant artistic prodigy who can spit in even an Outer God’s face, second to none! So you can finish them all in a week, right? Your guild leader believes in you.”

“Eeeeeeeeeek!”

Dozens of days later, I left behind Ah-ryeon, whose spirit and body had nearly both fled, and loaded over four hundred pictures onto a cart. Because there was so much art, I couldn’t handle it alone.

Instead, I enlisted the best loaders and couriers of the apocalypse era.

Do-hwa frowned. “We might as well call this a National Road Management Corps caravan…”

“That’s basically what it is.” Specifically from Busan to Seoul. Fortunately, in this cycle, the Inunaki Tunnel had been cleared, so we didn’t spend too long traveling.

Eventually, we piled up Ah-ryeon’s works on the Han riverbank.

–Gꢀuuuu□□□□hhhoooorr…!–

The Road Management troops flinched and reflexively looked back, halting where they had been hauling crates off their carts. They couldn’t see it, but off in the distance, a monster roared, its countless tentacles lashing the air.

Ten Legs.

In the distant past, it had driven the Korean Peninsula into ruin multiple times. In this present, murmurs spread.

“I hear it just wiped out our military…”

“They’re all dead. Every last soldier.”

“Did you hear? Northern cities got annihilated by that thing. Small towns too, all of them.”

“Yeah. My uncle was a colonel. He died to that son of a bitch.”

Ordinarily, I’d have taught them my Aura-training method so they could combine their forces here and defeat Ten Legs. But “ordinarily” was in the past.

‘I have to conserve Aura from now on.’

A sort of “Aura diet,” if you will. Just like in the apocalypse, when every bit of electricity was precious, now we had to limit the usage of Aura. Only a few people could wield it. In fact, aside from me, Ji-

won, and maybe a handful of others, no one had it. I myself intended to avoid using Aura entirely unless absolutely necessary. We had no choice, in order to keep Leviathan dormant.

‘Instead…’

Ignoring the troops’ agitation, I carefully laid out Ah-ryeon’s art.

Ji-won walked up to me and said, “Mr. Matiz, the monster’s approaching.”

“Yeah, I sense it.”

“I’ll have the others fall back.”

Thud… THUD…

The ground shook with the heavy steps of Ten Legs, which grew fiercer as it neared. Eventually, the caravan pulled out entirely, leaving only three people: me, Yu Ji-won, Noh Do-hwa. Both were stubborn enough to outdo each other. I doubted any scolding from me would make them retreat to the Inunaki Tunnel.

‘Well,’ I mused with a glance behind me, ‘it *is* a funeral, after all. A funeral needs a few mourners.’

Ah-ryeon’s paintings—about four hundred portraits for the deceased—were lined up in neat rows. Between the portraits, white chrysanthemums had been placed.[2] Hard to find in these times, so we’d grown them at the farmland run by the Sword Marquess’s faction.

–Gruuuuuoo–□□□□grauhhh!□□□!

Ten Legs finally appeared, crushing half-toppled buildings underfoot. It advanced—*THUD*—each step of dozens of thick tentacles tearing the ground. Every few steps or so, chunks of debris would fly past us. Still, neither Ji-won nor Do-hwa nor I moved from our stance.

Through hundreds of portraits, across the horizon, Ten Legs rushed forward.

I calmly brushed dust off my black suit. Then I bowed.

In the past, long ago, I used to think Ten Legs was just a standalone monster. But it wasn't.

'The Hollow.'

In this world, those who never receive a proper funeral are revived and linger forever. Ten Legs was one of them.

'When the southern half of Seoul was erased by the White Night, countless people died. Among them were many who left behind no known family or ties, they simply vanished.'

That was the core of Ten Legs.

If I were to compare the White Night to an atomic bomb, then the corpses at the very center of that "blast zone" turned into Ten Legs.

Nobody mourned them or even acknowledged them. Thus, they inevitably merged, weaving themselves into one monstrous body.

–Gr□□□□□□k□□□□!

But they weren't totally alone. Just like me back before the 4th cycle, they weren't utterly friendless. They lost their families, sure, but not every cousin's friend and friend's neighbor's aunt's nephew had died. The world hadn't fully ended yet.

By traversing the dreams of fairies, I discovered the faces of these missing people. From dream to dream, chasing those lost connections, I was able to "restore" the missing faces of hundreds of victims whose names and appearances had once been forgotten.

The rest had been straightforward enough.

"G-Guild Leader, does this look right?"

"No, the eyebrows are too thin. Make them a bit darker."

"Eek! My hands are shaking. I've already been drawing memorial portraits for six hours today! Are you going to take responsibility if my

joints wear out?!”

“What do you mean? You’re a healer, aren’t you? If your joints hurt, just heal them and keep drawing, Ah-ryeon. No rest for you.”

“D-Demon!”

Using my Complete Memory, plus Ah-ryeon’s unparalleled artistry and healing, we completed more than four hundred memorial portraits over dozens of days. And it wasn’t just limited to pictures. Every time I bowed, I mentally replayed one full day in the life of each of those four hundred people, just as I’d glimpsed them in their dreams.

–Kkkuuuuu/□□□/Kyaaa-□□□

I knelt.

–Krrr/□/Rrra□□fah□...

When I rose from my bow, Ten Legs was still charging with savage roars to slice us apart—and it was visibly shrinking.

Yes. Shrinking.

“The corpses are...” Do-hwa muttered behind me. “Are they falling off...?”

The giant body of Ten Legs began shedding bits, like petals falling from a flower. Each piece was an arm, a head, a leg—some part of a human corpse. Having received a proper funeral, a real name, a real face, a real memory, these missing people finally returned to the earth.

–Grrr/□□uhhh-□□□□oo/□□...

Not all of Ten Legs’ corpses were casualties of the White Night. Some had died in other calamities.

However, now that the core had broken, the entire mass of Ten Legs collapsed from within.

–Oo□o□ooooo□...

Thud. THUD!

Every time it tried to lash out with a tentacle, its outer layer crumbled. Thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of unburied corpses spilled out in all directions—lost souls turned back into wandering Lost, no longer anchored to Ten Legs.

–Oooo□□□□ooo□...

At last, Ten Legs reached the edge of our funeral site by the Han River, but the monstrous might that once crushed buildings had utterly vanished. It stood barely tall enough to match a three-story building.

Then two.

Then one.

–O□□□oo... oo...

And then there was one final person.

They were a patchwork figure made from scraps of other corpses' flesh, maybe from animals rather than humans, just imitating arms and legs. Their white hair wasn't human hair but broken piano strings, doll threads, that sort of thing.

Through and through, it was the core of Ten Legs. No one could say who she once was.

–O... oo... oo...

Thump. Thump.

Within that mismatched mass, two hearts beat. "Normally," you'd slice away both hearts with Aura to defeat Ten Legs.

But not now.

"My condolences," I said, kneeling once more, "Professor Adele."

Emit Schopenhauer's wife.

She'd come to give a lecture at a Korean university and died in the midst of the White Night.

"You lost your husband, again and again. I can only imagine how great your sorrow must be."

I extended an urn toward the deformed figure with two hearts, a porcelain jar containing Old Man Schopenhauer's remains.

"I was a longtime colleague of your husband and will remain in this world until he returns. I'm sure that someday, he'll come back to you. I'll be there too."

I bowed my head.

"Once again, my deepest condolences."

Thump. Thump.

This couple had lived sharing two hearts for centuries.

The wife's arms, barely arms at all, reached out. They melted like candle wax, bits of stringy flesh falling off, as she pressed Old Man Scho's ashes to her chest. There was no real skin to hold them, so the urn rested directly against those two hearts.

–E□e... mi... t...

Thump.

Her heart beat once more, then stopped.

With that final beat, every scrap forming Ten Legs collapsed. Piano wire, doll string, guitar strings, buttons, bird bones, animal limbs, bits of unknown flesh—all of it spilled onto the urn and scattered around it.

A lone button rolled to my knee and toppled to the ground, spinning there until finally...

Stillness.

Then there was only the sound of the Han River's flowing behind us while one warped tree overshadowed the waters, its identity twisted by the apocalypse's Void Poison.

As I picked up the button, Do-hwa murmured, "Huh. So that monster could normally have been cut down in a single slash with that Aura-power or whatever..."

"Yes."

"Then there'd be no need to pick through illusions or nightmares to find all those missing people, no need to force Ah-ryeon to paint memorial portraits for days, no need to install a funeral site by the river..."

"Correct."

"I see. That's a ridiculous waste of resources..." She lit an incense stick as she continued, saying, "Which is presumably why you placed me at the top of the National Road Management Corps, so we could shoulder these burdens..."

I didn't answer.

"I'm fine with it, Guild Leader Undertaker." She looked back at me. "I like this way better..."

It was indeed a difficult path, even for me in my 777th life. Yet it was also a path that only I, who had experienced this world 777 times, could walk. A hidden route that wouldn't open if I'd lived fewer lives.

I'd have loved to choose the easy way, but when does life ever follow our desires?

Sometimes, the road that looks longest is the real solution. This world demanded that solution of me. I needed wide strides, a precise map, and legs strong enough not to fail despite the blisters stinging my feet. Luckily, as a regressor, I had all three.

“Mr. Matiz.”

That night, I was lying in a tent pitched near the funeral site when Ji-won suddenly appeared, knocking me out of sleep.

She put a finger to her lips, shushing me. “You awake?”

“...Yeah. I wake up the moment there’s any hint of movement. What’s up?”

She leaned in to whisper, “There’s something I want to show you. Just between us.”

A faint smell of damp grass wafted over me. In earlier cycles, Ji-won liked faintly strawberry-scented perfumes, thinking that was the Undertaker’s preference. But not in the 777th cycle. Now, she no longer wore perfume.

“You see it?”

Stepping out of the tent, I found a small table on the riverbank, probably salvaged from a ruined convenience store. On the table lay several maps.

“Maps and chess pieces... Your Mini-Map skill. But what’s left to show at this point?”

She scoffed, a light smile tugging at her lips—unnatural, as though trying to sneer but not quite managing it. “Mock me all you want. This is the end of me just being some ‘one-trick navigation tool.’”

When I only stared at her in confusion, she pulled out a small device from her pocket. It was an electronic watch, useless in the apocalypse. Electronics typically lost to Anomalies.

“Yes, I see your point. Why an electronic watch? You know they’re basically worthless or even hazardous these days.”

“Well, by placing this antique on my Mini-Map...” Then she placed it over the Korean Peninsula area on the world map.

[■■:■■:■■:■■:■■]

Blink, blink, blink.

Even though the clock had definitely been powered off, it suddenly started flashing. What was more, the numbers it displayed were eye-catchingly odd. A normal digital clock would display something like [■■:■■], indicating hours and minutes. Even a clock that counted seconds precisely would, at most, show [■■:■■:■■]. However, the one set down on the Mini-Map flashed its digits in a random red pattern.

Blink, blink, blink, blink.

After blinking a few times with random red numbers, it suddenly stopped. The final numbers it displayed were these:

[00:03:41:56:79]

No movement, like a display that wasn't counting time but simply stuck on those digits.

"Any idea what the numbers mean?" Ji-won asked.

"No. I'm clueless. What is it?"

"It's simple, Mr. Matiz," she said. "It shows the population of that place, the number of 'survivors.'"

My eyes shot wide. "So, in that part of the Korean Peninsula—"

"Yes. Three hundred forty-one thousand five hundred seventy-nine... Oh, sorry, seventy-eight people."

[00:03:41:56:78]

"That's how many remain alive in Korea. And it's not limited to Korea."

She pulled out more watches, placing them over Japan, then Siberia, then Central and South America...

[00:04:91:01:12]

[00:00:93:87:94]

[00:27:54:48:31]

As she shifted the devices around the map, the digits changed on the fly.

My jaw dropped. “Impossible. Your Mini-Map never had an added function like that in any cycle.”

“Aha, as I suspected.”

While I was shocked, she looked unsurprised, prompting me to ask, “Got any theories as to why?”

“Sure. It’s an obvious metaphor, right?”

“A metaphor?”

“Yes.” Blue-purple eyes locked on me. “A metaphor that since I met you, my ‘time’ has started moving.”

“…”

“Walter Benjamin said that beauty arises from something unspoken and hidden, from whatever simply exists as it is. He called that Aura. But I disagree.”

She kept staring at me, though her hands moved. The smallest watch slid across the edge of the world to reach Seoul.

“I’m not interested in whatever ‘beauty’ hides beneath the surface. As you know, I don’t understand concepts that someone won’t take the time to explain directly. I’ve been that way my whole life.”

The watch moved from Dobongsan to Bukhansan, crossing the Han River.

“To me, beauty means something that remains, even if we peel away the skin and expose the flesh.”

The watch froze at the southern end of Jamsu Bridge…

[00:00:00:00:02]

...the exact spot where we stood.

She quietly took my hand. I flinched as a murky, bluish Aura emerged from her hand to cover mine, but she wasn't trying to hurt or threaten me.

It was comfort.

Her Aura rose higher and higher. Ceaselessly, as if it were reversing gravity. Streaming upward like rain falling in reverse from the ground. Soaring to the pitch-black night sky.

Until finally, her Aura touched the sky, then silently branched into millions, tens of millions of strands, coloring the night overhead.

"You once told me," she said, "that an Awakener's power stems from their misfortune."

The night sky lit up in a cosmic rainbow of colors: blues, yellows, reds, purples, greens... and hues beyond words.

"But it seems there's at least one counterexample that your theory can't explain, Mr. Matiz."

The aurora snaked in bright, leisurely ripples, a stark contrast to the plain transparency of Leviathan's watery rain.

Where once, this girl had sculpted a chessboard of players relegated to a vision of black and white, the array of her rain now painted the sky with every color the world had to offer.

"When I was 14, meeting you was basically a wrong answer for me."

Does the Undertaker exist?

Does Mr. Matiz, who wandered with a 14-year-old girl through a rainy summer night, truly exist?

■■■—is he real?

Or was everything just an illusion? A void?

“I figure the human heart is split in two: half for someone’s correct answer, half for their wrong answer.”

Yu Ji-won had crossed from her 14th summer to her 21st, existing just as Cheon Yo-hwa, the elder “twin” sister in some sense, once had.

All of that merged here, under the glow of these colors in the night sky.

“I get that you might see discarding Aura as your worst defeat.”

Her silver hair, devoid of any particular hue, now refracted all the night sky’s colors.

“But meeting you, Mr. Matiz, was my greatest fortune. Because even back when I had no power, you were my hero. So.”

Beneath these paints, we could all be equally real or equally false. Which one was true depended on my choice. It wasn’t possible to say only I existed or everyone else existed except me. Either none existed or all existed.

Void or coexistence. The ultimate choice.

“Mr. Matiz.”

Ji-won had made hers.

“This time, I’d like to be your error.”

I decided in that moment.

Anomaly: Leviathan

Aliases: Grand Monsoon, the Water Bug, Thales’s World, the First Promise, Infrastructure, the Nation, the State, Hobbes’s Monster, Aura, Aurora

Threat Level: Lv.5 Outer-God Class (Alienation)

Subjugation in progress.

Footnotes:

1 - Copernicus was the scientist to posit that the planets revolve around the sun, but also that all things in our solar system—including the sun itself—move relative to other objects in the system. Likewise, the philosopher Kant was the first to theorize that it is not just that the world imposes its environment on us, but that we ourselves actively shape and define the world around us by the very act of being within it and that we are indeed the focal point of that interaction.

2 - White chrysanthemums can symbolize mourning and grief.

Chapter 332

The Self-Immolator I

Sinnoa

Q: There's an old saying that "people can't be fixed once they're broken." Do you agree?

A: Yu Ji-won breaks that rule.

As shown in the previous story, throughout my long life as a regressor, there's been no one who's shown more dramatic growth as a character than Yu Ji-won.

Then again, perhaps I'm being too regressor-centric in my thinking.

"Good morning, Mr. Matiz."

In truth, Ji-won hadn't changed at all. She simply kept a landscape painting from her 14th summer, displayed deep inside her heart, exactly as always. The one who had actually changed was me, and since I had gone from being "Your Excellency the Undertaker" to "Mr. Matiz," her attitude toward me also changed.

Yes, surely nothing else has changed...

"Mr. Matiz, did you sleep well last night?"

"Uh... Yeah."

"That's a relief. I recall you used to suffer from bouts of insomnia in the old days, but it seems to have fully cleared now. Here's some chamomile tea I picked up. I'll brew you a cup at night if you're ever feeling lonely."

"O-oh. Th-thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Even putting aside the fact that I didn't realize I'd ever had insomnia, I had good reason to respond so awkwardly. After all, the location where Ji-won was speaking to me was none other than a conference room dedicated to our Regression Alliance in the National Road Management Corps main headquarters. In short, she was openly flaunting her rapport with me right in front of Noh Do-hwa, Seo Gyu, Cheon Yo-hwa, Sim Ah-ryeon, Lee Ha-yul, Oh Dok-seo, and the rest.

"Um, Teacher," Yo-hwa called with a bright smile. "I've been a little curious for a while now. Why does the Operations Team Leader over there call you 'Mr. Matiz' anyway?"

"Ah, well, you see, Yo-hwa... Actually—"

"It's nothing special." Cutting off my reply, Ji-won answered, "Doesn't the president of Baekhwa Girls' High also refrain from using the alias 'Undertaker' when addressing you, choosing to call you 'Teacher' instead?"

"Sure, but I didn't ask you."

Yo-hwa's interjection was ignored. "It's exactly the same reason."

"Eh?"

"The title the president gave you implies a sense of exclusive personal connection. It proudly displays a relationship that outsiders can never intrude upon," Ji-won reasoned calmly. "It's the same with me. You could say that in a way, I share the same sentiment as the president. Oh, though she *is* seven years late in forming her connection compared to me, of course. That's the only difference."

Yo-hwa smiled with her eyes. "Huh. Guess the team leader and I have similar personalities even though she's a bit older. Hey, Team Leader, should I start calling you unnie?"

"That won't be necessary. Since Awakeners no longer age anyway, you'd be stuck calling me 'unnie' forever, and that might feel a bit unfair to you."

“Aw, why? Once someone’s your unnie, she’s your unnie for life. Team Leader, I never thought you’d worry about something like that.”

“Hmm. Actually, you have a point. You’ll never bridge that seven-year gap.”

The temperature in the conference room dropped. Do-hwa began wiping her glasses, Seo Gyu muttered something under his breath about SG Net being full of trolls while fiddling with his smartphone, Ha-yul suddenly started repairing her maid-doll, and Ah-ryeon had already been dozing off for a while.

“OMG! Hey, Mister! This is nuts!”

Only Dok-seo was whispering in my ear with shining eyes.

“I never imagined there’d be a rivalry angle between Yo-hwa unnie and Ji-won unnie! But now that I see it, it kinda works, huh? The two of them look like they’re hogging all the darkness in the world —you know, instead of all the light. It’s a real feast for the eyes.”

“You... No, forget it. You’re the reason I can still breathe, Dok-seo.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Of course it is. You have boundless imagination, so it’s no wonder the Admin of the Infinite Metagame picked you to be its miko.”

“Th-thank you?”

“Sure.”

Although, after she’d handed over every ounce of her strength to being that miko, she ended up beating fans senseless at a meet-and-greet... No one, not even the Anomalies, could have predicted the sheer power of a chuunibyou otaku’s imagination.

Do-hwa chose that moment to interrupt, placing her glasses back on. “All right, then. If you’re all done with whatever that was, let’s get back to the meeting...”

Both Yo-hwa and Ji-won quietly resumed their seats. In our alliance, disregarding Do-hwa's authority was never acceptable, no matter what the situation.

Dark circles hung under Do-hwa's eyes like weeping willow branches.

"As you all know, we recently discovered that many Anomalies, including the Ten Legs, can be eradicated via a proper funeral rite. But given that the number of Hollow roaming around out there is greater than the remaining living population, we can't take care of every single body ourselves..."

And so, she shifted her gaze.

"Awakener Seo Gyu...?"

"Oh, right!" Seo Gyu said, holding up his smartphone in his right hand. "Based on the last meeting, we've created a brand new Missing Persons Board on SG Net."

Thanks to the weight training I'd taught him, his shoulders and triceps looked especially robust. Incidentally, Seo Gyu had set up an outdoor gym on Haeundae Beach, which boasted around 40 active members. Even in the apocalypse, some folks apparently just couldn't give up the iron.

"The Missing Persons Board has memorial portraits drawn by Ah-ryeon, and we've made the search function super user-friendly, so family members can find it any time."

The delicate tension among the alliance members ebbed, and the meeting moved along.

"Oh, right. Guild Leader Undertaker..."

"Yes?"

"We've gotten another letter from that monk guy, what's his name, Seok-hwa, I think? He says he plans to lead his fellow monks and believers in a 'Trans-Korean Joint Funeral Service.' What should we do...?"

“Hmm.”

“To me, it just sounds like a fancy way of committing mass suicide...”

Anyway, there it was. The “Seok-hwa” they just mentioned in passing—his Buddhist name—was the protagonist of this story. Sure, Do-hwa and I kept calling him a “dodgy monk” or a “renegade monk,” but plenty of folks out there respected him as the Venerable Seok-hwa.

While his name has only just appeared in this narrative, you might already be well acquainted with who he is. Where did he first show up, you ask?

“This is the might of the New Buddha!”

“If you believe in the New Buddha, you’ll be freed from every affliction and suffering, and granted a new body to live on in a brand-new world!”

It all goes back to the Udumbara story. He was the main instigator behind that pseudo-religion worshiping the Anomaly virus as a savior, aka the New Buddha Church.

“Immortal life through living flame! Eternal life in the floral realm!”

That man was none other than the renegade monk Seok-hwa.

The existence of a regressor in this world was not a blessing for everyone. While fortunes bloomed for Ji-won, there would always be others whose destiny was twisted beyond repair. The renegade monk Seok-hwa was one of those cases.

Up until around my 10th run, this ex-monk practically reigned with unlimited power. If you have a good memory, you might recall a conversation between Seo-rin and me in a very early cycle.

“Hah. These ‘flower guys’ are driving us to our wits’ end.”

“Right? In a world as hellish as this, it’s not surprising that people cling to a cult. The Neo Budhha Rebellion didn’t happen for no reason.”

We both sighed.

Even back then, Seo-rin enjoyed absolute dominance over Busan, yet not even she could get a handle on the New Buddha Church. The best she could do was avoid conflict by offering them massive gifts.

Still, let's be honest: In an apocalypse, "donations" are basically bribes or tributes. We offered them valuables to purchase peace. In other words, if someone like Seo-rin, the ruler of Busan, had to deliver tributes under the guise of "offerings," that should show how enormous the New Buddha Church's influence used to be.

"Oh, come on now, dear Ms. Dang Seo-rin. Although you don't yet enjoy the Buddha's grace, you devote yourself to saving the Middle Ages. Why would We of the Flowers treat you poorly?"

Back then, Seok-hwa would smirk slyly, savoring the hierarchy of power between us.

He had every reason to be so cocky. After all, while we only controlled Busan, the New Buddha Church had extended its reach across the Korean Peninsula, the Japanese archipelago, and even mainland China. Even the dispatch of volunteer troops from Japan depended on the New Buddha Church, or more precisely, on Seok-hwa's approval.

Whenever Seok-hwa held a rally, even in that mad apocalypse, tens of thousands of believers gathered, cheering wildly.

"People! What does "your overlord" mean? It is the flower blossoming on your very heads!"

"Waaaaaah!"

"Immortal life! Eternal flowering!"

However, all that changed drastically in the 41st run.

"Undertaker."

The first impact.

“I found it.”

“In South Chungcheong Province, Asan. The Onyang region.”

That’s right. Everything shifted the moment the Saintess discovered the source of the Udumbara virus. From that point on, the downfall of renegade monk Seok-hwa, who had once ruled the Korean Peninsula, became inevitable.

Now then, do you remember how the New Buddha Church spread so quickly in the first place? Because people believed that if you had a flower blooming on your head, you could survive even if your limbs were cut off. Problem was, once the source of the Udumbara virus was eliminated, it became obvious that the New Buddha Church was just a cult with flashy speeches and decent organizational skills—nothing more, nothing less. And in the cutthroat world of apocalypse-era cults, that didn’t stand out much at all.

This land was like a poison jar for pseudo-religions. Only those that survived the infinite competition in hell had any shot at going global.

“Everyone! Seek your salvation in Paradise! The Buddha originally declared that this world is Hell itself.”

Even so, Seok-hwa refused to give up.

“It is because we live in Hell without realizing it that the Maitreya Buddha has bestowed upon us renewed suffering. As in earlier times, if we train ourselves and find enlightenment, only then can we enjoy glory in the afterlife. Namu Amida Butsu. A crisis is truly an opportunity. Attain enlightenment, my friends!”

“Namu Amida Butsu. Namu Amida Butsu.”

He had about 500 to 800 followers left. Compared to the prime days when he dominated East Asia, it was pitiful. He was hardly a bottom-of-the-barrel case, though. In actuality, 500 believers might even seem mountainous to a self-identified cult leader who barely had ten. In the cutthroat cult scene, hundreds of zealots was still no

small feat.

In another world, Seok-hwa might have been content with that. Sadly, it turned out that he just wasn't destined to stay on top.

"Brothers and sisters! I, your shepherd, shall forge the way for you!"

"Our president is the best!"

"Mo Gwang-seo! Mo Gwang-seo!"

Then came the second impact.

Mo Gwang-seo Jesus Christ descended upon the "Eastern Jerusalem."

"The president has resurrected!"

"It's the Second Coming, a miracle of rebirth!"

In a land where other cults mostly boasted "miracles" in name only, Mo Gwang-seo literally performed showstopping miracles hundreds or thousands of times. It was no wonder a huge shift in the pseudo-religion power scene took place.

"Hey, they say that Jesus guy, Mo Gwang-seo, was it? He just keeps shining and reviving no matter how many times you kill him."

"Doesn't our monk have anything flashy like that?"

"Nothing, other than that shiny head of his."

That day, Seok-hwa lost four-fifths of his faithful. Yet he pressed on.

"No! Do not be fooled by something as heretical and absurd as resurrection! The truth we must focus on is cultivating our own minds, not indulging in flashy supernatural nonsense! Attain enlightenment! Enlightenment!"

"Namu Amida Butsu. Namu Amida Butsu."

Still, Seok-hwa retained a die-hard core of about 100 to 150 followers.

He was now well and truly in the mid-tier bracket, but in the world of apocalypse cults, having a hundred people was nothing to scoff at. Again, there were plenty of pitiful wannabe cult leaders out there who didn't even have ten. Maybe he'd even become the king of the mid-tiers.

But even so, it seemed Seok-hwa was not fated for a royal path.

"Saintess. So that's the Saintess..."

"They say Jesus has called upon Santa Maria!"

And the third impact was none other than our unstoppable superstar, Sim Ah-ryeon.

"Uwooooooh!"

"Hallelujah! The Lord beckons!"

Ah-ryeon was basically a "walking Udumbara"—the perfect upper-tier replacement for the New Buddha Church. Everywhere she went, flowers bloomed, and the injured were healed. She was even gorgeous (provided she kept quiet, washed her hair regularly, avoided using her smartphone, and wore something nice).

Seok-hwa's last remaining 100 followers took a good, long look back at their monk.

"What about our monk...?"

"He doesn't really have a sparkly anything, aside from that shiny head."

"He can't even heal people who are on the verge of death."

"So what can he actually do?"

That day, Seok-hwa lost nine-tenths of his last faithful, ending up with barely a dozen left. Those final dozen were truly devoted, because in a world where an "un-killable fake Jesus" and a "(fake) saintess who can heal people for free" were walking around, anyone who still chose Seok-hwa had to be at least a little fanatical.

Thus, at last, Seok-hwa truly hit rock bottom. Even though later runs saw humanity with higher survival rates and better quality of life overall, ironically, the renegade monk's fate just got more and more miserable.

"Ahhh! Look who's here!"

Perhaps that was why when I stopped by his place in the 802nd cycle, the sight of him running out barefoot to greet me had a strange feeling welling up in my chest.

"Well, if it isn't the esteemed Guild Leader Undertaker! Oh ho ho! It's such an honor to have a noble guest in this humble abode!"

Back in his heyday, he lived in a luxurious temple as grand as a palace. But here, in the 802nd cycle, Seok-hwa was occupying a shabby hermitage. No more throngs of envoys delivering tributes from every guild leader. Now he just had an empty yard where dust blew around.

His behavior toward me reflected that gap in status. In the old days, he would never have bowed and scrambled like this.

"I heard you're planning some sort of cross-country funeral procession," I said. "I came to discuss it."

"Ohhh, yes indeed! That's exactly right! Actually—come in, come in! I can't let an honored guest stand outside! Right this way, Undertaker! Please, follow me. Oh ho ho."

What can I say?

In front of me stood the man whose life had plummeted to rock bottom purely because of me—because of the existence of a regressor.

Chapter 333
The Self-Immolator II

Sinnoa

Once a former major powerhouse falls to being a small fry, they generally choose one of two paths:

1. "Well, I've already basked in more than enough love and glory. Let's just relax. I'll still manage somehow."

2. "You must respect me. I once conquered all of East Asia. Whenever I held a dharma assembly, tens of thousands gathered. Even the top guild leaders were terrified of me..."

Naturally, our small-fry renegade monk Seok-hwa belonged to the second category. He refused to abandon the glory of his prime (despite not actually remembering the previous cycles) and was willing to do anything to regain it.

There was one particular cycle, for example.

"Everyone! Our nation faces an unprecedented crisis. In such a time, how should we Buddhists across the land respond?"

"That's right. Whenever calamity befell the country, we did not hide away in the mountains. Instead, we took up hatchets and rose to action!"

"Didn't the Great Masters Seosan and Samyeong lead righteous monk armies to defend Joseon? This is the Buddha's will, telling us to save humankind!"

"Let us rise! We must carry on the cause of our ancestors, sages, and the Buddha!"

"All ten million Buddhists of the Three Kingdoms—unite through faith! Let us gather into a monk army, aaaaaah!"

In short, Seok-hwa wanted the Imjin War: Season 2.[1] No drama starring monk-warriors before nor after came close to the era's roaring success.

What Seok-hwa failed to consider, however, was that there was a far larger gap between a Joseon Dynasty-era monk and a modern-day monk than one might think.

For one thing, monks of the Joseon Dynasty often lived in mountain valleys. That wasn't so different from present times, but in those days, those mountains had tigers (size XXXL) lurking around, the literal big cats.

On top of that, in the Joseon Dynasty, monks were regularly conscripted for forced labor whenever the government felt like it. This was partly because Buddhism had accumulated some negative history back in the Goryeo Dynasty, and the logic of not atoning for the sins of one's forefathers didn't really fly in Buddhist circles. They saw it as a form of karma.

Hence, Confucius's quote that "a tyrannical government is more fearsome than a tiger" didn't resonate much with Joseon monks. After all, those monks had to fight both the government and real tigers.

Because of that, they grew strong. Monks of that age lived by the principle that if one saw a fellow monk in the mountains of Joseon, just think, *He has survived*. Indeed, they had to walk the thin line between life and death every day of their lives.

Meanwhile, what of monks of the modern era?

For starters, the "dungeon" of the forest no longer had giant tigers in it. Most temples had paved roads and stairways leading right up to them. Sure, modern monks did get a bit more protein in their diets than Joseon monks did, but that alone doesn't necessarily develop combat-ready muscle.

Like a popular meme featuring a certain Shiba Inu dog comparing the past to the present went, if the so-called great masters back in Joseon might have said, "Now that we have returned alive from the

war, let us rebuild the villages and the city walls alongside the peasants!" the modern monk might well say, "Ugh... The plane ticket to India is just too expensive..."

Such phenomena weren't limited to Buddhist circles. Across all sectors, the human drive for survival and real combat experience had grown weaker with time. It was in such a climate as this that Seok-hwa dreamed of reviving the glory of Imjin War monk armies, shouting, "Make Buddha Great Again!"

The result?

"Eek! D-demons— Demons are coming!"

"Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu!"

"Master! Help us, Masterrr!"

"Huh... Uhhh...?!"

The new-era monk-warrior movement failed spectacularly.

Up north, the Resurrection Church led by Mo Gwang-seo was pushing its congregation into a suicidal Crusade, and down south, Seok-hwa was dragging his own cultists into ruin. Thus, the pseudo-religions ended up in "harmony" by collectively making things worse in what could only be described as a double catastrophe.

In the end, I, the regressor, had to step in.

"Noh Do-hwa, Commander of the National Road Management Corps. Keep an eye on these people. They're dangerous. Always keep them on your radar."

"Sure, yeah. Got it..."

They were promptly blacklisted.

As for Mo Gwang-seo's Resurrection Church, we sent in our alliance's secret weapon, Sim Ah-ryeon, to brainwash them. Success.

Dealing with Seok-hwa was even simpler. We planted an undercover agent nearby, and whenever Seok-hwa tried something suspicious, we quietly sabotaged him. We even enlisted the greatest villain among the pseudo-religious Taoist sects, Cheon Yo-hwa of Baekhwa Girls' High, into our ranks.

Christian, Buddhist, Taoist. All three major heretical factions on the Korean Peninsula were subdued. At least as far as pseudo-religious troublemakers were concerned, peace finally arrived in Korea.

"Er, do you think we'll get many people at tomorrow's dharma assembly?"

"I'm not sure, Monk. Maybe twenty if we're lucky?"

Now the renegade monk Seok-hwa was truly abandoned, like an egg adrift in the Nakdong River.

In truth, his head had always resembled an egg, but now every aspect of his life mirrored one.

"Look at that! Guild Leader Undertaker has come all this way! How can I not serve him some fine tea? This here is a barley tea I've been cherishing. Oh ho ho. I even went to China and bought some Pu'er tea before the devils took over. Please enjoy, Undertaker. Oh ho! It's all sincerity, you see!"

Thus ends the history of how a once EX-tier cult leader ended up groveling in front of me.

"Ah, so! Undertaker, if we unite in one great spirit of faith, I have no doubt even those wandering Hollow will find peace and attain Buddhahood! That is what I firmly believe!" Seok-hwa argued passionately.

Watching him struggle not to remain a small-fry cult leader was almost pitiful.

"...So you're saying that with no real Awakeners at your side, just about ten believers, you plan to travel from Busan to Sinuiju in a grand journey across the peninsula?"

“Yes, indeed. It’s extremely dangerous, I know that well. But how can we fear danger when the Great Merciful Buddha is protecting us?”

Countless Hollow still roamed the peninsula. Essentially, Seok-hwa proposed a “pilgrimage,” heading north while comforting as many Hollow as possible with funeral rites along the way.

From a certain angle, it was admirable.

‘He used the Udumbara virus to expand his following, then tried to start a monk-warrior movement after that failed, and now he’s on to cross-country funeral rites.’

He was the genuine embodiment of an iron will to seize power. It was almost awe-inspiring how, despite his utterly shabby appearance, he could stay so unwaveringly driven. Nevertheless, as Do-hwa pointed out, it sounded like a suicide mission.

‘Would this renegade monk be able to carry out proper funerals for all those wandering souls?’

And that was before mentioning the other Anomalies and Voids that infested the land. How could he and his tiny band possibly handle them?

Sure, maybe it didn’t really matter. The deaths of ten random citizens didn’t even qualify as big news anymore. But there was one detail that weighed on my mind...

I glanced at the ten believers gathered outside the temple, humming in thought. Even after his downfall, these stalwart souls still stood by Seok-hwa. Most of them were frail, elderly folks. Among them was one old man who used a piece of medical equipment, built and maintained by Do-hwa, for support.

“Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu...”

That patient’s name was Shin Su-bin. He was a grandfather who’d worried about Do-hwa’s well-being up until the very moment the world collapsed.

When our eyes met, Su-bin and the other Buddhists clutched their malas and bowed multiple times from the waist.

“Buddha... Maitreya Buddha...”

“May Undertaker bestow mercy upon us...”

I stifled a sigh. Whatever level of Buddhist teaching they might have absorbed, these elderly believers were sincerely praying for our safety, purely out of goodwill.

When I politely nodded in return, they lowered their heads even deeper, looking touched and honored.

“They’re who Do-hwa is worried about...” I mused to myself.

She never breathed a word about her patients during our last meeting, but I understood her mindset. Frankly, I couldn’t care less if a random renegade monk like Seok-hwa lived or died, but if Su-bin died, it would weigh on Do-hwa’s heart. That was what concerned me.

I set down the Pu’er tea and rose to my feet.

“Huh? Wait, Undertaker? Where are you going...?”

Ignoring Seok-hwa calling after me in a fluster, I approached Su-bin, standing across from him. Leaning in slightly, I spoke louder so the elderly man with poor hearing could understand.

“Excuse me, sir.”

“Huh?”

“Are you absolutely sure you must join this cross-country journey? I get where you’re coming from, but Ms. Noh Do-hwa is really worried about you.” When he didn’t respond, I continued, “You know her better than anyone. She’s not at all like her public image —she cares deeply for her patients. If anything happens to you, she’ll be up all night worrying. Can’t you just stay in Bansong-dong?”

Su-bin pursed his lips. His eyes, or rather the hollows where his eyes once were, looked as though they had seen enough of the world to have no need for any more barriers between himself and reality.

“My...”

“Yes?”

“My foot hurts, see. It’s been giving me trouble. And it feels like I’m burdening Ms. Noh by making her fix it all the time... I feel bad about that...”

“No, she would never think that way.”

“Oh, I know. I do know that. But... Ms. Noh is busy handling affairs for the entire nation. I’m an old man who doesn’t have much time left anyway. Why keep hogging her attention? That wouldn’t be right.”

I shut my mouth.

“In half a year, my ankle brace might snap and I’ll need her to fix it again, you know? I’d rather go now, while I can still walk around. At least do something meaningful with the little time I have left. Why keep troubling her? So I’m sorry. I have to go.”

A fitted protective brace was wrapped snugly around Su-bin’s right ankle. Back in the 53rd cycle, when I was assisting Do-hwa in her workshop, I remember seeing a support brace identical to that one.

‘This is my own karma, isn’t it?’

In the distant past, before Do-hwa had come to command the National Road Management Corps, her workshop was frequently visited by elderly patients like these. To this day, she still juggled her positions as both the Corps commander and an assistive-device technician, accepting patients by appointment.

Yet over time, the number of patients had decreased, however slightly. Because she was the apparent “exalted Commander of the National Road Management Corps,” people felt guilty, like it was a

nuisance or a risk to take up her time for personal repairs.

And so, I'd swallowed up part of her reason for living.

"I see," I said. "Well, sir, please don't push yourself too hard on that journey. If you're making a trip around the peninsula, be sure to come back home safe."

"Oh no, that might not—"

"Trust me. Meeting you and helping you out is more like therapy for her. She's... Well, she's a bit eccentric about that. She hates politics and much prefers tinkering for her patients. You get it, right?"

"Yes, yes... Thank you. Well, then..."

I looked around, counting a total of eleven old men gathered in the temple. Banners waved in bright colors above their shoulders, painstakingly made with their limited funds, reading things like "Let Our Buddha-Hearts Unite," "Nationwide Funeral Tour," "Namu Amida Butsu," "Gwanseeum-bosal," "Paradise Pure Land."

It was a world too harsh on the elderly.

In an apocalypse that worshipped efficiency, these people were thinking hard about how to exit the stage quietly. Unlike the renegade monk who wanted to exploit these old believers' last moments for his own big "comeback"...

I turned away from the elderly and walked back to Seok-hwa, whose anxious expression lit up in relief upon seeing that I wasn't leaving just yet.

"Oh ho, Undertaker! I was worried you might be heading out. Since you came all this way, why not stay for a meal of temple fare before you go?"

"I'm fine. If you've got the resources, please use them to feed those seniors well, at least once."

"Oh dear. But they've cultivated their minds so deeply, they're

already shrouded in the Buddha's compassion—"

My finger pressed into his shoulder, firm and unwavering. "Venerable Seok-hwa."

His eyes went round. His mouth gaped soundlessly, letting a ragged gasp escape. He couldn't even scream properly.

No Aura was needed. Simply pressing a key pressure point was enough to rob this renegade monk of his voice.

"I know all about people like you. Don't go believing you're special. In this world, if you walk around enough, you'll trip over a dime-a-dozen people just like you."

"U-uh, huh... Mmph..."

"You're not the one 'bringing salvation' to others. If anything, you're barely surviving thanks to the people around you. Because for someone out there, you're still one of the few companions they have left... Don't fool yourself into thinking you're blessing others. It's the other way around. Got it?"

"Ugh... Ugh—"

"Do you get it?"

His terrified face went pale as he bobbed his head in a feeble nod. At last, I loosened my grip on his pressure point, preventing him from uttering any audible scream.

"Hhk... Gngh... Hah..."

"Please try to live a quiet life."

Seok-hwa nodded again, fear etched on his face.

The very next day, the "Unite in Buddha-Heart, Cross-Country Funeral Tour Squad" consisting of one renegade monk and eleven elderly believers, departed from Busan.

Footnotes:

1 - Over 8,000 Buddhist monks acted as warriors in the Imjin War against the Japanese invasion, some acting out of Korean patriotism and others to improve the standing of Buddhism with respect to Confucian ideology.

Chapter 334

The Self-Immolator III

Sinnoa

“Sorry about that, Mr. Matiz.”

“Hmm? About what?”

“It's about Seok-hwa.”

That day, Ji-won had shaken hands with every single member of the funeral procession. Immediately after the ragtag funeral procession led by that bald monk left Busan, she spoke up.

“I should’ve handled such a socially harmful force myself, taken care of everything discreetly. But they were such small fry that I completely overlooked them. Next time, I’ll make sure to crush any loach slipping out of the net.”

Our Ji-won has always been unwaveringly devoted to the business of knocking people down. It was kind of admirable...

Admirable...

Is that really a good thing?

We locked eyes. Her gaze was as steady as ever, shining with the same murderous glint.

I did my best to dissuade her.

“There’s no need for you to prove your worth time and time again anymore,” and “You know better than anyone that you’re not going to be abandoned or shunned by the regressor now,” and “It’d be strange for the operations team leader of the National Road Management Corps to intervene in some little group of barely ten people,” and so on...

“Hmm.”

Perhaps my desperate plea got through to her. The quasi-psychopath nodded.

“Still, Mr. Matiz, you must secretly wish for me to quietly kill those folks you can’t be bothered to keep an eye on, and do so without leaving any trace—”

“No.”

“And then I could just say ‘I killed them because I wanted to, so what can you do about it, Mr. Matiz?’ and you still wouldn’t abandon me, so obviously killing them is the right—”

“No! That’s not it.”

“Are you certain?”

“I’m certain!”

“Are you absolutely certain?”

“Yes! You psycho!”

Ji-won stared at me silently with a stony face, then left. Even as she departed, her face kept that puzzled look of *This is odd. If I kill those small fry, it’d definitely be convenient for you, why do you keep refusing me like some tsundere?* all the way until she was out of sight.

Meanwhile, around that same time...

– [BusanAgentno.1] ChiefOh: O wandering souls of worldly tribulations, let us console you. All ye Buddhist faithful of the Korean Peninsula, unite!

SG Net was flooded with advertisements.

– [BusanAgentTower] BotongDaily: Master Monk Seok-hwa steps forward to save the masses! A vow to console wandering souls across the peninsula!

There were no Awakeners among the faithful following Seok-hwa. Naturally, they had no way to advertise their project on SG Net. And that was precisely what “agency services” were for.

These agencies were typically run by small fry with weaker abilities. They took money from ordinary people to post “ads” on SG Net on their behalf, scraping by to survive. They did more than just ads, though. They’d copy the novels serialized on SG Net’s Novel Serialization Board into text files and distribute them to regular folks.

(Some of the readers who would later be ambushed by Dok-seo were funneled in through these channels.)

Seok-hwa also used an agency.

– [BusanAgentGold] GeumMi-young: “Even ordinary people can perform exorcisms for the dead?!” Exclusive interview with Seok-hwa, master of funerary rites for the departed!

– [BusanAgentLegacy] sambaekwon: Seok-hwa says, “Reincarnation of Buddha? Nonsense. I am simply a Buddhist disciple, just like all of you.”

– [DaejeonAgentNo1] choice: The midway stop for the National Buddhist Pilgrimage Mass Funeral Procession! Daejeon! One hundred thousand believers exclaim: “We await Monk Seok-hwa!”

– [BusanAgentOriginal] Capital: Seok-hwa: “My compassion toward the dead is in no way inferior to an Awakener’s.” The Great Funeral Procession displays remarkable resolve... Donations pouring in.

It was a show of sheer quantity.

Realistically, for an ordinary person, paying these agencies was no small burden. Normally, thirty to a hundred people would pool their money to hire an agency, piece by piece. But for this particular project, Monk Seok-hwa was going all-in. It was as if all the hidden funds he’d been stashing away in his cult’s secret coffers were reserved for precisely this moment. He poured everything, without hesitation, into ad fees, all in the hope of escaping the

humiliating label of a “nobody streamer.”

The result?

– Anonymous: Is there anyone who wants to meet up regularly at a café for coffee? Mid-thirties since Awakening. Looking for casual friendship. My depth is 700m. (comments: 2)

– [Samcheon] WitchJudge: Couldn’t sleep last night, so I made a new song out of my late-night muse. Thoughts? (comments: 1,131)

– Anonymous: I’m with the National Road Management Corps but using Anonymous mode for a moment. If I quit my job now, can I leverage my experience to get recognized in a bigger guild? (comments: 41)

– [BusanAgentGold] GeumMi-young: “Even ordinary people can perform exorcisms for the dead?!” Exclusive interview with Seok-hwa, master of funerary rites for the departed! (comments: 1)

– [AtelierSalt] JustIncense: Regulars’ EVENT! Personalized custom fragrance design for you. First 5 people only. No proxy requests. Depth under 200m. (comments: 27)

– Anonymous: Wow, the Grand Witch’s new song is lit (comments: 3)

– Anonymous: I listened to the Great Witch’s new track... (comments: 1)

Astonishingly, no one cared at all.

Well, they were exactly fated to only zero comments. Every ad post got one comment each.

– OldManGoryeo: Ad spammer GTFO

A comment that, if anything, was worse than having none.

Incidentally, Ah-ryeon typically left comments on nearly any new post that came up on SG Net. That netizen-turned-resident ghost was essentially fused with the community. Could it be she was a

real Anomaly?

Anyway.

Effectively zero comments. Effectively zero interest.

Even Ji-won's unfeeling remark about "killing them all" was probably the biggest chunk of attention bestowed upon this so-called "National Buddhist Pilgrimage Mass Funeral Procession."

The days went by.

As mentioned, no one in Monk Seok-hwa and his ragtag band of eleven was an Awakener, meaning I couldn't simply track them down with the cheat code from the Saintess's Clairvoyance, specially designed for me.

Still, that was no problem.

"Hey, Ji-won. By now, that funeral group should've arrived in Daejeon. How's it look?"

"Ah, yes. They left Daejeon this morning. There are now only eight of them left."

Some had gotten sick of it and dropped out, apparently.

"Is Mr. Shin Su-bin still there?"

"He's alive. And so is Seok-hwa."

"...Good news, and also bad news."

The further they traveled, the more pathetic this so-called funeral procession became, and it wasn't just the group's size that was diminishing. The cult leader's wallet was taking a direct hit, in real time.

– [DaejeonAgentNo1] choice: A fervent send-off from Daejeon's Buddhist faithful for the National Buddhist Pilgrimage Funeral Procession! (Photo)

– [DaejeonAgentGalaxy] Team Leader Seo: An open sermon for the homeless... “Enlightenment transcends any literal sense of ‘Awakening,’ caring for oneself and others alike.” Monk Seok-hwa ties the bonds.

The number of ads dropped.

When they had first departed from Busan, they hired dozens of agencies for a full-blown PR blitz, but by the time they passed Changwon, Suncheon, Jeonju, and Daejeon, the ads kept decreasing in frequency.

Finally, upon arriving in Seoul...

– [NorthSeoulAgentOrigin] DongdaemunMarket: The Mass Funeral Procession arrives at the old capital city of the peninsula, Seoul! “Many sacrifices, many souls comforted.” Monk Seok-hwa’s sermon! A heartfelt resonance for those worn out by life.

Only one agency post remained on SG Net.

I chuckled wryly.

‘It was a gamble from the start.’

Jackpot or bust.

Had it been proven successful that “even ordinary people can track down and handle the dead through my teachings,” they’d have raked in a fair share of donations by the time they reached Seoul, for sure.

‘They were only counting on having enough budget to hold out until they hit Seoul.’

No looking back, just *go*. However, to their dismay, the project that had sounded somewhat plausible to them at the start backfired spectacularly.

The reason was simple.

“Mr. Matiz. You’re already taking enough—no, more than enough—

requests from ordinary people and holding funerals for the dead as you travel," Ji-won concluded. "For normal folk, anytime they want, they can submit a missing-person report to any city guild. If they don't trust the guild, they can wait for a National Road Management Corps caravan to pass by and file it there, right?"

They gather all that data and post it on the SG Net's missing-person board.

"Once a decent number of requests have accumulated, you choose the perfect time to personally go out there to conduct the funerals. Meanwhile, the fee is practically free or at least minimal, so it's all the reporters need to do."

She tilted her head.

"It's practically a no-cost funeral service performed by the world's top professional. No sane person would hand over their deceased loved one or friend's funeral to some random bald monk they've never heard of, not when someone like you is around."

"Mm."

"Trying to stir conflict by painting it as 'Awakeners vs. ordinary people' used to be a valid tactic, but with you dominating that 'funeral market,' there's no angle left for them. Reliability, price, convenience, accessibility—there's no area where they can overpower you."

The phrasing aside, that was essentially how things were.

Times had changed. In a distant past, when Monk Seok-hwa had riled up anti-Awakener sentiments, people had rallied behind him in droves. But now, it was the 802nd cycle. Unlike back then, the Korean Peninsula was filled with the forces I had spread across the land.

Just look at Yo-hwa of Sejong City or Ah-ryeon of Pyongyang. Have you ever once witnessed them acting like Awakeners reign supreme and normal humans are trash? (If anything, in Ah-ryeon's case, we might wonder if she's even a person at all. She's basically an

Anomaly, after all.)

The Korean Peninsula in the 5th cycle and in the 802nd cycle might as well be two different worlds. Whether there existed an immortal Udumbara virus or not, people had simply changed.

Only Seok-hwa. Only his boundless lust for power and prestige remained the same.

“Mr. Matiz, the group arrived in Pyongyang this morning.”

Despite running out of money back in Seoul, they still dragged themselves north.

“How many survivors?”

“Just three, counting Seok-hwa. Some parted ways along the route and settled in the cities.”

But, ah, Ji-won added.

“Mr. Shin Su-bin is still accompanying him.”

A few days later, a post appeared on SG Net:

– [Eastern Holy State] KindPerson: Guys, there’s a monk here who says he’s going to self-immolate at the upcoming Monster Wave?

I clicked the link immediately.

I’m just some random person who travels between Pyongyang and Sinuiju. Yesterday, I ran into this monk and one other person.

Honestly, at first I thought they were beggars lol. Their clothes were so dirty lol

But we ended up talking. I told them I was going up to Sinuiju, and they asked if they could come along. I asked why, because they’re normal folk, right?

He said he’s going to show “the demon army” the heart of the

Buddha or something, by self-immolating in front of them, talking about compassion and whatnot.

Demon army" = Monster Wave lol

Self-immolation = pouring oil on yourself and lighting yourself on fire, basically killing yourself lol

It sounds like total nonsense, but I've never met an ordinary person who wants a ride north just to do that, so it's kinda fire. I'm thinking of going with them, haha

---

I scrolled down to see a few comments.

– Anonymous: Nice checks out lol

– Anonymous: Letting some random normal person wander into Sinuiju is basically a death sentence

[Eastern Holy State] KindPerson: Eh what can I do if they're determined to crawl into a place that's basically hell coz they claim it's heaven? lolol

[Eastern Holy State] KindPerson: So yeah I'm going with them, whatever

– [Eastern Holy State] LowlyPerson: Oh, I think I saw that monk today too. Isn't their party all walking around with canes?

[Eastern Holy State] KindPerson: Yep that's them. Brother or sister in faith.

[Eastern Holy State] LowlyPerson: Surprising that they tolerated someone from another religion. They could've been hostile.

[Eastern Holy State] KindPerson: Must be thanks to the grace of the Saintess in the North.

[Eastern Holy State] LowlyPerson: Amen.

[Eastern Holy State] KindPerson: Amen.

– OldManGoryeo: Isn’t this the same so-and-so big-whatever group that set out from Busan?

[Eastern Holy State] KindPerson: Psh, a troll. The Saintess up north would just shake her head at scum like you. Ugh, so pitiful

OldManGoryeo: ?

My brow furrowed. And no, it wasn’t because of Ah-ryeon making my facial muscles twitch. I ran out of that centuries ago.

It was about Seok-hwa.

‘Self-immolation.’

Just as the post said, it meant setting one’s body on fire as a form of offering.

‘Who would’ve thought a bald monk like Seok-hwa would do that?’

Not once in any previous cycle had I heard something so bizarre.

Chapter 335

The Self-Immolator IV

Sinnoa

It wasn't as though the Buddhist world was only populated by shameless monks like Seok-hwa. In the countless loops I've been through, I inadvertently became well-versed in cults. After all, how many people out there have acquainted themselves with heretical sects from Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism alike as I have?

(Frankly, even if there were more like me, it'd be a problem.)

Thanks to that—or rather, as an unexpected bonus—whenever I met with high monks now and again, I could hold some rather profound conversations with them. There was a time I asked them this:

"Venerable Monk. Why do you practice Buddhism?"

That time, an elderly monk replied, "To die well!"

Indeed. If the purpose of a Christian is to go to Heaven, then for a Buddhist, the greatest task on earth is to be free of suffering in this shitty life. Birth, old age, sickness, death. There was nothing in life that wasn't painful, but among them, the absolute worst was undoubtedly the pain of death—the terror of one's own death, and the thoughts and reflections that terror brought. Naturally, for all Buddhists, the hardest challenge is liberation from the suffering of death.

The high monk I met sighed as well. "This is damn hard!"

That final moment. The instant of death that no human can avoid. Shorter than one second, right before my consciousness plunges into a pitch-black abyss—

That's when you let go of fear.

You accept, with not just your mind but also your heart, that

breathing and letting the breath slip away are both nothing more than the natural flow. You face it head-on—and in that sense, transcend. Go beyond. Maybe to make a jump away from this final millisecond apocalypse that monks devote their entire lives to meditating over in a cross-legged posture.

“But how do you prove you’ve transcended death, Venerable Monk? That’s something only you yourself can truly know, isn’t it?”

“Ah. Well, there’s no real need to prove it to others. But sometimes, for the sake of future disciples, you might want to show that it’s possible, right? The Buddha did that too. Compassion and all. In that case, we monks usually just go, like this, see? Sitting cross-legged as we kick the bucket.”

“Wow.”

“You maintain the exact same posture you had in life and keep it even after death. Right then, people can see, ‘Oh, for him, living and dying really were the same thing, and off he went.’ Something like that.”

Back then, I just nodded as I mused it over and the high monk burst out laughing.

“When we old monks are among ourselves, we joke about it. ‘Hey, you know, that phenomenon where a monk’s body doesn’t collapse even after death? Maybe it’s because we’ve sat in that same posture for 50 or 60 years till our muscles and bones stiffened in place.’”

“That could happen.”

“I think that’s actually true. The muscles just stiffen. But that half-century of practice spent stiffening those muscles was my life, you know? That’s what I studied for, that’s why I meditated. And so, that’s what I said at that time. If anyone points a finger at you to accuse your muscles of just stiffening, you just laugh back at them. Punks. You’re right, dammit. We worked our asses off to stiffen them!”

By the way, that high monk ranted quite a lot about Seok-hwa

behind his back every time we met, right up until the day he died.

Ah, even venerable monks can't resist trash-talking Seok-hwa.

'But now, that very same Seok-hwa isn't just dying. He's apparently going to perform self-immolation, no less?'

Self-immolation. Burning one's body.

Of course, even for a seasoned master who has supposedly transcended all sorts of pain, self-immolation is no easy task. I've also died by burning a few times, so I know that truth very well. It's unbelievably painful.

'Just sitting cross-legged and passing away is already regarded as attaining nirvana. Imagine pouring fire on top of that.'

There's no doubt it's the highest realm of enlightenment. It is an act of dedicating one's self to the world, to others, and to the seed of the Buddha-nature found in all beings.

Once again, I tilted my head.

'He says he is going to do that?'

Was it all bullshit, or was it for real?

Probably bullshit, if you asked me.

In an ordinary modern setting, when people speculated over truths and falsehoods, they'd just assume it was a lie and move on because they were busy going to work. But since I'm a regressor, I just skipped work.

In other words, I chose curiosity.

"Commander Noh. Sorry, but I'm leaving today's and tomorrow's duties to you."

"What? Where—?"

"I'll bring back some ice cream on my way."

“Wait, just a minute. Hey? Hey, you asshole! Where the hell do you think—?!”

I, the Undertaker, who has experienced all kinds of deaths over millennia, a sommelier of death, a Baskin-Robbins of death, a Faker of death—how could I not be intrigued?

I was honest with myself.

‘A regressor can’t resist meddling with Seok-hwa.’

As soon as I saw the news on SG Net, my legs were already carrying me to the designated location for the self-immolation, north to Sinuiju.

Sinuiju in this era was more or less known as the biggest “military city” on the Korean Peninsula. Wave after wave of monsters would come from the continent side whenever they felt like it, handing in their complaints as they asked, *Excuse me, is immigration to this place possible?*

So perhaps that was why. In the Eastern Holy State, Sinuiju was considered one of the cities with the most devout believers, along with Pyongyang. Paladins armed with faith in Mo Gwang-seo and the Saintess roamed about. It was a strict, solemn atmosphere.

Contrastingly, there was a disproportionately developed red-light district to provide soldiers with adequate rest.

But on that day, Sinuiju saw an unfamiliar sight for the very first time.

(Monk) Venerable Seok-hwa’s Nirvana Self-Immolation (Event)

There it was—colorful, bold, and right in the heart of the front line that blocks the monstrous armies.

They’d hung up a banner.

By the way, in this era, banners weren’t mass-printed but instead were all handmade. They even hired a professional to paint lotus

flowers on it with utmost care.

Surely by now, Seok-hwa's wallet must have been bled dry. Where did the money for that come from?

"I-I... I painted it for free."

Somehow, Ah-ryeon was already at my side. As if to remind everyone this was her own front yard, she was wearing her official Saintess attire.

"Northern Saintess" mode, ON.

Even the cheesy pizza smell that usually wafted from her hair now smelled a bit cleaner, more like butter croissants.

"A-are you saying you painted it for free?"

"Yes, y-yes. I mean, I'm the Saintess. And that lotus design is literally a sacred painting..."

"Why'd you do that?"

"Well, you know, the notion that if some penniless nobody burns himself, the demonic forces might tremble in awe and bow to the Buddha... Th-this is a super fun, massive-scale event we can't miss, right? So I deliberately upped the scale. See, wasn't that a smart move?"

For crying out loud.

Truly ridiculous. I'd sent her up here to the Eastern Holy State to do some real work, and she'd wasted time chasing cheap thrills. Talk about dereliction of duty.

"U-um, well, Guild L-Leader, you're obviously dumping your duties on the Commander yourself and running away..."

"You got any popcorn?"

"Caramel, butter, or soy sauce?"

“Caramel.”

“Ehehe…”

A pair of dopamine addicts formed on the spot.

With the Saintess of the Eastern Holy State in attendance, there was no room for interference. The Holy State’s paladins instantly transformed into event staff, organizing the venue.

In the center of it all sat the bald monk, Seok-hwa.

“Ah.” When his eyes met mine, they slowly grew bigger. “My, Undertaker. Isn’t that Undertaker?”

“Long time no see.”

In the time we hadn’t seen each other, Seok-hwa had become noticeably thinner. In past loops, he’d always been plump and oily, but now his cheeks and arms were dried up like roasted squid. His monk’s robes, which were always neatly laundered in the past, were now rather shabby. The thick cloth couldn’t fully hide the grime staining it.

Meanwhile, where once Ah-ryeon had looked ragged and never got accepted by any proper guild, now she was dressed in the finest garments imaginable.

‘Truly, the vicissitudes of life.’

Seok-hwa staggered toward me with an exaggerated wobble. “Undertaker… It is you, yes.”

“What is it you want to say?”

“I have nothing left. All I have left is this.”

Abruptly, he grabbed both my hands. A faint scent emanated from his face, like the smell of something scorched—an air of mental precariousness.

“They say when a person undergoes excruciating pain, they achieve

enlightenment. Awakening. Yes, Awakening is also a sign of enlightenment, is it not? Wouldn't you agree?"

A strange, nearly indescribable fire burned in Seok-hwa's eyes, which had gone dry to the point of losing all moisture.

"I will do it. Self-immolation. And I shall boldly achieve enlightenment in the presence of the Buddha."

You might not notice it from text alone, but as he spoke, his voice was so low it was barely audible. All rasps and hisses, that sort of sound. It was nearly impossible to hear him clearly.

Ah-ryeon only tilted her head in confusion from where she stood right beside me.

"I find Mo Gwang-seo suspicious. The Second Coming of Jesus, they say? Ha. That can't be. That idiot can't possibly be... He simply awakened when he was blown up."

Neither of us responded.

"It's all lies. All bullshit. This Eastern Holy State or whatever, it's a damn cult. I'm the only one who sees it for what it is. Undertaker. Tell me, does any of this make sense? Does it?"

Inwardly, I was surprised. His rambling sounded like nonsense, yet in fact it pierced the core of the Eastern Holy State. Probably a case of a blind squirrel stumbling upon a nut, but still.

"These masses... They can't recognize a rabble-rouser, nor can they recognize a truly remarkable man. I'm going to make them come to their senses. Just watch, Undertaker. I, Seok-hwa, the most faithful disciple of Shakyamuni, will bring the East back into the Buddha's embrace."

He staggered, about to turn away. I grabbed his shoulder, holding him in place.

"Wait. What happened to your right leg?"

When he approached me earlier, he was swaying so badly from side

to side. The cause lay in his right foot.

From the ankle down, Seok-hwa's foot was "gone." His toes and achilles tendon were replaced by a prosthetic device, one I found extremely familiar.

It was a device belonging to patient Shin Su-bin. Something Do-hwa had once made for him.

"Ah. My foot?" With a slow blink, Seok-hwa answered, "That happened when I crossed the 38th Parallel. You know how the area is a literal minefield, yes?"

"No, I mean how did a device belonging to Shin Su-bin end up in your possession, Venerable Monk?"

"Ah, that. Right, he gave it to me. He said he didn't mind moving around on crutches, so I should take it. Heh. It doesn't fit too well since it's old, but living without it wouldn't be so bad for a monk anyway."

He wobbled and lifted his right foot. The worn-out prosthetic squeaked like a cricket as he swayed.

"It's better than nothing, so I'm just borrowing it for now. Why? Does it bother you, Undertaker? Is there something on your mind?"

My lips parted momentarily.

...That's not just some scrap device. It's custom-built by Noh Do-hwa for Shin Su-bin. For him, that's not just a machine, it's like his actual foot.

...Giving that prosthetic to you wasn't just handing over a piece of hardware, it was practically an act of offering part of himself.

...Furthermore, it's a symbolic link that ties Su-bin to someone with real power: Commander Noh. Some people might take lifelong pride in that connection, treat it like a piece of their own identity, or at least trot it out as a good drinking story.

...But you have no clue. Probably because Su-bin never even

bragged about it once, not even for a laugh.

I shut my mouth.

Did I have the right to tell him the truth? Even if I did, would it mean anything?

“Nothing at all.”

“Really?” he asked.

“...How is Su-bin these days?”

“Hm? Well, yes. He came with me to Sinuiju. Saw him this morning, as a matter of fact. He’s probably around somewhere.”

As I suspected, Seok-hwa had zero interest in someone “like” Su-bin. What could it matter that the man had literally walked across the country with him, risking his life all the way? In the game in Seok-hwa’s mind, his quest for influence, someone like Shin Su-bin was just an NPC easily replaced at any time.

“If... If Buddha helps me attain enlightenment...”

A dried foam had crusted around his lips.

“I’ll transform this land. What’s so great about being the Commander? Ruling over that tiny Busan, what’s the point of that? A man has to have a broad ambition. Busan, Daejeon, Sejong, Pyongyang, Sinuiju... Beyond that, even. That Noh Do-hwa or Mo Gwang-seo—once I’m awakened, I’ll accomplish so, so much more than them. That is the karma I must bear. Undertaker! I’m going to create a Pure Land for all the people, you hear?”

He muttered like he was chanting a sutra.

“I know full well you never liked me.”

I stayed silent.

“But just watch. Everything will be different once I awaken. Truly, wait and see.”

Glaring, Seok-hwa added one final thing.

“I’ll spend one whole night here, then tomorrow at dawn, I shall offer myself to the Buddha in flames. Please, Undertaker, bear witness…”

He looked as if he could no longer be hurt by anyone or anything.

Chapter 336

The Self-Immolator V

Sinnoa

When you've lived a long time as a regressor, you end up experiencing all sorts of bizarre things quite often. Take, for example, Seok-hwa, who was already camping out on the altar so he could burn his body at dawn the next day.

"Why were we even assigned to watch over that old man?"

"No idea. It's an order from above."

"Damn it. Must be a pretty famous monk down south, I guess."

Deep in the darkness of night, two guards tossed their chit chat onto a fire as though it were kindling. The bonfire crackled and babbled as its red flames licked at the air.

"Honestly, though, he doesn't look like a venerable monk at all. Just an old beggar..."

"Our Saintess sure is broad-minded. She's letting him do whatever he wants, no matter the religion."

"True enough."

One of the guards yawned loudly then called out, "Hey! Monk! Should we bring you anything for a late-night snack? Maybe some sweet potatoes?"[1]

Seok-hwa gave no response except the soft rattle of the prayer beads rolling in his right hand.

The guard scowled. "Whoa, hey. A person asks you a question and you don't even answer? What, you think we ordinary folk aren't worth your time or something?"

“Leave it,” his companion warned. “He’s going to die tomorrow anyway, so what’s the point?”

“True. If he eats a sweet potato now, I guess we’ll see roasted sweet potato coming out of his guts later on.” Then the guard burst into laughter.

I was seated a bit farther away, in the audience seating that had been set up in advance for the self-immolation ceremony.

‘I could never have imagined this would happen from past cycles…’

Sure, the guards might have dismissed Seok-hwa as just another “crazy old man,” but to the eyes of a regressor, he appeared in a very different light. To me, Seok-hwa was not simply a shabby old man.

‘He was once a human who stood at the pinnacle of power and luxury on the Korean Peninsula, and now look at him.’

That obsession. That madness.

‘Will Seok-hwa truly be able to Awaken?’

That was when it happened.

Someone approached the platform. Their silhouette was hidden by darkness, but I could see they were limping, leaning on a crutch under their right arm.

The silhouette spoke.

“I got ahold of some things for you, Monk.”

“What in the world?!”

Boom! Until now, Seok-hwa had been silently fiddling with his prayer beads. Suddenly, he boomed like a train engine.

“What took you so long?! Layman! How could this take all day?!”

“I’m sorry. I ran out of money, so I had to run my tail off

scrounging the things up. These days, even hammers and nails are a tad rare."

"Haven't you heard of simply asking that— that Saintess or whatever who's in charge here? Why go around searching on foot?!"

"Come on, we can't do that. Right? They're already doing us a huge favor by letting us use this space at all. To shamelessly beg them for random junk..."

"Oh, you're killing me! Old folks and youngsters just don't speak the same language, I swear. Give it here!"

Seok-hwa rudely snatched the bundle from the person who'd brought it.

I got up from the audience seats and walked a bit closer. Thanks to that, I managed to get a glimpse of what was in the bundle.

A hammer. Long, thick nails. Ropes.

"Watch closely, Layman Shin Su-bin."

The monk swung the hammer.

"This is the will of me, Seok-hwa, the top disciple of the Buddha!"

Claaang!

The guards jumped in alarm. The clang of metal broke sharply through the dark around the campfire.

"Wh-what the hell?"

"No idea. Hey! Over there! What do you think you're doing?!"

Claaang!

Seok-hwa neither answered nor acknowledged them. He just kept hammering in nails one after another.

"Namu Amitabha."

Claaang!

There was no question what he was nailing. It was the “monk’s robe” he was wearing down to the “platform” floor. Why? The reason was just as obvious. Once dawn broke, he intended to self-immolate. To prevent his body from flinching or struggling even slightly during the act, he was forcibly securing himself to the floor.

“Namu Amitabha.”

Claaang!

He hammered the edges of his own robe to the platform and wound his body tightly with rope. Each time nails and rope threaded together, he muttered his mantra.

Both the guards and I were stunned into silence for a while.

‘Has there ever been a monk who carried out his self-immolation in that manner?’

Not as far as I’d heard.

Yes, in Buddhism, self-immolation was just one form of ridding oneself of all attachments. Trying too hard to succeed at the self-immolation itself, ironically, meant failing to cast off attachment.

‘It’s completely absurd…’

Kaaang!

Yet despite his withered arms, Seok-hwa managed to hammer in dozens of nails. Between heavy pants, he declared, “Now! Neither demons nor the Devil Army of 1.8 billion fiends shall ever interrupt the great nirvana of me, the Venerable Seok-hwa!”

A hoarse voice rasped out from between his dried, cracked lips.

“I, this humble monk, shall be reborn in Sakyamuni’s embrace tomorrow as the Wheel-Turning King! Children of the peninsula! You from the East! You shall bear witness to me! You shall see!”

His voice rattled through air his body could no longer sustain, leaking breath at the seams in the form of coughs. Then Seok-hwa's head dropped as though a string had been cut. His strength gave out, and he slumped, unconscious.

After a while, the guards recovered from their shock and started whispering to each other.

"What the— Holy shit, man."

"I know, right? That old monk's completely nuts. I've been stationed here for a while, and I haven't seen a weirdo like that in ages."

"Exactly. This land must be cursed. Why is it that in every town, there's a different God and a different Buddha?"

"And people like him always get possessed by Anomalies in the end."

The campfire sizzled down.

The night was passing.

Before dawn, I had a moment to speak alone with the patient, Shin Su-bin.

"Sir."

"Huh? Oh dear. Well, if it isn't our Undertaker."

A half-bloom of delight appeared on Su-bin's face.

Perhaps it was the toll that trek across the country had taken. Su-bin looked painfully thin, much like Seok-hwa. Yet—

"Yes, it's been a while, sir. This might sound odd, but you look well."

"Huh? Oh ho. Oh ho ho! Guess I did a lot of walking, so I must've gotten some exercise. When you're my age, you gotta keep walking,

keep moving.”

How to put it?

If Seok-hwa looked timber stricken with pine wilt disease, then Su-bin’s body looked like a well-honed wooden spear. Even though he had to keep himself upright on crutches, you could glimpse firm triceps in his thin right arm.

“Sir, I heard.”

“Heard what?”

“About your prosthetic device. Apparently, you handed yours over to that person.”

“Ah…”

In that moment, you could see Su-bin flinch a little. His expression was a transparent one. He had the face of a model student caught doing something bad by the teacher they were friendly with.

“Don’t tell Noh Do-hwa, all right…?”

“Can you tell me why you gave it away?”

“Well, think about it. I lost my leg quite a while ago, right? So I know how to get around on a missing limb, and even before I met Noh Do-hwa, I managed fine with a crutch. It’s second nature now.”

“Hmm.”

“But that monk lost his foot crossing the 38th Parallel. If you think about it, who’s gonna have a harder time right now: someone who only recently had their foot blown off or someone who’s been missing it for ages? So I just gave it to the monk. A good item should go to whoever needs it the most.”

For a moment, I only stared. “I see. So that’s what I’ll tell Noh Do-hwa, yes?”

At once, Su-bin made a face like he was about to cry. “Oh! No, no,

Undertaker! Please don't tell her, okay? That'd make her upset! We can't have that."

"That would put me in a bind."

"Come on, you just take good care of Noh Do-hwa for me. She's been through so much—I can't help but worry about her. Still, I'm glad you're by her side, Undertaker. Really glad."

"She curses at me every time she sees me, though."

"That's her way of caring, you know. Right? I've lived a long time, and I've never met anyone as warmhearted as our Do-hwa."

"Hmm." If Do-hwa herself had heard that, her face would have contorted all eighty muscles into the perfect anatomical depiction of disgust. "I'll be sure to relay your words to her."

"Okay, then."

The campfire burned out. Before dawn in Sinuiju, the only remaining flame flickering was the beacon fire set by Nenet. And so, the conversation that had briefly blossomed between Su-bin and me also slowly wilted.

After all, people started gathering, right on schedule.

(Ritual) Venerable Monk Seok-hwa's Nirvana Self-Immolation (Event)

It was still only around five or six in the morning, yet the faces of the Sinuiju citizens were full of vitality and their voices buzzing with murmurs. After the apocalypse arrived, everyone's circadian rhythm shifted to that of bright, energetic "model adults," so to speak.

"What? A monk's gonna burn himself?"

"It's not 'burn himself.' It's called self-immolation, you ignorant fool."

"I read on SG Net that he traveled from Busan all the way to Seoul, exorcising the dead on the way up. Says he's not even an

Awakener.”

“Oh, so he’s a holy figure.”

“Think I’ll be late for work?”

Several knights under the Saintess of the Eastern Holy State also turned up.

“Please stand back! Stand back!”

“If a stray Anomaly clings to the fire, the flames might spread beyond our control. Please keep a safe distance!”

For the record, the knight order showed up along with Ah-ryeon, and the crowd erupted in wild cheers, which caused quite a scene—but I’ll spare you the details. Dwelling on that would only lead to Ah-ryeon boasting an unpleasant smile. The world was already overdosing on “Ah-ryeon content,” so further detailing it would be detrimental to the readers’ mental health.

“...formisnootherthanemptinessemptinessnootherthanformformisonlyemptin

Perhaps awakened where he sat on the platform by the commotion of the gathering crowd, Seok-hwa had begun chanting the Heart Sutra. The pitch, rhythm, and cadence of his chanting were surprisingly on point.

Typically, when monks realize, *Oh, I’ll starve if I don’t pick up a side job as a minstrel*, they start training in chanting as a matter of survival skill. A similar parallel would be a wannabe painter honing their speech and presentation skills.

“Oh dear.” With a sigh, Su-bin rose, leaning on his crutch. “Guess I’ll get going, Undertaker.”

“Why not stay here and watch?”

“Somebody’s gotta rub him down with fuel.”

I didn’t respond.

Now that I thought about it— I'd spent a whole day observing them, but aside from Su-bin, there wasn't a single other devotee or companion around Seok-hwa. The original group of the eleven Nationwide Pilgrimage for Uniting Buddhist Devotion departing Busan had either all died or deserted, leaving only one survivor.

"He's a lonely man."

I was picturing their rough journey in my mind when the knock of Su-bin's voice tapped my eardrum.

"Pardon?"

"Monk Seok-hwa, I mean." Su-bin's gaze was locked on the platform. "He doesn't have anyone to talk to. No real friends. Yesterday morning, I was the only one left to share a meal with him... I tried telling him twice not to go through with this self-immolation. He doesn't listen. He's too stubborn. There were so many good people who passed by, more than ten who said they'd walk alongside him, but I guess that wasn't enough for him."

I looked up at his eyes and realized it then. I might have been operating under a ridiculous assumption all along.

'I thought Shin Su-bin was lonely, so a sly swindler monk took advantage of him... Was I wrong?'

I figured it was an example of a standard cult tactic. Exploiting an old person's solitude was practically Lesson One in a con artist's handbook. But the tone and the look in Su-bin's eyes, directed toward the platform now, suggested a different interpretation.

If...

'He saw how lonely Seok-hwa was and decided to stay by his side as a willing companion.'

If there was never a time when Shin Su-bin got manipulated by any sly cult technique...

"He's so sure he'd Awaken that way. But I think it's all pointless. Look at Noh Do-hwa. She's an Awakener. Do you think she's any

happier for having Awakened?”

“...I don’t see much connection either way.”

“Right. Enlightenment doesn’t fall from heaven just because you pray with sincerity. Isn’t Guan Seum Bosal, Avalokitesvara supposed to be in hell, not heaven?”[2]

Su-bin pushed into his crutch like a cane and limped away.

“It’s all hell. Everywhere is hell.”

I watched him go in silence.

“I’ll try talking to him one last time. Honestly, I don’t think I’ll be able to convince him. But pray for me, Undertaker. I’ve seen you, and I think you’re a true Buddha. Namu Amitabha, Guan Seum Bosal. Namu Amitabha, Guan Seum Bosal...”

Su-bin waded through the crowd with stuttering steps. Soon enough, his small figure was submerged under the throng of people. Then as quickly as he disappeared, he reappeared on the platform, guided by a holy knight. Su-bin said something or other to Seok-hwa, who was in the midst of chanting the Heart Sutra.

“... ..., ...”

“... ...!”

“... ... ...”

“... ...!”

There’s no need to record what they said. A wave remains a wave whether or not it crashes upon some shore, but words that fail to hit their mark remain noise.

Such was the noise we heard.

Sssshhhhkk!

Seok-hwa himself opened the cap of a gasoline canister and poured

it over his own head. Yellowish fuel dribbled down his face. When he opened his mouth, a thin film of fuel pulled apart.

Drenched in gasoline, he shouted.

“Light the fire!”

Footnotes:

1 - Calling out a sweet potato moment is Korean slang for saying that things have started to drag and get boring.

2 - Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Gwaneum bosal) is the Buddhist deity of mercy and compassion who, in some traditions, transforms himself into thirty-three forms to save all beings from suffering. He also leads them to the Pure Land Paradise of the Buddha Amitabha.

Chapter 337
The Self-Immolator VI

Sinnoa

CONTENT WARNING: This chapter contains depictions of self-harm, suicide, and torture that readers may find disturbing. Reader discretion is advised.

As soon as Seok-hwa opened his mouth, the stench of gasoline spread in all directions. Oil trickled across his face, streaming from his head downward.

“Hurry! Set my body ablaze— Oooh!”

Yellow droplets burst in quick succession as the thin film of oil clinging to his parted lips kept bursting and re-forming each time he raised his voice. The spectators stirred at the eerie sight.

“Uh, uhhh...”

“He’s really going to start a fire!”

“Step back, please! It’s dangerous, move back! Everyone behind me, get back!”

“Whoooa, look at that, whoooa!”

Chaos overtook the scene. No onlooker could tear their eyes away from the monk, and Seok-hwa, as though the fluid covering him were not gasoline but the crowd’s excitement and attention made manifest, pressed his palms together with supreme confidence.

“...gategateparagateparasamgatebodhisvahagategateparagateparasamgate...

“This is it! Everyone be on guard!”

The knight in charge of the ceremony—nicknamed “the kind one” on SG Net—lit a torch with a quick puff. He stood over two meters

tall, so raising the torch was in itself a show of impressive might, drawing exclamations of awe from the crowd.

The knight turned his head. There, stooped close to Seok-hwa, was the last person remaining at his side: Old Man Shin.

“Sir, you need to come out of there now!”

“Oh dear...”

“Hurry! Should I help you out?”

But before the knight could say more, the monk slick with oil snapped at them himself. “Begone!”

Normal ears likely couldn’t make out the sound drowned by the cheers and noise of the crowd, but Su-bin’s plea reached mine clearly.

“Oh no, Monk, don’t do this.”

“Get lost! You hypocrite! The Buddha awaits this humble monk!” Seok-hwa’s eyes, glistening with oil, shone like a ravenous leopard at night as he cried, “Lowly mortal, you have no place standing in my way!”

Su-bin glanced around once. Then, bowing his head to Seok-hwa—or maybe to the hundreds of onlookers, or even to the sky—he slowly retreated backward.

“Namu Amitabha, Kwan Seum Bosal...”

Once even Su-bin had stepped away, the knight who had guided Seok-hwa from Pyongyang to Sinuiju shouted, “Fire!”

“...gategateparagateparasamgatebodhisvahagate...”

He tossed the torch toward Seok-hwa. As the flaming torch traced a parabolic arc, the crowd’s uproar reached a peak.

“Fiiire—!”

To my eyes, the torch seemed to float slowly through the air.

“Young man.”

In a very distant past from the 53rd cycle, back when I first got to know the old man named Su-bin, I was working as an assistant in Do-hwa’s workshop. One evening, as the world was nearing destruction, Su-bin had gone out of his way, hobbling on his bad leg to come by the workshop.

“Aigoo, so our young assistant is still in Busan, huh? Eh? Why are you still here? Eh? And Noh Do-hwa too. How come young people like you are still here? Oh dear...”

Why?

Why did the old man remain in Busan, at the very brink of doomsday, instead of fleeing to another city like most? And why visit the workshop?

Was it loneliness?

“Young man. Let me off here.”

No.

If he’d come simply because he was consumed by loneliness, he wouldn’t have gotten out of the car halfway, refusing to let me drop him off at his home. Back then, he refused my help and went off by himself.

“This is far enough. You go on back.”

He left on his own.

Hence a hypothesis arose: What if it wasn’t because he was lonely but the opposite?

In the final moments of the world, maybe he worried that “Noh Do-hwa” or “me” would be lonely, so he came by to check on us?

“Thank you, young man. You’re worried about Noh Do-hwa, right?”

But I was there with Do-hwa in the workshop. Two of us, together, prepared to face the end.

Perhaps he was reassured by that. He saw that the two people who concerned him most were already in place, saying their final farewells as they should.

“Then this path is not yours.”

“We must each go our own way.”

And so, he departed without regrets.

A regressor is doomed to be lonely.

Do-hwa also had built her life to be like an isolated island in the corner of the world. Perhaps she caught the old man’s eye because of that.

If ever there exists someone willing to endure minor discomforts “like missing a leg,” then you can’t simply graft a piece of your heart onto them. Time is all you can lend. And maybe that old man was always ready to spend his remaining days with whomever looked loneliest in his world.

‘Ah.’

Even if someone looked like a vagrant, or a madman consumed by old, greedy desires, or perhaps someone with neither power nor fame nor many believers—maybe in that old man’s eyes, he was merely a “lonely person.”

Fwoooosh!

My train of thought blazed up like the flames.

The fire ignited the oil before the torch even made contact, and the built-in kindling—namely, Seok-hwa himself—began to consume him.

“G-aaaaargh!”

A shriek rang out.

“Uh? Uh—?”

“What the hell?”

Hundreds of onlookers recoiled.

Seok-hwa’s scream slashed through the air like a razor, grating the atmosphere around the ceremony site.

His cry...

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh!”

His cry carried the sound of unimaginable agony.

Everyone who had come at dawn had arrived with some measure of expectation in their wake. Would the monk really succeed in self-immolation? Perhaps it’d be interesting to watch. A person couldn’t possibly endure the pain of burning alive...

But a real scream always shatters your expectations with its searing edge.

“Gyaaaaaah, ahh, aaaargh! *AAAAAHHH!*”

Pain bled into the crowd on the back of a raw human voice, on the stench of burning flesh, the smell of oil, a crackling blaze. Every gap in the air flayed by the monk’s razor-edged scream seemed to bleed gaseous gore.

As humans can sense suffering simply by hearing it—the “Kwan Seum” principle—the entire ceremony site shook with Seok-hwa’s howl.

Clang, clang, clang!

And yet, from the onlookers’ perspective, an even stranger sound rose.

Clang, clang, clang, clang!

One might expect a person in such agony to thrash around, roll on the ground, do anything—but strangely, Seok-hwa did not budge. Even now, as his entire body burned, his seated posture remained rigid. Only his body and the platform rattled violently, as if they had been pinned together.

"*Aaaaaaaaah!*"

Clang, clang, clang, clang, clang!

The monk shrieked and the spectators couldn't fathom it. The only reason he could keep seated, legs folded, was that he'd spent the night hammering nails and binding himself with rope. Naturally, everyone was dumbstruck.

"Sh-should we help him?"

Just going by the screaming, it seemed they should.

"But look at his posture... He's staying so straight. Isn't that some incredible level of discipline? He's enduring the fire—it's just his voice that's breaking."

From his stance alone, that would be a reasonable assumption to make.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah-AHHHH!"

Clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang!

The mismatch of sight and sound. No one knew if he was begging for rescue or wanting applause for managing to remain still despite the flames.

It baffled the crowd.

"Is he an Anomaly...?"

Someone muttered, "An Anomaly?"

"Look, the monk is trying to hold on, but he's screaming non-stop... Maybe some Anomaly leaped into him the moment he caught fire,

copying his voice?”

“Oh.”

“Well, it’s a situation Anomalies would love, for sure.”

“I heard he traveled from Busan, exorcising all sorts of wandering souls. Maybe they’re cursing him now.”

“Wow, so that means he’s enduring all those wrathful spirits while still sitting there?”

“Hang in there, Monk!” another shouted through cupped hands. “Stay strong!”

“Don’t lose to those Anomalies!”

“You can do it, Monk! Fight on!”

Amazingly, though it seemed absurd at a glance, they might very well have hit on a partial truth, for Seok-hwa burned for far too long.

“*Aaaahhhh!*”

Under normal conditions, the flames should have instantly scorched his throat and tongue to ash. At the very least, the wooden platform he was on should have turned to charcoal. Yet for some reason, his screaming and the platform’s burning continued beyond five minutes, as did the crowd’s heated cheers.

“Hold on, Monk! You can do it!”

Could Seok-hwa hear their voices? The cheers and support from the throng, which he had coveted so deeply, resounding across the entire ceremony ground...?

Ah—aaaah—ahhh—aaah——

After about ten minutes, the screaming ceased.

Seok-hwa had lost every organ that could produce sound—his

lungs, throat, tongue, and teeth had all melted away. His muscles, which trembled spasmodically while nailed to the platform, were likewise consumed by flame.

Finally, the fire died down. On the char-blackened platform floor, the seated form remained in its meditative posture, charred into a coal-black statue.

“Heh.”

A murmur of awe drifted among the spectators.

“So he really was a venerable monk, after all.”

“Right? He kept his form flawlessly.”

“Enduring self-immolation even while some Anomaly latched on, that’s some potent spiritual power.”

“They say he was from Busan, right?”

“Will this really stop the Monster Wave…?”

“If we open that up, bet we’ll find a bucketful of relics.”

Some onlookers pressed their palms together toward the monk who had burned himself in the Eastern Holy State’s territory like admiring a performer who staged an intense show so early in the morning.

“Namu Amitabha, Kwan Seum Bosal.”

“May you be reborn in Paradise, Monk.”

“Namu Amitabha…”

People gradually dispersed.

Once the crowd’s wall dissolved, I got a better view of the remains of Seok-hwa, the blackened statue of his body. Though all of him was burned to cinders, every part of the human shape stayed intact, save for his right foot, which should have been empty.

The prosthetic made by Do-hwa was no match for the flames and had burned away completely.

I silently glanced around.

(Ritual) Venerable Monk Seok-hwa's Nirvana Self-Immolation (Event)

Under the flapping banner in the sky—

In the nearly deserted ceremony ground, after the audience had dispersed—

No matter where I looked, Shin Su-bin was nowhere to be seen.

There is an epilogue.

"So..."

A few days after I returned to the National Road Management Corps HQ, I found Do-hwa glaring at me.

"You're saying you visited for fun, basically sightseeing while some guy got roasted alive in a big cozy 'bonfire session,' and then came back...?" she asked.

"Hey now, that makes it sound like I took pleasure in someone's death, like I'm Yu Ji-won. Please be more mindful of your phrasing."

In the corner, Ji-won quietly raised her head, puzzled.

For reference, Do-hwa had dark circles under her eyes and was petting her dog as if it were some government-approved narcotic. No, some source of healing. This official "state-level dog" also had "Doctor" in its name, and maybe one day, I'll have the chance to talk more about it.

"Anyway, I wanted to find Old Man Shin and bring him back, but he vanished. So here I am, back alone."

"Hmm..."

“Oh, right. Fear not, I haven’t forgotten your gift. Here, it’s Melona.[1] A handmade ice cream recipe replicated faithfully via regressor’s knowledge.”

“Get out…”

Weird. This gift always thrilled Seo-rin. Maybe I should have tried a B.B.Big bar instead? I’d keep that in mind for next cycle.

As I left (but not before handing the Melona instead to Ji-won), Do-hwa’s voice caught me by the neck.

“Ah. Leave, fine, but come back tomorrow. I’ve got something to give you…”

“Hmm.” I looked back at Ji-won. “Ji-won, is that telling me to leave or not? As the director’s right-hand woman, I’d like your reading on this.”

“Take the words at face value, Mr. Matiz,” she replied, tearing open the Melona wrapper (perfectly reproduced, by the way) with a blank look. “She asked you to leave for today, then come again tomorrow. Just interpret it plainly, please. As for how the director’s feelings are involved, that’s best left aside.”

“Oh.”

“Damn it, now you’re double-teaming me with your nonsense…”

A day passed.

When I arrived at HQ the next day, no sooner had I opened the door than something solid came flying at my face. I reflexively caught it.

It was a long-shaped box.

“What’s this?”

Do-hwa eyed me, still hunched over in that same slouch. “It’s Old Man Shin’s prosthetic…”

“Ah.”

“Sounds like that monk—whatever his name was—burned it to a crisp, right? So you can deliver it yourself. It won’t be the same as me fitting it personally, but it’s a decent enough device…” Then she muttered, “Well, that’s all a typical prosthetic is really for, anyway. Right…?”

I didn’t need Ji-won’s help interpreting that.

She’d let me off for ditching my job and running away on the condition that I personally deliver the prosthetic to the patient. I could accept those terms. Besides, leaving Su-bin without a proper goodbye had bothered me a bit.

“All right. If you prefer, I can carry you all the way to Sinuiju, so you can see him for yourself—”

“Stop. I mean it, shut up…”

And so I did.

Su-bun had vanished from the ceremony site, but I wasn’t too worried about finding him again. At least, not until I was about to ask Ji-won to check with the Saintess’s Telepathy for a location beacon.

[Ms. Yu Ji-won says he does show up on the Mini-Map, but something’s off.]

I tilted my head. “Off how?”

[He’s located in some hill near Sinuiju, and it hasn’t moved at all. He’s completely stationary.]

“Huh? That’s definitely strange.”

[Right?]

Before the apocalypse, the world beyond one’s blanket was where danger lay. Nowadays, it’s “outside the city.” People flocked together in cities these days for a reason. Stepping outside a city’s

boundaries drastically raised your odds of vanishing into the Void. Sure, traveling from one city to the next was dangerous, but to sit around on a random hillside that wasn't even on a national road, and without budging?

"All right, I'll go. Keep giving me directions, please."

[Got it.]

I hurried on. Not far beyond the roads maintained by the National Road Management Corps, the scenery grew glum. Living shadows took note of my presence, then skittered away the moment they sensed me.

'This way.'

A faint trail of footprints, a left foot and a crutch, plus wheel marks scattered like stepping stones led me on.

They were barely visible. Ordinary folks would have missed them.

'But it's enough.'

I came upon a low hill where sparse brush left the view wide open. Following the direction from the Mini-Map to the very end, I found a broad slab of rock.

There, a figure that seemed to be Shin Su-bin lay burnt to death.

I heard the Saintess's quick intake of breath as her sight took in mine.

I carefully checked the boulder's surroundings. Where...? Where had he found it? A gasoline can identical to the one used to burn Seok-hwa lay askew, giving off that same odor.

Shin Su-bin's body knelt on the rock, hands clasped as if respectfully praying to someone, or something.

'Self-immolation.'

Out here.

In a lonely hillside no one would ever see.

With no disciple, no companion, no onlookers.

Alone.

Silent.y, I set the prosthetic box on the stone. Then I dropped onto the grass with a thump.

It was by chance that I ended up directly facing him—Shin Su-bin, whose burned body was pointed at the sky in prayer.

"...Departing like this, sir? That'll sadden Miss Noh Do-hwa."

No reply.

Naturally. Where his face should have been, there was no expression, only blackened charcoal in place of wrinkled limbs and features.

And yet, why did it feel like...

'That's your job now, Undertaker.'

...a chuckle rose from the mouthless remains?

Somewhere in that hillside, a few pine warblers chirped, still not consumed by the Void. I stayed there, gazing at the old man's body that had silently given itself up to the world, until dusk fell.

Does the world brim solely with those who leave behind glowing names?

Throughout humanity's vast history, countless unnamed individuals must have blossomed like flowers, then faded away without a trace, yet they surely existed. Perhaps among them had been those who attempted feats beyond human limits that would never be recognized in the annals of fame.

A leap of faith.

They did not wish even to display their deaths for others, seeing

that too as “excess baggage of the heart.”

Casting off all honor and desire. Avoiding any onlookers, choosing a quiet place. Simply praying in their hearts for the end of all sadness.

Some offered themselves in works of art.

In a cathedral whose architect was forgotten.

In a buried sculpture.

In song.

In flesh.

In silence.

And so they vanished.

Exiled from time.

You can’t meet them in any normal way. They’re lost in alleys, erased data.

Perhaps the karmic lot of a regressor is to reunite with those who disappeared from the world. To encounter the story of “Shin Su-bin,” who was overlooked by most as just an ordinary old man, only now to discover the blank space he left behind.

Thus, a regressor’s destiny is not simply to chew on loneliness. We’re only visitors who pass by every alley of this world before leaving.

“Until next time, sir.”

I rose from a respectful bow to depart.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

Then suddenly, the Saintess spoke.

“Yes?”

[Mr. Undertaker, about his foot.]

I turned. How had I missed something so obvious?

Shin Su-bin had been missing his right foot. He'd given his prosthetic to Seok-hwa, and it burned up in Sinuiju. That should have been the end of it.

So where there should have been an empty space, a missing right foot—

Even though it too was charred crisp, I could see a perfectly "intact foot" in proportion with the rest of his body.

[What do you think happened?] the Saintess murmured. [Is it someone else pretending to be Shin Su-bin? Or an Anomaly lurking in the corpse?]

I don't claim to know every secret of this world. But looking at that foot, it didn't register as some suspicious puzzle to me.

"Who knows? Maybe it's just 'excess baggage of the heart.'"

[...?]

"Seems he left a final message not to grieve for him. That's what I see, anyway."

I let out a faint laugh and turned away.

This time I'd bring a B.B.Big bar instead.

Footnotes:

1 - **Melona** is a popular South Korean ice pop brand, known for its creamy, gelato-like texture and diverse range of fruit flavors, including the classic honeydew, but also banana, strawberry, mango, and more.

Chapter 338

The Nurturer

Sinnoa

Today, let's keep it brief for once.

I'll skip even the epilogue and spin a short tale.

With civilization's collapse, most of humanity's beloved industries found themselves plunged into an era of "hardship marches."

The pet industry, also known as the companion-animal market, was hard-pressed to avoid being delisted.

"I'd rather starve to death myself than abandon my baby!"

"Hyung, I'm telling you, there are monsters chasing after us..."

"I'll go! If I die, I'm dying alongside my kid!"

That's what folks shouted as they fled with their pets in tow. But after three days of real hunger, their perspective got a little more flexible.

They didn't love their pets any less. It was just that people were weak.

What could they do? Most Koreans after the 1970s had lost their immunity to starvation. Suddenly resetting one's stomach to the standards of decades past and telling it to bear with it was no simple matter.

Still, a few owners somehow managed to reach their refuge without letting go of their pets, clinging to iron will. However, they soon ran into cold reality.

"That's weird. Just last night, my baby only walked on four legs,

but this morning it's on two...?"

"It's just smart, that's all."

"That's weird. Last night, my baby had only one head, but this morning there are three...?"

"With three brains, so triple the IQ! I knew my baby was a genius."

"That's weird. My baby used to love your touch, but now it's biting, ripping you apart with those teeth..."

In refugee camps, cases of people meeting a gruesome death at the paws of their own pets skyrocketed. If they were lucky, owners might come to lose only a finger or two. If they were unlucky, maybe two full limbs. They had little choice but to admit the truth:

"Gaah! It's a monster!"

"Help me! My child's gone insane!"

Most animals were vulnerable to Void Poison.

No need to categorize mammals, reptiles, birds, fish. Every morning that dawned, pets took on a new "species adaptation" that was, for all intents and purposes, *off*.

In the end, the vast majority of owners tearfully "took care" of their pets. Those who hesitated too long were taken care of by the pets themselves.

But then...

"My baby doesn't bite."

"Sir, you do realize you could die at any moment if you keep insisting on that? We're not trying to be mean here. If one Anomaly starts rampaging within this village, everyone is done for! All of us!"

"No, I understand that. I'm not just being stubborn—I'm telling you, my baby really doesn't bite."

“Huh?”

No matter the time or place, mutations sometimes took place.

It was a phenomenon truly miniscule in number... 1%? Maybe the odds of pulling a super-rare in a cruel smartphone gacha. Every so often, one would appear: a “relatively safe from Void Poison” pet, rare beyond measure.

A normal person might rage at such savage odds, but from a seller’s perspective, it spelled big money. Sharp-nosed entrepreneurs saw the potential jackpot in these now “safe” pets, rarer than ever.

“How about it, sir? This is the scarlet macaw. Really hard to come by. You could scour all the pet shops in Busan and only find this one that still appears normal.”

“Whoa.”

“Hey, Papanya, introduce yourself.”

– Yes, hello. I’m a cute pet parrot. My name is Papanya. Sometimes I dream of flying out the window when the weather is nice, but right now I’m happy spending time in a warm house with my master. Being with my master is my favorite thing, so every day I sing and enjoy such cheerful days.

“As you can see, it speaks quite eloquently.”

“I mean, for a parrot, that’s a bit too articulate. It’s kind of creepy...”

“It’s probably blended with something like ChatGPT AI. Ask it anything you want, it’ll answer well.”

“So, it’s an Anomaly?”

“Sure, probably. But who cares if it’s so perfectly parrot-like?”

Soon, these “safe-rated” pets started commanding astronomical premiums.

Over ten high-end pet shops sprang up in Busan alone. Unlike in the old days, you couldn't find separate cat-only or dog-only shops, there simply wasn't enough supply. But that was fine because "pets" as a concept had risen to an elevated status.

"Wow, look at that dog."

"It's got two heads?"

"Yep. One side looks like a Doberman, and the other side's a spitting image of a Samoyed."

"Black and white fur patterning is crazy..."

These days, anyone who seemed fairly well off would flaunt their lifestyle by owning a pet.

The pet-shop owners of Busan formed a "Pet Association," which granted animals their own rating tiers. The lowest safety rating was "1 Day," the highest was "10 Years."

The standard was simple: If adopting that pet gave you a high probability of dying within twenty-four hours, 1 Day. If you could expect a safe, carefree pet life for ten years, 10 Years.

Of course, the shop owners didn't actually have the power of prophecy. Incidents happened. Like a gator labeled 10 Years devouring its owner within a week.

(There was debate about whether that was really the Pet Association's fault.)

Such were the times. Such was the trend.

"Commander Noh."

"Yeees...?"

"Might you be interested in joining the True Dictator Club?"

"Huh?"

I always gave Do-hwa a pet as a gift.

It's well-known that dictators love pets.

Surprisingly, Hitler established Germany's first animal protection laws and was very attached to his own dog. In fact, there's a "Law of Preserved Affection Quantity" behind this phenomenon. A person doesn't lose the ability to love simply because they've lost affection for humankind. Their total capacity for love remains unchanged, just diverted to something else.

It's akin to the Law of Equivalent Exchange discovered by the great alchemist Arakawa Hiromu.[1]

So it begged the question:

Q: How much might the ultimate misanthrope, who despises humanity—namely, Noh Do-hwa—cherish a pet?

Is that not an enthralling experiment?

Yes, indeed. Even someone whose love for people is FFF-grade might possess an EX-grade "pet-owner aptitude."

"Here, a Maltese."

Me, the Undertaker. As an avid viewer of Surprise TV, I had to solve this mystery.

"I handpicked a good-looking one, specially selected. Please care for it with all your love and attention."

The Maltese I brought faced off with Noh Do-hwa, who was sitting in her usual slouched posture.

Yes, right at eye level.

"That's odd. The Maltese I know is a small breed from the island of Malta. Yet the head in front of me is so big, it'd slap aside any Old English Sheepdog meme I've ever seen on the internet...?"

“It’s exceptionally tall, yes. But because it was originally a small dog, it’ll probably live a long time.”

– Woof!

The 112-centimeter-tall “Maltese” stuck out its tongue and rubbed cheeks with Do-hwa. It might have sounded different to each ear, likely a *slurp slurp* to her.

“Geez, you son of a...”

“What do you think? Pure white fur, just like the lab coat you always wear, Commander Noh. Eats barely anything. Hardly sheds.”

“Cut the crap. Dammit. It’s heavy as hell. How can a dog that big not shed...?”

“Credit the blessings of Void Poison, I suppose.”

– Woof! Woof, bark!

Just as you’d expect from a pet selected by a regressor, the giant Maltese was extremely gentle.

It poured unconditional affection (with a high H_2O content) on a master who didn’t understand human hearts at all, surpassing even Kwan Seum Bosal in benevolence.

– Bark!

“See? The Maltese seems to like you too, Commander.”

“...I’d like to return it...”

“I’ll have it recorded as accepted.”

On that day, Commander Noh joined the ranks of historically famous dictators reputed as pet lovers.

To be candid, I wanted to give Do-hwa something she might care about, if only a little.

Humans aren't invincible. Even those who seem unbeatable eventually find their mental reserves drained.

Take me, for instance, I have to take a "vacation" every ten runs or so.

"Here, a Maltese."

So from around the 100th run onward, I always brought a dog to Commander Noh.

– Woof!

On the 200th run, the 300th, the 400th, always a "white Maltese that was way too big to be called a Maltese."

Effectively, across multiple runs, Commander Noh and that dog maintained the bond of "pet owner and pet."

"Here, a Maltese."

Its name was Doctor.

It wasn't a name she chose nor I. It was a nickname the staff started using when they saw a dog appear near the Commander.

"Wow, what is that huge thing?"

"It's the commander's dog."

"It's so white..."

"Looks expensive. Where'd she even find something like that?"

"I heard from a buddy in the ops team that the Undertaker gave it to her."

"Ah, so..."

"If it's from the Undertaker, guess that makes sense."

"You could practically ride it."

Before long, the white dog's towering size and majestic looks turned it into an idol beloved by everyone in the National Road Management Corps.

"Doctor, come here!"

– Woof!

"Good morning, Doctor. Another fine day—"

– Bark!

How it picked up the nicknames "Doctor" or "Professor" was almost laughably simple:

A dog given by the Undertaker → Undertaker → "Doc" → "Professor." QED.

Hence the staff all called the white dog Doctor or Professor. The fact that Commander Noh always wore a lab coat almost certainly shaped its image too.

'I figured that when I'm not around, Do-hwa can at least find some solace in caring for Doctor.'

I felt a bit of satisfaction at that thought, yet for some reason...

Even when she sometimes fed the dog, or told the staff to look after it, or briefly stroked its head amid her duties:

Commander Noh's expression always remained utterly blank.

"Awakener Undertaker."

One day, when the Monster Wave was soon to devour the world, sometime in the future of the 511th cycle, Do-hwa said this:

"That dog you gave me... Doctor..."

"Ah, yes, what about our Professor?"

"For a dog, it sure lives a long time..."

She pointed to Doctor, lying down with his tail wagging.

– Bark.

It had already been 20 years since his adoption, yet Doctor was still as lively as day one. That alone was enough to raise Do-hwa's suspicion. A Maltese can't usually last more than 15 years, and for large breeds, the average lifespan is even shorter.

"Ah, yes. Well, guess he's just healthy? The staff play with him all the time and toss him food. He's living the dream. Probably the best-fed, happiest dog in the world right now."

She clicked her tongue.

Hearing that familiar sound, Doctor shot up (*!*) and ran over to her. With a well-practiced touch, she petted his head, neck, then back. Doctor panted happily.

'How heartwarming.'

It was a pure, very human display of affection, which reaffirmed that my gift was not misguided. Smiling inwardly, I kept watching.

So when those words came from her mouth...

"How many died...?"

...I was too slow to respond.

"Pardon?"

"This dog. Big enough to befit someone called 'Commander.'"

Stroke.

"Its fur is so white that anyone would marvel at it, and caring for it is easy. It's docile. Gentle. Above all, it has an incredibly long lifespan. We'll never have to bury it before the world ends. Truly an ideal dog..."

Stroke.

She ran her hand through the fur at Doctor's neck. Her gaze was half-lidded, fixed right on me.

"So I got curious. Just how many 'failures' did you discard before selecting this perfect dog to give me, Awakener Undertaker...?"

I shut my mouth. Her faint, smiling eyes were sharper than a blade from afar.

"How shall I put it?" she began. "This thought suddenly hits me..."

"Which is...?"

"Ordinarily, the old me would simply pass away without leaving a will, letting the next me in the next cycle handle everything with a big 'Screw you.' And that accumulation of petty revenge turned me into who I am now, presumably..." Then she murmured, "But if humans have one advantage over animals, it's the ability to reconsider our mistakes... is it not...?"

She pressed lightly on Doctor's throat, enough to put mild pressure on his voice box.

– *Woof*.

"So after hundreds of years, I'd like to do something nice for the next me..."

Doctor trembled, but didn't fight her grip. Perhaps he interpreted even this as an act of affection.

"From the next cycle onward, don't just pick any dog for me. Give me the choice to adopt it myself... Just tell me the old me left that as a final will. If I'm not a total idiot, I'll figure it out..."

An Undertaker's job is also to carry out the last wishes of the deceased. I couldn't dismiss her request.

Thus, in the next run...

"Huh. A pet, you say."

When I conveyed her older self's final message, for a while, the new Noh Do-hwa fell into thought. Her gaze flicked from open air to me and back again until, finally, she let a small grin escape.

"Ah, I see..."

"You see what it means?"

"Yes, more or less..."

She stood up with a flutter, her lab coat rumpled. Surprisingly for someone who spent 24 hours a day holed up in the HQ, it looked like she was about to go out.

"Where are you going?"

"I have work to do, now that I've received the message. I figured I'd visit a pet shop. I'm new to raising pets in this run, so I need your advice. You're coming along..."

Extremely unusual. She was the one inviting me out, not the other way around.

"W-welcome! Thank you so much for visiting the best pet shop in Busan!"

At the arrival of the National Road Management Corps Commander and the Undertaker, two of the peninsula's mightiest, the shop owner nearly fell over bowing. He rubbed his hands together as he said, "What sort of pet can I get for you? Whatever you wish, Commander! In fact, it would be our honor to present you with one, no charge!"

"Hmph..."

Normally, Do-hwa despised this sort of treatment. She rarely even went to Jagalchi Market for her favorite vin chaud except at dawn, all to avoid people.

And yet...

"I'm not looking for a specific breed. I just want to stroll around a

bit…”

“O-of course, Commander! Take all the time you need! Our shop deals exclusively in pets rated at least 2 years by the Pet Association! Truly a top-quality selection! Haha!”

“Hoh…”

Strangely, she seemed in a great mood. Where typically she’d scowl at sycophants, her expression now was calm and unruffled. A rare sight indeed.

“This one? Or maybe this? Hmm, or would that be better…?”

She stopped in front of each cage: a parrot turned purple, a rainbow-aurora fish, a cat with three tails, a miniature dog with an off-kilter body ratio, a reptile with amethyst crystals sprouting from its skin. With each, she glanced my way as I remained silent.

“What do you think…?”

Then, I answered thoughtfully, “It won’t live very long.”

“Yes, I know…”

“It’ll probably die before you do, before the world collapses.”

“Yes. I’m aware of that…” Her boot tapped lightly as she looked up at me from close range. “When that happens, I want you to handle my pet’s burial, Awakener Undertaker…”

I didn’t respond.

“Oh, Shop Owner, I’ll take this little one. Not exactly pretty, but somehow it feels familiar…”

“Eh? A-ah, right! Commander, you’ve got an eye for cuteness indeed! Haha!”

She selected…

A small dog that resembled a Maltese, its forelimbs and hind legs all

mismatched in both size and proportion, so that even standing still made it shuffle around.

– Woof.

She scooped up the pup, eyes and nose misaligned, into her arms.

“Awakener Undertaker.”

She smiled.

“It would be lovely if you’d pay for it... Because it’s a *gift* for me...”

That pup died at 4 years 7 months.

From then on, in each new run, Do-hwa adopted a different pet.

“I’ll take this one.”

“This one draws me in...”

“I want this one.”

“I’d appreciate it if you pay for me...”

Sometimes a dog, sometimes a cat, sometimes a fish, sometimes a lizard. The species always changed. Yet three constants remained:

1. She always cared for them with real devotion, determination, and patience.

2. Regardless of species, they were always called “Doctor” or “Professor.”

3. Finally, every “Professor” invariably died before she did.

“This one. It was running around by itself last night and hit the wall. Seems it broke its neck... Could I ask you to handle the funeral, Awakener Undertaker...?”

Unlike the half-hearted vibe she used to give when raising that giant white dog, from the 512th cycle onward, she genuinely loved

these pets. Her grief each time they died was sincere too.

But still—even past the 550th run, 600th, 700th, 800th, and on—she always chose a life that would die before her own in a doomed world.

“I’ll take this one...”

To outsiders, it might appear a twisted hobby, but though neither she nor I had ever openly stated the reason, we both guessed it.

The Noh Do-hwa of the 511th run and the 512th cycle are different beings.

I, in each run, raise a different pet and mourn a different death.

I want you to remember that.

“This one looks good...”

In short, she demanded that the memories pertaining to her, in my mind, not be “copy + paste.” She refused to be simply “the same old Noh Do-hwa,” raising “the same old pet,” an “identical existence.” She wanted to remain this person, remembered exactly as she was now.

By that measure, it was a pretty twisted hobby. Though she raised a different pet in each run, overall, the one she was truly caring for was the space she occupied in my memories. Time after time, she nourished my mind’s recollections and scars, ensuring one truth would remain forever:

The “511” and the “512” weren’t just a trivial difference of “1.” They held a time that could never be erased, nor should it be.

Through subtle means, so very typical of her, she whispered that message.

“You’re unbelievably twisted. Seriously.”

Eventually, in some run, I couldn’t help letting that remark slip. She had just chosen a tiny puppy right then, and she turned to me to say

it.

“Indeed…”

Quietly, she lifted her lips into a grin.

“In that case, you should’ve been more cautious when you picked me…”

– Woof!

In her white coat, holding the cheerful little dog, she smiled.

Footnotes:

1 - The author and artist of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, a popular manga that explores the study and costs of alchemy as a science.

Chapter 339

The Surrenderer I

Sinnoa

There have long been certain taboos in genre fiction, rules where we all agree, *Let's all be careful not to do* this*, okay?*

For example, if the protagonist has racked up over 200 chapters of sweet, devoted romance with another character, they can't suddenly end up with some other random side character.

The protagonist can't make a blunder that results in a decisive defeat for their allies, nor can the allies blunder in a way that causes the protagonist a decisive loss.

It may come as a surprise to you readers, but a plot in which a ninja appears out of nowhere and massacres all the characters is, in fact, also forbidden.

Among these is, of course, the taboo known as *the once-powerful protagonist suddenly loses their power and becomes weak*.

And so there is I, the Undertaker, who has entered a self-imposed Aura diet. One might say that I, too, have violated an unwritten rule of the genre-fiction world.

However, the particular taboo dealt with in this episode is of a slightly different nature from the ones mentioned above.

[...]

Today's protagonist is none other than the bearer of such illustrious titles as "The Weakest of the Four Heavenly Kings," "One-Trick Laptop," "Got-Wrecked-By-The-Mastermind Award," "Out of Every Possible Miko, They Chose Oh Dok-seo (LOL)," and so on.

[.....]

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame.

This is an account of their desperate battle to somehow overcome the literary taboo binding them:

A villain who has already been defeated by the protagonist must never return stronger than before.

That account is today's story.

"Hey, mister! I brought something super amazing!"

Bang!

One day, as usual, Dok-seo made her entrance by kicking the door wide open. Because her brain still hadn't evolved beyond a simian-level, she maintained the miraculous logic of "hands = front feet ≒ hind feet."

I spoke softly, channeling the mind of a chimpanzee caretaker. "Dok-seo... I'm begging you, please just knock. You barged in right after I finished showering last time too."

"Whoops, sorry, sorry. But, like, Saintess unnie is always watching you anyway, right? Even if I see something, it's basically like a single drop in the Pacific Ocean."

[Ms. Dok-seo?] the Saintess hastily called out using her Telepathy. [I've never done anything like that, you know?]

We were both silent.

[Mr. Undertaker, it's a misunderstanding and slander. You know very well how much I respect your privacy.]

Moving on.

As you all know, Oh Dok-seo is an otaku suffering from an incurable case of chuunibyou disease. And, tragically, the concept of "super amazing" for a chuunibyou is often a far cry from what most normal people might consider as such.

Suppose there's a character who, for some tragic reason, lost an eye. An ordinary person would think, *How sad...* But our beloved author Dok-seo here would get all excited, going, "Wow! A magic Eye! All hail the King of the Mystic Eye!"

Dok-seo chose that moment to pipe in again. "Yeah, we can debate Saintess unnie's tastes later. For now, just look at my super-amazing creation."

[Ms. Dok-seo? Dok-seo, can you hear me?]

"Tadaaa!"

Dok-seo unfurled a newspaper with a dramatic flourish. On that newspaper, which hadn't been updated in years, there were gigantic brushstrokes:

List of Outer Gods List

Type 1: End of All Shape & Form, "Infinite Void"

Type 2: serverSHUTDOWN, "Admin of the Infinite Metagame"

Type 3: Abyss of Dreams, "Nut"

Type 4: Infinite Labyrinth, "Mastermind"

Type 5: Absolute Sike, "Leviathan"

Type 6: Army of Annihilation, "Monster Wave"

Dok-seo proudly flapped the newspaper.

"Ta-da! What do you think? I wasn't sure whether I should list them by threat ranking or just in the order they had contact with you, so I thought I'd keep it simple first! So?!"

A whole galaxy sparkled and spun in Dok-seo's eyes.

"Pretty amazing, right?"

I fell silent, struggling to work out exactly where and how to launch a rebuttal. Maybe I should start with the core issue: What the hell was up with that weird way of writing Server Shutdown? And she even spelled the word “Psyche” wrong. Did she mean something like Absolute Mind? Something like that.

“Well...”

“Uh huh?!”

“It’s... cool. Very cool.”

“Right?!”

“Yeah, you’ve really got a special flair for these things. You truly are a writer, through and through, and a great one at that.”

“Hah!”

“But, hmm... Actually, we’re not even sure if Monster Wave is truly an Outer God or just a secondary phenomenon connected to an Outer God, right?”

“Right, right, right. Yeah, that part bugged me too, *buuut* ‘Army of Annihilation’ just sounded *sooo* frickin’ awesome that I couldn’t leave it out... So I just tossed it in for now. Isn’t it epic?”

So just because it sounded cool, they got to be crowned an Outer God. Whether Monster Wave would be happy or appalled to hear that, I had no idea.

Anyway, there was still more to point out.

“Hey, Dok-seo.”

“Mhm!”

“Why did you force in all these epithets, anyway? They’re not aliases used in the standard strategy guides or anything. Don’t you think it’s unnecessary?”

“Huh? What are you talking about? If that’s the standard we’re

going with, then all those fancy *Three Kingdoms* names, like the Five Tiger Generals or Crouching Dragon and Young Phoenix, should be treated the same way too."

"Well, those have been around from the start. It's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. They've got that classical authenticity, a rightful claim to their epithets."

"Oh, really now?" Dok-seo then said with total nonchalance, "Then since I'm writing *Undertaker: The Novel*, I can just assign epithets however I want, can't I?"

What.

"I mean, in the *actual* historical records of the Three Kingdoms, there was no such thing as the Five Tiger Generals, right? Same thing here, yeah? You go play around in the real historical accounts, mister. In my 'Romance,' these are the official epithets. *Bang-bang-bang.*"

This indefinite-hiatus brat...

'For this arc alone, you've posted 96 separate "delayed publication" notices and 37 "resuming publication" notices, and yet you act like you're on par with the venerable Luo Guanzhong, a man who properly finished his epic!'

Regrettably, I couldn't muster any immediate counterargument to her half-baked debate on "historical records vs. a romance." Thus, I changed my angle.

"But isn't the list kind of inconsistent? Look at your list."

"Huh? Where?"

"For Type 2, you wrote serverSHUTDOWN, 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame.' All the other Outer Gods are written like normal titles, but this one is half-and-half. Don't you think that's weird?"

"Oh, that?" Dok-seo casually folded the newspaper. "It doesn't really matter, does it? After all, that one's the weakest—no—the absolute weakest Outer God."

Bzzt.

Just then, the laptop on my desk—the last “main body” that the Admin of the Infinite Metagame had left in this world—began trembling frantically.

But Dok-seo neither saw nor heard it.

“Admin of the Infinite Metagame might sound impressive, but the poor thing got beaten by you, got beaten by the Mastermind, and also got beaten by Infinite Void. Aside from handing me the draft for the novel before you even regress, what does it have left? Leviathan devours the Aura of every Awakener, but this thing? Meh. Honestly... By now, in terms of Anomaly threat level, it’s not even Outer God-class. It’s, like, village-class?”

Bzzzzzzz! Vrrrrrr!

The laptop that had quietly stayed powered off now booted up on its own, flashing a blue screen in pulses.

But Dok-seo ignored it.

Why? Because that laptop was for writing her serialization, and right now... she wasn’t writing anything.

She was on hiatus.

Today, yesterday, the day before that, the day before that one—throughout past, present, and even future eternities—she remained steadfastly on hiatus.

I couldn’t stand by and watch it silently any longer.

“Well... Still, Dok-seo.”

“Mhm?”

“The Admin of the Infinite Metagame is the Outer God that chose you to be its Miko, you know. When everyone else just saw you as a brat, it alone discovered some remarkable potential in you. In other words, it ‘scouted’ you. Couldn’t you see it that way?”

“Hmm.”

“That Absolute Defense you rely on—”

“AT-Field.”

“...Yes, your AT-Field is also proof that you remain its Miko. You can dismiss any interference in this world as mere ‘NPC struggles inside a creative work.’ That’s quite a power.”

“I mean, I guess so, but...” She furrowed her brow and tilted her head. “I became an author—something I was never meant to be—and ended up writing your life story all because it chose me as its Miko, right?”

“Uh, yes, that’s true.”

“But mister.”

Suddenly, Oh Dok-seo’s expression turned serious.

“I find writing... painful.”

I went silent again.

“Every time I face that blank laptop screen, my mind goes blank too. I’m scared of how the readers will react. I’m afraid of tomorrow’s sunrise. Ahh, I am a girl trapped in the hell of everyday life! Who is it that relegated me to a fate of being incapable of finding joy in the sunlight as sunlight? Right. The Admin of the Infinite Metagame. *It* is the culprit. *It* is the one that robbed me of life’s happiness...”

“So I don’t particularly feel any gratitude toward it. If it’s so upset, it could at least bestow upon me a body that pumps out nonstop dopamine so that I love writing every single day. I really don’t want to be on hiatus, but because of that thing, my poor readers are the ones who end up suffering.”

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!

The laptop trembled so violently it fell from the desk. Even on the

floor, it kept shaking in anger.

Dok-seo blinked in apparent realization, then said, “Oh, right! I should ask Seo Gyu to replace all the Outer God epithets on SG Net with my versions! Heehee! This is gonna be fun! Now I’m an official *Historian* of the Library Society!”

Then, just as quickly as she had kicked the entrance open, she went scampering out the door like a hamster excited to see its master.

Silence fell over my private room.

After a while, the still-quivering laptop gave a small click, and its blue screen disappeared. In its place appeared a Vtuber avatar—a small girl with white hair, in 144p resolution—who began to speak in a badly compressed, low-quality voice.

*[This is so—***CENSORED***—unbelievable—]*

[I gather up everything I can muster—give it my all—like a final grudge orb—]

*[Yet a so-called Miko ends up beating up her own god. Where in this—***CENSORED***—world is there a Pope that thrashes her believers—***CENSORED***—?]*

*[We need more devotion, more faith than ever, but all she does is trash talk her own god—***CENSORED***—***CENSORED***—]*

[And then there’s the matter of me ghostwriting the so-called scripture. She just made me do that out of nowhere—]

*[And she got caught, so—***CENSORED***—she just stopped writing the scripture for seven whole years now—]*

[Whatever you think, I’m not behind this. I’d gain at least a little of my power back if she would just finish that scripture—why on earth would I sabotage its completion—?]

*[She’s the—***CENSORED***—one who stopped writing all on her own volition. I had no hand in it and—]*

*[Seriously—**CENSORED**—just think about it for one second. If she finished that story, at least some portion of my strength might recover. Why would I prevent it?]*

There was the crackle of static, the laptop overloaded, and the monitor went black.

There was no helping it. In its present state, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame was so weak that even such a small manifestation in the real world nearly used up all its power.

“Well... my condolences.”

[...]

“But, you know, it really makes me wonder.”

[...]

“It was you who chose Oh Dok-seo as your Miko in the first place, wasn’t it?”

[...]

“Your Miko, your responsibility. Tough it out, oh ‘Server Shutdown’ of the Outer Gods—The Admin of the Infinite Metagame.”

[...]

[CENSORED.]

[CENSORED.]

[CENSORED.]

[CENSORED.]

[CENSORED.]

Like a certain ancient genre novelist who filled over two pages with just the phrase “Level up!”,[1] the Admin of the Infinite Metagame spewed out a stream of 144p-quality profanity for quite some time.

I still wonder sometimes.

If only, at that moment, I had consoled it just a little more kindly instead of mocking that Anomaly—

Maybe, just maybe, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame wouldn't have gone on to fully embrace the dark side...

"Mister! Emergency, emergency!"

Bang!

One day in the next cycle, sometime around the 925th, Dok-seo once again came kicking in the door with her hind leg and barged in.

I screamed.

"Gyaaaaah!"

Because I'd just finished showering.

Dok-seo also screamed.

"Kyaaaaaa!"

"Huaaaack!"

"Kyaaaaaaaaaa!"

"Raaaaagh! Get out! How long are you going to just stand there screaming, you brat?!"

"Oh, right. Mister, your abs are insane. I mean, just out of a, you know, like from a physics-curiosity kind of thing? Could I—?"

"Before you get to experience the crushing weight of physics, get out."

A moment later...

"Oh, right! Mister! Emergency! Emergency!"

Bang!

Dok-seo once again slammed the door and came in. Thankfully, this time I'd only just gotten my hair damp, I was fully dressed in my barista uniform.

Drained, I muttered, "Alright. What is it now?"

"A transparent dragon has appeared!"

"Sorry, a what?"

"They say a transparent dragon just showed up in Daegu! It's going all *Grrrroooowl!* and roaring, and it's super, super powerful! It might be Outer-God class!"

Yes.

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame.

Literally, the Anomaly that governs every creative work in existence.

It got pissed off.

Footnotes:

1 - This is possibly a reference to Nam Heesung, the author of *The Legendary Moonlight Sculptor*.

Chapter 340

The Surrenderer II

Sinnoa

As mentioned several times before, it is a fool's errand to expect anything like humanity or human warmth from an Anomaly. After all, Anomalies possess neither "intellect" nor "reason" nor "conscience."

(We'll table the discussion of times when human beings also sometimes lack those qualities.)

In that sense, you could also say that Anomalies have no "mind," and because they have no mind, by Aristotle's syllogism, they of course had no concept of "peace of mind" either.[1] Thus, the proposition that "an Outer God lost its mind" cannot be established in the first place.

And rightfully so. How could the Admin lose a peace it never had?

– Kwaaaaang!

And yet, when the impossible needed doing, Dok-seo delivered.

– Kraaah! Kaaaaaang!

I arrived in the Saharan plains of Africa— No, I mean, in Daegu on urgent business. The entire area had been consumed by Void Poison long before now and consequently been turned into a desert that stretched across the horizon. Thanks to that, we now had a new type of biome here on the Korean peninsula.

Today, that extraordinary visual spectacle came with an additional auditory effect.

– KWAAAAANG!

Boom! Kaboooom!

Something unseen was rampaging in the heart of the desert.

Whenever “it” thrashed about, sandstorms blew in all directions, and tremors shook the ground.

– K-kieeek!

– Geeek! Kiiiiik!

The local Anomalies that inhabited the desert were so overwhelmed by “its” power that they scattered, fleeing in all directions.

Of course, having the will to run didn’t necessarily mean you succeeded in escaping. Unfortunately for those Anomalies that hadn’t learned the Teleport skill from their ancestors, they got squashed to death with a sickening crunch under the invisible weight of “it.”

As the corpses of Anomalies were trampled underfoot, “it” let out a roar.

– Kraaaaaaaah!

Complete pandemonium ensued.

Sharing my field of vision, the Saintess murmured, [There’s… nothing visible about it at all.]

“Indeed.”

[But with so much sand flying around, we can at least make out an outline.]

“That’s right.”

[It looks like… a western dragon.][2]

It was a legend from ages past, so ancient that it had essentially gone out of circulation, making the original text hard to find.

Invisible Dragon.

A masterpiece famed for having one of the most perfect prologues

seen across the literary spectrum. On the Korean peninsula alone, it stands as one of the two great pillars alongside Kim Hoon's *Every Abandoned Island Blossomed*.[3]

That heart-stirring prelude, towering higher the more you look up to it, reads as follows:

> "Kraaaah"
>
> even among dragons the strongest
> invisible dragon roared the invisible
> dragon was crazy strong so it was the
> strongest among dragons it beat gods or
> demons it beat them all no matter who
> came the invisible dragon was the only
> one in the world anyway it roared

Behold the use of plain words.

A writer's frail instinct might try to avoid repeating the same phrasing, changing "roared" to "howled" or "bellowed" or what have you. But not this text. No, this text boldly ignored such attempts, pursuing the single word "roared" without faltering, with a craftsman's dedication.

And the rhythm it found! By repeating, "I won, I won," over and over and over again, the text achieved a kind of cadence so rarely found in modern Korean poetry—a masterpiece in extreme metrics.

Can you appreciate the aesthetics woven into that prologue, dear human? It is the pinnacle of postmodernism, a challenge to the senses.

"Look at this fine piece of work," it boldly proclaims. "You feeling our art?"

No one dared complain that the text was displayed in the deeply irritating Gulim font. Back in those days, Gulim was the very foundation upon which all great amateurs stood.

The fact that this classic appeared in 2002 sent shockwaves through modern literature.

Think about it. The main body of the Admin of the Infinite Metagame is a white-haired girl. Its design has zero originality. As mentioned when we first subdued it, this white-haired girl was inspired by that stereotypical NPC who goes, *Hi? I'm God.* And the foundational work upon which that character is based, Fate/Stay Night, had been published in...

2003.

Yes. Just one year after *Invisible Dragon* was released.

"Bah...!" A tremor ran through me. The grandfather blood that coursed through my veins began to seethe wildly. "All of the puzzles... they have been solved!"

Somehow, I'd suspected it. A centuries-old Anomaly that made a habit of rummaging through ancient works, an Outer God with 1 HP. Of course it was up to something like this.

[Um, Undertaker?]

"It's all a scheme by the Admin of the Infinite Metagame!"

Why did the Invisible Dragon appear out of nowhere, despite never once showing its face in previous cycles? Even now, we couldn't see its physical form. I had no actual evidence, only the release years of Invisible Dragon and Fate/Stay Night... And yet I had exposed the truth of it:

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame was the mastermind behind this all.

My own deductive power scared me a little. If this continued for a year or so, over four hundred people around me could very well die.

After hearing my perfect reasoning, the Saintess murmured, [Mr. Undertaker... Strangely enough, whenever something is even slightly related to Ms. Dok-seo, you seem to become... a different person.]

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

[You act like a different person. Or should I say your mental age regresses? Wasn’t it just last Wednesday that you visited my place to discuss Kant’s pure reason? How, then—]

I cleared my throat. “That is a complete misunderstanding. Much like the baseless slander that you secretly spy on me with Clairvoyance, even while I’m in the bathroom.”

The Saintess sunk like a ship. Yet, like the captain of the Titanic, she steadfastly fulfilled her duty even as water flooded the hull.

In a breathless voice, she asked, [How do you plan to subjugate that Anomaly? Even if you know it’s the Admin of the Infinite Metagame’s doing, it doesn’t look like an easy opponent.]

“Ah, yes. Surprisingly enough, it will be simple. First, please log in to SG Net’s novel serialization board. Search for *Invisible Dragon*, and you’ll find some documents.”

[What? Oh, you’re right. I see them.] Then the Saintess muttered, [And the upload date is listed as 2002, before SG Net even existed...]

Surely, it was the Outer God’s handiwork.

I also had surmised why it specifically spawned the Invisible Dragon in Daefrica. The Invisible Dragon originally belonged to the genre of “fantasy,” yet even in an apocalypse, remnants of modern civilization still remained that defied the fantasy tropes. But Daegu? The city and everything in its vicinity had been cleared of anything resembling city life. With some effort, you can pass its desert landscape off as a fantasy setting.

“In the original story, the Invisible Dragon teleports to reality only after annihilating its world. Right now, it’s stuck in Daegu, but once

it wipes out all the local Anomalies in the desert, it'll head outside."

[Ah... I see. We have to subjugate it before that happens.] I could practically see the Saintess tilting her head as the next thought came to her, even over Telepathy. [So you plan to use Aura, risking the chance of provoking Leviathan?]

No, there was no need.

First, I asked the Saintess to summon Dang Seo-rin. No matter which cycle we're in, Seo-rin was always deep into Constellation business, and since Busan was nearby, she arrived quickly.

"Hey, Undertaker. Haaah, it's always so hot here near Daegu."

"Indeed. We don't have much time, so let's subjugate that invisible Anomaly first."

"Oh, okay. It's been making a racket, so it's been annoying me too."

Seo-rin began to sing.

Ah——ah, ah—ah, aaaa——

Instantly, the roar that had been shaking the entire desert began to fade.

– Kraaaah! Aaaah... aaa...

It was the power of Seo-rin's Cursed Song Incantation, specifically her Anti-Resonance. By emitting sound waves in precise opposition to the enemy's, she completely negated all noise, like magic.

Keen readers may have noticed: Yes, this was her signature technique, the same skill she used to lull the Meteor Shower to sleep back when we first subjugated it.

"Okayyy, song is over! Now I'll set up a loudspeaker here to keep replaying the recording, yeah?"

"Right."

Moments ago, the Invisible Dragon had been screaming as if tearing the sky apart, but now it had fallen silent. Now, only Seo-rin's beautiful singing voice echoed across the desert.

Judging by the way it stomped its feet, maybe we should call it the Invisible Caterpillar instead of the Invisible Dragon.

I exhaled. "If the Invisible Dragon can't cry out, it's no longer the Invisible Dragon. A simple strategy, right?"

[...]

"Oh, just in case, please edit the novel that the Admin of the Infinite Metagame hid on SG Net and run a spell check."

The Saintess carried out my instructions.

Roooar!

Among all dragons, the mightiest was the roaring Invisible Dragon.

The Invisible Dragon was oh-so-strong, the strongest of dragon-kind.

It beat gods and demons. It won against all who came to challenge it.

The Invisible Dragon was the only one of its kind.

Anyway, it roared.

Ah.

I couldn't help wiping away a tear. What a savage defilement of the original text.

"Alas! The proud spirit once exuded by our dear Young-geun has vanished without a trace!"

[...]

For some reason, even the Saintess—who was far beyond the range of Seo-rin's Anti-Resonance—was also inflicted with the Silence status. But the effect was evident.

– Kieeek! Geeek, Kiiiik!

– ...! ...! ...!

From an Invisible Tyrant to an Invisible Worm, the dragon had devolved. The Anomalies that had been running away now turned back and beat on the "unseen" thing.

It was somewhat sad to watch a once-glorious being brought so low, but such was the irresistible flow of time.

Subjugation complete.

If that had solved the problem, we could've had a happy ending. Unfortunately, no such luck was to be had.

As I said, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame had lost its composure.

Why had it suddenly unleashed the Invisible Dragon? Did it believe it could defeat me, the Undertaker, that way? Think it could reverse the tide that had already turned?

No.

It just... got pissed off.

In short, objective power analysis no longer mattered to the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. It just wanted to throw a big middle finger to the Miko who disrespected it, to the Regressor who made the Miko that way, and to the entire world that had allowed the Regressor to be born in the first place.

"Hey, mister! Something huge, huge is happening! All those works from the old internet era called the *Seven Forbidden Tomes* are going

wild! Members of the Samcheon World Guild suddenly started worshipping something called *Harry & Monsters* instead of *Harry Potter*! The great witch is going on a rampage! You're the only one who can stop this, mister!"

The momentary high I'd felt after elegantly subjugating the Invisible Dragon had been dashed. My brain temperature swiftly returned to a cool 38.5°C.

We'd known for a while that the Admin of the Infinite Metagame, an Outer God, was lying low and waiting for a chance to make its comeback. A typical vanquished-king-returns story. But now that it had decided to double, triple, quadruple down on its tantrum, the whiplash of events was leaving me dizzy.

"Wait a second. Infinite Metagame, let's talk it out. We can use words to solve this."

I rushed over to turn on the laptop, but oh? How baffling. Its avatar —a white-haired girl who always rushed over eagerly whenever I booted it up, hoping to seduce me or something—was nowhere to be seen.

Well... Actually, no, it was there. Just there about 20 meters away from the monitor screen, curled up in a ball with its back turned to me.

The white-haired girl avatar was smaller than the Recycle Bin icon on a desktop. Anyone else might not have noticed it.

"Admin? Ms. Metagame?"

[...]

"O Great Adminship, the peerless AI that can degrade the entire world into mere characters of its novel?"

[...]

"You know that using your power in these petty ways won't help you. It's only slightly annoying for me, but it poses no real threat to my forces."

Bzzzzzt.

Like a laptop that'd been on its last legs for five years, the screen fuzzed with static. Then the desktop background changed. Now, on a blank white screen (matching the avatar's white hair), there was only a single character:

凸

Uh. Hmm.

"...If I were to say that using that character as a makeshift middle finger is an old-school touch, would that make you even angrier?"

[...]

"Oh, by the way, imagine I said that line with '(lol)' appended at the end. Just to suit your tastes."

Flick!

The laptop screen went black.

Maybe if I had stopped mocking it right then, comforted the Admin of the Infinite Metagame, shown a bit of kindness, things might have turned around. But how could I resist savoring the downfall of an Outer God that had plummeted to the bottom?

I, the Undertaker, had always lived true to my own desires. I believed that was the secret to maintaining a healthy mindset as a regressor. And every ounce of satisfaction came with a price.

"Aaaaagh, misterrrrr!"

Boom!

Dok-seo struck the door with a flying kick again. By now, the hinges were starting to break. She landed in a flashy flourish.

If you looked at her status screen, you'd see [Skill: Novel Writing] had been stuck at the same level for years, while [Skill: Kicking] had soared past level 90.

“S-something huge happened! Mega huge!”

“You always come to me saying it’s something huge, you know.”

“I’m being so for real this time, though! It’s, l-like, *really*, really big! Come on, hurry!”

I followed.

Dok-seo led me to Haeundae. Though civilization had collapsed and the concept of vacationing had disappeared, the outdoor gym Seo Gyu set up was still thriving. The gym members were all bustling about the beach. Even if the world ended tomorrow, they’d lift a barbell one more time.

“Huh? What’s this now?”

“They keep washing in from the sea.”

“What does it say?”

“Dunno. Something about serialization? It’s going off on some weird stuff.”

Stone tablets.

Like the Rosetta Stone from Egypt, monument slabs etched with densely packed text were floating in the sea and drifting ashore at Haeundae. Some gym members tried to approach one of these monoliths, but Dok-seo rushed at them in terror.

“*Stoooop!*”

“Huh? Who are you?”

“I’m the administrator here! Don’t look at them! Don’t you dare! They’re all Anomalies! If you read them, you’ll lose your mind!”

“Whoa, damn.”

“Get back! Hurry, hurry! Don’t even *try* to read what’s carved in these stones!”

Sure enough, though she never writes, she wanders the Void, and that made Oh Dok-seo a surprisingly seasoned Awakener.

Following her guidance, the gym members scattered.

While Dok-seo was clearing people away, I drew near to one of the dozens of monoliths stuck in Haeundae.

I read the inscription.

Resting a Little Longer (Must-Read)

I'm so sorry…

This is your author, LiteraryGirl, speaking…

As I mentioned in my last notice, I've been suffering from severe burnout, so I decided to take a break from my projects and immerse myself in various works by other authors to recharge my creative battery.

But alas, I didn't realize at the time that burnout can cast its sinister spell not only on writing but also on reading…

So although I told my readers I'd take time off to recharge, in the month or so since I stopped uploading, I haven't managed to read a single work…

And yet, at the same time, I discovered hope.

Yesterday, I noticed I was enjoying a free web game distributed on SG Net, and it startled me.

Wait, I thought to myself. I'm enjoying a work again, aren't I?

That's right.

Who says creative works have to be novels? The song of Korea's absolute top star in the Great Witch of Samcheon World, the music of the Nymphcalypse channel that plays on the radio daily, the occasional games that trend on SG Net—

they are all, all of them, legitimate "works."

As soon as I realized that, it was like a door to heaven opened in my mind!

Yes. I'm not a lazy bug who's been ignoring all nourishment after telling my readers I needed a break.

The sunlight of this world that shines upon me. Like an environment that wholeheartedly bestows its moisture and light upon plants, everything around me has continued to whisper works of "recharging" to me.

I have nothing to fear anymore.

Even if my progress is slow, excruciatingly slow, I am definitely taking small steps forward, heading toward that unknown realm known as serialization.

So I ask my readers to please wait just a bit longer for my small struggles.

I'm listening to songs, listening to music, playing games. That is how I, LiteraryGirl, am gradually moving closer to you all.

Give me just this month and next month, plus or minus about 20 days, and I should truly be able to return this time.

Lately I've been really into games.

This little step from me, LiteraryGirl.

Please, watch over me.

I fell silent.

The monoliths that washed up onshore bore the same message, and it wasn't just in Korean. The message also appeared in Japanese, Chinese, Hindi, Arabic, German, French, English—dozens of languages from around the world.

Having dispersed the crowd, Dok-seo stomped over to me, fuming. “Ugh, seriously! I never wrote any notice like that! Who the heck is flinging this slander around? Seriously, if I find them, I’ll dox them on SG Net so hard!”

She wasn’t wrong. She’d never written such a notice. Not in *this* cycle.

But I, who entrusted her with the job of writing *Undertaker: The Romance*, the Regressor with Complete Memory, remembered it perfectly.

‘This is the 13th notice Dok-seo posted on SG Net’s novel serialization board in the 788th cycle…!’

I glanced at another monolith lying next to it.

‘And this one… It’s the legendary text she uploaded in the 813th cycle, your 39th message, where you torched not only your own readers but every lurker on the serialization board…!’

All around us, and all around that too.

Dozens of monoliths, hundreds of monoliths, all of them…

Proof of all those times Oh Dok-seo had abandoned her serialization…!

Pure disgrace incarnate!

“Ugh. Anyway, I was actually gonna build a three chapter backlog and resume uploading next month for real. I have no idea where this nonsense is coming from.”

Dok-seo turned to me, the sea breeze at her back and her smile wide and cheery.

“Right, mister?”

The next day, a total of 1,131 of these monoliths landed on Busan’s Haeundae shore.

Footnotes:

1 - This is likely in reference to a quote often misattributed to Aristotle but that was actually written in a treatise on anxiety and mental peace by Seneca the Younger: “No great mind has ever existed without a touch of madness.”

2 - Could be a running joke after the SSS-Clas Suicide Hunter artist mistakenly drew a western dragon in the manhwa’s martial arc instead of an eastern dragon.

3 - *Invisible Dragon* has been mentioned before in previous chapters, but the story would more accurately be described as “infamous” rather than “famous” for its... *particular* quality in both Korean and English versions alike. The other work mentioned, *Every Abandoned Island Blossomed*, has yet to be translated into English.

Chapter 341

The Surrenderer III

Sinnoa

After careful consideration, I reached a conclusion:

Oh Dok-seo was screwed.

Honestly, she'd been screwed from the moment she posted enough announcement notices on the SG Net novel-serialization board to reach double-digits. Now, countless stone tablets had washed ashore in Busan like a landing force, a veritable *four*-figure count of them.

Could there be a situation that better embodied the word "karma"?

Yesterday, we only needed to control Seo Gyu's gym members, but as of today, these tablets weren't just on Haeundae Beach, they were popping up on any Busan beach facing the sea.

Once again: Oh Dok-seo was screwed.

"C-Commander Noh! No, Do-hwa unnie! Please, just lend me 50 of your National Road Management Corps personnel! Please, I'm begging you!"

"You think I can just casually hire out 50 people from the corps...?"

As dedicated as the National Road Management Corps was to battling Anomalies, they didn't have the resources to deal with something like this. Besides, these tablets gave off no hint of Anomalous energy. What potential harm did they pose? At worst, sailors might find them annoying when navigating and... a certain author going by the handle "LiteraryGirl" had her reputation severely tarnished?

Do-hwa felt no reason to care about that second part. Indeed, she was a normie with zero interest in subculture. Astonishingly enough, among the members of the Regressors' Alliance, she was

the only one who wasn't a reader of LiteraryGirl.

"P-please! Look, I've been shipping you and the Undertaker since forever! Even when everyone said I was stuck in a minor fandom, I never lost hope! Take pity on me and help me out!"

"What the heck are you talking about...?"

The golden hour had passed. Now in this hour and day, countless people in Busan encountered these mysterious monoliths. Some glanced at them on their way to work at Dream Casino, some while walking their Sapsal dog on the sand. And among them, inevitably...

– Anonymous: Lmao, wtf hahahaha

Some were LiteraryGirl's readers.

– Anonymous: I was on a morning stroll and I saw these tombstones? Stone slabs? Stuck on the beach haha. I'm a coward, but I got curious whether it was some Anomaly, so I went closer...

(Image)

– Anonymous: LitlololerlololarylololGirllololol

– Anonymous: Lmao is she posting indefinite-hiatus notices in reality now instead of on SG Net? Every day with this author is legendary lmfao

Countdown.

3, 2, 1.

Ready.

– [Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: This looks like Busan?

Action.

– [Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: Some of our guild's scouts just got back from a night flight. The beach was jam-packed with those

things.

Anonymous (OP): oh rly? did the Road Management Corps say anything?

[Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: They said it's harmless, so just ignore it.

– Anonymous: lmao f**k LiteraryGirl hahaha

– [Baekhwa] SixthGrader: Hoehee >_<);;

– Anonymous: Wth is this??

20 comments reached.

– [Baekhwa] SchoolNewspaper2: Weren't there rumors that a Constellation read her stuff? Guess it's true lmao

Anonymous: Ah

Anonymous (OP): O

Anonymous: So that's why these tablets suddenly appeared, huh?

50 comments reached.

Post becomes popular.

– [EasternHoly] KindlyOne: Wow, I'm zooming in on the pics and reading them. My blood is boiling from my dantian.

Anonymous (OP): Right??? I gave up a year ago, but seeing that hiatus notice again raised my blood pressure.

[NationalRoad] ForbiddenBooksDept17: Ugh, why does LiteraryGirl keep posting announcements if she's never going to return? She could be writing during that time instead.

[EasternHoly] KindlyOne: secret info our Saintess is also a reader ㅋ

[NationalRoad] ForbiddenBooksDept17: Haha, so is my squad

leaderㅋ

[Baekhwa] SchoolNewspaper2: Same with our guild leaderㅇㅇ

[Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: Our Great Witch too. Add her in.

[EasternHoly] KindlyOne: lolol

200 comments reached.

300 comments reached.

Dok-seo begged Seo Gyu to use his authority as the SG Net admin to remove it from the “popular posts,” but he refused. By then, more than 30 identical posts were going viral, anyway.

– OldManGoryeo: lmao these guys are hilarious. At this point it’s not the author, but the readers who have issues lmaoooo

OldManGoryeo stepped in.

1,100 comments reached.

– Anonymous: How does LiteraryGirl have the nerve to keep going on indefinite hiatus?? Wouldn’t a normal person just keep writing?

– Anonymous: I don’t get it. Someone please explain LiteraryGirl’s mental state.

dolLHoUse: Not simple

Boom.

SG Net exploded.

From Pyongyang to Seoul, Sejong, Busan, to even across the Chinese mainland and Japanese archipelago—courtesy of AOIM-GPT’s stellar translation—all these regions’ power players were now united, all reading in the same language.

We might fight each other for various reasons, but we all shared one thing: we despised authors who went on indefinite hiatus.

A grand unification of Asia. A stunning miracle.

On the old internet, folks sometimes posted that if East Asian countries ever stood united, they would “theoretically” be the strongest in the world. Of course, there were no more states in the apocalypse, yet now that national borders had fallen, East Asia had ironically decided to prove that “theory” in practice.

“Uh, hyung… It’s looking pretty rough. I’m not even sure mobilizing the Constellations will help,” Seo Gyu said. “These guys are convinced the Constellations are on their side, so if we try to suppress them, we might get hammered instead.”

We were in a corner of the room where Dok-seo was gnawing her fingernails. If you listened closely, you could hear a rapid-fire rap verse escaping her lips:

Whydidthishappen

Whydidthishappen

Why

Thissodoesn’tmakesense

Iwasreallyreallygonnacomebacknextmonth

Whycan’ttheyjustwaitonemonth

Whydotheyhavenopatience

It’scompletelynonsensical

From a reader’s perspective, her attitude was infuriating. But for my own part in it, my surprise stemmed from another source.

‘I can’t believe even her mental fortress can shake like this!’

Unlike the characters in the original anime who used the AT-Field, her mind was more like a fortress of hardened steel.[1] Usually, if an author posted a hiatus announcement and then went to play games, they’d feel guilt. *I promised my readers I’d write*, they’d sigh to

themselves, *but here I am just gaming like the trash I am*. But in Dok-seo's case...

Haha! I'm taking in nutrients from other works to feed my readers better. There's no other author like me!

That was how she genuinely thought about it. It wasn't self-justification or escapism either. She sincerely believed it, 120%.

On top of that, in my hundreds of iterations, she'd never once used macros for her hiatus notices. Every notice was handmade—painstakingly typed out, letter by letter. Why? Because that was how she showed devotion and courtesy to her beloved readers!

The perfectly obvious courtesy, some might say, would have been actually writing the dang novel. But that argument never reached Dok-seo.

'Even that adamantine spirit is crumbling now!'

Truly the work of an Outer God. It might not have been able to save its Miko's rotten mind, but it could most certainly drag that mind by the hair and drown it in a well.

She looked even more unstable than in iteration 888, when she secretly had an AI ghostwrite her chapters and got caught by me.

[Mr. Undertaker. Sim Ah-ryeon finished a week's worth of tasks this morning and is rushing down to Busan now. If we don't resolve this before she arrives, Oh Dok-seo's state might deteriorate even further.]

A similar Telepathic message must have reached Dok-seo too. She snapped out of her muttering and jerked her head up.

"N-no! I can't handle Ah-ryeon unnie on top of this! My dignity! My honor! They'll die! I'll be butchered, strangled, then utterly massacred and ground to meat paste!"

I watched in silence.

"Y-yes! It's all the Admin of the Infinite Metagame's fault! I won't

forgive it! Outer Gooood!”

She dashed off. Seo Gyu, who oversaw SG Net, stared after her with a baffled expression.

“Uh, hyung, aren’t you going after her?”

“...Should I?”

“Of course. You picked her up at Busan Station. Her, Ah-ryeon, me —all your responsibility.”

“I’m only human, Seo Gyu.”

“Huh...”

Ignoring Seo Gyu’s dubious look, I went after Dok-seo. Much as I didn’t want to, who else would take responsibility for that kid?

“Stop that right noooow!”

When I arrived, Dok-seo was violently shaking the precious laptop —the main body of the Admin of the Infinite Metagame—that I had stored in my room.

“I-I’m your Miko! Your agent on Earth! Why are you slandering the person most important to me? Is it... Does it make you happy? Huh? You sadist? Why frame me as an enemy of the world over something that never even happened?!”

[Heeheeheeheehee.]

A cheap speaker played giggling on loops while the character for “laughter” was displayed on-screen. The white-haired avatar was carefully retracing the letter with a brush pen.

“S-stop laughiiiiiing!”

[Kieuk-kieuk-kieuk.]

Apparently, the Admin pronounces the Korean character for “lol” as “kieuk-kieuk-kieuk.” I added that useless factoid to my mental

Akashic Records and stepped into the center of the commotion.

“Name your terms.”

[Hah?]

“Surely you didn’t do all this arbitrarily. You squeezed out your already-weakened power to produce thousands of stone tablets. In martial arts terms, you spat out your last innate energy,” I analyzed calmly. “You must want something. If it’s a reasonable proposal, I’ll consider it. State your demands.”

“Y-yeah! That’s right! What do you want? What’s so important that you started all this madness?!”

On the monitor, the 144p white-haired girl smirked.

[Go—search up the Three Kingdoms tag-at the novel-serialization board—right now lmao]

I tilted my head but complied.

SG Net’s novel-serialization board had tabs sorted into Fantasy, Martial Arts, and so on, but there was one very special feature distinguishing this site from older novel platforms.

Three Kingdoms.

No need to even search the tag, the Three Kingdoms genre was boldly displayed at the top of the site in a stately style. Throughout the previous cycles—thousands of years combined—Three Kingdoms was always massively popular. SG Net was in the throes of a total Three Kingdoms obsession.

“That’s because of you, mister.”

This time, it was Dok-seo who responded calmly.

“You push the popularity of any *Three Kingdoms*-based story, artificially inflating their views by at least 100 to 5,000 with a macro. Then you literally pay authors royalties based on those rigged view counts, so from their perspective, they’d be stupid not

to churn out these stories. They're guaranteed sales, no matter how trashy the writing is."

"Silence. What do you know about the loyalty and camaraderie contained in *Three Kingdoms*?"

"I'm just saying, normal readers complain about why it's always another *Three Kingdoms* whatever topping the charts..."

I had no interest in listening to the indefinite-hiatus demon.

With a snort, I clicked on the currently top-ranked Three Kingdoms work. I'd already purchased and read up to the latest chapter this very morning, so if the Admin had tampered with it, I would notice right away and—

Zhang Fei: Aha, Sister Liu Bei! Just rely on your lover Zhang Fei!

Liu Bei: Uh huh, sure! I trust you, little sister!

Mi Zhu: Goodness. You girls' bond amazes me more every time I see it.

"Uwoaooooooooooooook?!"

A cry straight out of Munch's *The Scream* escaped my mouth.

"Eek! A-are you okay, mister? Hey, mister! Snap out of it! Is this a mental attack? An Anomaly? An Outer God? Don't pass out!"

This novel, that novel!

All the stories I'd been reading—even logging in from multiple dummy accounts to give them 20 upvotes each because I sensed the author's extraordinary talent from just the first three chapters.

The warriors of Shu Han, the strategists, and Wei, Wu, even Emperor Xian... Every single one, all of them had been replaced...

With *girls*!

“Ogh. Ughk, huk. Kugh. Kkh, snrrk.”

[Hehehehehe.]

[Don’t you find Romance of the Three Kingdoms *turned* Romance of the Sisterhood *quite intriguing, Regressor?]*

“I-I can’t… breathe… You, you scoundrel, Admin. How can you commit such a monstrous atrocity? How…?”

[Why? Don’t you devour every genre you see anyway?]

What nonsense. It was like someone saying they loved pineapple and also mint chocolate, so a chef lumped them together on a pizza to claim they’d “used all your favorite ingredients.”

“Wh-whatever it means! Don’t torture the old man, you nasty Outer God! Take that! And that!”

[I still have 3,122 more of your hiatus announcements, if you’d like me to show them?]

“Huwaaaaaack!”

A KO.

The Regressor and the Possessor collapsed side by side.

What no other Outer God could achieve, this so-called “weakest” Outer God, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame, had managed it.

I groaned. “Let’s… talk…”

[?]

“A… A friendly negotiation. Why spill meaningless blood here? At this point, you can’t destroy the world, right? Let’s settle this nicely. Huh? Let’s both be happy…”

[Heh]

“Name your conditions, specifically. This time, I swear I’ll refrain from mockery or criticism. I’ll listen seriously...”

Bzzt.

Until now, the white-haired avatar had trudged around the desktop in an area about the size of a Recycle Bin icon, but now, the screen zoomed in.

Click.

In both hands, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame held up a text file like a signboard. Once more, the note spelled out the Outer God’s demands.

[You—must—respect—me.]

Footnotes:

1 - AT-Field is a reference to the nearly impenetrable shields called Absolute Terror (A. T.) Fields in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

Chapter 342

The Surrenderer IV

Sinnoa

[Monster Wave and Nut were nothing more than marionettes meant to hasten my own doom.]

Tap-taptap-taptap!

Text poured forth at a speed of a thousand keystrokes per minute across the laptop screen's notepad file. Along with it, a low-quality TTS voice prattled on.

[I used the descent of the Monster Wave and Nut to reimagine this Void-tainted world as a server shutdown, thereby cutting through all competition among the Outer Gods to ascend proudly as the one who would destroy the world.]

[And by reinterpreting the Awakeners' abilities as "skills" in a game, I turned every phenomenon into a "game"—an illusion.]

[In this way, I also devoured the Mastermind's simulation-cosmology. I set up a contrast between—the "inside" of the logged-in game world—and the "outside" of the logged-out real world.]

[The same goes for Infinite Void.]

[The property of Infinite Void—treating all the world's elements as mere data—was clearly a step below—my own Void, which turned this entire world into a game.]

[I—was the Outer God that made Monster Wave—Nut—the Mastermind—and Infinite Void all bow down.]

[Unlike them—I was not helpless against the regressor's time. I placed my own preparations—like demonic artifacts.]

[You must—respect—me.]

Truly, humans are creatures that learn from experience.

Which meant that mocking the Admin of the Infinite Metagame again right now would risk yet another tragedy occurring.

Even beyond all my beloved *Three Kingdoms* novels being forcibly turned into genderbent stories—who knew what horrendous new hybrid might be born. Imagine if Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei all turned into internet streamers.

I had to endure.

I could endure.

Unlike these Anomalies that knew nothing of humanity or compassion, we humans had the capacity for introspection and repentance—

“But either way, your Miko is still Oh Dok-seo, right?”

[#$□)%(♡)@#%^?_□!]

Ah. Slip of the tongue.

In short, the Outer God the Admin of the Infinite Metagame was in despair.

– I was honestly pretty confident, you know.

Henceforth, the monologue that follows shall be acknowledged as the Admin of the Infinite Metagame’s “human-friendly version” with the background noise filtered out, resulting in a cleaner, more polished voice. The wording and tone were slightly adjusted to be something of an “edited for humans” version.

– Whether it’s Nut’s night sky, Infinite Void’s qualia, or the Mastermind’s simulation games, I could easily reinterpret them all as “games” or “works of fiction.”

– No matter how fiercely they struggled, they couldn’t deny the board I’d laid out.

Of course, the Admin wasn't truly strategizing in elaborate moves against those other Outer Gods or anything close to it. The Outer Gods altogether were more like a group of mutually incompatible viruses vying for territory, devouring or propagating at will.

Yet once again, for the sake of this "human-friendly version," we'll call it a puzzle-solution style retelling.

– Still, in order to convert this world into a "creation" for my "game," I had to accept certain shackles and chains of my own.

On-screen, the white-haired girl raised her index and middle fingers. No longer was her avatar 144p, but instead, she had become 8K HD. Even so, her skin was unnaturally flawless, betraying her inhuman nature.

– A God.

– I, who would reign as "God," was bound to remain just a typical raid boss in any piece of fiction.

– That was my first constraint.

Clank!

From the blank desktop, a pixelated chain arose and snared the white-haired girl's ankles.

– Irregulars like regressors.

– Such a typical "main character" trait, always found in a story's cast.

– That was my second constraint.

Clack.

Another chain slithered forward like a snake and cuffed the Admin's slender wrists, leaving no gap.

– But it was a manageable risk.

– From the perspective of an Outer God like me, do you know which type of irregular is the hardest to deal with?

“...Some regressor like me?”

– No.

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame smiled politely, like a well-bred noble maiden.

Come to think of it, the character design this was based on apparently had a background of German nobility too.

– Regressor types are surprisingly easy to handle. They’re mentally fragile.

“Ah.”

– It’s never easy to live the same life dozens of times over. Even if they do survive, they’re prone to Corruption. You just happen to be an exception, Regressor.

I was reminded of Old Man Scho, and of many protagonists in countless works who fell to despair under the loneliness and pain of regression.

– The real threat is... “Prophets.”

“Prophets.”

– Yes. No matter how ingenious my strategies, what good would that do? Even if I respond to their moves, they can read four or five moves ahead. If someone can see every future, the game inevitably ends in a stalemate.

– I don’t want a draw.

– So I killed them.

Like Zeus punishing Prometheus.

“...I see. That’s why in the novel you showed to Dok-seo, the

prologue had all the prophets die off from the start."

– Hehe. Indeed. I'm the sort of person who devours the tastiest part of the curry first.

The Admin's voice had once degraded to series of girlish scoffs, but now she wore a more refined, old-fashioned smile.

– Six prophets, promised for humanity's future.

– I wiped them all out by letting them all simultaneously read your, the Regressor's, future. Their minds basically exploded.

– After that, I tossed in a bit more gunpowder. That is, I generously shared with them all my data—absolutely everything—about the entire cosmos.

– Unless you had a special ability, it was impossible for a human brain to handle that much data capacity. Cue *poof*—nice fireworks.

Firework effects filled the desktop.

– From that point on, I only had to worry about regressors. Out of the two main ones, one was no problem at all.

– As I'd predicted, after tens of cycles, that one collapsed on his own.

Swordmaster Schopenhauer, disqualified.

– Which meant only you remained.

The last irregular. Codename: Undertaker.

– As soon as you surrendered to the time of regression, it would be over for you.

And here, for the first time, the Admin realized her miscalculation.

– Unlike that other regressor, you had no real talent in martial arts or brute force.

– Nor did you have any special standout abilities compared to other

Awakeners. Complete Memory? That's bait for Anomalies at best. He's sure to die in the tutorial dungeon, anyway.

– A trash ability. An F-rank skill.

– Even Time Seal was no threat. If anything, it helped me, since you basically erased humans for me.

Yet...

– Why did you refuse to give up on this "game"?

100 cycles passed.

200 cycles passed.

300, 400 cycles passed.

To the Admin, it felt like that old song, "Air Man ga Taosenai," was playing on loop.[1]

– That's when it hit me.

By the 500th cycle, as an Outer God, she had to admit her miscalculation.

– Complete Memory. That was the culprit.

– Ordinary people internalize pain and trauma more than necessary and quickly let happiness fade.

– But... because you possessed perfect recollection, that typical phenomenon never affected you.

– No matter how many people around you died, how many killings ensued, how many fell into hell, you preserved in your memory the exact moments when they lived most happily.

– To think that this trash skill, which seemed useless, was a trump card for the Regressor...

That was the Admin's first blunder.

– But... it was still within acceptable parameters.

The Outer God soon devised her next move.

– I would degrade you, the Regressor, to a “mere character in a novel” and introduce someone with a stronger protagonist trait than yours.

Oh Dok-seo. Trait: Book Possessor. A cheat-like ability that could read the entire life story of the Undertaker in advance, in “book” form.

– Did you know? A “Book Possessor” is essentially the same as a “Prophet.” In fact, that’s the most powerful trait you can have.

– Sure, I shot a data bomb at the real Prophets, annihilating their minds. But my Miko was different.

– What the Miko read was a novel—merely text, infinitely compressed in resolution.

– And I just... added a bit of seasoning so that she would form a certain prejudice about you, that’s all. Really just a sprinkle of bias.

Suddenly, I recalled my first meeting with Dok-seo in the 555th cycle, after she’d become a “Book Possessor.” She was quite different then from how she was now.

[Oh Dok-seo: There he is.]

[Oh Dok-seo: The protagonist of this world. Codename: Undertaker.]

[Oh Dok-seo: He’s better-looking than I... Actually, maybe the cover art was better? Hmm. Is he better in person?]

[Oh Dok-seo: But I mustn’t be fooled by his looks.]

She remained alert toward me.

[Oh Dok-seo: The Undertaker is a protagonist who has multiple regressions under his belt. He’s got no tears to shed or warm blood

to lose.]

[Oh Dok-seo: He's full of hatred for monsters, a typical regressor who lives only because he can't die...]

[Oh Dok-seo: Basically, he's a madman. If I slip up, he might kill me on the spot. I've got to tread carefully.]

It was hard to believe when confronted with the indefinite-hiatus-laden LiteraryGirl of today, but she was once quite sharp. Her movements were swift, her brain cunning, her approach to people proactive, and she knew how to lead. Above all, she had started at the same vantage point as the Regressor Undertaker.

– I was confident I'd chosen the perfect Miko.

A Book Possessor who was wary of the Regressor, fated to collaborate sometimes and clash at others, eventually dancing on the Admin's puppet stage to overpower him.

But then...

– Then why?!

All at once, the white-haired girl's face contorted into that of a demon, and the desktop went blood-red.

– When did you acquire Mind Reading?

– Infinite Void! Cheon Yo-hwa! That piece of trash offering! How dare they meddle with the Mastermind's powers and pull off such a cheap trick!

Yes.

The Admin never realized that she wasn't exchanging moves with me, the Regressor, across a chessboard as she thought. In reality, someone else stood off-board behind me, wearing a secretive grin as they guided my hand with "hints."

"Seriously, sunbae, you have too few strategist characters by your side... That's the problem."

My “Tactician” in Regressions.

“I’m sorry. I really wanted to save Old Man Schopenhauer for you too, but messing with the causality so drastically would’ve been too much.”

“It already took a miracle to weave together a timeline that could coexist with your footsteps up through the 688th cycle without negating them.”

An expert who knew more about Outer Gods than anyone.

“Aha-ha. Sorry for dropping out early like Grandpa Swordmaster, yeah? Good luck living the rest of your life, sunbae. Work hard for my share, okay?”

“After all, that’s the fate of a regressor.”

Unlike the hotheaded, martial-arts-loving, frontline twin who always charged into battle...

This twin was cold-blooded and cunning, hiding in the background and setting traps.

That was Cheon Yo-hwa’s doing.

In hindsight, it was strange.

Oh Dok-seo was chosen as the Miko and became a Book Possessor in the 555th cycle, yet I gained my Mind Reading in the 554th cycle. They were only one cycle apart: the Book Possessor arrived, and the regressor acquired a new skill. Wasn’t that timing a bit too perfect to be mere coincidence?

“Haaaah, Teacher, can’t you please help me...?”

Thus spoke the 554th cycle.

That day, the student council president of Baekhwa Girls’ High, Cheon Yo-hwa—the younger of the twin sisters, sporting orange ponytails—came to me.

“Help you with what?”

“Well, the house I used to live in was the main base of that cult, right? There’s negative energy piling up and ghosts keep appearing, so I decided I have to do some cleanup. It’s just... too big for me to do alone.”

“Why not ask your Baekhwa friends?”

“Eugh. That’s my old home! There are a bunch of my childhood photos and clothes in there, they’d totally swipe them if they found out.”

“...You’ve had it rough.”

“Hueeeng. Sorry! You’re the only one I can rely on in times like this, Teacher!”

So I helped my student clean out the big Cheon-family estate.

Though it was already touched by the Void, I’d been here before while investigating one thing or another, so clearing it wasn’t too hard. However...

“Exploring these Void-infested spots together reminds me of the old days. I was so scared back then, but now, it feels almost nostalgic.”

“Yeah. That coffee you brewed in the student council room was delicious. And that time we took the water-scooter to the ends of the earth, that was fun.”

“Hehe! Oh, Teacher. There’s still a place here!”

This time around, Yo-hwa knew all the secret passages in the estate. Thanks to that, we made it into places we’d missed in previous cycles, including deep into some tunnel as she led me by the arm.

“Huh? What’s that?”

A jet-black stone statue stood there.

“This thing was here all along...?”

It was a bizarre statue, one that likely represented some deity or

another at some point in time, but its head had been cleaved off, making it impossible to identify. In its place was a Buddha's head on the neck stump. That Buddha's head was also strange—perfectly ordinary except for an "eye patch" carved over one eye.

I muttered it without thinking. "Gung Ye...?"

"Pardon?"

"No, nothing."

Gung Ye. A real historical figure, but on the internet more famous as a meme from the drama *Taejo Wang Geon* for being a mad cult leader who claimed he had the "power of clairvoyance" and shouting "Who coughed?" among other things.[2]

"Huh, weird. My family forbids anything related to Buddhism, so normally we'd just destroy a statue if we found one... If this had been around, they would've disposed of it right away," Yo-hwa mumbled.

It was unfamiliar even to the former successor of the cult. In other words, only someone on par with the "other twin successor" could have hidden such an item so thoroughly under her nose.

Who placed it here, and when?

At the time, neither I nor the younger twin could guess the truth, which was that since the 1st cycle, Yo-hwa's older twin had stored that strange statue in the estate's depths.

Why?

"All right, let's investigate, then."

"O-okay, teacher. But be careful? The head's chopped off, so you can tell it's suspicious. Don't just reach out and—" She paused, startled as I touched it anyway.

She'd arranged things so that her "sunbae" and her "sister" would discover the statue in the 554th cycle. So that in the next cycle—when the Admin played its "Book Possessor" trump card—the

Regressor would already hold a sword to counter it.

“T-Teacher? Why are you spacing out? Is it cursed? Even you can’t handle something so obviously fishy?”

“Yo-hwa.”

“Yes?”

“It seems I... might have just acquired... a new ability.”

“...Huh?”

At long last, after hundreds of cycles, the Regressor unlocked the skill Mind Reading, and all thanks to a certain supreme trickster who possessed the authority of both Infinite Void and the Mastermind. She took care that the Admin of the Infinite Metagame would never notice, even making the event appear like sheer coincidence to me, her ally.

“Hey, you, mister.”

So in the 555th cycle, Dok-seo approached me.

“Come over here. That freaking fairy’s just caused a blood geyser to spout, and everyone else has gone and bailed. The ones of us left gotta stick together, don’t you think?”

Surely the Admin of the Infinite Metagame was smiling cunningly from behind her then.

The Admin felt confident that by placing the regressor and Book Possessor in close proximity, she could intervene anytime she liked and manipulate the scenario.

[Oh Dok-seo: Come on, damn it, please. Come over here. Without you, we're all dead!

Except her plan derailed at step one. Because to my Mind Reading eyes, acquired anew in the previous cycle, Oh Dok-seo was...

...not suspicious or dangerous, nor someone the Regressor must

keep at arm's length.

[Oh Dok-seo: I get it, your first love and the only guild leader you served under is dead and lost to you, monsters are shit, the world is shit, I get it...]

[Oh Dok-seo: But for real, help us out!]

On the contrary, I felt curiosity.

'Following this kid around looks like it'll make this cycle a blast!'

Then goodwill. A quick glimpse into Dok-seo's psyche told me she wasn't vicious or wicked, so as the Regressor, I felt secure staying close to her.

Hence, the Regressor and the Book Possessor never clashed, never doubted each other. We trusted one another.

Brrrrkk.

From that moment on, the massive tower the Admin had built began to crumble uncontrollably.

Undone by a certain strategist who happened to fall in love with a single regressor.

Footnotes:

1 - "Air Man ga Taosenai" (lit., "I Cannot Defeat Air Man") is a song about trying to defeat Air Man, the boss of *Mega Man 2*, and failing over and over again.

2 - In the drama, Gung Ye beats people to death with a mace for coughing in front of him.

Chapter 343

The Surrenderer V

Sinnoa

The admin had reached her conclusion.

For a moment, my private room fell silent. On the laptop resting on the table, the screen showed the Admin of the Infinite Metagame's avatar again in 144p resolution—or even more degraded, like a dot-pixel white-haired girl perched atop the Recycle Bin icon.

[At first, I did not suspect—Infinite Void or that elder twin girl, Cheon Yo-hwa.]

Her voice had likewise weathered further. Gone was any trace of that aristocratic flair she once gave off, that sense of maybe smiling with a butterfly on her hand. No vintage elegance, just a worn-out relic. All that remained was a simple, off-beat TTS voice emerging from the laptop's tinny speaker.

[Just a worthless-loser.]

[Pathetically tried imitating—a human, clinging to the Regressor with flattery—and coquettish wiles, that pathetic insect—]

[I—took her lightly.]

Perhaps because of that, even in the 688th cycle when we subjugated the Mastermind, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame chose to cooperate with Cheon Yo-hwa. She decided that Infinite Void was a more serious threat as an Outer God, not suspecting that the real puppet master was Cheon Yo-hwa.

[You would—remember.]

[That I tried persuading Infinite Void—to form a pact with me and rise against you, the Regressor.]

But Infinite Void did not act as the Admin wanted. It used the Admin and betrayed her, leading to the Admin's ultimate conclusion.

[Cheon Yo-hwa was actually the Mastermind—]

[She was just Infinite Void at first, but then stole the Mastermind's authority—granting Mind Reading to you.]

[She's the one who toyed with me from start to finish.]

Bzzt.

The curses, fried in static, dripped like sticky black grease.

[Sly creature.]

[Treacherous creature.]

[Malicious creature.]

Indeed.

From the moment that Book Possessor, her trump card, was dismantled by Cheon Yo-hwa, the Admin's chances of victory nosedived. After that, the Admin's moves were less rebellion, more desperate flailing.

She gave Oh Dok-seo Side Story Creation, hoping it might shake the Regressor's psyche. Failure.

She pumped all the Aura she could into Oh Dok-seo while Leviathan slumbered, yet though Oh Dok-seo fell somewhat, she still wouldn't oppose the Regressor Undertaker. Failure.

She tried secretly poisoning the novel Oh Dok-seo was writing (*Undertaker: The Romance*) to distort the readers' perception.

And yet the more the Admin tampered, the more Oh Dok-seo felt a primal aversion to writing. The Miko's drive to avoid harming the Regressor overpowered her servitude to the Outer God.

Failure.

Failure, failure, failure. Failure.

[If at least…]

The speaker crackled in her lament.

[If you had treated your comrades as disposable pawns even a little bit.]

[If you hadn't given them your trust—I would have won—]

[And you—would have become me.]

Finally, I broke the human silence. "So? A loser can replay the chess game all she wants, but the outcome doesn't change."

[…]

"I get that scattering tablets along the shore was your way to vent your grudge against Oh Dok-seo. Now go ahead and state the real condition you want."

Squirm, squirm.

That black curse-stuff seeped over the background, forming greasy droplets as they all converged in one direction: the recycle bin. Once all the black sludge had drained into the icon, the background turned pure white again, as though bleached.

With a squelching plop, the Admin's avatar hopped out of the bin, then knelt quietly in the center of the white screen.

[I surrender.]

Like a white flag unfurling, a notepad file popped up with lines of text typing out in real time.

[Please grant—the victor's mercy.]

[At least spare—my life—if you would.]

In the 925th cycle. Autumn.

So it was the day the Outer God known as the Admin of the Infinite Metagame formally offered a complete surrender.

Faking it until you make it. Raising your price before offering terms.

That was what all this fuss amounted to for the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. Making a pathetic show of proving she wasn't dead "quite yet," so to speak.

I hummed in thought. To be honest, there was no particular urgency from my end of things. So what if my beloved *Three Kingdoms* stories were all transformed into bizarre gender-bent side-lore? Fine by me. I could simply re-read the same text in a new twist and enjoy it again.

Two ways to savor the meal. Men's camaraderie and maidens' friendship. Different flavors, perhaps, just as Ceylon Tea was distinct from café au lait, but if you prided yourself on being the greatest glutton in the best of times, you might declare them both delicious and gulp them straight down.

"P-please accept her surrender, mister..."

However, our illustrious literary figure clung to my arm like slime, stretching out in desperation.

"If that thing promises not to sneak any Outer God junk into my novel anymore, I can keep writing without interruption! Then our dear readers are happy, your allies are happy, and I'm happy too! A happy ending! An overwhelmingly happy ending—!"

"I-I won't be happy at all," a voice intervened.

Dok-seo and I turned to look, and there stood Sim Ah-ryeon, who had rushed to Busan so quickly she hadn't even changed out of her Saintess garb. Fidgeting, she said, "Don't accept the surrender, G-Guild Leader..."

"Huh," I huffed, somewhat intrigued. "Considering you're also part of the Regressor Alliance, I'll at least pretend to listen. Why not?"

“B-because an Oh Dok-seo who updates daily isn’t Oh Dok-seo at all. Characterization. There’s a certain personality trait that must remain protected, even if it’s h-hidden from others.”

I nodded. “I see. What’s your real reasoning?”

“Because I won’t let go of this precious gem who’s living a life even more worthless than mine…”

“What the— Ah-ryeon unnie?!”

“I— I absolutely won’t let you go. Ms. Dok-seo, taking it upon yourself to become a decent human being is a betrayal I can’t forgive…”

“Mister! Mister, I’m scared! Please accept the surrender!”

So Ah-ryeon clung to Dok-seo, and in turn, Dok-seo clung to me.

Ha-yul, who had been wandering around the guild hideout, saw this and latched onto Ah-ryeon’s waist, asking, [What’s this game, anyway?]

It was total chaos.

[Listen—to how it feels to be bested by these scoundrels.]

Anyway, it was a momentous event: an Outer God formally surrendering.

We had but one crucial question left to settle: Where would we accept this surrender? If there were some famous “capitulation hot spot” nearby, like the Palace of Versailles in France, that would be convenient, but we had nothing so thematically fitting in Korea.

When in doubt, improvise. We needed a space meeting three specific criteria:

1. It must remain intact no matter how much time passes.

2. Neither the Admin nor the Regressor can easily meddle with it.

3. The host of that space must be on par with or above an Outer God in stature.

Could such a place actually exist?

Surprisingly, yes.

“Welcome, sunbae! I’ve been waiting!”

Beam, beam.

Waving her hand was Cheon Yo-hwa, the older twin sister, dressed in a black sailor uniform.

The Divine Realm of Infinite Void. A classroom that kept the windows of four seasons sealed. The domain of a god, in which time stood still.

“And… Aha.”

When she looked at me, she had a face of pure innocent cheer, but upon noticing the laptop in my arms, her expression turned sly.

“Pop Quiz: The manga character Whitebeard and that white-haired girl inside your laptop share something in common. What do you suppose that is?”[1]

[…?]

“Three, two, one, buzz! The answer: They’re both holdover losers from the previous era!”

[…]

“Bahahah! Ehehe, ahahahahaha!”

Zzzt—zzzt—zzzt.

Static hissed violently from the laptop, but Cheon Yo-hwa just pounded on a desk, rolling from laughter.

“Wow! Remember how that Outer God once mocked me? ‘How can a god stoop to love a human or surrender to a human,’ she said.

Huh? What happened to her old adage, ‘you can’t beat them, join them’? But you wouldn’t listen! Then, oh, I heard we got a new member this season, so I came here and—and what do you know? It’s you? *You* also joined?!”

[CENSORED.]

“Uh oh, sorry! I can’t hear a has-been whose power got sealed by sunbae like a disobedient puppy—!”

[CENSORED.]

“Gasp! Or could this be an example of the Great Guardian of the Script? Like how the word for male genitalia can’t be spelled out directly, forced into the obscure world of bleeps. You’re physically demonstrating the content guidelines of a creation—?!”

[CENSORED.]

“Hehehe. Goodness, Admin-chan! You’re so committed to roleplay. If you had this level of RP skill in Japan, you could shoot for the top Vtuber rung! I’m laughing because you’re so into it.”

[CENSORED.]

[CENSORED.]

[CENSORED.]

“Repeat after me: The Admin of the Infinite Metagame… is just an above-average laptop, that’s all!”

[CENSORED.]

[CENSORED.]

[CENSORED.]

For over fifteen minutes, Cheon Yo-hwa tormented the Admin with every variety of otaku insult, humiliating her psychologically.

‘Man, she has a nasty streak…’

Then again, from what I could recall, the older twin was always a real piece of work. While her younger twin might troll the entire world from behind a mask—she was Ah-ryeon's friend, after all—the older twin would pick one target and tear them apart until they coughed blood, curse-caster style.

Cheon Yo-hwa stretched her arms wide, looking thoroughly refreshed. "Haaah! I feel better!"

In stark contrast, the laptop across from her was spewing black smoke as if broken.

"You done venting?" I asked then.

"Mhm! I'm good now. Anyway, I guess from what I'm seeing, the Admin wants to fully surrender to you, sunbae?"

"...Yes."

"Aha, it's all going according to my plan. Ehehe, guess I really am a genius."

She giggled manically like a clown, but I couldn't bring myself to laugh along.

"There's something I'd like to ask, Yo-hwa."

"Sure, sunbae! Ask anything you want. Doesn't mean I can answer everything, though."

"The Admin suspects you of gifting me Mind Reading, specifically to sabotage the scenario she cooked up of pitting her Miko against me. Is that true?"

"Ah, yep," she confirmed briskly, as if it were no big deal. "I did. To be exact, I did it after absorbing the Mastermind's powers. Remember when I apologized because I couldn't save Old Man Schopenhauer? That time."

I swallowed hard. "I'm not accusing you of anything. Just curious. Why didn't you tell me?"

Smiling, Cheon Yo-hwa answered, “I’m sure you have an idea already, sunbae... And that guess is correct.”

Go Yuri.

That entity living not just in my mind, but in the deep unconscious of humanity.

‘I can’t forget anything once I hear it. That’s just the way I am.’

Finally, I felt certain.

All along, Cheon Yo-hwa had not only been taking the Regressor’s point of view into account when interacting with me, she had also always factored in the presence of Go Yuri, who was entwined with my memory.

Noticing my face stiffen, Cheon Yo-hwa forced a faint smile. “It’s tough, huh, sunbae? The world can collapse so easily. And to prevent that, we have to calculate variables as complicated as the Sands of the Ganges. If a mere vow to sacrifice ourselves could solve everything... it’d be simple.”

“Indeed,” I said gravely. “It’s not easy.”

“Mhm. Not easy.”

For about five seconds, we gazed at each other. Perhaps we both need the time to verify the angles and intensities of our mutual wry smiles.

“But in any case, we’ve come this far because you never gave up, sunbae.”

With a motion of her hand, Cheon Yo-hwa made chalk levitate and write on the blackboard in a nostalgic rhythm.

“People often say that strategizing is about variables. They think preparing for unknown factors demonstrates intelligence and deserves praise.” Cheon Yo-hwa curled her arms around her knees. “But for a tactician like me, the truly precious thing isn’t the variables, it’s the constants. Something that stays the same

wherever, whenever. A bedrock for your calculations, a reliability that lets you plan strategies without worrying it'll shift."

In that classroom, her gentle voice and the chalk's scratchy writing formed a sort of *a cappella* duet.

"What was the reason the Admin lost, anyway? Because I'm the greatest genius who defies even the gods?"

[...]

"No, she was a genius too. Our calculation power is basically the same. So I myself can't be the decisive cause of her defeat."

The chalk paused against the blackboard.

Resting her face on her arm, Cheon Yo-hwa turned, letting the light of sunset frame her silhouette.

"The Admin and I were originally both far from human. But after hundreds of cycles, we each grew more human. Think about it, sunbae."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply the fact that she says 'I surrender'—that's extremely, profoundly human. And 'making promises' even more so."

A small smile tugged at her lips.

"You call humans Corrupted by Anomalies 'Fallen Ones'? 'Corrupted'? Those are nice terms. It's the same on this side, too. By now, The Admin has fallen so far from being an Outer God that she's barely an Anomaly. She genuinely got mad at her Miko, sulked, sought survival—enough to consider surrender... And it's thanks to you, sunbae. All because you've remained the same, unwavering you."

There, behind Cheon Yo-hwa.

"While the Void gazes upon humans, so too do humans gaze upon the Void. Maybe Anomalies need a saying like that."

The blackboard's "Surrender Agreement" read:

1. The Admin of the Infinite Metagame shall relinquish all authority over creative works (novels, comics, movies, games, etc.).

2. The Admin of the Infinite Metagame shall, under no circumstances, interfere with any future works authored by her Miko, Oh Dok-seo.

3. The Admin of the Infinite Metagame shall not threaten the Regressor Undertaker's physical or mental survival in any way. Nor may she communicate with other Anomalies without the Regressor's permission.

4. The Regressor Undertaker will allow the Admin of the Infinite Metagame to avoid entanglement in the flow of regression and to retain her own sense of self and memory.

5. The laptop provided by the Admin of the Infinite Metagame, and any works written on that laptop by Miko Oh Dok-seo, will remain safe from the ravages of time, recognized as an Ark that retains its own unique identity.

6. All of the above shall be guaranteed by the Admin of the Infinite Metagame, the Regressor Undertaker, and the Divine Realm's Cheon Yo-hwa. Should any party break the agreement, that violator shall face unconditional destruction.

7. The right to determine the ultimate interpretation of the words and phrases in this pact lies solely with the Regressor Undertaker.

The white-haired girl on-screen bit her fingertip, tipping away the tip of her right index finger with a static hiss.

[…If it will ensure.]

[That my life—is guaranteed.]

[Gladly.]

Thump.

She held out her hand, and—oddly—in that very moment, the laptop screen and the blackboard both displayed her fingerprint.

A blood oath. The strongest form of pledge.

Cheon Yo-hwa and I placed our own bloody seals in turn.

After wrapping her finger in a white handkerchief, Cheon Yo-hwa turned to me to say, “You know, sunbae, to me this world was always just variables. Ever since I was a kid.”

Then she smiled like a blooming flower.

“You’re my only constant, sunbae.”

There is a brief epilogue.

One day in the next cycle...

“Mister! We’ve got a problem, a huge problem!”

“Now what?”

“I-I can’t write anything!”

I stared.

“What do I do? I took Friday off because I was sick, Saturday and Sunday are always off by default, Monday I claimed I had the Flu Anomaly, so I took another day, but if I slack off today, Tuesday, everyone will start asking why I didn’t just get healed by Ah-ryeon unnie! Because the Baekhwa Girls’ High student council leader and Ji-won both know I can get treated anytime! So I need a legitimate excuse—some miraculous reason—why a literary figure like me can skip Tuesday too, so I can trick the Regressor Alliance...! Mister!”

Thus was it proven that Oh Dok-seo’s indefinite-hiatus disease wasn’t wholly the Admin’s fault. QED.

Footnotes:

1 - Whitebeard is a character from the manga *One Piece*.

Chapter 344

The Inviter I

Sinnoa

The Great Witch of Samcheon World.

My guild master.

Let's talk about Dang Seo-rin.

A regressor and an Undertaker. The sole survivor of the Busan Station tutorial dungeon.

That was the honor bestowed upon me in my 4th run. A bloodstained name.

It must have been raining that day.

Oh Dok-seo still needed thousands of years before she would Awaken as the Book Possessor.

Sim Ah-ryeon would later be reborn as the savior of the North.

At that point, Lee Jae-hee was still active as a frontline swordsman in the Regressor's party.

Uehara Shino personally risked her life to taste-test and concoct tonics out of the Void vegetation that grew in the tutorial dungeon.

Seo Gyu, I didn't get a chance to learn his name before his head burst open.

Lee Baek always stirred up trouble in the tutorial dungeon.

I couldn't share any genuine bonds, create any real memories, or live any real life with them. All of them died too soon, to a world fallen to ruin. In a season of drought where any harvest was slow to

yield, only death ripened prematurely.

I had nothing in those days.

Nothing but anger and hatred.

Even if the sky poured down rain, the flames devouring the wick of my soul would never go out, burning on endlessly.

"Those eyes of yours are just dripping with poison, huh?"

Footsteps.

You stepped forward, trailing your shadow behind you. The boundary your black leather boots stepped upon lay at the edge of a single pyeong radius where the sound of my burning heartbeat reached.[1]

“So you're the one they talk about, right?”

I couldn’t recall your voice or expression of that moment, nor the hue of the thunderclouds raining down, nor the angle at which you offered me your umbrella.

For me, a regressor who needed to remember everything, another death was still required.

“The one who survived from Busan Station—almost the *only* one. Word is it had the highest difficulty among the tutorial-stage Gates. Some hellscape you made it through... Your name?”

My mouth opened, then halted. Something tried to jump out of my throat but got stuck in my vocal cords. I tried coughing out a few breaths, but my voice, having tripped once, couldn’t get back up.

I truly had nothing.

Not even a name.

“...Undertaker. It’s an alias.”

“So, someone who buries people?”

You liked to assign meaning to everything.

You called emptiness—where no crops could ever be harvested—"the open sky" and rose into that sky on a broom that only swept up dust.

You called the scrap metal that could no longer run anywhere "a train" and made it your home.

Because there wasn't enough water to wash one's hair, people stubbornly took to wearing hats all the time, and you adopted those battered hats as your guild's symbol.

Since there wasn't enough water to wash clothes, people grew accustomed to covering themselves fully, and you called those ragged coats "capes" and loved them.

You were alive.

"Not bad. A person is only as deep as the number of corpses they've buried in their heart."

Only later did I learn that the corpses buried in your heart were your parents and three younger siblings.

"So what do you say? Wanna join my guild?"

In the cold rain, your breath bloomed pale and white.

To my eyes, it looked just like a signal of smoke, drifting in the hope that some other survivor out there might see it.

If there was white smoke in this world that even rain could not wash away, it would be human breath.

"...What's your guild called?"

"Samcheon World. Samcheon for short."

I sometimes wonder what conversation passed between us then.

Now and then, I'm curious, yet not terribly lonely. At the time, my

timeline hadn't been completely devoured by the whirlpool of regression. The better half of me—or perhaps just the soles of my feet—still barely stood on the same plane of time as other people.

So even the fact that I forgot you sometimes, as well as the memories I held of you, were proof that we once shared that era together.

"Undertaker. Help me... I need your strength."

You bowed at the waist and held out your hand.

Even if every word and sentence were erased, the color known as "you" still remained, and within that dark sky, we sought the feeling of one another like castaways sent adrift from each other.

Can I entrust my life to you?

Yes, I'll keep it safe.

I grasped your hand. You set aside your umbrella and helped me up.

We were too powerless to lessen the rain falling endlessly on this world, not even by a drop. But I could promise that my heart would be submerged in the same rainfall soaking you.

My last was memory this:

Two tendrils of smoke lit up in the dark sky. Two silhouettes overlapping in a rain puddle.

"Then, let's go."

"...Where?"

"Home!"

It rained.

Yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

The rain was still cold.

But not so cold as to freeze two people's worth of body heat.

Today's episode is a bit special.

"Saintess."

[Yes?]

"I have a favor to ask."

[What is it?]

In this story, I didn't go out to hunt any Anomalies or subdue any Void. I didn't observe or save anyone.

It was just a story of me heading off to meet someone. That was all.

Perhaps, this story might not strictly meet the standard narrative conventions that Infinite Metagame obsesses over. But the treaty of surrender already featured the line I wrote that says, "Sign here! The Admin of the Infinite Metagame is... just a slightly more powerful laptop." Why care about that when it's already been undone by that big distortion?

"For one day, please refrain from using your Clairvoyance on me."

[...]

"Not just on me, but please do not share the viewpoint of anyone I meet as well."

I sensed hesitation in her silence.

Given our lack of real trust, it was hardly surprising. We'd only formed our alliance right after clearing the tutorial with the Saintess, just yesterday.

[Of course, I respect your wishes, Mr. Undertaker.]

[But I'd feel better if you shared why you need to hide something from me.]

“It’s nothing serious. I’m about to meet someone from a past life, and it would be embarrassing if you were watching.”

[Ah. If it’s that sort of thing,] the Saintess replied calmly. [All right. So I just have to stop observing for 24 hours, correct?]

“That would be enough. Thank you.”

[No need to thank me.]

[See you in 24 hours, Mr. Undertaker.]

A soft click signaled the end of our transmission.

Of course, since the Saintess’s Telepathy isn’t like a walkie-talkie, there’s no real “end-call” tone.

That little *click* was made by the Saintess herself tapping her tongue on the roof of her mouth.

It was like a small code between us, whenever we sensed our conversation nearing an end, one of us would make that clicking sound with the tongue.

If, by any chance, you Awaken to telepathic powers someday, this tiny life tip might prove useful... but let’s move on.

“Hmm.”

I finished showering and stood before the mirror. I ran my fingers through my still-damp hair in light strokes.

“Time to begin.”

“Hey, you’re so dull.”

“What?”

“Undertaker. I’m talking about you. You’re so dull.”

“...”

“Why don’t you cut your hair? Are you trying to grow it out? Do you realize unkempt long hair is practically a capital offense?”

“True. I’m part of an organization now, so going around like this doesn’t look good. I’ll cut it. I was being short-sighted.”

“Yes, good thinking. There’s a barbershop at that intersection that our guild members often use. The owner’s pretty nice.”

…

“No!”

“…?”

“Now it’s way too short?!”

“…Is there a problem?”

“Of course there’s a problem! My gosh! That’s practically a shaved head! I never told you to cut your hair shorter just because your vision of the future is short-sighted!”

“Long hair is an issue, short hair is an issue. I have no idea which tune I’m supposed to dance to.”

“Listen, there’s something called moderation in everything. With a face like yours, you should at least keep your hair so it doesn’t get in the way!”

“Self-care… in this day and age? That’s quite extravagant to—”

“If I say do it, do it. I can’t stand seeing a guild member of mine roaming around looking like a beggar. And plus… come to think of it, you. There’s something else short about you besides your thinking and your hair, isn’t there?”

“What else could that be?”

“Your speech.”

“…”

“Formal speech.”

“…”

“Do you want to wear a pointy hat?”

“I’m sorry, Guild Leader.”

“Hmph. Next time, let’s cut your hair with moderation, okay?”

“…Yes.”

That happened once.

“Great.”

I looked into the mirror. In it stood a man with quickly trimmed hair and neatly shaped eyebrows, standing upright.

Just as a dog that watches a school for three years can recite poetry, after hundreds of regressions, I could style my own hair perfectly.

I turned my head this way, then that way.

“Mm.”

Looks good.

After finishing with my hair, I applied a light sheen of lotion all over. Basic makeup had already been finished off by washing my face earlier.

The perfume came a little later.

On to the next step.

With a rattle, I opened my closet. Inside were various barista uniforms I’d gathered from (closed-down) cafés in Seoul and Busan, all hung up by type.

I stared at roughly sixteen different barista outfits, then paused.

Barista uniforms are more diverse than you might think, unlike the more standardized butler attire. The single most crucial element is the apron.

Do I go with a style that includes an apron or something closer to a bartender's vest? And if I do pick the apron, what sort of style should it be?

This is a very important matter. You could say there's no issue more pressing than this.

If Rodin had known about barista uniforms, he would surely have put an apron on his sculptures.[2]

'But no. Today, I'll go with...'

Decision made.

I reached into the closet.

"Undertaker. What do you do?"

"..."

"I said, what do you do, huh?"

"What is it this time? More— I mean... Guild Leader? We have a meeting soon with the people from Cheong-un Guild, remember?"

"Were you about to call it nonsense— No, *bullshit*? Huh?"

"No, absolutely not."

"Pointy hat."

"Yes, that's correct. I'm sorry."

...

"Ugh."

"Look, all our guild members are required to wear witch hats and

carry brooms, but you're the only one wandering around dressed like a Muggle."

"Yes, I am a Muggle. I can't use magic, I'm lower than a Squib. I am truly grateful that the Great Witch of Samcheon World, with a heart more cunning than Slytherin and more brilliant than Ravenclaw, would kindly look upon me."

"Heh heh."

...

"Argh, no, that's not what I meant! Honestly. Listening to your flattery can be hypnotizing, you cunning Tongue Grand Wizard!"

"...What exactly is it, then? We really do have to go soon. The meeting time is approaching."

"Undertaker. You're a guild officer, but dressing like a Muggle doesn't set a good example for the others."

"Mm."

"Just yesterday, an owl delivered a Howler."

"A Howler... you mean the wooden owl figurine containing the guild members' petition, yes?"

"Yeah. They complained about how 'Lord Undertaker' roams around freely while they have to wear witch outfits every day. My goodness! Reading that letter made me feel faint. I, Dang Seo-rin, the master of Samcheon World, shall address this matter sternly."

"..."

"..."

"Even so, witch cos— witch outfits are a bit..."

"You were about to say 'costumes,' weren't you?"

"Certainly not. It's a misunderstanding, Great Witch."

“You wanna die?”

“Yesterday, I managed to find a Ford Anglia while roaming a haunted mansion. The moment I saw it, I realized only the majestic presence of our Great Witch of Samcheon World could handle such a remarkable car. Please accept it as my tribute.”

“Undertaker. I name you an honorary witch.”

“It is an honor spanning three lifetimes—”

“No, that’s not it at all!”

“…”

“Ugh, seriously. Fine, if you can’t wear a witch hat, I’ll graciously forgive you! But at least pick some uniform that’d make the others go all approving when they see it.”

“A suit is also a uniform.”

“Guess what? A school uniform is a uniform, too.”

“…”

“Want me to just stick you in my sibling’s uniform?”

“Pardon me, but which sibling’s uniform do you mean—your younger brother’s or your younger sisters’?”

“Here.”

“…?”

“Roll the dice.”

“…”

“If it lands on one or two, my younger brother’s. Anything else is my younger sisters’ uniforms. Oh, don’t worry about sizing. I’ll hand it off to a tailor.”

“…I promise I’ll find a suitable uniform that sets a proper example.

Soon.”

“All right.”

That happened too.

Okay.

“You’ve been chosen.”

A thick, white, cotton dress shirt.

Bright white, but not too glaring, with thick cotton so the folds of the shirt crease nicely. To offset the plainness of the color with the folds, I rolled the sleeves up to my forearms.

There was another reason for this choice: It naturally showed off my arm muscles.

Let us remember, in fashion, a touch of exposed skin is a bonus.

‘And I’ll match it with simple black pants and a black apron.’

A barista apron can easily slip into tackiness, but that didn’t matter. I wanted to be seen not as a fashionably balanced passerby, but as a “barista who just stepped out of the café” for a moment. In other words, to give the impression of a man stepping out from work rather than going out to play.

Poetically, not the image of someone “lost with nowhere to go,” but rather “lost though there was somewhere he should return.”

Hence, rolling up my sleeves to bare my forearms was crucial. It relaxed the rigid impression of a uniform.

A wristwatch is enough for accessories. And not a metal watch, but one with a leather strap. Small in size.

‘She actually prefers a pocket watch much more, but…’

This was only the first meeting. If I showed up perfect from the

start, it'd be off-putting.

We were both people who had lost our way, whose paths just so happened to intersect. We didn't have to be perfect.

We weren't players competing to determine a winner or loser.

We were simply an inviter and a visitor.

Hiss.

Finally, I chose a perfume and lightly spritzed some behind my ears —done.

In the mirror stood the person you used to like.

'Well.'

Were you nervous? I know I was.

Time only truly becomes life when it's accompanied by the sound of one's heartbeat—that's what you taught me.

'All right, off we go...'

Come to think of it...

I've mentioned countless stories shared with Dang Seo-rin, yet never once have I described the exact moment I first crossed paths with her.

Why hide it?

Until the distortion of Infinite Metagame was severed, I'd maintained my silence about this moment.

I, too, learned a thing or two about waiting from her.

'Time to go... get lost.'

I'm on my way to see you now.

Footnotes:

1 - Translator’s Note: 1 pyeong ≈ 3.3 square meters. A Korean unit of area.

2 - François Auguste René Rodin was a French sculptor generally considered the founder of modern sculpture.

Chapter 345

The Inviter II

Sinnoa

‘Undertaker.’

‘Hey, can I ask one favor?’

‘Don’t die before I do.’

‘No matter what happens, okay? If at all possible.’

‘Don’t die before me.’

‘You can promise me that, right?’

Summer.

June 24, midday, when the sky had slathered on far too much white-cloud foundation, right in the middle of a diagonal crosswalk in Centum City, Busan.

There you were standing all alone, looking up at the sky.

“Excuse me, are you all right?”

You did not turn your head at the first call. You had already temporarily entrusted your lost address to the sky—it was still too early for you to anchor your heart here on the ground. Only ten days had passed since you buried your parents, three siblings, two relatives, and four friends in the earth.

Funerals come in two layers: the one where you bury them in the ground and the one where you bury them in your heart. The ground always lost its heat sooner than the heart, despite the worry it caused people.

Under the summer soil lay countless cicadas not yet fully born.

Standing in the center of that crosswalk marked by white X's, you quietly speculated as to why the temperature of the earth below could not keep pace with the warmth of your heart.

On the surface of a heart that had just finished its mourning, a faint film of steam lingered.

That was why a single call was not enough to reach you.

"Hey, you over there. Are you all right?"

At last, you turned this way.

A single thread of a cicada's cry clung to the tilt of your head. The cry of a being left to emerge before all others.

You were Dang Seo-rin.

"Standing there is dangerous! But don't move either! Stay put for now!"

That was no lie. All of the traffic lights at the crosswalk where Dang Seo-rin stood were blinking red, where normally, at least one side of the four-way intersection should have been green. When looking closer, the red lights were dripping with some kind of liquid.

Blood.

Palm prints, stained with blood, trickled down from the traffic lights.

Slosh. Splat. Squish.

Those bloody handprints crawled eagerly over the crosswalk, pressing down here and there on the white stripes, almost as if they were massaging a human spinal column.

No one else was stopped at that intersection. No one else was alive there but Dang Seo-rin.

Her empty pupils stared this way.

“Please, just wait. Don’t make any sudden moves.”

I pulled a dagger from the pocket of my barista apron. Then with a gaping slice, I carefully cut across the center of my right palm. Bright red blood oozed from the wound I had opened.

For the first time, something like emotion flickered across her eyes. But it was neither shock nor horror. In the past few weeks, the world had seen far too much happen for mere human blood to be surprising.

What sparked to life there was merely mild curiosity.

I breathed out, spreading the dripping blood evenly over both my palms in a pat-pat motion. Then, holding one hand high, I began crossing the crosswalk.

One step. Two steps. Three steps.

Dang Seo-rin’s face came closer. The curiosity reflected in her eyes grew as her expression drew nearer.

“When red handprints start pouring out from a red signal like this, you have to coat your hands with the same color blood and hold them up as you cross. If you don’t do that, they consider it a rules violation, and the handprints strangle the pedestrian.”

“...What happens if the signal’s yellow or green instead of red?”

Her first words to me were polite, as anyone’s would be.

June 24. At that point, I was simply a stranger meeting her for the first time.

“You just have to stand still without budging,” I answered.

“And if you do move?”

“The green or yellow handprints will start digging into our bodies, trying to find something the same color as themselves… Maybe if your irises happen to match their color, you’d just end up blind and that’d be the end of it.”

I extended my other hand to her. It too was soaked in my blood.

“Anyway, we have to get out of here before the light changes. Come. Hurry.”

“…Ah.”

Dang Seo-rin pressed her palm against mine—firmly, like a stamp. Her hand was also stained with my blood.

We walked side by side, hands raised high, across the crosswalk.

Slosh. Splat, splat. Slosh.

The crosswalk was wide, far wider than the “original” that had once existed in this spot. The crosswalk thirty meters across and one hundred twenty meters long was lined on both sides by countless palm prints scurrying about.

“My condolences.”

A blink. Then she turned back to me at my abrupt words. “Pardon?”

“This crosswalk isn’t a place just anyone can come to,” I answered, expressionless.

“Not a place just anyone…”

“Yes. Only people who have lost their entire family are invited here… How did it happen for you?”

“…I was at home. I closed my eyes for just a moment, and when I opened them, I was standing there. I thought I was dreaming.”

I gave her a faint smile. “Is that so? Well, there’s not much meaning left in distinguishing reality from dreams, these days.”

“...Indeed.”

“Almost there. Until we’re completely past the crosswalk, please do not lower your hand for any reason. These little things will take it as you ‘belonging to their kind’ the moment your hand drops toward the ground.”

“Ah.”

Finally, the edge of the crosswalk. Our feet stepped up onto the sidewalk, and as we turned around—

Beeeep! Beeep! Hooonk! BEEEP!

“Hey! Move it! Aren’t you gonna move your car?!”

“Get outta the car, you jerk! Hey, I said get out!”

The sight of a street in the real world unveiled before our eyes as if it had been there all along.

It was still too early back then to say for certain that civilization had collapsed. In Busan, there were still families on the move somewhere with the last bit of remaining fuel, and from the looks of those people quarreling over there, some pedestrians standing by as witnesses were dialing the police on their smartphones.

Within another week, though, all of it—every bit of this fleeting season’s landscape—would vanish.

Dang Seo-rin gazed blankly at that scene.

“...That place. *There*. What exactly is it?”

“Not sure.”

What is emptiness?

There are far too many theories about and answers to that question.

Just as one cannot call a person to you with a single summons, a single answer cannot solve such a mystery.

“I interpret it as the spot where people who’ve lost their way end up being placed. Do you know where people most often come to a stop?” I asked, pulling bandages and a handkerchief from my apron. “In the doorway of their own home and at crosswalks.”

I wrapped my own hand first, then handed the handkerchief to Dang Seo-rin, who thanked me politely before accepting it.

“So, for those who have lost the home they used to return to, the only stop remaining is the crosswalk... Perhaps the view of that crosswalk isn’t much different from the image in our minds, in a way. There’s no point separating dreams from reality, so maybe those things simply ‘invited’ us to the place we belong.”

“It’s a bit... literary, huh?” Dang Seo-rin blinked. “This is the first time I’ve heard someone describe these Anomalies, these monsters, like that.”

“It’s merely my own interpretation.”

“Earlier, when I was suddenly summoned—invited—onto that crosswalk...”

Summer. The cicadas cried.

“Right at my feet, there was a warning painted there: *Do not move under any circumstances*. By any chance—”

“Yes, I wrote that. There are so many people who lose their way.”

She hesitated, looking at the bloodied handkerchief in her grasp, uncertain whether she should return it now or wash it first and give it back.

Like the half-red, half-green pedestrian signal, her heart was split in two. Likewise, half of her gaze was silently asking for my address.

For people, a “road” can exist not only for the feet but for the eyes as well.

I smiled. “Shall we grab some coffee?”

“…”

“What do you think?”

“…”

“I looked through a bunch of books because our dear guild leader told me to try making some. Oh, the beans may be a bit old, but at least we managed to get them from a nearby store.”

“…”

“Since I’m already wearing a barista uniform, I agreed it’d be nice to get more familiar to coffee in some way, just as you suggested.”

“…”

“So, how’s your very first taste of my coffee?”

“…It’s friggin’—”

“Friggin’?”

“Friggin’ awful!”

“What?”

“Good grief! How can you call this coffee?! This… This is an insult to coffee itself, you know! Are you sure it’s even safe for people to drink? Huh? Didn’t this stuff expire?”

“But I worked hard to brew it for you…”

“I just said find me any random packet of mix coffee and fix it up! Who on earth would ask you to fetch beans in this apocalyptic world and brew them like that?!”

“That’s a luxury only someone like the Great Witch of the Samcheon World is worthy of enjoying.”

“It tastes terrible… so terrible… unbelievably hellish. It’s more horrific than the mud cookies I used to eat when we were starving. I can’t believe coffee could taste worse than those sugarless mud cookies… How…?”

“Hm. That bad, huh?”

“Yeah, you taste it! You idiot!”

“Guild Leader.”

“Huh, h-huh?”

“To make up for my last failure, I’ve brought my trump card coffee this time. Please give it a try.”

“Eeek! Poison! Poisoning attempt! Everyone, the vice guild leader is trying to poison me! Save me!”

“If I succeed to the leader seat, the first thing I’ll do is standardize our uniform, so I imagine they’ll actually side with me.”

“Bah! So I raised a dog, not a tiger cub…?!”

“Isn’t that usually the other way around?”

“…”

“Well?”

“This is… surprisingly drinkable.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Yeah. But Vice Guild Leader, I’m not sure this is coffee so much as coffee-flavored liquid poured over vanilla ice cream.”

“In professional terms, that’s called an affogato, Guild Leader. And it’s definitely in the coffee family.”

“Right, sure. Except for the fact I think it would’ve tasted better without the coffee, it’s a perfectly decent affogato.”

“Well, still.”

“This is the best coffee you’ve made for me so far. Yup.”

So it happened.

“Here you are. Your affogato.”

Dang Seo-rin looked noticeably flustered as she faced the coffee cup set with a clink before her.

Which is to say, she was deliberately showing me that she was flustered. Displaying her feelings. The most basic kind of joke.

“...I can’t say I expected you to brew the coffee yourself. I just assumed you meant going to some café for a cup.”

“Mm. There were two difficulties with that.”

“What are they?”

“First, recently, the number of cafés still in business has dropped drastically. No one’s left in this area at least.”

“Ahhh,” she mused with a nod. “Well, that’s pretty much how it is nowadays.”

“But honestly, even if there were a café open, I wouldn’t have taken you there.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Because nobody brews coffee better than I do. I am the man who makes the best coffee in the world.”

Dang Seo-rin burst into laughter then. It was a small laugh, but it was also her first laugh since we met at the crosswalk.

“I should’ve realized it from the moment I saw you in the barista uniform. Were you originally a café owner?”

“I’m just that kind of person.”

I smoothly produced a business card I'd prepared in advance. Dang Seo-rin took it in her hands. On that pearl-paper card, written in an archaic brushstroke (my penmanship surpasses any printing press), were these words:

Café *Azit*

~Undertaker the Barista~

World's Best · Earth's Strongest · Universe's Greatest Coffee Master

---

"*Pfft.*" Her smile deepened. "Wh-what is this?"

"As you can see, my business card."

"Seriously? You mean you wrote it in earnest, not as a gag?"

I cleared my throat dramatically. "A true master lets the flavor do the talking. What more need be said? Please, savor it at your leisure."

Her laughter trailed off into a bemused chuckle as she lifted the spoon in her hand.

A porcelain cup, but in an East Asian style instead of European, focusing on shape rather than pattern.

The affogato within. One spoonful, ice cream soaked in coffee.

A taste upon her lips.

Dang Seo-rin's eyes lit up like traffic signals. "This is delicious!"

"Isn't it?"

"Yes! Wow, really... this is amazing! Hey, how is coffee this good?"

One spoonful, another, and another.

Chocolate stripes were drawn across the ice cream. Of course, I had

a hand in making that chocolate too. And the main ingredient as well. It was real vanilla bean ice cream, not just flavored with "vanilla essence."

No wonder it was delicious.

"Waaah! Really, your business card wasn't lying—this is the real deal. At least among all the coffee I've tasted, this is absolutely the best!"

"World's Best?"

"Earth's Strongest!"

"Universe's Greatest Coffee Master, indeed. Thank you."

Her laughter was bright as she said it next.

"By the way, I'm Dang Seo-rin."

"Miss Dang Seo-rin."

"Yes. My name's a bit unusual, right?"

"I'm not that different, if you think about it. I lost my real name when I encountered these Anomalies, so I've been living under the alias Undertaker."

"Ah."

I already knew. This was her first time meeting this strange barista—and also the first time she had smiled since burying her family ten days ago.

"Forgive me for asking, but how old are you?"

"I forgot that too. All that remains in my heart, in these careful hands, is the fact that I'm the greatest coffee craftsman in the world."

A huff of laughter.

She gave me a playful once-over with her eyes. "Still, I bet we're

not that far apart in age…”

“I feel the same way.”

“Huh. Well then.” She propped her chin up on her hand. “Shall we —”

“Yes.”

“—drop the honorifics?”

That was how we first met.

Chapter 346

The Inviter III

Sinnoa

“I can't walk along the same rails with you, but at least for as long as I live, my lifespan will follow you at the same pace.”

“We can’t walk together in life, but in death, we do. We are companions, you and I.”

“From now on, I’m counting on you, my companion in time.”

In the 10th cycle, Dang Seo-rin died.

Even now, when I close my eyes, it all comes back to me vividly as if it happened only moments ago.

She lay in a white bed and passed away as lightly as if she’d just nodded off for a moment.

“My condolences.”

“It must have been devastating for you. My deepest sympathies.”

Mourners gathered in crowds.

At the time, Dang Seo-rin was the great hero who led the subjugation of the Ten Legs. She was the leader of the Korean Awakener Alliance. The event was practically on the scale of a national funeral—countless people came to pay their respects.

“M-my— My deepest condolences…”

Sim Ah-ryeon was among them.

Since even Ah-ryeon herself had not yet realized her true ability at that point, I saw her as just a run-of-the-mill healer.

“Thank you for coming.”

There was no particular sense of connection between us either. A superficial connection, sure, in that we had both cleared the same tutorial dungeon, but nothing more than that.

Ah-ryeon fidgeted, trying her hardest to muster social grace that was foreign to her, and managed an awkward bow.

“N-No, it’s just... I... truly offer my condolences.”

“Thank you.”

On that day in the 10th cycle, I decided to remember each and every one of the thousands of people who came to pay their respects at Seo-rin’s funeral.

Later, even all the way in the 50th cycle when the so-called OldManGoryeo Villain was causing chaos in every which way, I was willing to hear out Ah-ryeon’s excuses after learning she was that villain. That was the reason why.

By now, no one else remembers, but those who braved the roads of the apocalypse, risking their lives on the treacherous path just to make it to the funeral hall, met with threats in every direction—I never once forgot their faces or their names.

Because Seo-rin had no family, I served as the chief mourner. Oddly enough, not one member of the Samcheon World Guild under her command objected. They merely clung to my sleeves and sobbed.

“M-Mr. Undertaker, what are we supposed to do now? Our guild leader, Dang Seo-rin... What do we do...?”

I looked after them.

No matter which cycle it was, there were always only two possible ends for Dang Seo-rin:

Dying in battle. Meeting a foe too powerful for humanity to face at that time and throwing herself against it before anyone else on the front lines.

Or dying together. Because I refused to leave you like that, I'd drag you all the way to the farthest rear line so we could perish at the same instant.

"Undertaker."

In either case, I kept my promise to you.

"There's just one favor I want to ask, if that's okay?"

"No matter what happens, okay? If you can."

"Don't die before me."

She had personally buried her parents and siblings in the cycle, so the thought of me showing up to her as a corpse terrified her.

"You can promise me that, right?"

That was our promise.

As with most encounters, mine and Dang Seo-rin's first meeting happened at an intersection. It was more an "encounter" than a formal introduction, though.

"Ah. Hello... Wait, that's right. We decided to drop the formality last time, didn't we?"

"No, see, I'm the type who's super shy around new people, so dropping formal speech is kinda tough for me."

"Eh?"

"Ms. Dang Seo-rin, my heart's pounding out of my chest. Could we put the casual speech off a little longer?"

"Pfft. Oh, whatever."

The second meeting was different.

That was a proper get-together.

You and I, after drinking coffee on June 24, agreed to meet again four days later at noon under a willow tree. So on the afternoon of June 28, there we were.

Seo-rin laughed. “You’re not even surprised by this?”

“No, believe me, I’m pretty shocked.”

The so-called “startle point” she was referring to was her outfit. When she’d lost her way on the crosswalk, she’d been wearing everyday clothes, but now she was decked out in the well-known “witch’s attire.”

Even in those early days, Seo-rin was running Samcheon World. The guild’s numbers hadn’t even hit double digits yet.

“So, I may or may not be questioning if I’m dealing with someone who’s totally off their rocker.”

“Lies. You don’t look shocked at all.”

“My mental minus is canceled out by your external plus. You’re proof that the finishing touch to fashion is the face.”

Amused by my brazen remark, Seo-rin burst out laughing. Then with narrowed eyes, she looked me up and down.

“Hey, Undertaker. Let’s be honest. You… must’ve dated a ton, right?”

“No comment.”

“Aww, come on. Tell me, I love hearing about romance stories.”

“Hmm.”

Here’s a little regressor tip:

Q: They keep asking if you’ve had a lot of relationships. How should you respond?

Answering “No, this is my first time” is the worst move. It’s tough

to keep the conversation going, and there's no guarantee they'll believe you. Not to mention, there's also a good chance the same subject will come up again. Plus, you risk seeming overly serious. No good.

Answering "Just the usual amount, same as anyone else" is mediocre. Not terrible but not great. It's okay if you're ready to change the subject quickly. A good way is to shift attention to something the other person has dressed up for or cares about.

So what's the best move? According to Sun Tzu's Art of War: "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting."

In other words, winning without fighting is ideal.

"Okay. In that case, I'll give you two choices."

"Two choices?"

A true strategist expects in advance that such a question might arise—and comes prepared.

"Choice One: I'll answer the question you just asked. Then we'll head off to one of the few still-open restaurants in Busan for a nice lunch."

"Huh. That sounds good. What's Choice Two?"

I held up a picnic basket. "Instead of answering, we skip straight to these homemade sandwiches I prepared this morning and eat them together over on that bench. Paired with Earl Grey milk bubble tea I brought in this thermos."

You can probably guess which option she chose when faced with this visual-novel-style decision.

Shortly thereafter, Seo-rin put the thermos down with a deeply philosophical expression.

"What on earth were the sandwiches I've eaten all my life until now...?"

“I’m glad it suits your taste.”

“The word ‘delicious’ doesn’t cut it. It was sheer bliss... I mean, seriously. What’s with the bacon? How does bacon even taste like that?”

“Mm.”

Now, now! You too can achieve it!

☆The strongest chef in the human world☆

Just casually regress for a few thousand years starting now!

Note: Regression ability is non-refundable.

I swallowed that unspoken joke, giving her a soft smile.

“Shall we walk a bit, now that we’re full?”

“Oh, sure. Sounds good!”

It was summer, but the clouds visited frequently and the breeze kept knocking, as if we were in the windy corridors of New York. Busan’s wind was pleasant that day.

Perhaps eight-tenths of what fosters a poet is the wind, and likewise, eight-tenths of what swells the conversation while strolling is also the wind.

“So, I was thinking there should be a specialized board on Constellation Net for guides or tip posts that everyone, not just our guild, can reference.”

“That’s a good idea. What did the Constellation say?”

“Nothing yet. I’m going to talk more with you about it today and then suggest it to the Constellation in earnest.”

We never ran out of topics. After all, from that crosswalk meeting onward, Seo-rin saw me as someone with “extraordinarily unique yet extensive knowledge” about Anomalies.

We shared an interest in Anomalies. We also shared an anger toward Anomalies.

From Seo-rin's perspective, I must have seemed to her a fellow traveler in "losing one's family." That was the condition for being summoned to that crosswalk, after all.

"Ohh, that's a really great idea!"

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Heh heh. You're pretty smart, Undertaker. Why don't you and I go around wiping out these Anomalies together?"

She seemed all lively on the surface, but at the time, her soul was still shredded by the grief of losing her family.

In a certain past cycle, the Saintess had told me something in private.

[When you aren't around, she never laughs, Mr. Undertaker. Not even once.]

[She treats me, a Constellation, with this stiff, businesslike attitude.]

Right now, Seo-rin was desperate. If she were left alone, at any moment, she might feel the urge to kill herself or else the urge to wipe every one of those damn Anomalies off the face of the earth.

She battled that double-edged deluge, suicidal despair on one side, murderous rage on the other, fighting tooth and nail to maintain her original nature.

To remain the person who had once loved to laugh.

Who had once loved people.

She fought desperately for herself.

Under those circumstances, the arrival of "Undertaker" was an urgently needed refuge.

She wasn't sure why, but being around this man, she could briefly forget her loss.

She could laugh naturally.

She could stay human.

"So what do you say?"

"Wanna join my guild?"

Just as you did when you gave me that invitation, I silently promised that in this June summer, I would always stay by your side.

I never forgot it, not even once.

We simply needed each other to remain human and survive.

"Let's stop by there for a second."

"Huh? Where...?"

She froze.

We were strolling through a park when I pointed it out, and Seo-rin's shoulders flinched.

The botanical garden. A pathway leading to a village of trees and flowers, both outdoors and indoors.

"...Ah. Ah— Aha! So that's a greenhouse."

For the first time, Seo-rin stammered. Though I knew perfectly well why, I cocked my head.

"Hmm? You don't like flowers?"

"No... that's not it. I do like flowers."

She had no choice but to like them.

Her family used to run a flower shop. It had been big enough to be

called a full-on nursery. They had three large greenhouses, growing all sorts of flowers and trees. Locals who loved flowers always purchased from the Dang family business, and there was always a truck out front delivering heavy pots and fertilizer.

Seo-rin and her younger siblings also helped out with their parents' work. Seo-rin was particularly quick at math and good at greeting customers with a smile, so she was a great asset to her family's business.

Until the greenhouse plants turned monstrous and slaughtered her family, Dang Seo-rin loved flowers.

"Then great. Let's take a look."

"...Ah."

But our relationship was not deep enough for her to confess to her trauma yet.

A swirl of emotions kept her from wanting to appear weak: her family's screams, confusion about how to talk about it, the images of her siblings' corpses entwined in vines, plus the wish not to break the pleasant mood of this breezy day, the nausea, the self-reproach for being so shaken by mere flowers, and so on.

All those feelings overlapped as she followed me.

She didn't even realize I was holding her hand, guiding her along. Too many colors of emotion, more than a human heart could handle at once, had taken over.

"...Ah..."

As we neared the flower garden, the trembling in her hand grew stronger, her breathing shallow.

I could have asked if she was okay, but I didn't. I knew all too well she wasn't.

Rather than ask if she was all right, I wanted to help her feel all right.

“Dang Seo-rin. Look carefully.”

She’d been hanging her head, but now she slowly lifted it. She blinked, then seeing the scene before her, her eyes went wide.

“This is...”

“Amazingly strange, right?”

I felt her trembling hand and labored breaths ease all at once.

It was no wonder, really. Here in this greenhouse, all the trees and flowers were “withered.” Anemones that had once been red were now shriveled petals of rotting-wine hue. Campanulas with closed buds resembled dark tea leaves, like pu’er tea.

Not a single petal was in bloom. Only debris lay scattered on the ground like trash.

The scent of them remained only in traces.

“I personally call this place the ‘Garden of Fallen Flowers.’”

“The Garden of Fallen Flowers...”

“Guess it’s under the influence of some Anomaly. In other gardens, you still see flowers in bloom, but here... they only ever wilt.”

And right now, it was the only garden in this world that you could bear to love.

Chapter 347

The Inviter IV

Sinnoa

A flower bloomed.

“Aaaaaaaah!”

Once, in some spring of the past, screams rang out in a train that had forgotten how to run.

It was the train Samcheon World had made their base of operations. And in the VIP car where the guild leader resided, screams resounded.

“Dang Seo-rin?! What happened?”

“I—I... Undertaker, I...!”

I checked on Seo-rin’s condition and shouted immediately, “Nobody come in!”

They froze. The Samcheon World guild members who’d rushed in behind me came to a startled stop.

“Until I say otherwise, nobody enters! Nobody!”

“Y-yes, understood.”

I drew the curtains over the windows, making sure no sound leaked out. All the while, Seo-rin kept trembling violently, on her knees on the floor strewn with shattered mirror shards.

“Dang Seo-rin!”

“I-I’m different now. My flesh, yeah. I felt this itch, and look... Ahaha. Look, Undertaker, I...!”

Buds and vines.

Plants were sprouting from her body.

“Ah, aaah. Aaah... ah...!”

Crunch!

Seo-rin tore the leaf emerging from her forearm with a shaking hand.

Yet it was so bizarre. Each time a leaf was ripped away, there was the sound of fingernails cracking. Each time a flower stem broke, red droplets of blood spattered. Even more unsettling was how her lacerated skin instantly regenerated within seconds, leaving smooth as if it had never been touched in the first place.

The more she tore at it, the thicker the leaves grew. The more she tried to rip them off, the tougher the stems became.

“No! Don’t tear at it! Dang Seo-rin, get ahold of yourself! The more you rip it out, the deeper it’ll breed inside you!”

“Ah, ugh...”

Udumbara. The New Buddha virus.

“But it’s... look at this, Undertaker. It’s all prickling. See, this is just what’s on the surface! My blood, my veins, my bones, they’re all flowers already. All of them... Ah, with every breath, ugh, something falls inside my throat. Leaves. There must be leaves in there. Every time my heart beats, something’s stuck. Undertaker, please. Help me. Breathing—”

Seo-rin was quarantined.

She’d always found the New Buddha Church extremely ominous to begin with. Though the Udumbara virus nullified Awakened abilities—definitely a drawback—ordinary folks considered it no disadvantage because they gained a body that was practically invincible.

Despite that, Seo-rin despised the New Buddha virus and took an extreme dislike to members of that faith, calling them “flower freaks”—unlike her usual self, who always cared about civilians while ruling over Busan.

“Seo-rin, I brought sandwiches again. Eat even just a little. If you stop eating altogether, you’ll really become someone who only needs sunlight for nourishment.”

Dang Seo-rin could not love flowers.

More specifically, she had an extreme aversion to living flowers—fresh, blooming ones.

Even after she’d done her best to move on from the tragedy with her family, the same remained true. She didn’t have a panic attack at the sight of fresh flowers, but she avoided them, not wanting to be around them herself.

Then came Udumbara’s outbreak.

The phenomenon of flowers blooming inside her own body struck directly at Seo-rin’s trauma.

“Your Excellency.”

Ji-won, who had taken on the management of Samcheon World in Seo-rin’s stead, spoke to me in the train corridor.

“How is the Great Witch faring?”

“She’s not there yet... She’s not in a state to converse normally. I need your help a bit longer, Ji-won.”

“It’s no trouble, Your Excellency the Undertaker. I’ll take good care of the guild here.”

“...Thank you. Truly.”

“Hmm.” Ji-won peered into my eyes. “Yes. Leave it to me.”

After we finished discussing various matters, I returned to the VIP

room—now effectively a sick room. Seo-rin didn't even look this way where she lay slumped on the bed.

Black violets.

From the neckline of her clothes up along her throat crawled a vine, its tip bearing a flower bud so black it looked as though it might burst at any moment. Red blotches of blood bloomed across her bed, her blankets, even growing in dark stains along her clothes.

No doubt she'd exhausted herself overnight, harming her own body and then collapsing.

For several days, I too had noticed the beginnings of Udumbara infection, shoots sprouting from the back of my hand. When an Awakener was infected with the virus, their body would normally fully bloom in about two weeks. Once it reached full bloom, that was the end. The Awakener would lose their abilities.

In my case, I'd likely lose my regression power too.

"...Seo-rin."

I sat in a chair to match Seo-rin eye-to-eye, but she still wouldn't turn to look at me. Right now, for her, only the relentless growth of those plants pulsating inside her body must have felt real.

"While I was making today's lunch, I thought of something. How I want to kill them all... All those cultists who worship mere flowers as gods. And the people who believe in and rave about it. I started thinking it would solve everything if I wiped them all out."

"..."

"Yesterday, I actually tracked down the New Buddha Church monk responsible for Busan and secretly buried him. No matter how strong his regeneration is, at a hundred meters underground he'll suffer in pain forever, don't you think so?"

"..."

"I'm sorry."

I gently embraced Dang Seo-rin's body.

"Next time, I promise... Never again."

Aura wrapped around me.

There was a *pop* and a splattering of red.

On the pointed hat she loved. On her cloak. On her broom. On her hardcover books. On her giant globe. On her retro camera. On the artificial flowers I'd given her.

As the world reddened in my final sight, it no longer mattered what color it stained, so long as we were colored together.

That happened.

Early summer, in June.

We strolled together through the Garden of Fallen Flowers.

"How is it? Has a certain vibe, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Seo-rin nodded absently. Her breathing, which had been as ragged as if she'd run an intense cardio workout, was now fully calm.

Although she'd finally regained her composure, Seo-rin suddenly paused.

I noticed. "Ah... What's wrong?"

"...No, um. I just— It's strange."

She turned her head slightly, pretending to look around at the surroundings.

It was likely only then that she realized I had been holding her hand.

We silently agreed not to mention the sensation of our fingers

interlaced. Nor the flow of our heartbeats passing through our palms.

“All these flowers... they’ve really all wilted. Hmm, why is it only this place? Is this an Anomaly too?”

A graceful change of subject, smoothly done.

As expected of Seo-rin. Considering she’d been briefly exposed to her trauma in a disconcerting situation, it was quite skillful.

“I don’t know. I can’t say the cause for sure.”

“Huh...”

I waited a short seven seconds.

It was on purpose. In conversations, silence can be advantageous or disadvantageous. Clearly, in this case, it was the former.

People only feel uncomfortable with silence when they’re unsure of the other person’s goodwill.

Yes, that was enough.

Around the time her trauma’s aftershocks had all but cleared, I approached a flower remnant nearby.

“Dang Seo-rin, I’ve got a confession to make.”

“Huh?”

“I brought you here, but I’m actually nearly clueless about flowers.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Do you know what this flower is?”

“That? Um...”

Seo-rin bent down and gazed quietly at the dried-up flower, or rather, the fallen bloom.

Determining the species of a dead flower, with its color entirely faded and its petals shriveled, wouldn't be easy. However, Seo-rin had worked at her family's flower shop for many years, as both mascot and clerk, and so she swiftly recognized the identity of the fallen bloom.

"I'm not entirely sure if it's ranunculus or peony... but looking at the leaves, I'd say it's peony. It's been dead a while, though."

"Peony. I've heard of it."

"Yeah. People who're a bit older like them. They often grow them."

Her voice picked up some life.

"Sometimes you get customers who are sick of rose bouquets, right? When I recommended them peonies, they loved it."

"Yeah? What color do they come in?"

"Everything from white to wine-red. They go well with roses too. Their flower meaning is 'shyness,' so it's cute. But if you bundle only white ones, it can feel too solemn, so in our shop, we'd mix in pale pink and pink."

"This flower."

"Huh?"

"What color do you think it was?"

A blink. "This one? You mean this exact one?"

"Yeah."

"Ehh, no way to know color. They're all dried-out brown. Just look at them."

"Still, guess for fun."

"Huh..." Seo-rin's gaze turned serious. "Then I should look at which flowers were planted nearby. Since it's near the entrance, they

probably wouldn't start off with something too flashy... so maybe white?"

"White."

"Yes, people often confuse peonies with garden peonies because the names are so similar." Seo-rin cleared her throat for a bit of silly, smug fun. "If it were me, I'd plant white peonies right at the garden entrance to greet visitors with a broad 'flower smile.' Otherwise, I don't see much reason to start with peonies at the entrance."

"Excellent."

I let go of Seo-rin's hand. She let out a tiny sound in response, but I acted as if it was nothing, placing my two palms gently around the fallen bloom she'd identified.

"White peony. Are you sure?"

"Um... Undertaker? What are you doing—?"

"Let's check."

"Huh?"

Dark Aura trickled out from between my fingers. I needed to save my Aura usage to avoid Awakening Leviathan, but—

This much was okay.

Sssrrrk.

That jet-black Aura spread along the flower's dead stem into the soil. Moments later, that which had surely been dead turned a shade of light green.

Next to me, Seo-rin drew a breath.

"...Ah."

Light green crept upward, gradually reaching the bud of the once-wilted flower, hidden in my cupped hands. We still didn't know

what color it was.

“I’ll count to three, then let go. One, two... three.”

When I released it, there it was.

A snow-white peony.

Seo-rin’s lips parted. From them came a breath, but it was nothing like her earlier ragged panting. It was somehow more delicate.

“Oh. So it really is white...” I mused. “Guess a flower shop clerk knows her stuff. How about this here? Ah, I think I can guess it too. A rose, right?”

“...Yeah, a chameleon rose. A wild variant.”

“What? That’s a thing? So what color?”

“...Peach.”

A flower bloomed.

“How about this?”

“...Moran, a tree peony. Pale pink.”

A flower bloomed.

“...It’s a patterned orchid, purple.”

A flower bloomed.

“Lipstick dodan, bell heather... White, but at the edges it’s tinted red like balsam dye.”

A flower bloomed.

“Campanula... A bluish color with a faint purple mix.”

“Moran.”

“Angel’s trumpet.”

A flower bloomed.

A flower bloomed.

A flower bloomed.

We walked quite far.

Looking back after we'd gone all around, the garden lay in full bloom beneath the early-summer sun.

Seo-rin stood and looked at the newly flourishing garden wordlessly, as if her feet were rooted to the ground.

"Ah."

Could a flower that had already withered ever bloom again?

"Agh... A-ahhh..."

Could a scorched ruin ever again yield a song?

"...Ah..."

Dang Seo-rin shed tears.

She wiped at them with her long witch's sleeve, but they overflowed no matter how hard she tried.

At last, the temperature of the soil had caught up with the heart.

"I— I... My little siblings."

"Yeah."

"My siblings kept begging me to just abandon the shop and run away with Mom and Dad, but I told them... I told them to trust their big sister, that you can definitely keep the shop open and still survive... But then, I... I... I had this thing about guilds and kept chasing after this dream of forming one... By the time I came back, no one was home. I went to the shop, and—"

"It's not your fault."

“If I just hadn’t, then—”

“It’s not because of you.”

“Why...?”

She took a long breath.

“Why, even though everything ended up like this... even though the whole world is like this... why are flowers still so beautiful...?”

That was the cry of a human voice.

Chapter 348

The Inviter V

Sinnoa

On the night when a meteor shower rained uncountable falling stars, each piece of starlight was the corpse of an Anomaly. Seven hundred Awakeners in a suicide squad clung to those handfuls of starlight, one by one plummeting to their deaths.

“Aaaaah!”

“Eleven o’clock! Another squad is covering Anomalies at eleven o’clock! This bastard, it’s getting wider and wider! We have to destroy it before it spreads!”

“Squad 12, annihilated.”

“Die! Die, die! Just die already!”

“Great Witch, thank you! We love you! Long live Samcheon World!”

“Squad 10, cleared two o’clock.”

If “humanity” is not something you are born with but something you prove by living, then without a doubt that final band of seven hundred was the last of true humanity left in this ruined world.

That day, humanity was clearly going extinct.

“Three o’clock cleared. Squad 10, decimated. Six people remain. Moving on to four o’clock. Good luck.”

“Squad 7, annihilated. But at least eleven o’clock is clear. Heading for ten o’clock... Oh. Found one remaining corpse. Can’t join you.”

The stars fell like blossoms.

I suddenly hated the night sky.

If the world's logic decreed that the most beautiful flowers must be trampled the most cruelly, I couldn't fathom what that logic served.

"I'll go on ahead, Undertaker hyung. I haven't forgotten what happened in Sejong. Thank you, always."

"Squad 4, annihilated."

I hated every single weed growing on the fields. I loathed their red and purple, the raindrops that fell on their petals, the voices that called it beautiful—and the muffled breaths of those too dulled by dawn's tremors to feel anything.

Falling blossoms.

The night sky was filled with starlight.

Descent.

My heart blazed like a flame.

If this season existed solely to kill humans, especially those who were most human, then how could I not hate every season first?

Undertaker!

———.

I love humankind!

—, ——?

And I'd like if you could refrain from hating people too much.

————.

Do you hate me too, Undertaker?

———, ——.

...I know. So, however much you like me... just that much, please love humanity more.

‘Ahhh.’

I looked up at the night sky.

‘Truly, truly. Such a beautiful sky.’

A contract.

Even if the day comes when one hates everything, someone will still find this world beautiful.

An imprint.

The night sky is not beautiful on its own. Samcheon World. All things in creation. None of these are inherently beautiful.

It is beautiful *because* it’s reflected in someone’s eyes.

Magic.

No matter how many times, how many tens or hundreds of summers pass, the night sky of that day will remain scorched into my heart like soot.

I was always under your spell.

Hic!

“Ugh...”

It took exactly twelve minutes and thirty-one seconds, plus four handkerchiefs, for Seo-rin to calm her tears.

She sniffled on a bench. “Ugh.”

“You can blow your nose, you know. Don’t worry about me.”

“No, come on, that’s a bit much... We’re basically flirting, aren’t we? Who on earth blows their nose on the second date? Are you crazy?”

She said that, but she couldn’t mask her ragged breathing.

Seo-rin definitely seemed more at ease when she was with me. Before entering the Garden of Fallen Flowers, she'd been carefully controlling her image.

"Haah. This feels weird."

Now it was different. Her eyes were all red from crying, and she sat on the bench swinging her legs.

"Even at my family's funeral, I didn't cry. Then here I am bawling in front of someone I basically just met... it's weird."

"That's because I'm weird."

"Who, you?"

"Both of us are. After all, anyone who shows up in a barista outfit or a witch's robe can't be normal."

Seo-rin laughed softly. Then, she said, "Undertaker. Let's be honest."

"About what?"

"You've got some mind-reading power or something, don't you? Some kind of ability connected to people's psyches? This makes no sense otherwise. I never told you how my family died, never mentioned working at a flower shop, yet you somehow picked the perfect date route for me?"

"Hm."

"If that's not due to an Awakened ability, then you're just an insane Casanova. Which is it? Why go so far to seduce me?"

Well...

Normally, I'd deflect the conversation easily, but I couldn't let that stand.

"Dang Seo-rin, that's all well and good, but let's straighten out the order of events."

“Huh?”

“I’m not the one who seduced you.”

I made a solemn declaration:

“You seduced me.”

Confusion.

“I was just minding my own business. I didn’t even know you existed. It’s you who approached me first, saying my alias was cool or whatever, openly flirting.”

Bewilderment.

“Not to mention you wore clothes and did your hair all tailored to your personal... Dear heavens, O ye Seven Outer Gods. Driving a psychologically cornered person to rely on you? A monstrous level of manipulative gaslighting.”

“...Uh, what the hell are you going on about?”

“Karma. You reap what you sow. Everything returning to you is just the consequence you must accept.”

“Ah, right. A cult. Makes sense... A good-looking sweet-talker who’s *too* kind must be some kind of cult fanatic.”

She tilted her head to the sky, half playfully, half in earnest. By now it was dusk. The purple sky bled like a droplet of spilled paint in a dim palette.

“This world won’t last long... Probably 20 years. 25 at most. No matter how we struggle, preventing destruction is tough. But I intend to gather people who still won’t give up and fight to live with everything we have.”

“...Huh.”

“I’ve already assembled many to my side. I’ve prepared an organization called the National Road Management Corps to

function in place of a government. Dang Seo-rin, I need your help too."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"When you're facing death, you become that way."

I gazed back at the Garden of Fallen Flowers.

The life I'd restored with Aura was fleeting. Before the sun could creep below the horizon line, those bright petals had already begun to fade again.

Yet at the very least, those petals were no longer drab browns. They fell in reds, oranges, yellows, and greens. Then they could bloom again, albeit for just one more season's respite.

Seo-rin stood silently beside me, looking out at the Garden. A few inches sunken below the horizon later, her gaze turned to me.

"Sorry for calling you weird. I guess if I had to actually put it to words... I'm fascinated. I've never met anyone like you."

"Thanks for saying so, but no need to apologize to me."

"Mm... Yeah, that is the feeling, huh? This is weird too. I feel like with you, I don't have to explain everything or think about how I word things. It's like... like you're family—"

Her head jerked.

"Mmph."

Then she rose from the bench.

A short walk away lay a crosswalk. Not as huge as the one where we first met, but the white paint was still intact, and the black asphalt wasn't broken.

No cars roamed here.

Only a few days had passed, yet this city had already grown

accustomed to silence.

“Seo-rin?”

She didn’t respond, only stepped into the middle of the crosswalk and closed her eyes, raising her hand toward the sky.

A wind blew.

A strange sensation came over me.

The breeze drifting between her fingers, through her hair. It felt as though Dang Seo-rin might scatter into the wind at any moment.

I stood up.

One step, two steps, I trod the black asphalt. Each step snagged me on images of the many times I had witnessed her die.

Three, four, I crossed the white stripes. Each step pulled me into the June summer in which we’d crossed paths.

Past countless black and white surfaces, I came close to one person. Then, Dang Seo-rin opened her eyes.

A breath lingered on her lips.

“I have a confession.”

When I only gave her a puzzled look, she continued, “When we first met, I was interested in you right away. Do you know why?”

“Well…”

Because I dressed meticulously to suit her tastes. I hadn’t stopped at just my appearance either. My mannerisms, my attitude—I’d shaped it all to fit her sensibilities.

But seeing my expression, she shook her head.

“Actually, I heard a song.”

“A song?”

“Yeah. A song, or maybe a sound. Usually it’s just noise. But whenever I approach certain people or places… I hear a particular ‘sound’ they have.”

I blinked.

Not an act. I was genuinely startled.

In these hundreds of timelines, never once had Dang Seo-rin said such a thing to me before.

“Wait,” I said, “I’m not sure I follow.”

“Ah, well. As an example… look at the sunset overhead. You see red, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t just see red. I hear the sunset’s distinct sound in my ears. It’s kinda like the sound of waves. But the sensation is shallower than real waves—broader than a stream, but thinner than an ocean tide.”

I’d never heard of this before.

‘Why…?’

It baffled me.

‘We’ve gone to that crosswalk. We’ve walked the Garden of Fallen Flowers. Sometimes we visited Udumbara instead. But never… not once did she mention this.’

Something had changed.

Now it was the 999th cycle.

To the casual eye, that number might seem special, but I hadn’t noticed any extraordinary differences from previous rounds. Yet the fact that “she hid it for 998 rounds, then confessed on the 999th” was bizarre in itself.

‘But why would she hide something like this? Was there a reason to hide it from me at all?’

Seo-rin giggled at my confusion.

“So earlier, I got a bit startled. When you took my hand and led me to the flower garden, all I could hear was screaming. Over and over... But when you cradled that peony and let it bloom, suddenly the flower’s screams stopped. And instead, a really pretty... it’s like piano keys being played, that kind of sound.”

She clasped her hands behind her back.

“I can hear a song from you, too... It’s very sad, but also very clear. It’s been continuous from the start, connecting seamlessly. Sometimes the key changes, but the melody never does. Like footprints. Really faint... but really strong.”

Gently, Seo-rin took my hand. Behind her, broken traffic lights flashed slowly, blinking as if half-asleep.

“None of the sounds I hear have ever lied to me. So I want to trust you too. Thank you... for giving me a reason to still like this world.”

She smiled, likely listening to a tune I could not hear—part sunset to the west, part night sky to the east, half upon this place, half upon her heart.

“If you ever need my help... whenever it is, just say so, Undertaker. Even if we have to set the whole world on fire, I’ll do it. I’ll help you no matter what.”

There is an epilogue.

Let me briefly mention another story.

When Ji-won and I decided to seal Leviathan, I’d already grown exceedingly cautious about using Aura. We needed to limit Aura usage drastically, like living with blackouts or water rationing.

‘If I use Aura right away, I can easily defeat Ten Legs or a Meteor

Shower.'

But that was a poor solution. We had to learn to fight without relying on Aura at all.

'That's the only way to completely put Leviathan to rest.'

It was a harsh path.

After the 777th cycle when I first pioneered this route, I spent hundreds more refining the approach step by step.

'We can't jump straight from 100% usage to 0%. That's too ambitious.'

'We'll do it gradually. If we used 100% before, we'll try 95%, 90%, 85%... steadily reducing bit by bit.'

It wasn't just Aura either. Ultimately, we had to rely less on other Awakened abilities as well.

'And somehow... until the 20th year, when the Monster Wave fully hits... we must endure.'

Easier said than done.

The less we relied on Aura, the more we depended on other Awakened powers. And naturally so, since humanity needed weapons to fight Anomalies that could destroy the world at any moment.

"Guild Leader."

In one cycle, Ah-ryeon fell to Corruption and blanketed the world in flowers.

Because we'd reduced our Aura mastery, to minimize casualties we leaned on Ah-ryeon's abilities... and she was Corrupted.

- Dad.

In another cycle, Ha-yul fell to Corruption, turning all living things

into puppet dolls.

We'd woven puppet strings across continents to strengthen communication lines among Awakeners... which led to her Corruption.

In yet another, Yo-hwa created an entire NPC army, or Dok-seo enlarged the protective barrier too far, or Ji-won once again relied on Aura in the end.

'This...'

I bit my lip.

'This is basically just shuffling cards around.'

A deadlock.

To stop these Anomalies, we must rely on Awakened powers. But that only leads the Awakeners to become stronger, to be Corrupted, to approach the Outer Gods.

'Is there a way...?'

An ability that doesn't grow stronger the more you use it.

An ability that, the more you use it, the weaker it gets.

A power that—no matter how much you wield it—will never risk Corruption, instead returning you closer to an ordinary human.

Such a miraculous ability, if it existed...

'Is there a way to...?'

There wasn't.

"Undertaker."

But there was magic.

"Do you need my help?"

Dang Seo-rin.

Her ability, Cursed Song Incantation, was simple.

She uses up her own lifespan to cast spells.

Exactly.

Only Seo-rin did not grow stronger with the use of her power. In fact, the opposite was true. The more lifespan she saved up by not using it, the stronger she became. The more she used it, the weaker she got—completely inverse to every other Awakener's ruleset.

Burn your lifespan, and your death draws near.

She would die.

As a human.

That, indeed, was Seo-rin's magic.

She was just like me.

Like my role as a regressor, who must erase the very Aura-levels I'd built up to save the world... so too did Dang Seo-rin abandon herself.

My companion.

There existed a song to strengthen humans without Aura, a song to heal without crushing Ah-ryeon, a song to reach Ha-yul without cornering her.

Everything fit together like a miracle.

This path was destined for someone to walk with me.

"All right. Sorry. It appears I do need your magic."

"Mm. There's no need to apologize."

Thus, after that day in the 777th cycle, it became the story of how I and another gradually died.

Our string of failures.

A singular route.

Escaping the cursed formula of Awakener Corruption and the Anomalies' mockery.

A grand magic of Equivalent Exchange, balancing humanity's decline with our own demise.

From here on, the tale will fast forward.

Chapter 349

The Missing I

Sinnoa

For a moment, it might sound strange. And for now, it may look like nothing but drifting clouds.

But let us consider a single, rare piece of imagination here.

‘...’

There once was a certain girl.

No. She wasn’t a girl but an adult.

An old woman. A calculator. A planner. An explorer. A gambler. A schemer. A loser. A winner.

One who wandered. One who pursued. One who remembered. One who was forgotten.

It didn’t matter what name she was given because she could become anything. All that mattered was keeping in mind that she was solving a very difficult, extremely complicated puzzle right in the middle of the night sky.

‘...’

The puzzle was four-dimensional.

It demanded not only spatial assembly but also temporal intersections and overlaps. In other words, it wasn’t the kind of problem you could solve by simply hitting the pause button.

None of the puzzle pieces had any color.

Colorless, like a mirror.

These mirror-like fragments were scattered about, and she had no choice but to fit them together herself.

Each attempt at fitting them together cost her decades of time. There was no such thing as a skip button, nor was an auto-hunt option available to her.

The difficulty could only be described as unfathomable.

She had to endure the flow of time without beginning or end.

'...'

You might want to lament how outdated and unplayable this game was, but at some point, she no longer gave up.

She simply calculated. Plotted. Explored. Schemed. Gambled. Repeated loss and victory.

Even as she wandered, she never stopped pursuing.

She lived by dying. She died by living.

Time flowed on.

'...'

Finally, the pieces came together.

She picked up a single shard and attached yet another mirror to the night sky, where only a dizzying emptiness stretched beyond.

The Void turned into starlight.

From her perspective, it was beautiful.

The first shard of starlight.

「Oh Dok-seo is a writer.」

Surprisingly, this sentence was true.

She had more days not writing than actually writing, and she was less of a genius who delighted her readers and much more like a genius who enraged them. Nonetheless, by some miraculous principle, Oh Dok-seo was still a writer.

A fine testament to how thoroughly this world deserved to be destroyed.

「Oh Dok-seo writes historical fiction.」

Surprisingly, this was also true.

If you wonder why we'd say "historical fiction writer" instead of "fantasy writer," well—

It's probably faster to see for yourself how Dok-seo actually worked.

"Phew."

The great literary master. The once-in-a-lifetime genius who mocked not only humanity but even Anomalies. Oh Dok-seo...

...woke up at 2 PM.

With a resounding burst of motivation, she resolved to begin work at 5 PM, then spent the next three hours busying herself checking the latest trends on SG Net. After that, she devoured a hearty dinner to restore her creative stamina, lounged on the sofa for some philosophical meditation until her blood sugar returned to normal, and then, at last, at 10 PM, she murmured with the pensive eyes of a true author:

"All right, the time has come. I shall try writing something."

[You're a total bum.]

Ha-yul, who had been working hard all day and was now off duty, flipped through her sketchbook with an expressionless look.

Ever since finding out about the existence known as Oh Dok-seo, Ha-yul had acquired the skill called Quiet, Contemptuous Stare. This was also part of Dok-seo's gracious influence.

[Trash. Shut-in loser. The disgrace of the Regressor Alliance.]

“So, let’s see. Yesterday, I heard a story about the 173rd run from the old man. Whoa—he said Dang Seo-rin falls into Corruption, so I was kind of expecting a romance scene, but apparently, there’s no memory of anything past the kiss!”

Dok-seo’s eyes gleamed.

That wasn’t just some figurative literary phrase. Her eyes literally sparkled—because she had infused them with Aura. Even regressors usually saved their Aura for the gravest of situations, but every now and then, Dok-seo used hers as proof of her “sincerity.”

“Skipping a naive romance scene… Even if Anomalies might forgive it, and regressors might accept it, I, the free-spirited author Oh Dok-seo, cannot allow it!”

[?]

“I’m certain that in the 173rd cycle, the old man definitely went beyond just a kiss with Dang Seo-rin.”

[Are you nuts?]

Ha-yul’s contempt grew sharper.

If you ignore for a moment that she once killed her father and turned her mother into a doll—yes, aside from that tiny bit of history—she was actually pretty reasonable. And if you take issue with the question of whether that’s really “reasonable,” well, take a look at who’s living in the guild dorm: Oh Dok-seo, Sim Ah-ryeon, and Yu Ji-won. Three mountains that loom overhead.

“Restoration means sincerity.”

[?]

“And creation means… freedom!” Dok-seo whispered gravely. “I made a vow: never to replace the word ‘fuck’ with ‘f—k.’ Because fuck is fuck and damn is damn. If the truth is so obvious, then why would I fail to call love by its true name?”

[Wait. So right now, you want to spy on dad's love life? Are you actually insane?]

"Of course! If I have to be insane to tell the truth—!"

By the way, let me just say that in my own stories, I've always filtered out anything that wasn't agreed upon by the people involved. Naturally, there was no consent regarding "anything beyond a kiss." In fact, having explicit consent would have been problematic.

But fuck is fuck, and likewise, Oh Dok-seo is Oh Dok-seo.

"The readers have a right to know...!"

[The most urgent right for your readers is actually for you to write regularly, you know.]

"It's not only about Dang Seo-rin! Cheon Yo-hwa the student council president, Commander Noh Do-hwa, all the others! Think about it! How could hundreds—no—*thousands* of repeated runs go by without a single love affair between a man and a woman happening even once?!"

[You're crazy.]

"This is a trick. A lie! It's all a ruse by the Infinite Metagame! I refuse to be deceived by this fake world any longer! I will witness the truth with my own eyes! I swear it's not personal. My foolish heart beats only for the readers...!"

[I'll go get your brother.]

"Hey, hey, hey." Dok-seo's arm stretched *waaaay* out and clung to Ha-yul's shoulder, who flinched in alarm.

What in the world? Was this an Anomaly? It was almost identical to a monkey from some joke comic! The intelligence level might not be too different either.

"Okay, okay, you are so uptight. In that case, I won't insert an R-rated chapter in *The Regressor's Epilogue* that I'm serializing."

[...]

“But let’s just keep it to ourselves.”

[...?]

“I’m going to possess 173rd-run Seorin.”

They called it possession, though the official name was slightly different:

Side Story Creation.

A power that allowed Oh Dok-seo—both writer and V-tuber—to pick some far-distant run from the past and “summon” a character from it.

It took the usual writer’s tool, empathy, to the extreme. She didn’t just sympathize with the character’s feelings—she fully recreated everything that character had felt and thought.

“So while I’m playing the part of your sister from the 173rd cycle... you, Ha-yul, can ask me all sorts of questions.”

[Questions? About what?]

“Ah, geez! Don’t try to act innocent like you’re some pampered noble from a politically gifted, traitorous family background or something!”

[Should I actually kill you?] Ha-yul asked, barely suppressing her murderous intent. It took extraordinary effort to hold back.

“Ha-yul. Huh? Lady Lee Ha-yul. You’re curious too, right... what sort of romantic escapades the old man has?”

It was a whisper from the fiend who wore an author’s mask.

“And it’s not even about what he’s up to now! It’s about what Mister was doing hundreds, no, thousands of years ago. That’s basically a ‘historical’ fact, so it’s not even a privacy issue! Who’s going to criticize a romance from thousands of years ago?!”

[...]

“You can handle the rating. Just lightly—very lightly—ask about it, okay?”

[...]

“Was the kiss... sweet?!”

[...]

“And if it was sweet, did they go even further?!”

[...]

Ha-yul grabbed her half-curly hair with both hands.

She agonized. She wrestled with her desires.

[Just a little. Just a little bit, okay?]

“Deal!”

No point in hiding it.

The aristocratic lady from a traitorous political dynasty was somewhat weak to temptation.

Under normal circumstances—meaning before the 998th cycle of the scenario—this is the point at which the *STOP!* button would usually activate.

The reason was simple: the Saintess.

In other words, if you compared the world to a classroom, she was always the class president. Our model student.

But now it was the 999th run.

Just as she tried to put a stop to Dok-seo’s chaotic behavior (which, if we’re honest, was far beyond mere chaos from the start), the Saintess hesitated for a moment.

She pressed her own power, Time Stop, pausing the flow of time, and held her chin in thought.

“This... does make sense,” the Saintess murmured.

In a Time Stop, it was easy to lose one’s sense of self, so she intentionally spoke out loud this way to avoid forgetting her position.

It was a habit reminiscent of a certain regressor.

“Mr. Undertaker just got finished telling me about it... That Dang Seo-rin’s behavior was something we’d never seen before, in all cycles combined.”

That stuck in the Saintess’s mind.

“I discussed it with Mr. Undertaker at length, but in the end, we couldn’t find any peculiar changes in the 998th cycle. Nor in this 999th cycle. So...”

Maybe the best idea was to ask the “past” Dang Seo-rin about it—about that unknown potential even Dang Seo-rin herself didn’t realize.

Of course, if Dok-seo’s Side Story Creation were truly capable of summoning the full power of the Fallen Witch from her prime, it would be dangerous. But Side Story Creation wasn’t omnipotent. Sure, the Infinite Metagame obviously wanted its Miko to eventually reach such heights, but in accordance with that eternal law of an Outer God and its Miko, she was thwarted.

“From what I gather, it merely ‘summons’ the personality and memories that Dang Seo-rin had back in the 173rd cycle.”

Who was to say it truly originated with the Infinite Metagame, though? It was still an extremely game-like power, the Regressor’s timeless clear method was likewise inclined: forcibly dressing that ability up in a name like Side Story Creation.

“In that case... it should be safe, I think.”

It wasn't perfectly harmless. After all, it would inevitably violate some of the personal privacy of both the Regressor and the Great Witch.

Yet what a coincidence! The Saintess, flawless model student that she was, had precisely one moral principle she did not uphold: "respecting personal privacy." She single-handedly operated a 24-hour, round-the-clock CCTV that monitored every single Awakener across the Korean Peninsula and all without a single staffer to give her a break. A system so sweeping that even George Orwell would have been appalled.

If she'd cared about the words "personal privacy," she'd never have set that operation up.

Hence...

"...Yes. Looks like there's nothing wrong with letting this happen."

The one and only conscience of the Regressor Alliance lowered her hand that was about to declare *STOP!* Instead, after releasing Time Stop, she quietly transmitted a message to Dok-seo by Telepathy.

"Ah—"

For some reason, upon receiving the Saintess's voice, Dok-seo smiled slyly, as if she'd been expecting this all along.

"Ahhh. Sorry, Saintess unnie! Once again, I neglected your feelings."

?

"Of course you'd be super interested in Mister's romance scenes too! Gosh, I almost left you out. Don't worry. Just watch it all you like through Ha-yul's eyes! I'll keep it a secret from the old man till the day I die!"

...

A single flower bloomed in the Saintess's heart.

‘Huh. Why is my heart pounding so fast?’

The petals, however, were quite murky.

‘Could this feeling be... murderous intent?’

It was an evil flower.

Unbeknownst to anyone, Dok-seo had just given the Saintess a little shove toward the brink of Corruption. If the Saintess fell, the end of the world was certain—thus in that context, Dok-seo had unwittingly become the hidden mastermind of ruin.

In any case, the Saintess did not stop her. On the contrary, this was like a model student who stumbled into a gang of delinquents secretly playing with fire and ended up joining them for this runaway joyride.

After 998 normal runs, now on the 999th: derailment.

Thus was the second shard of starlight.

“Ahem? What are you all talking about here?”

“Ah.”

Dok-seo and Ha-yul were in the cafe hideout lobby, a public space that everyone in the Regressor Alliance used freely. That was its purpose, after all.

“J-Ji-won.”

“A good evening to you, Dok-seo.”

Among them was, of course, that pale-haired psychopath who called herself the Regressor’s one and only right hand.

Ordinarily, this specter of authority preferred the dormitory at National Road Management Corps headquarters over the guild’s quarters. After all, she was bound to the Regressor by a solid contract. No matter what sins she might commit, her final testament

would always reach some future iteration of Yu Ji-won. In other words, from her perspective, the Undertaker's favor was pinned at a certain threshold.

However, it was a different story when it came to Noh Do-hwa. Commander Noh's favor rating had a maximum of 20, and reaching that 20 was unbelievably tough.

For Yu Ji-won, doing mild upkeep with the Regressor was enough for him. The rest of her time she devoted to "conquering" the commander. Efficiency at its finest.

Until the 777th cycle, that is.

When the aurora spread across the night sky, the Regressor's favor rating limit of 60 jumped straight to 100, and a seasoned gamer knows to grind faster than anyone else after a major server update.

Since the 777th cycle, Ji-won had been coiled up in the guild hideout, and she started by buddying up to Ha-yul. It was all to build a thoroughly rational formula:

Lee Ha-yul = Someone the regressor cherishes like a daughter

Yu Ji-won = Takes good care of Lee Ha-yul

Undertaker = "Ah, so my Yu Ji-won is kind after all!"

Flawless, was it not? To capture a general, you first take out his horse.

This silver-haired psychopath even had the steps down pat.

"Well, it's, like... basically, we're trying to study what happened when Dang Seo-rin turned 'Corrupt.' So, you know, my ability, Side Story Creation? We'll see what went on with her and Mister when they, you know. It's just curiosity, totally a trivial thing!"

"Aha." Ji-won made a show of marveling with a nod. "How interesting. Please allow me to join in on this academically minded observation as well."

“O-oh, sure! Of— Of course.”

Dok-seo felt a bit nervous. From reading the Regressor’s tale in “novel” form, she knew how gifted at murder this pale-haired beauty was.

She also had the worse end of the matchup, fundamentally. Even though Dok-seo herself was a Miko, the Infinite Metagame had now become a Outer God mostly by name (lol). Meanwhile, Leviathan was still in its “secretly powerful” stage. The Regressor and the psychopath were simply restraining themselves for the moment, but if they wanted, they could unleash their Aura anytime.

But that was not the end of it.

“Hey, what’s going on? Let me in too!”

“Ergh, Student Council President…”

Eternal High Schooler Cheon Yo-hwa, reporting in.

“‘Ergh’? That’s harsh. Come on, Dok-seo!”

“…But you, well, you don’t like me… r–right?”

“Eh? Why would I dislike you, Dok-seo? I don’t hate you at all.”

She wasn’t lying.

When nobody else was watching, Yo-hwa had bullied Dok-seo countless times. Again, if we imagine the world as a classroom, Yo-hwa was the vice president, center of the social circle, and the main culprit behind ostracizing Dok-seo. Like the difference between Poison-type and Psychic-type in Pokémon matchups.

“So you’re saying we’re gonna dig up Teacher’s past, right? Hehehe, I wanna join! I’m curious too!”

“Ugh…”

Why did Yo-hwa bully our dear, innocent Dok-seo?

It's not like this author took more days off from writing than writing itself, or wrote mocking 3,000-word announcements whenever she went on hiatus, or physically hit fans at a fan meet-and-greet, or constantly used Aura for her own self-indulgent whims when even regressors saved it for emergencies. It's not like she stole the sacred "Mister" title that Yo-hwa used to address her teacher before switching to "Teacher," is it?

From the viewpoint of the great literary master Oh Dok-seo, it was pure nonsense.

And that still wasn't the end!

"Wh-what is everyone doing here...?" A greenish-haired woman who embodied the very concept of absurdity poked her head in for a peek, and Dok-seo's face went sour in record time.

"Ah, shit! Sure! Ms. Ah-ryeon, come on! Let's just gather the whole neighborhood, why don't we? Sheesh... Just don't tell Mister, okay?! Got it?!"

"I-I'm not sure why you're u-upset with me, but... okay, I'll keep it s-secret..."

Ah-ryeon thought, *But does keeping a secret as "Sim Ah-ryeon" differ from keeping a secret as "Old Man Goryeo"...?*

For reference, in Pokémon terms, Sim Ah-ryeon was like a Digimon. Meaning matchups were meaningless.

"Oh, my head hurts. All right, everyone take a seat on the sofa! We're about to do the Side Story Creation! Hey!"

Oh Dok-seo, Miko of the Admin of Infinite Metagame. Prime era: 888th cycle. Corruption.

[...]

The Saintess, Miko of Nut. Prime era: presumably 107th cycle and 267th cycle. Corruption.

"Hm. I've only heard about it before, but this is my first time seeing

an actual Side Story Creation in progress.”

Yu Ji-won, Miko of Leviathan. Prime era: after the summer when she encountered “Mr. Matiz” at age 14, in every run starting from 777th. No record of Corruption so far.

“Um. Huh, Ms. Ah-ryeon?”

“Yes?”

“Sorry, but do you use some kind of perfume? There’s a really unusual smell here...”

Cheon Yo-hwa, Miko of the Infinite Void. Prime era: after the 688th cycle in which her “split personality”—the persona of the Infinite Void—vanished. Multiple histories of world destruction. Multiple Corruptions.

“I don’t, no?”

“Huh?”

“We’re Awakeners, right? Perfume seems pointless, plus it’s expensive, and kind of a hassle. Ehehe. So I just go around comfortably!”

Sim Ah-ryeon, undecided. No recorded world destruction so far. Multiple Corruptions.

“All right, everyone pay attention! We’re starting now!”

From the 107th run, the 173rd run, the 267th run, the 688th run, the 777th run, the 888th run, and on to the 999th run.

Upon treading again on the sand of the Ganges, calling out those numbers and names, climbing the hill of nayuta, and crossing the boundless sea.

So that coincidence may become inevitability, the third shard of starlight sparkled.

Chapter 350

The Missing II

Sinnoa

“Hey, mister.”

“Sometimes, when I write down your story as a serial novel, can’t I insert ‘side stories’ as well?”

This conversation took place around the 692nd cycle, right when Oh Dok-seo began to fully Awaken to her Side Story Creation ability.

“Though I call it a side story, it’s basically just writing from the perspective of ‘someone else.’”

“But it’d be a problem if it eclipses the main storyline. So let’s say… yeah. Once I’ve stacked up about ‘100 chapters’ of the mister’s point of view,”

“I’ll write one ‘side story’ each time.”

Back then, no one thought anything of it. It was hardly unusual for a novelist—especially a certain LiteraryGirl who complained about serial stress more than anyone—to write side stories as a kind of vacation from the main story.

But wasn’t it strange? Despite having declared she’d present one side story every 100 chapters, Oh Dok-seo had never once actually written an episode that truly counted as a “side story.” Even when she fell into a crippling slump, whether caused by her own nature or the Infinite Metagame’s curse, an Infinite Hiatus Syndrome, she never used her free pass to create a side story.

“By the way.”

“It’s a side story, so do I still need you to proofread, or can I just write it and post it as I please?”

Thinking back on it now...

“Yeah. Go ahead and write whatever you like.”

“Great! Thanks, mister! You’ll be blessed!”

What Oh Dok-seo really wanted back then might have been the condition that “she could skip the Regressor’s review.”

As of the current serial timeline, we’re at Chapter 350.

Number of side-story opportunities: 3.5 times.

The shackles of the Infinite Metagame are unlocked. There’s no better chance for an Outer God to distort history.

Saying she “had been waiting for this precise moment” might be an exaggeration, but it couldn’t be denied that she had been preparing for a time just like this.

Title of the first side story: The Missing.

Selected time: 173rd cycle.

Selected viewpoint: first-person POV, Undertaker.

* And no proofreading by the Regressor required.

For the first time, Miko Oh Dok-seo manifested her power in full.

The fourth shard of starlight.

At last, the constellation was drawn.

We return to that day, the moment Dok-seo roped the other members of the Regressor Alliance into sneaking a peek at the Regressor’s romance with her. If I were to describe succinctly what happened to me, the Undertaker, I would say it went like this:

“Undertaker? What’s with you all of a sudden?”

At the time, I had been drinking with Seo-rin.

As someone who loves working out, I'm supposed to stay away from alcohol, but an alchemist from Japan, across the Korea Strait, invented a pill advertised with the tagline "Drink this, and your hangover's gone in 50 seconds—no side effects!" If you can afford the price of such a hangover cure, alcohol can indeed become humanity's savior in no time.

Needless to say, Seo-rin and I had no reason to worry about the next day and we were both fairly inebriated.

"Hey, doesn't the weather seem... kind of odd?"

"The weather?" Seo-rin echoed, looking up at the sky.

It was around 10 PM. Except for the nightlife district near the casino, the city of Busan was otherwise asleep.

"I dunno?" she continued. "I don't hear anything out of the ordinary."

"Hmm. Maybe it was my imagination."

Just a moment ago, the clouds in the night sky almost looked like they twitched and rapidly shifted to one side.

Like some gigantic dragon.

I shrugged it off and raised my glass.

'Well. If something that big had actually happened, the Saintess would have tipped me off by now—'

A sudden *clang!* made my hand pause. Seo-rin looked in the same direction as I did. Some distance away from the bar, one of the streetlamps that lit up the Dream Casino district had burst.

"...What's that?" Seo-rin furrowed her brow and muttered, "Is some Awakener messing around?"

"Not sure. I missed it too."

"You? Wow, you really are drunk, huh?"

I didn't respond, still wary. Something felt ominous. Seo-rin went right back to focusing on her drink, but though I felt a bit buzzed, I sharpened my senses and focused on my surroundings.

It wasn't long before I realized the source of my unease.

'...No one's coming out of the casino.'

At this hour, the main flow of foot traffic in Busan should have been right at the casino entrance—yet it was weirdly silent. And it wasn't just the casino either.

'That customer who went to the bar's restroom still hasn't come out. The waiter who went to the kitchen isn't coming back either.'

Not only were there no people in sight, but their very presence had disappeared. A textbook sign of an abnormal phenomenon.

I immediately lowered one hand beneath the table and wrote a note on my thigh.

'Saintess?'

No response.

'Saintess?'

No response.

"Hey, Undertaker. Let's just finish this and move on to the next spot," Seo-rin suggested.

My mouth went dry. Even as Seo-rin offered me another drink, I quickly took out my smartphone to try connecting to SG Net.

[Cannot connect to the site.]

Dead.

"...Undertaker? Seriously, what's wrong?"

"Listen carefully, Seo-rin."

“Huh?”

“Something’s happening and we don’t know the cause. Communication with the Constellations is down. Access to SG Net is also blocked.”

A blink.

Seo-rin tilted her head. “Out of nowhere?”

“…I’m just as shocked as you are. Anyway, we should stay close and not separate.”

“Ah, okay. Got it.”

Though I didn’t know the cause, it meant the Saintess, Seo Gyu, and maybe even more people had been taken out all at once.

To be honest, only one suspect came to mind.

‘Is this Go Yuri’s doing?’

And yet… that, too, seemed strange. No warnings whatsoever, just me having a few drinks at night—and then suddenly the world goes off the rails? In an early cycle, maybe. But in this 999th cycle, with all our contingencies prepared to face Anomalies, a sneak attack of this magnitude was highly irregular.

“Let’s take a look around.”

“Ah—”

I got up, taking Seo-rin’s hand. At first, she didn’t realize how serious things were, but as the minutes passed—5, 10, 15—her expression steadily darkened.

“There’s no one around…”

I nodded. “Right. They’re all gone.”

Literally.

All of humanity had disappeared, leaving only Seo-rin and me

behind.

“Still not hearing anything from the sky?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s silent.”

“Think about it. You said you usually hear all sorts of sounds and songs mixed together. Is it normal for the entire sky to make no sound at all?”

“Ah.” Some inscrutable emotion flashed over Seo-rin’s face. Then she let out a small sigh and took a pill from her pocket, biting down on it: one of Uehara Shino’s special anti-hangover drugs. “And I wanted to stay drunk today... Looks like I need to sober up, though. Sorry, Undertaker.”

“No need to apologize.”

“Let’s fly.”

Seo-rin hopped on her broom and rose into the sky. I climbed on behind her, and we took off together.

Didn’t change a thing.

“I sent a signal to the train, but no response. And the ones supposed to be on patrol at this hour aren’t around either... Looks like you were right. Seems like there’s absolutely no one left in Busan.”

The city looked bleak. Power was still running, so lights flickered around the casino, but I couldn’t sense a single human breath anywhere.

Not in the residential areas, not at the National Road Management Corps headquarters, not in the refugee camp, not at the cafe hideout, not at the authors’ dormitory.

Nowhere.

“Should we check another city?”

“Nah, I bet Seoul, Sejong, Pyongyang are the same. Everyone’s gone but the two of us.”

“…I see.” While steering her broom, Seo-rin snuck a glance back at me. “So where do we go now?”

We returned to the bar. In a place with no customers, no staff, no owner—just us two—we set down our now-cold side dishes and drinks to brainstorm.

“For now… in cases like this, where something inexplicable has happened, sometimes it’s surprisingly best to just stay put in the starting location.”

“Like that old movie. What was it called? *Cube*?”[1]

“Yeah. Since the Anomaly happened where we were, the cause probably lies here as well.”

“Huh.”

Seo-rin looked around.

The bar was shabby—a hole-in-the-wall joint at best. Still, the owner’s cooking skills were top-notch, so Seo-rin and I were frequent customers.

“But there’s nothing here,” she said then.

That was the problem.

We’d visited this exact same bar countless times, but never encountered anything like this before. Not until the 999th cycle.

I remained calm, working through the logic.

“If that’s the case…”

“Huh?”

“We might need the opposite perspective. Instead of ‘the world suddenly ended,’ or ‘everyone vanished except for us two,’ think the

other way."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly the reverse, Seo-rin. We're the ones who disappeared."

Her eyes went wide.

"Huh? You and me?"

"Right. Ask yourself: is it harder to make 'all humanity vanish except for these two,' or is it harder to make 'just these two vanish from humanity'?"

"Ohhh. Right, that does seem more likely."

An unknown Anomaly or Void had basically kidnapped us, yet Seo-rin calmly raised her glass. She fell silent for a moment, then spoke.

"Feels a bit weird."

"What does?"

"Your explanation's perfectly convincing. It explains why the world's so quiet, why the usual clamor of songs in my head suddenly stopped. And yet... somehow, this feels more comfortable to me. This feels more 'normal.'"

I stayed silent.

"Come to think of it, it was the same when we first met. Remember? That huge crosswalk? It was just the two of us."

"I remember."

Of course.

"Yeah. This time, the crosswalk's just a bit bigger, right? Not that different, is it? Thinking of it that way, I feel much more at ease. You'll figure something out, anyway."

I opened my mouth, wanting to argue that it wasn't that simple, then closed it again, opting instead to comb through my mental

archives for a key to solve our predicament. Whatever else may have happened, the Saintess's existence being erased was more concerning than anything.

While I was distracted, Seo-rin suddenly plopped down next to me.

"...Dang Seo-rin?"

"I think I might know how to clear it."

"Seriously?!"

"Yeah."

Quietly...

"...But can I ask why, if you supposedly know how to solve this, your hand is now pressed against my cheek?"

"Ahaha. You're clueless, huh?" Seo-rin said with a giggle. Thanks to that top-grade hangover cure, her intoxication should have dissipated almost instantly, but her laughter still carried a night-air drunkenness to it. "In a world where suddenly only two people remain—wouldn't the most 'plausible' explanation be that it's all a dream?"

"A dream."

"Right. Whether it's your dream or mine, if we just say, 'It was all a dream,' the mystery is neatly solved. But..."

Softly...

She placed her other hand on my cheek as well.

"And we both know the easiest way to wake up from a dream, don't we, Mr. Self-Proclaimed World's Greatest Expert on Anomalies?"

"...The correct answer: an alarm clock."

"Shut up. You fool."

Seo-rin's breath brushed my lips.

I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing that if this didn't dissolve the Void, we'd be in serious trouble.

The hush that had submerged the entire world flowed like transparent currents, circling quietly between the two of us.

And then

「Foolish man.」

for some reason,

「Was that your first kiss?」

behind my tightly closed eyelids, I suddenly heard a nostalgic voice.

「Undertaker. Put all your memories of kissing onto the scales, if you have any—across all cycles, not just this one.」

Memories of when I revealed to Dang Seo-rin that I was a regressor.

Memories of the 173rd cycle, when she fell into Corruption but I swore to remain by her side until the very end.

「There. Now then.」

「Close your eyes.」

A remembrance of utopia.

Sensing that a great deal of time had passed, I opened my eyes again—

And my eyes went wide in shock.

Seo-rin was right in front of me.

That in itself was normal enough. We'd been alone in a bar just moments ago. But beyond her, the Busan night sky was bursting with fireworks in red and blue, brilliant colors lighting up the air.

Between the explosions, witches from the Samcheon World soared on brooms, laughing and whooping as they flew.

That was not normal. It made no sense.

Just moments ago, Busan had been silent as the grave. Forget fireworks—Seo-rin couldn't hear a single noise anywhere.

Now, above Seo-rin's head, a golden set of scales shimmered like a Constellation.

No denying it. It looked far too much like the scene imprinted in my memory long ago. No, it matched it exactly.

The Dang Seo-rin in front of me...

That Dang Seo-rin, smiling softly...

"Now this is our very first kiss."

...was not the Dang Seo-rin of the 999th cycle.

She was the Dang Seo-rin of the 173rd cycle, the Fallen Great Witch.

What in the world was going on?

To this neverland of a missing space—this utopia—where witches' laughter and bursts of fireworks echoed without end...

I, the Undertaker, had been brought along.

Footnotes:

1 - The 1997 sci-fi horror film *Cube* features an escape-room premise wherein the characters are tasked with escaping a series of deadly trap-rooms shaped together in a giant cube to get to a room on the outer edge where they can escape. Toward the end of the film, it is revealed that all of the rooms move over time, so the safest way out would have been to stay in the room they originally found themselves in.

Chapter 351

The Missing III

Sinnoa

Originally, my memories were supposed to end right here. In the 173rd cycle, after the “Undertaker” shared a kiss with Dang Seo-rin, the story jumped into the next regression without delay. Yet for some reason...

“Still... Yes, that’s right.”

Before my eyes, Dang Seo-rin was casually living on into the time beyond the kiss.

She was smiling, tilting her head.

She was alive.

Like a sequel to a novel that had once been left unfinished.

“Well, I know I’m being a bit unreasonable. But, as the master of Utopia, the commander of the National Road Management Corps, and the supreme Great Witch, I might be able to grant one single wish, you know? By the way, that’s a really big deal, yeah? The moment you told me I was an Anomaly, it felt like some mental shackle snapped off in my head.”

Seo-rin puffed out her chest with a self-satisfied harrumph.

“Right now, I could probably grant any wish, like a genuine god,” she continued.

“...A wish, is it.”

Finally, the “Undertaker” opened his mouth.

It was certainly not my own will. My tongue was **automatically, instinctively** moving on its own. I felt like I was a customer in a

movie theater, left only to watch the “Undertaker” speak these lines right in front of me.

‘No,’ I thought to myself. ‘Perhaps… while I still don’t know why, I might be witnessing the **epilogue** of the 173rd cycle. If so, it’s only natural I can’t intervene. In this moment, the one who kissed Dang Seo-rin is the **Undertaker of the 173rd cycle**. And the person conversing with her now is also my past self.’

My spirit quivered.

‘Am I finally going to learn what happened?’

What actually went down in the 173rd cycle?

Until now, I’d simply assumed that right after we kissed, Seo-rin had killed me. It was the simplest and most persuasive explanation.

And yet…

“…When I think about it, you’re right.”

The epilogue now playing out before my eyes showed me that my original assumption was wrong.

“It’s true that in the past, you’ve never fallen into Corruption exactly like this before. I doubt it’ll happen again.”

“Because you’d stop me?”

“Yes.”

Seo-rin had not killed me. Nor had we perished together. Amazingly, after we shared a kiss, the two of us were still talking to each other in a perfectly normal way.

Having apparently been abducted from the 999th cycle back into this past scene, I held my breath, secretly eavesdropping on the epilogue.

“In the end, you’d have to say this cycle failed. And yet, that doesn’t change the fact that it’s a rare opportunity,” the Undertaker said,

stroking his chin. “Just let me confirm one thing. Seo-rin, that golden set of scales of yours... that Equivalent Exchange scale can extract greater rewards the more you sacrifice. Am I correct?”

Seo-rin nodded. “Yeah. When we kissed earlier, I tried it for the first time. Right now, I can probably put ‘pretty much anything’ on the scales. My own lifespan. Your memories. Anything at all, as long as it matches the price.”

Indeed. When you consider it carefully, it’s a horrifying power, isn’t it?

‘My Complete Memory ability is practically absolute. Excluding the handful fo blank slates from the 1st to the 4th cycle—the ones Cheon Yo-hwa mentioned—I remember basically everything else.’

And yet, Dang Seo-rin had just placed even that flawless ability onto her golden scales. She erased all my memories related to that kiss so that the kiss we just shared could be “my first kiss.”

‘Right, that explains why Infinite Void— Why *Cheon Yo-hwa* once demanded something so absurd, claiming we’d shared a kiss way back when!’

Realization struck heavy, true, yet totally unexpected.

Still, if here in the 173rd cycle, Seo-rin had wiped out all my memories of **my first kiss**, it *did* fit. She had deleted a chunk of memories that Cheon Yo-hwa once possessed. Later on, once Cheon Yo-hwa absorbed all the powers of the Void and the Hidden Mastermind, she reclaimed the memories that had been snatched away.

‘Unbelievable, so it was actually...? No, wait, that’s the 1st cycle, so... This is getting way too complicated. And besides, the kiss isn’t even the main point here!’

There was really only one vital point: Right here in the 173rd cycle, the Corrupted Dang Seo-rin before me had risen to a nearly omnipotent state capable of tampering with the Regressor’s Complete Memory. According to her, she could place absolutely

anything on her golden scales, and in exchange, she could gain any corresponding wish.

If that was the case, then what would the Undertaker of the 173rd cycle—my past self—do when faced with such a one-of-a-kind chance?

'Maybe he borrows Dang Seo-rin's power to hunt down an Outer God? No, that would be pointless. Even if we defeated an Outer God with the Fallen Dang Seo-rin's help, there's no guarantee we could replicate it in a later cycle.'

My thoughts were running a mental race against each other.

'Besides, the fact that it's specifically the 173rd cycle is way too conspicuous. We don't have enough intel! At this point in time, we've barely even taken down the Outer God called Infinite Void. We haven't found any way to tackle the Infinite Metagame, and as for the Mastermind or Leviathan, I might not even know they exist!'

I felt my throat going dry. Or maybe I really was parched.

The faster I thought about the perfect way to utilize this priceless opportunity, the closer I felt to the 173rd-cycle me.

'Any wish I might make **now** could end up wasted by hindsight. I lack crucial knowledge, experience. I still need to figure out how to conquer this world, this Void! For instance, what if I used this chance to wish for enough power to defeat the Admin of the Infinite Metagame? That'd be a catastrophic mistake!'

I understood.

Logically speaking, I knew.

In the 173rd cycle, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame seemed like an unbeatable entity. A towering mountain. We had no practical way to conquer it. It wasn't until the 593rd cycle that we managed to subdue the Infinite Metagame, and even then it took Dok-seo's cooperation.

'Meanwhile, my 173rd-cycle self has no clue how crucial Oh Dok-

seo is...'

I wanted to warn him, to tell my past self that the 173rd cycle is still early in the entire regressor's journey.

There's no need to worry about the Infinite Metagame right now. You should consult Dang Seo-rin about an even worse giant evil that's coming!

In that instant—

'Ah.'

my heart—

Thump!

I felt a sort of resonance, past with present, now with the future, two layers of melody that should never overlap somehow crossing through the miraculous magic of my heartbeat.

The "Undertaker" spoke.

"...Dang Seo-rin."

"Hm?"

"I've made up my mind."

"Oh, really? What's your wish? Now I'm curious too."

"I doubt I can just figure out an optimal wish right now. So—"

Thump.

"I'll ask my future self."

Thump.

"Huh? Your future self?"

"Right."

Thump. Thump.

“Let’s say the me from the 10th cycle asked you how to defeat the Ten Legs. Wouldn’t that be pitiful?”

“Pfft. Hahaha, true! Makes sense!”

“Maybe we’re in the same boat right now. So the wish I want to place upon your golden scales of Equivalent Exchange is—”

Thump!

And—

“**Summon the future me to this very place**.”

My heart pounded.

“Ohhh, your future self, huh? That even piques my interest.”

“Really?”

“Yeah! Sounds fun. Dunno if it’ll work. Besides, how far in the future are we talking? Right now we’re in... Sorry, which cycle was this?”

“The 173rd cycle.”

“Got it, 173. Let’s see. So if we say... the 300th cycle? The 400th? You want me to bring your future self from around then?”

“No.” The Undertaker shook his head as a hint of amusement crept into his voice. “If we’re going to make a wish, let’s go all in. Summon the me of the 1,000th cycle.”

“What the heck? 1,000th? If you haven’t saved the world by then, doesn’t that mean something’s seriously wrong with you?”

“That’s exactly why I’m trying this,” the Undertaker said with a chuckle. “Think about it. If I put a wish on the scales to bring the me of the 1,000th cycle—and nothing happens—that means I must have already saved the world by then, right?”

“Oh?”

“On the other hand, if it actually succeeds in summoning me from the 1,000th cycle… well, we’ll find out plenty of things. Either way, there’s no downside.”

“Wow, that’s our Utopia’s Guardian for you, when it comes to this, your brain’s in top gear.”

“All thanks to having such a wise Great Witch as the leader of the National Road Management Corps.”

“Oh hush, flattery will get you nowhere.”

Seo-rin smiled.

“Cool, got it,” I affirmed. “Then I, Dang Seo-rin, the Great Witch of the Samcheon World, also known by some as the Corrupted ‘Great Anomaly,’ command you now.”

“Are you sulking?”

“Onto the right side of the scales, I place **the 1,000th-cycle Undertaker**, bringing him into this place.”

Fwoooosh!

The golden scales projected into the night sky began tilting violently to the right, as though the chain might snap.

“Huh?”

“Uh— Um. For now…”

“…Looks like it went up.”

“Y-yeah.”

The Undertaker and Dang Seo-rin spoke at once, both sounding flustered. “Maybe?”

“But this is… wow. Way too heavy,” the Great Witch continued. “The heaviest I’ve ever felt on these scales was Yu Ji-won’s feelings,

but…”

“And?”

“…Compared to that, this is ten times heavier. No, even heavier than that. I mean, I’m wondering if there’s any price in the entire world that can match this weight.”

Silence.

After about twenty seconds…

THUD!

Seo-rin slammed the table with her fist and stood up.

“Hey, Undertaker! Isn’t this just ridiculous?! How can you fail to save the world even after 1,000 cycles?!”

“Look, don’t shout at me about that.”

“Who else can I shout at?!”

“This is… it’s the Anomalies’ fault, Seo-rin. There’s no way I could be that incompetent!”

“Seriously! It was all so romantic until we kissed!”

“You started it!”

“Huh? Are you for real? You were basically begging me for a kiss—like, ‘Even if the world burns. Even if you turn into an Anomaly. I’ll always be by your side forever!’ Everyone could see you were craving a kiss!”

“I never dealt with you out of that kind of selfish desire! Not once!”

“That’s even worse, you idiot!”

Hmm.

I wished I could plug my ears, but “I” wasn’t free to do so.

It was depressing.

The two of them bickered for quite a while. At length, after this petty fight that dragged both human and Anomaly down to a cringe level, they finally pressed their foreheads together in all seriousness.

“My remaining lifespan... Yep,not enough. Ugh, maybe we’re not offering the right sort of price...”

“What if we add my lifespan?”

“Still nowhere near enough. And it feels like the ‘type’ is mismatched. I tried throwing in the entire lifespans of Busan’s citizens just as a test, and the scale didn’t even budge.”

“Wow.”

“Feels like it’s too much of a cheat code or something. So what do we do?”

They tried various experiments, but that golden scale, which had tilted violently to one side, didn’t so much as twitch.

Then—

The Undertaker parted his lips.

“Dang Seo-rin, I need to confess something.”

“A confession? About what?”

“To be honest, even if you had killed me a moment ago, I would have accepted it without any regrets.”

She looked at me. Facing her gaze, dark as the night sky, the Undertaker continued.

“If our life ended there, I would have been able to accept it... Mind if I ask if you feel the same?”

“Yeah.”

Her answer came immediately.

“I do… I feel just like you do.”

“Then—” The Undertaker inhaled. “I’ll offer up my memories as the price.”

Ah.

“Your memories?”

“Yes. The biggest problem with summoning my **future self** is that I’d acquire far too much knowledge in the present. But even if I do acquire knowledge, if I wipe out my memory of having acquired it —”

“Ah.”

“Then maybe it won’t be seen as such a cheat code. We’ll just forget we ever summoned **the me of the 1,000th cycle**.”

“Wait, so…” Seo-rin trailed off, scrunching her brow. “Let’s see if I’ve got this right: We bring in your future self and ask him a bunch of questions. But then we treat it like none of that ever happened, erasing the fact we asked him in the first place?”

The Undertaker nodded. “Exactly. To me, the 173rd cycle ends here. Actually, it ended the moment we kissed… I’ll erase all memory that we had this conversation. And anything that happens after we summon the **me of the 1,000th cycle**, any actions or discussion, all of it goes away from my memory.”

“Even if you do… what good does it do for you? Without memories, it’s basically the same as death. No different from dying. Even if you go to the trouble of summoning your future self, it’s pointless.”

“Pointless for me, sure.”

His quiet murmur.

“But it might matter to the Undertaker of the 1,000th cycle… And to the Dang Seo-rin of the 1,000th cycle. And to all of us, and all of humanity.”

Gently, the Undertaker reached out and clasped Seo-rin's hand.

"Dang Seo-rin, watch over my death."

There was a brief silence. Then a sorrowful smile.

"Gladly."

Seo-rin's palm blanketed over the back of my hand, her whisper drifting over our interlaced fingers.

"I, Dang Seo-rin, hereby declare. On the left side of the scales, I place the body, mind, and consciousness of the Undertaker now before me."

With each word—body, mind, consciousness—the scale shifted slightly. Even then, the scales had yet to balance.

"And also, every single event that will happen from now on, in this so-called 173rd cycle... Undertaker forfeits his right to remember them."

The left scale rose a little higher. But balance had still not been achieved.

The master of Utopia whispered.

"And even his time spent together with me... He forgets it all."

At that, the two sides of that golden scale, which seemed like they'd never even out, finally reached equilibrium.

Equivalent Exchange. A power that only a Fallen Dang Seo-rin at the pinnacle could wield.

Beneath the night sky, the witch's scales shone golden like a constellation.

The weight was balanced.

Chapter 352

The Missing IV

Sinnoa

“Undertaker. Even now, you could still back out,” Seo-rin said.

At this point, the golden scales were pouring light onto her shoulder. Her face, turned halfway toward me, was partly hidden in shadow.

“We could just laugh, chat...”

“Travel together?”

“Yeah. We could spend the rest of this world—this 173rd cycle—together until it ends in destruction.” When I didn’t respond, she continued, “And that’s not all. If you don’t lose your memories here, at least you’d walk away with the knowledge that you fail all the way up to the 1000th cycle, right?”

She made a valid point. And yet when I looked into her eyes, I sensed a pitch-black current swirling in the well of her logic.

She was afraid.

Of what, you might ask? Afraid that the feelings we had managed to share here in the 173rd cycle would vanish so quickly and pointlessly.

It was a good instinct. In the next cycle, I’d be extra cautious to protect the National Road Management Corps so its commander wouldn’t meet a tragic end, and I’d set up all sorts of guardrails so Dang Seo-rin wouldn’t fall into Corruption.

This life is only for this cycle.

The 173rd-cycle Undertaker squeezed Seo-rin’s hand. Perhaps he felt the same.

“Don’t think of it that way, Great Witch. You’re not parting ways with me—just the opposite. You get to meet the Undertaker of the 1000th cycle. Isn’t that lucky?”

She blinked. “What?”

“No person is eternal. Our personalities, habits, humanity—they can all change. In other words, this is an opportunity. You get to see what the man you gave your heart to becomes after a few thousand years. That’s like a special event... So there’s no reason to be sad. If anything, you should be excited. Even in this vast world, who else but you would get invited to an adventure like this?”

A bemused huff escaped Seo-rin. “You call that a farewell line? There’s no trace of romance in it at all!”

“But it made you laugh, right?”

“I only laughed ’cause it was so ridiculous! You’re really something when it comes to ruining the mood. You go on about *Three Kingdoms* all the time just to sound old and keep people from getting too friendly, don’t you?”

“Ah, you’ve caught me.”

“...Idiot.” She waved her hand. “Just get going, already.”

At that, threads of gold poured out from the Undertaker’s chest and were sucked into the scales. His life in the 173rd cycle, his mind, the rights to his memories—they absorbed it all until his eyes lost their playful sparkle and grew vacant in a sort of suspended-animation state. Seo-rin’s expression fell into sorrow as she watched.

‘Ah.’

Simultaneously, the same change occurred in me—I went from floating around like a ghostly observer, separate from “Undertaker,” to suddenly feeling a violent pull. The golden light from the magical scales flared, illuminating the entire night sky and pouring into the empty shell of “the Undertaker.”

And then, my head was spinning. It felt like I'd broken the surface after diving in deep water. The next instant, I was looking at Seo-rin not from the perspective of a spirit but directly, with my very own eyes.

My self from the 999th cycle had truly "possessed" the 173rd-cycle Undertaker's body.

A tense silence settled over the terrace atop the Tower of Babel.

It was a truly strange encounter. On one side was the Great Witch, still thinking and acting human yet controlling this Utopia city as if it were her limbs—a thoroughly Corrupted being. On the other side was the Regressor of the 999th cycle: a being who might be even closer to an Anomaly than the Great Witch, depending on how you looked at it. Both were doing their best to mimic humans, and in that sense, they were alike.

'She's on guard.'

I didn't feel offended. From Seo-rin's perspective, the me of the 999th cycle was an unknown entity. Depending on how things went, she might need to use all her powers to confront me.

The stillness of silence broke as my lips abruptly parted.

"Sometimes, those shallow Wippa or dimwitted brother—"

A blink.

"—slur the governor's name and call him a hypocrite, but that's downright blasphemous. The governor was imperfect, just like any other human, yet he pressed forward, worrying about everyone's morality. And in the end, he admitted even his own mistakes! How dare those brats like Aman compare themselves to him?"

Another.

"Anyone who disses the Governor is either a child who hasn't lived long enough to realize human imperfection, or a narcissist who'll never become truly human no matter how long they live!"

Then one more.

Dang Seo-rin's expression shifted from wariness to confusion, then realization and scorn, and finally, she breathed out a sigh—one of relief.

She lowered her broom with a slow, casual motion. "Welcome, Undertaker."

"Mm."

"Even after tens of thousands of years, you're still going on about that?"

My sincerity had been proven.

Dang Seo-rin and I—two problem children but the strongest in the world—joined forces. No one in the 173rd-cycle world could stand against us.

"But why is it you from the 999th cycle, not the 1000th cycle?"

"I have a theory."

We spent the whole night on the terrace—it wasn't like any of us actually needed sleep, anyway—holding a strategy meeting.

"A theory?" she echoed. "Let's hear it."

"I think that the moment I got summoned and possessed this body, that might've turned this world into what we'll call my '1000th cycle.'"

"Huh?"

I called it a theory, but I was nearly certain. "Think about it, Seo-rin. The 'Undertaker of the 173rd cycle' just died. And the 'Undertaker of the 999th cycle' left his own world behind to come back into this other past timeline. You could say it's a bonus stage or maybe a 1000th stage."

“Heh. That does make sense.”

“But strictly speaking, it isn’t a proper 1000th cycle so much as a bonus stage. We’ve distorted the timeline.”

A hidden history, not the official record. A side story rather than the main story.

Still, I had no clue why we ended up alone in a world empty of everyone else right before I was pulled here. But in this messy Void, mysteries are never in short supply. Maybe we’d find clues later.

“So? You sacrificed your soul to summon your future self, so this must be a pretty big plan. What devious scheme is the Undertaker of the 1000th cycle plotting?”

“Like I said, this is a bonus stage.”

I petted Blackie.

Oh, right. Blackie was the cat that Seo-rin was raising in this cycle. It looked like a normal cat, one befitting the commander of the National Road Management Corps.

“I can pull off strategies here that would be impossible in the real 1000th cycle, like using Aura infinitely,” I offered by way of example.

“Huh? Aura? What about it?”

“Well, Ji-won actually...”

After hearing the truth about the silver-haired psychopath and the nature of Aura, Seo-rin’s face contorted in shock.

“N-no way! Yu Ji-won? Our operations officer is the one who controls all the Aura in this world?!”

“Not ‘controls’ exactly. She more acts as the caretaker. Anyway, that’s the gist of it.”

“You’re kidding! But she... she once got caught killing cats, and we

forced her to get personality readjustment via the golden scales…”

“She planned it, obviously—to avoid letting either of us suspect her real identity. She got her ‘safe’ status certified, so to speak.”

“This is crazy…”

Blackie meowed on my lap. Thanks to my regressor’s mastery of cat-petting (I’d memorized all the sweet spots through countless cycles), it had long since hit 100 favorability toward me.

“And that’s not the end of it. Yo-hwa, well… Actually, there’s a being with the same name who’s both a human and an Anomaly.”

Seo-rin tilted her head. “Huh? I know Lieutenant Cheon Yo-hwa quite well.”

“They’re homonyms in Korean, but the hanja are different.[1] Anyway, that person is both the ‘Infinite Void’ and a shrine maiden to the Hidden Mastermind—”

I was cut off as a commotion broke somewhere beneath the Tower of Babel.

“Hey, come on! Let me through!”

“Even if you’re from the National Road Management Corps, you still can’t just barge onto the terrace!”

“But I really have urgent news for Commander Dang!”

“We still have regulations—”

“Ugh! Would I come all the way here during a festival if it weren’t critical?! If I don’t report this now, our city is doomed! Doomed, you hear me?! If we’re late reporting this and everything goes to hell, are you gonna take responsibility?!”

“W-well…”

The rowdy atmosphere from the Utopia fireworks festival below seemed to be rising to our floor. Seo-rin furrowed her pale brow.

“What is this?” she wondered. “I specifically told everyone not to come up here until after tomorrow afternoon.”

“Uh…”

She looked pretty annoyed, but I could only blink in like a dazed frog.

The voice drifting up the stairs was awfully, painfully, infuriatingly familiar.

“That’s…”

The real question was “why” and “how” did that person appear here now?

An unbearable curiosity filled my chest.

“Sorry, Seo-rin. I think that’s an acquaintance of mine.”

“What? An acquaintance? Of yours?” The expression on her face translated loosely to “no way” in human language. “The only person you’re close with these days is OldManGoryeo. You two have basically set up a whole private corner on SG Net.”

Ah, right… In the 173rd cycle, practically everyone in Utopia had completed Dang Seo-rin’s Personality Correction program. They sincerely believed that participating in “community stuff” was just a waste of life, time that could be spent reading intellectual books instead.

Truly fitting for a Fallen One—a veritable Anomaly.

Feeling oddly nostalgic, I said, “Let them in. She must have something urgent to say.”

“…If you say so.”

Seo-rin waved a hand, and the magic activated shockingly easily. The locked iron door opened, and the troublemaker below was pulled in by some invisible force.

“Wah, huh?! Hiyaaaaaah!”

Dangling in midair, the person who was magically summoned sported short red hair and exuded a certain Aura of “utter newbie” from head to toe.

There was no hiding it.

“O-oh, mister!”

She flailed about in the air but somehow managed to meet my gaze with desperate eyes.

We’d collectively agreed to call this hopeless being “Oh Dok-seo.”

Dok-seo was thrashing around, but her eyes brimmed with genuine relief when she saw me.

“Mister, it’s you, right? Right?! I’m so scared! I opened my eyes and found myself in this weird-ass place and—! And—! I looked all over Busan, and everything was totally different except for the Tower of Babel! What the hell is going on?!”

Seo-rin’s scowl deepened at the word “mister.”

“You…” she began warily. “Aren’t you a librarian under the Forbidden Books Department of the National Road Management Corps? I don’t remember your name. Is that right?”

“Uh, y-yeah! Yeah! Seo-rin unnie, it’s me! Me!”

“Unnie…?”

Seo-rin looked perplexed—a perfectly natural response. Dok-seo wouldn’t formally join the Regressor Alliance until after the 555th cycle. It was only the 173rd cycle now.

So to “the Undertaker” and “Dang Seo-rin” of this time, Oh Dok-seo was no more than a total extra.

‘Though the fact she remembers Dok-seo’s affiliation is so like Seo-rin,’ I mused inwardly.

Back in her days as Guild Leader of the Samcheon World, Dang Seo-rin memorized every guild member's name and family situation. By the 173rd cycle, in which she also held the commander post, she couldn't pull off quite that same feat, but it seemed she remembered the basics.

Anyway.

"Since we're basically strangers, calling me unnie at first sight is a gutsy move. You've got nerve, kid—I'll grant you that much."

"No, no. Wait, Seo-rin," I rushed out.

"Huh?"

"That kid... That little newbie is definitely not the 173rd-cycle staffer from the Forbidden Books Department. She probably got dragged here from the 999th cycle, just like me."

Seo-rin's eyes went wide. "What? You're telling me that in the 999th cycle, she calls me unnie?"

"Well, among our members, she's basically the youngest in spirit..."

"Uwaaah! M-mister, you're still normal—*hic!* I'm so, so glad! If you were all weird too, then I— I... "

For the record, the actual youngest is Lee Ha-yul in terms of physical age. Naturally, in no cycle did Ha-yul ever treat Dok-seo like a big sister. Whether she considered her even human was questionable.

"What is going on...?"

Confusion rippled through me.

I understood why I got pulled back to the past. The Undertaker of the 173rd cycle made countless sacrifices and used Dang Seo-rin's powers as a Fallen One to summon me and my "future knowledge" for a time. But there was no reason to drag Oh Dok-seo along. None at all.

So why?

Seo-rin let out a long breath. “Looks like this isn’t the right time for you and me to relax over drinks. I’ll summon Ji-won and the other deputy directors from the National Road Management Corps. Sure, it’s late at night, but they don’t sleep much, anyway. There’s no threat of a Monster Wave attack, so…”

“Huh?” I tilted my head. “Deputy directors—plural? In this cycle, didn’t Yo-hwa alone serve as Deputy Director?”

“Um? Oh, yeah, that’s correct. Cheon Yo-hwa.”

I looked at her in confusion, and she mirrored that confusion right back at me. We’d exchanged the same line, but our interpretations differed somehow.

I repeated my question. “So there’s only one deputy director named Cheon Yo-hwa, right? Did you appoint another one without me noticing?”

“…What are you talking about?” Seo-rin frowned, clearly puzzled. “To win over Baekhwa Girls’ High Guild, you proposed we recruit their two top members into the National Road Management Corps. That was your idea, Undertaker.”

Thump—my heart gave a jolt.

“Two top members? But from what I remember, Baekhwa Girls’ High was basically a dictatorship under Student Council President Cheon Yo-hwa.”

“…You’ve been saying weird stuff all night when it comes to the Cheon Yo-hwa business.”

Seo-rin’s lips seemed to part very slowly.

“Student Council President Cheon Yo-hwa and Secretary Cheon Yo-hwa. Those two governed Baekhwa Girls’ High together as twin sisters. Right now, they both serve as deputy directors for us.”

That’s right.

It wasn’t until the 688th cycle that Cheon Yo-hwa sealed away the Mastermind and erased herself in the process.

For the present time, the older twin sister was still alive.

Footnotes:

1 - In other words, they’re spelled the same way in Korean and sound the same, but the Chinese characters that define their meaning differ.

Chapter 353

The Missing V

Sinnoa

“Hey there, Teacher! Huh? What’s with the gloomy face? Oh—don’t tell me you finally got sick of our great witchly leader, the commander of the National Road Management Corps?”

“Aww, unnie, come on, like that’s possible! Teacher’s such a magnanimous soul that he embraces even the lowliest of dropouts. You can tell from how he let those people, who literally go around cosplaying as witches every single day, all year round, acting like it’s always Halloween, join the National Road Management Corps. That’s all the proof you need of his generosity.”

“Ah—chaa. I guess I wasn’t thinking straight. No matter how ugly or vile the vermin are, Teacher still won’t cast them out. It’s a level of magnanimity beyond any normal imagination!”

“Mhm. Don’t beat yourself up, unnie... Actually, I have a little confession to make.”

“Huh? What is it, little sister?”

“Well, every time I climb the Tower of Babel and see all those pointy witch hats bustling around, I completely lose faith in humanity... so today while going up the stairs, I snagged three witch hats and chucked them out the window.”

“Good grief! We still have a lot of spiritual training to do, little sister!”

“Mm. We just can’t keep up with the speed of this world...”

“Indeed, pitiful dropouts like us can only rely on Teacher to guide us!”

“Teacher. I’m ready to endure 500 times more reading of the

Romance of the Three Kingdoms in its original classical Chinese. Please watch over me!”

I went blank.

It was almost impossible to believe these two were people who’d been summoned at 2 AM. Their tension level was somewhere in another dimension. And those two in question...

A pair of twins.

Old-fashioned as it sounds, they really looked like a “perfectly symmetrical butterfly’s wings,” a classic decalcomania.

Bright orange hair. Red eyes. Aside from one wearing a pure white uniform and the other wearing solid black, there was no telling them apart by appearance alone.

“Yo-hwa...?”

I choked out their name through my tight throat.

The already high-energy twins grabbed each other’s hands with a flourish and struck a pose.

“Yayyy!”

“The two sisters are problem kids but the strongest!”

“Who would have guessed that of the tens of millions of cults on the Korean Peninsula, the final surviving sect would belong not to Christianity or Buddhism, but to Taoism? Who could have imagined?”

“The Yo-hwa–Yo-hwa ☆ Sisters have arrived!”

“Yayyy!”

They high-fived each other.

Then silence.

Again, note that it was 2 AM.

Even though it was technically festival night, in Utopia—a city of upright, well-regulated citizens—most people were fast asleep. Thus, our surroundings were dead quiet.

Beside me, Seo-rin let out a sigh as long as an anaconda.

“Ugh, that’s exactly why I didn’t want to call these lunatic sisters...”

Truthfully, I was even more flustered. “What’s up with them, anyway?”

It was bizarre.

The younger Cheon Yo-hwa sister was famous for always smiling no matter where or when, but she’d never been quite this hyper. She was more the type to stab someone with a smile on her face. And the same went for the elder sister Cheon Yo-hwa. Even back when she was the Infinite Void, and later sealed in that four-season classroom by Time Seal, she was always sly and inscrutable, not this openly frenetic.

They really were shrine maidens from a suspicious cult, so their attitude seemed fittingly shady.

But... well. Seeing them together for the first time, side by side, gave off a whole different vibe. It was like an RPG: If the two appear as bosses, one is only vulnerable to magic attacks, the other only to physical, and if you don’t knock them out on the same turn, they resurrect infinitely. That sort of vibe.

“Hey, Teacher, Teacher.”

One sister linked arms with me on the left.

“Hey, Teacher, Teacher.”

The other sister latched onto my right arm.

“Which one of us do you think is Yo-hwa?”

“Wait! That naive idea of identifying us by uniform color... Mm, that’s not good. Not good at all...”

“How do you know we didn’t swap outfits in preparation for exactly this scenario?”

“Even if you factor in our manner of speech, perfume, all that, you’d be underestimating our intellect if you tried pegging us down that way, Teacher.”

“What are you saying, unnie? You can’t call him ‘Teacher!’ I’m the older one!”

“Huh? Why are you saying that, little sister? My memory of hearing your first cry the moment after I was born is still perfectly vivid—are you committing some betrayal now?”

“Waaah, boohoo, waaa...”

“Oh gosh, how adorable! You’re still my little sister! You look exactly like me, how cute, how precious! I want to nibble you up...”

“Let’s not cross any lines.”

“Yes, unnie.”

Someone began to lilt out a sigh.

Ah... ahhh... aah.

“My energy... my energy is draining away!”

I looked to my side to see Seo-rin—and immediately felt her feelings resonated with mine in pitch-perfect tune. She wore the face of someone forced to endure tedium beyond measure.

No doubt about it. These twin sisters must have secretly installed nuclear power plants in their throats, evading the supervision of the IAEA. If left unchecked, they’d chatter on forever.

“Hmm.” Ji-won, also summoned here at an ungodly hour, stroked her chin. “How fascinating.”

Her bluish-purple eyes seemed to quietly, carefully watch my every move. Maybe because this 173rd cycle’s Yu Ji-won had undergone

“personality correction” from Dang Seo-rin, her expression gave off a strangely human vibe.

“It’s peculiar,” she remarked. “Under normal circumstances, Your Excellency the Undertaker would chime in with them, but now he’s just silent.”

“What...? You think I’d jump into this crazy mess?”

“Huh? Yes, of course. If I may use a metaphor you’d understand, the two sisters were Rosa and Roy, and you were their cat, Nyaong.”

Seriously? Wasn’t the 173rd cycle supposed to be a constant “serious route?” Just who was my past self, anyway?

Moving on, they weren’t the only ones summoned to the Tower of Babel main building.

Ha-yul’s eyes were drooping closed out of drowsiness, her head nodding as if playing seesaw, while Ah-ryeon stood there in her normal (filthy) everyday clothes, staring intently at me until she at last opened her mouth to say...

“Wh-who are you?”

Everyone on the terrace turned to look at Ah-ryeon. Even the twin sisters, still clinging to either side of my arms, fell silent.

“Huh? Who is he? He’s Teacher.”

“Wellllll... He looks like the guild leader, but, um, he feels a bit different... Huh-hum. Very, very different.” Ah-ryeon shook her head violently. “S— so... wh-who are you?”

“Wait, I said he’s Teacher—”

“Stop. That’s irritating... Would you please shut up?”

The night air grew chilly.

Someone sucked in a breath: Dok-seo, crouched anxiously in the corner of the terrace. Even Ha-yul, who’d been napping against a

cushion, was blinking awake and staring at Ah-ryeon.

The twins' transformation was dramatic as well. Where they'd been all smiles a moment ago, now their faces went blank. Quietly, those four red eyes with fuzzy boundaries between iris and pupil gazed at Ah-ryeon, wordlessly.

Like insect eyes.

Ah-ryeon, normally the most sensitive to others' gazes, was behaving differently right now. She didn't respond at all to the collective stares, only keeping her focus on me.

Suddenly, it hit me. That abnormally high tension from the twins might have been their flailing attempt to stir up a little warmth among the members, each of whom harbored a piece of the Void, so to speak.

'In the days before Dok-seo joined us...'

After the 555th cycle, things changed.

Dok-seo always roomed with Ah-ryeon, who was perpetually drifting on the outskirts of the group. She even got mild scolding from the ever-serious Saintess. She chatted frequently with the perpetually stoic Ha-yul. She also made a point of following after Seo Gyu when he withdrew from the others to keep them safe from his personal issues.

She got along awkwardly with Yo-hwa, but she never avoided talking to her—she just got verbally smacked around for her trouble.

She even clung to Do-hwa and teased, "Wow, Old Undertaker x Commander pairing! The black-and-black couple is the best!" The type of reckless remark that only LiteraryGirl could make.

All told, the relationships between the current group members were precarious. They were all cursed souls, each just one step from slipping into Corruption. And in that group, Oh Dok-seo was like a clown—a jester among the Regressor Alliance.

After all, weren't writers historically once called minstrels in the earliest days—a sort of clown in a way?

'I see.'

It cast new light on why my 173rd-cycle self might have played along with the twins' antics.

I broke the silence. "Here's a question. My dear members of the Regressor Alliance. You mostly remember that it's the 173rd cycle right now. In your opinion, how many cycles do you think it'll take to save the world without error?"

"Ah... Teacher, you're quite talented, so even if it takes a while... maybe around the 300th cycle?"

"Hey, unnie, think about Teacher's mental health. Let's be generous and say 350 cycles! By the way, let me come along on vacation next time, Teacher!"

[Monster Wave has been wiped out. All that's left is the Admin of the Infinite Metagame. We figure 200 cycles total.]

"I also side with Ha-yul's opinion. It shouldn't be much longer before Undertaker becomes our true savior."

Hmm. Putting on a resolute face, I said, "Here comes the correct answer."

I took a deep breath.

"It failed. It failed, failed, failed, failed, failed, failed, failed, failed, failed, failed."

...

...?

???

The question marks floating above their heads gradually evolved and grow in number, a bold challenge to Korean spelling

conventions.

“We achieved absolutely nothing!”

????????

Silence.

All of them clammed up. Dok-seo, who’d been quiet as a mouse the entire time, suddenly relaxed and got chatty.

“Wow, mister... You just did that coming out thing from *Attack on Titan*, right? After all, *Steins;Gate* was a time-loop story, and *Attack on Titan* once had fan theories that it was a loop story too! So it’s a kind of self-referential metaphor for our current predicament, yeah? Haha. That’s quite impressive... but you’re dealing with a grand literary mind like me, so let’s keep it moderate!”

Exactly 12 seconds earlier, the terrace at Babel Tower headquarters had been abuzz in uproar.

“Um, Teacher. Let me see if I’m understanding this right.”

“Go ahead, Yo-hwa. It’s still a bit weird for me to see you and your sister together, but I’ll try my best to ignore that.”

“Ugh, that only complicates things more, so let’s set that aside! Anyway!” Cheon Yo-hwa spun around. “So, Oh Dok-seo? Ms. Dok-seo? You have a power called Side Story Creation. Because you used it in front of all of us in the future, you ended up coming here to the 173rd cycle from the 999th. Is that correct?”

“Uh, y-yeah... that’s right.”

“And Teacher used the Great Witch’s golden scales of Equivalent Exchange, sacrificing ‘his current life and memories’ to bring in ‘future knowledge.’”

“Precisely.”

Cheon Yo-hwa sighed and pressed her hand to her forehead. “What

on earth is going on...?"

The members of the Regressor Alliance each sank into their own thoughts, trying to process all this. They were likely struggling to digest these impossible events.

[That was quite a wise decision.]

The one with the most free time, the Saintess, finished collecting her thoughts first. Apparently, she'd been quiet so far because she'd promised Seo-rin she wouldn't use Clairvoyance at all today. But seeing the entire Alliance gather like this, she'd gone back on that and was now speaking via Telepathy.

[According to Mr. Undertaker's explanation, the more cycles we go through, the harder the clear condition becomes. The usage of Aura is eventually restricted as well.]

Though not physically present, everyone listened to her Telepathic voice.

[And if the older Ms. Cheon Yo-hwa falls out...]

The group's gaze fell on the twins. They'd been sitting on a bench, hands tightly clasped together.

[That would be a serious blow, indeed. In essence, we'd lose the brains of our central strike force in the Korean Peninsula. Though from what we've heard about the Outer God known as the Mastermind, her sacrifice is definitely worth it.]

"...Unnie."

The younger twin looked worried, but the older one had no answer. Strictly speaking, she seemed lost in very deep thought and pointedly kept her gaze fixed on empty air to ponder to herself silently.

"Hmm."

The next one to gather her wits was Ji-won.

“I have a question. Ms. Dok-seo, does Side Story Creation usually allow you to hop between past cycles like this?”

“Uh— Oh, no way! All it ever did was let me ‘download’ someone else’s personality. Like, tbh, I have no idea what’s going on or how it happened...”

“I see.”

For a fleeting moment, I caught a glimpse of disappointment in Ji-won’s eyes.

An unstoppable desire surged up from my stomach.

“So, Ji-won... You might not have told us yet that you’re the Leviathan’s Miko, but eventually you open up to everyone, so no need to fret.”

“What do you mean, exactly? I was planning to inform everyone in due course.”

“Oh, so it wasn’t just a matter of being content to let Awakeners keep training Aura, thus strengthening Leviathan and your powers, like some sort of ‘auto-hunt is sweet’ approach?”

“Good heavens, of course not. Your Excellency, I wasn’t aware of the Outer God’s identity either. Leviathan? That’s horrifying.”

“Right? By the way, I’m Mr. Matiz.”

“...Excuse me?”

“You remember that spot wasn’t actually Dobongsan, right? Took me a while to recall.”

I diverted the conversation by saying, “The Saintess is correct. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We can figure out exactly how this miracle happened later.”

“Excuse me, Your Excellency the Undertaker, sir? ‘Mr. Matiz?’ What exactly—”

“I’ll be forgetting everything that happens from now on, anyway. The summoning was premised on my forgetting. That’s how it works.”

“Your Excellency the Undertaker? Are you listening, sir?”

“But that doesn’t mean my actions from here on are meaningless. I want to seize this chance to muster our maximum fighting force and hunt down the Outer God we can only defeat right now.”

“Sir, please listen to me!”

I glanced around. Seo-rin, who’d been quietly waiting for everyone to catch up, finally spoke. “So which Outer God is it that we can only defeat *now*, Undertaker?”

“The Goddess of Night.” I bit down on my anger as it bubbled up from my heart. “Nut.”

Looking around, I explained, “Mirror realms. The geocentric worldview. The Eye of Horus. An Anomaly so powerful it treats regression like a mere virus, capable of distributing it across existence. It has so many titles, but we still haven’t pinned down its true nature. And…”

I looked up at the night sky. As always, the moon shone brightly, a pristine sphere untainted by the messy chaos below.

“Just like Cheon Yo-hwa sacrificed herself to seal the Hidden Mastermind, and how the Saintess once gave herself to freeze time —”

[…]

“I’m convinced that here, in this ephemeral bonus stage, this short-lived vantage point, we have to launch a surprise strike against that one.”

A small hush fell.

Seo-rin nodded. “Sure. If it’s that formidable of an enemy, you’re wise to strike it early, now that I’ve gone Corrupt.”

“Thanks for understanding.”

“Mm. By the way, you might want to answer Ji-won soon. She’s giving off an Aura that’s… Well, it seems quite concerning…”

“Oh.”

Breaking news: Yu Ji-won had narrowly avoided Corruption by a hair.

Chapter 354

The Missing VI

Sinnoa

The readers' fiery wrath that once set SG Net ablaze had faded. The stone tablets announcing the hiatus lay forgotten beneath the East Sea. In an era where no one cared about such things, Corruption had become nothing more than a cheap joke.

Such was the world we lived in.

An author was strolling through the city.

"You know what, mister? When I think about it, I had absolutely no reason to panic."

"Yeah?"

"I mean, this is before the 555th cycle! Before the SG-Net Novel-Serialization Board even existed! We're in the prehistoric, primitive days before I ever debuted under the pen name LiteraryGirl. Which means... can you guess what?"

Dok-seo laughed.

Considering we'd just pulled an all-night marathon meeting with the Regressor Alliance—partly to stop Ji-won from Falling—Dok-seo's smile was almost unnaturally fresh.

Under the clear dawn sky, she tipped her forehead toward the light slowly brightening Utopia's horizon and declared, "I... I am totally, utterly free from serialization now! Ahhh, this air! The sweet nostalgia of Utopia! Mmmm, sooo delicious. Is this what the air of a world without readers smells like? Ooooh! Positively scrumptious!"

"...Right."

"Wait, no, no. mister! Let's just dig up the entire Novel Serialization

Board. Then, come the 999th cycle, I'll steal all the chapters Ah-ryeon unnie was publishing and dump them online in one shot! *Ka-yaaah.* She'll see them, right? She'll probably leave nasty comments without even realizing they were her own words. Then... I'll capture every last hate post! And reveal, 'Surprise, that was actually your future manuscript!' *Ka-hyaaaa!* Pure, soda-pop justice! I can't wait to see the look on her face!"

I honestly had no idea what kind of face I should be making. Sadly, no abused kid beside me would murmur, "Just smile." Only a chuunibyou with a lethal case who was busy abusing the whole world.

It was never easy.

The takeaway from last night's meeting was simple:

『Attack Nut.』

Nut, the Night Goddess—an Outer-God-class Anomaly.

Her compatibility with a regressor like me was the worst. The Saintess had to Fall and even sacrifice herself just to barely seal her away, and even that was only a seal, nothing more. A method for a complete kill was still nowhere in sight.

"Sorry, sunbae. None of us have ever faced Nut directly, so it's hard to wrap our heads around it," said Cheon Yo-hwa, the older of the twin sisters.

A few days ago, she'd looked lost in deep thought throughout the meeting, but maybe she'd finally sorted it out in her head.

"Haha, honestly, it's a little overwhelming. You dumped so much future intel on us that my brain's about to fry."

"Mhm."

"Still, overwhelming doesn't mean bad. From humanity's point of view, I'd say we've never had a more decisive opportunity." Cheon Yo-hwa raised her ballpoint pen and clicked. "So, tell me about Nut,

sunbae. Like always, let's craft the op together."

We talked for a long time, enjoying the whole sunny café we'd rented out to avoid prying ears. Soon enough, I realized something.

'This kid not only knows the Anomalies inside out, she's got a deep grasp of my regressor abilities too. Smart.'

I already knew that, of course, but sitting here face-to-face hashing out strategies made it crystal clear: the elder Cheon Yo-hwa was sharp.

"The simplest route is to smack Saintess unnie with Time Seal. Nut would get sealed automatically."

"...Losing Clairvoyance, Telepathy, and the Constellations would hurt too much."

"True. But right before you save the world, and after you've wiped out every other Outer God except Nut, you could pop Time Seal, right? That'd be the final cycle, the very last moment. We wouldn't need Saintess unnie anymore."

She was also resolute. Not a flicker of hesitation, even while discussing a scenario where our comrades might vanish forever.

Did she read the look in my eyes?

Leaning her chin on her pen, Yo-hwa giggled awkwardly. "Mmm, I've been thinking about it for a while. This system that links Outer Gods to their Mikos, maybe it's tilted way, waaay in your favor, sunbae."

"...Pick a Miko, Corrupt her, fuse her with the Outer God, then fire off Time Seal."

"Yup." She smiled, then continued, "And that's not all. So far every Miko we know of happens to be clustered in Korea, right? Why? Sure, this land's always been catnip for cults, but isn't this a bit much? I've got my own theory, but let's stick to Nut for now. So, sunbae—no chance you'll seal Nut and Saintess unnie in the final cycle?"

“No chance.”

“Hmm.” Her red eyes narrowed. “Because you’re afraid she’ll get hurt? That’s harsh. You forget *e-ver-y-thing* about your adorable private student, even call her an Anomaly, but you can’t do the same to Saintess unnie? How’s that not favoritism?”

“...Sorry. It’s not feelings that make me reject that plan.”

“Then what?”

“Just a hunch, but Time Seal isn’t omnipotent.”

I laced my fingers together.

We were broaching a topic I’d discussed with no one, not even with Kim Ji-soo, Yu Ji-won’s adopted daughter, who’d later become the psychological counselor for the Regressor Alliance. Maybe the only person I could confess it to was the girl sitting across from me, the one destined to be hit by Time Seal.

“For starters, Yo-hwa, you yourself proved that Time Seal isn’t absolute.”

“Huh? Me?”

“Yeah. Using my quirk of remembering almost nothing from the 1st to the 4th cycles, you managed to regain a good chunk of your identity even inside the sealed realm. Suppose I seal every Miko and Outer God,” I proposed next. “Yo-hwa, what happens to me after that?”

“You’d become the god of the new world, of course.”

I sprang to my feet and, without a moment’s delay, launched into the Light Bakayaroid Dance.[1]

Yo-hwa exploded, powerless to resist. She spewed her coffee, hacking and coughing, tears streaming as she laughed her head off.

“Why, ah, *pft*, ugh, seriously! Gah! So unfair! How old even is that gag?! Why do I have to laugh at something so dumb?! You crazy,

geriatric regressor!”

“You’re the one who cracked a joke during a serious discussion. Choose your words carefully if you don’t want this happening again,” I offered in solemn warning.

“Oh. Ohhh, wow. Seriously… Wow, sunbae. You’re a total nutcase. Fine, I, Cheon Yo-hwa—heir of the House of Cheon—admit it…”

TMI: this heir’s favorite work of all time is *Death Note*. She’s watched the musical not only in Korea but even on a pilgrimage to Japan. Her best boy is Ryuk, runner-up is Misa (reason: she looks easy to exploit like a little sister).

“I don’t want all our efforts to end with a single Outer God called ‘The Undertaker.’”

“Oh, come on. Quit it with the serious face—I can’t focus…”

“In the end, it wouldn’t be just Saintess unnie but me too. I’d have to lose my powers. But could we really cherry-pick so that only Time Seal stays while everything else disappears?”

I had no response to that.

“Even if I disappear, everything about me would vanish. A scenario where only Time Seal remains seems awfully unlikely. So we shouldn’t lean on it too heavily.” Yo-hwa put down her tear-soaked tissue.

“Like with Aura?”

“Exactly, like Aura.”

“Hmmm…”

With a click, the cap of her pen snapped shut.

“Then, sunbae, how about flipping it completely on its head?”

“Completely on its head?”

“Yup. You called this cycle your bonus stage, right? Then let’s Corrupt not just the Great Witch but the entire Regressor Alliance.”

What?

“Wait… Yo-hwa, what are you even saying?”

At last, Yo-hwa turned fully serious.

“From where I’m standing, you’re kinda scared of using your powers right now. Almost like trauma. The revelation that Aura was part of Leviathan hit you so hard that you’re holding back on your other abilities too… I’m not saying your strategy’s wrong. Just that you should be aware your thinking’s gotten stuck in a rut.”

Yo-hwa opened her notebook and scribbled a phrase.

Overwhelming power.

I found myself mouthing the words.

“Right,” she confirmed.

“With overwhelming power—”

“Absolutely everything—strategy, tactics, martial arts—becomes meaningless before true overwhelming power,” Yo-hwa coolly cut off my gag—proof that her learning capacity was intact. “That used to be your specialty. Grind Aura through endless regressions, then steamroll the enemy with that cheat code. Maybe it won’t work in the 999th cycle, but right now it’s still viable.”

“…Because right now, we’re in the special stage that’s both the 173rd cycle and the 1000th cycle.”

Yo-hwa grinned mischievously. “Exactly. Nut? Unknown, mysterious Anomaly? Scary? Yeah, who cares? Is she stronger than the Great Witch? Maybe. Is she stronger than Oh Dok-seo, who’s soaking in the Great Witch + Infinite Metagame buffs? Stronger than my sister, who drags out the Great Witch + Oh Dok-seo + Infinite Void’s authority? Stronger than me, the puppeteer pulling the strings? Stronger than Team Leader Yu Ji-won, who squeezes

Leviathan's potential to the limit? Stronger than Saintess unnie, who freezes the entire world's time?"

Her crimson pupils met mine.

"And stronger than the Regressor who commands all those Fallen? Do we really think this mystery Outer God tops our full might?"

The answer was obvious.

"Not a chance."

A daring smile stole across her face. Instead of cowering before the Anomaly, she faced it with boundless confidence and rock-solid self-belief.

Such was the strategist sitting across from me.

"Crush it with brute force, sunbae. Only you can do it. And only in the destined-to-be-forgotten 173rd cycle can we pull off such reckless insanity. Let's show those Outer-God bastards—who fancy themselves masters of the universe—what happens when they mess with us."

My heart pounded.

It wasn't love. It wasn't fear.

It was closer to a child's sense of adventure—pure playfulness.

"...You're out of your mind."

Yet the corners of my mouth were already curling up.

"Maybe even truly insane. There's never been a cycle where that many Fallen emerged all at once."

"Yep," she chirped. "We might totally get wiped."

"Even if I call this a 'bonus stage,' the ripple effects on past and future events remain unknown. And you want to create the Fallen on purpose, unsealing Anomalies we've already defeated or locked

away?"

"Yep. Dangerous, huh? One slip and our fallen Regressor Alliance members could start a civil war for control of the timeline. Worse than Rome."

"And the cleanup?"

"The almighty Regressor will figure it out somehow, right?"

"You're pitching this as an operation?"

"Yup." Yo-hwa's smile deepened. "But it's exciting, isn't it?"

Yeah.

Only now did I truly grasp the core of the girl before me. Calling her a strategist wasn't wrong, but it wasn't enough. Schemer fit a bit better, yet still missed the mark.

Gambler.

The elder Cheon Yo-hwa was simply addicted to gambling. Drop her into *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and she'd choose post-Liu Bei Shu just because "the win-rate's lowest and the dopamine's tastiest." Thanks to a lucky combo of sisterly love and a brilliant brain, that dopamine addict managed to pass for human.

"Let's do it, sunbae."

And who am I to hide it?

"The world's already doomed. Let's make it even messier!"

Like teacher, like student.

I'd been sitting at the cosmic poker table called destiny for a long, long time.

The simultaneous Fall of the entire Regressor Alliance.

Project Collapse — COMMENCE.

Footnotes:

1 - A meme of the final episode of *Death Note*, wherein the protagonist's final, unhinged rant is turned into a dance beat.

Chapter 355

The Missing VII

Sinnoa

In most works, regression is treated like a lopsided playing field that overwhelmingly favors the protagonist's side. Naturally, everyone except the regressor fails to notice the loop and just keeps treading water, which means only the regressor's allies get to monopolize every lucky break.

However, is regression truly advantageous to the protagonist alone?

"Truth is, regression benefits the enemy as well."

[Why is that?]

"Every time the cycle resets, the Anomalies we've already slain spring back to life. That's virtually immortality."

My counselor this time was the Saintess.

Noh Do-hwa was the one who always slammed on the brakes whenever the Regressor Alliance tried to barrel forward, so with her now gone, the Saintess had the final say on our plan in this 173rd cycle.

Project Collapse.

Since the scheme asked every member of the Alliance to fall into Corruption on purpose, we obviously had to win the Saintess over.

[I-I never thought of it that way.]

"It's a hardship only someone who has actually regressed can understand, Saintess."

After parting with Cheon Yo-hwa, I strolled through midday Utopia. Lively laughter echoed through the streets as children darted past

with high-pitched giggles.

In that surprisingly peaceful post-apocalyptic afternoon, I traded Telepathic messages with the Saintess.

“Each cycle I have to infiltrate Baekhwa Girls’ High to catch Infinite Void, spending what feels like a year—sometimes ten—inside its prison of time.”

[Ah… You suffer so much.]

“The same goes for Ten Legs and Meteor Shower. I get infinite tries, and the Anomalies get infinite life-coins.”

And yet…

“Outer Gods like Infinite Metagame or Nut are different. Their partial immunity to regression… makes them vulnerable.”

The immunity they cultivated against me could be turned into a new opening. A weakness.

“If we wound Nut this time, it’ll carry that scar forever, cycles be damned.” I shrugged. “Just like I carry mine.”

[…]

“By sharing my heart with my comrades, I’ve secured spare hearts. An Outer God hasn’t—it’s fundamentally alone. Saintess, we won’t be the ones who collapse. They will.”

There was a small sigh.

[…If it’s to save the future me, it’s hard to refuse.]

“Then you consent?”

[Yes, provided we have safeguards so the Corrupted don’t end the world.]

“I already have a strategy for that.”

The first runner of Project Collapse was the silver-haired former psychopath. Now, thanks to the Golden Scales, she was a member who'd had humanity and emotions forcibly injected into her.

Yu Ji-won.

Even when I looked her way, Ji-won turned her head without a word. She'd stayed like that ever since my "regression coming-out" that night.

"C'mon, Ji-won, I said I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Please be more mindful of what you say, Your Excellency. How could a lowly, ignorant soldier like me deserve a personal apology for failing to recognise a regressor?"

In short, Lady Yu Ji-won was sulking.

I couldn't hide my dismay.

"Wow... I can't get used to this side of you. I know it was unromantic to blurt out I was Mr. Matiz on the spot, but—"

"It's fine. My birth parents never adapted to me either. Adding one more maladjusted person to my life changes nothing."

I, the Undertaker, warrior of 999 cycles, could handle Dang Seo-rin's tantrums or the Saintess's sulking any day.

Been there, done that.

But Yu Ji-won sulking? This was my first! After all, a humane Ji-won only exists in the 173rd cycle—a limited edition!

"What does our Ji-won like...?"

"Forgive me, Your Excellency. Even if we met in childhood, you can't keep treating me like a kid. Letting go of the past is something adults must learn."

"I said I'm sorry!"

“Are you shouting at me now?” Ji-won blinked. “My apologies. I’ve incurred Your Excellency’s wrath—why live any longer? I should die.”

“Ji-won! Please! I swear I’ll never spill the Matiz secret without romance again!”

“...Adding another disgrace to your dignity—why live any longer? I should die.”

“Ji-won, where is the pure, innocent girl from that summer...?”

“She’s dead. I should die too.”

“Please, just spare me...”

“Also, use that old perfume for the rest of your life.”

I froze. “Um... for life? Just this cycle?”

“Oh? So you plan to die after this cycle, Your Excellency? If you’ll abandon the world, why live any longer? I should die.”

“All right! All right! I’ll use that perfume until my regression ends. Will that appease you?”

“Excuse me? Are you suggesting I’m angry?”

Someone kill me...

Who would’ve thought that the comrade I assumed easiest to persuade—and easiest to Corrupt—turned out to be the trickiest.

So I quietly brewed the perfume.

“Hmm.” Ji-won inspected the seven-note fragrance like a picky civil servant approving paperwork, then nodded. “This suits you.”

“Right... Thanks.”

“Is that sincere—”

“Thank you, Ji-won! I’ll wear this forever! I’m thrilled!”

A nod. Approval earned.

Sometimes, a person without psychopathy is scarier than someone with it.

After learning that brutal truth, Project Collapse truly began.

Execution date: June 6, midnight.

That night, Ji-won climbed up onto the rooftop of the Tower of Babel, in an odd outfit: a school uniform.

For Dang Seo-rin's Operations Team Leader to wear a uniform of all things was sacrilege. Not only that, she'd even graduated long ago. How embarrassing.

"Whoa, team leader! Transferring to Baekhwa Girls' High?"

"Must... photograph! And archive on SG Net forever!"

The others teased her, but I kept silent.

It was the uniform of Shinseo Middle School, practically Miko robes to Ji-won. She'd first received Leviathan's possession in that attire.

Ji-won ignored the jokes and draped a white blanket over the uniform like a cape, then knelt quietly on the rooftop. I watched with the others, then it hit me:

I'd never seen Ji-won Fall before.

We observed from afar as her lips moved, her hands clasped in prayer.

"Thank you."

I tilted my head. Who was she talking to?

"Thank you for watching over me."

Ah.

To Leviathan.

She prayed to the colorless, odorless sea-dragon that had chosen her as priestess.

That, too, was a never-before-seen event. I'd never seen a Miko harbor gratitude for an Outer God.

"Thank you for letting me distinguish between people. For letting me see colors. For letting me smell."

Clearly, evenly, the silver-haired priestess offered her lone worship to the midnight sky.

"Thanks to you, someone like me could live among humans... The human heart was an unknowable well to me. Thank you for turning that nameless transparency into Aura I could see... But now, that's enough."

Ribbit.

Somewhere, a frog's cry rang out.

"I don't need to see them anymore."

Ribbit, ribbit.

I looked down. Citizens were gathering in the plaza, gazing up.

Ribbit.

The sound came from their mouths.

Though they should be asleep, more and more people flocked beneath the tower. Their mouths were gaping and their eyes were hollow, like wells whose rims had collapsed into darkness.

"I no longer wish to separate people by color, scent, or spirit."

Ribbit. Ribbit. Ribbit.

They did not move their tongues—only their uvulas bobbed. Even newborns stood upright, croaking *ribbit* with their throats alone.

“But if I may, my god.” Ji-won bowed her head. “Please leave me the color and scent of the single person precious to me…”

Ribbitribbitribbitribbitribbit.

“…and of the people precious to that person.”

At that instant, rain began to flow in streams—but not downward.

Upward.

“Eiyaaaah!” Ah-ryeon shrieked, clinging to my arm. “Their m-mouths— Look!”

No. With my sharper sight, I saw where the water truly took form.

It was their hair.

Drops seeped from every strand, from Unawakened and Awakened alike, looping around necks like nooses and then shooting skyward like ropes.

Ribbitribbitribbitribbit.

Color drained.

Black, brown, blond, red, blue—every vivid shade of post-apocalypse humanity melted into the water.

Desaturation.

[…My word,] muttered the Saintess. [It isn’t limited to Utopia. The few survivors across the peninsula are experiencing the same. The colors, Mr. Undertaker. Everyone’s hair is turning white.]

Humanity’s colors were being stripped away. Instead, the night sky, now soaked in their pigments, blazed with an aurora brighter than mankind.

As though saying we no longer need to look at humans, only at the sky.

Oddly, the aurora spilled scents as well as light. It was as if people’s

bodily odors had also been stolen.

And yet...

“Uh... Huh?” Ah-ryeon peeked out from behind me. “I-I think... we’re fine?”

Yes.

Members of the Regression Alliance were exempt. While the aurora reaped every hue and fragrance from humanity, only we on the rooftop remained untouched.

I stared at the aurora above us for another moment, then spoke. “Ji-won’s prayer got through.”

“Ehhh.”

“Come to think of it, she has never once defied Leviathan. Unlike some, she’s been a devoted Miko. Leviathan must cherish her.”

Though she’d weaken the dragon by abstaining from Aura usage in the distant future, even that tactic was gentle. It lulled Leviathan, not killed it.

‘...Lulling a god to sleep is within a Miko’s role.’

When the rain ceased, I glanced at Seo-rin, who nodded. This city—the “Divine Realm that Shouldn’t Exist”—was hers, giving her a keen sense of just what had been sacrificed.

“The people of Utopia feel... devoid of individuality. Humanity excised—almost like AI. Their hair is all white, their scents gone.”

“Has your power suffered?”

“No. It’s annoying, but the sacrifices themselves are still recognised as mine. The god only took what it could claim.”

Ji-won rose, and the blanket slipped, revealing her true form. She’d shrunk—no—*returned* to the girl I met that summer.

She scanned us, nostrils twitching—an old habit of a girl born with prosopagnosia. Then she raised her hand.

“Dang Seo-rin… Sim Ah-ryeon… Cheon Yo-hwa. Cheon Yo-hwa. Lee Ha-yul. Oh Dok-seo. Seo Gyu.”

Like tracing the contours of existence, she named each person, then her finger halted at me.

“Mr. Matiz… Mr. Matiz.”

Those mirror-clear eyes held only me.

“Yes. My world needs nothing more.”

She clenched her fist, and the night sky rippled, curling with the soft curve of her fingers, and I knew it then:

The galaxy of Aura dyeing that sky, the palette of that virtually limitless aurora, had gathered into Ji-won’s grasp.

“Who’s next?”

Awakener: Yu Ji-won

Corrupted alias: Despot

Has joined the party.

Chapter 356

The Missing VIII

Sinnoa

Project Collapse.

Next up: the second, commemorative contender.

Ah-ryeon fussed with her fingers, her weed-colored hair hanging like willow branches. “Um, Guild Leader... isn’t the o-order here all wrong?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Well... my power only grows when I feed on people’s negative emotions, but... the t-team leader fell to Corruption first, so now there’s literally no one left who can hate me...”

“That doesn’t matter.”

The one who cut her off wasn’t me. It was Seo-rin.

The four of us—Ah-ryeon, Seo-rin, Dok-seo, and I—sat in a circle in a nearly pitch-black safe room, the single candle our only light, like middle-schoolers sneaking into a classroom for a séance.

“In my city, citizens gullible enough to chase low-rent villains like OldManGoryeo disappeared ages ago. Everyone’s living their best real life now.”

“Y-you devil! H-how can you say something so evil so casually? Those *citizens* of yours have all had their souls pawned away, they’re the Great Witch’s slaves! This place is hell!”

“If a place where kids like you run free is heaven, I’ll take hell any day.”

They traded barbs, but I honestly felt conflicted. On SG Net, Seo-rin

was no less a villain than OldManGoryeo. In every cycle, Samcheon guild members passed around unwritten rules like “The moment the Great Witch posts, hit Like and rocket her to the front page!” and “Leave a comment on her posts!” and “If too many comments have the [Samcheon] tag, log out and comment as Anonymous!”

I remembered it all, clear as day. Even the girl in the corner nibbling her sandwich, Dok-seo, was an SG Net superstar.

So I was the only wholesome celebrity in this room—me, ZeroSugar…

The dark side of internet culture hit me anew.

“Hold on, Undertaker? Could you please explain why you’re looking at me like that?”

“Just worried I might be wasting too much of the city ruler’s precious time.” Before Seo-rin could fire back, I switched targets. “Ah-ryeon, like Seo-rin said, the moment Utopia was complete, emotions like resentment, contempt, or jealousy all but vanished from this place. The order doesn’t matter.”

“Th-then isn’t that even worse?” Ah-ryeon asked with quivering lips. “I’m already the outcast… I-I’ll get left behind. The Ops Team Leader, the Baekhwa High Sisters, even that chuuni kid suddenly acting all chummy—”

Dok-seo, who’d caught a stray for no reason, chomped her sandwich with a big question mark over her head.

“They’ll all Fall and their power level will be crazy high! I’ll be the only low-level left. Even you’ll ignore me, Guild Leader!”

I sent her a wry smile. “Don’t worry, Ah-ryeon. You’ve got me.”

“Huh…? And what does your existence have to do with my perfectly rational prediction?”

Everything.

Let’s pull up some quotes from Ah-ryeon in other cycles:

Cycle 133: *“D-delicious! So tasty! A delicacy I’ve never once tasted in my life...! Who could be giving me such delectable resentment...?!”*

Cycle 134: *“Eek?! I did nothing and all this aggro spawns on its own...?! It’s tasty but terrifying! G-Guild Leader! Someone I don’t even know is hating me for no reason—live, in real time!”*

Cycle 267: *“Ahh! As expected of the guild leader. S-so delicious. Your aggro’s the tastiest in the world...”*

It was a veritable anthology of great lines.

When I calmed my spinning head, the conclusion was simple: For the villain Ah-ryeon, who finds other people’s aggro “tasty,” the sweetest gourmet hatred was none other than my own malice.

Ah-ryeon jolted at that. “Eek! W-what are you saying, Guild Leader? You mean... you’re going to resent me now?! The one abandoned by the world, shunned even by my forum friends, arguably the most pitiful being in the universe... even you, Guild Leader? Even you’ll curse me?!”

“Wow,” Dok-seo muttered under her breath. “Ah-ryeon unni’s fangirling is off the charts this cycle. Is this what happens when you quit the internet?”

“S-see? Even this kid who’s clearly younger than me looks down on me! Ahh. Let the world just end already...”

I sighed. “Fine. For the next few hours—maybe days, maybe weeks—in this room, I’ll resent you, Ah-ryeon.”

“Hiiieeek!”

“But with a dash of illusion.”

“Hee-hee... huh?”

I turned to the side. “Seo-rin. I want a contract.”

“What kind?”

“I, the Undertaker, until I leave this room, will believe any illusion shown to me is the absolute truth.”

With a flourish, a golden scale appeared in the darkness.

“And I will not recall that I made this contract. Moreover, if I never realize it’s an illusion, I can’t affect reality in any way.”

“Hmm, that restriction’s not hard.” Seo-rin weighed it, then glanced my way. “Okay. What’ll you put on the other pan?”

“When I wake, I want to remember nothing of what happened inside the illusion.”

“Huh? That’s not exactly to your advantage— Wait, the scale is balanced?” She tilted her head, hesitating at the sight. “Strange… but fine. Shall I cast the spell?”

“Yes. Oh, and Dok-seo.”

Dok-seo stared at me. She’d been watching my every move.

“You know what’s coming. Remember, it’s only an illusion. I’m about to dive in—you’re the anchor. I’m counting on you.”

She wiped sandwich sauce from her lip and gave a solemn nod. “Got it, mister. Leave it to me.”

Seo-rin breathed a sigh as Ah-Ryeon whined, “I’m used to being the hated role.”

I closed my eyes.

The candle barely clung to life. When my eyelids fell, the world returned me to darkness. From there, I faintly heard Dok-seo asking Seo-rin, “Huh? No… Wait… I can manage that… You…”

A peculiar silence settled over the room.

“The Miko of Infinite Metagame proclaims…”

Dok-seo’s voice, uncharacteristically grave, rippled through the

dark.

“…this is the 5th cycle. Undertaker, you staged a final defense line in Busan. Yet Dang Seo-rin, fighting beside you, was impaled and killed by Ten Legs. And now, what you see before you is not Sim Ah-ryeon but that very Ten Legs—”

At that instant, my memory cut out.

“You failed to stop the Meteor Shower. You dragged the half-dead Seo-rin away in retreat, but in the end, both of you turned to white dust.”

…

“Dying together was your only solace, your escape. Yet even solace has a hint of falsehood. In truth, you died after Seo-rin. One second—perhaps a millisecond, a mere instant. Enough to watch her scatter like dust…”

…

“It went unspoken, but death’s simplicity spares no one. Even comrades met it. In the 173rd cycle, you brought her Pu'er tea as usual, yet found Noh Do-hwa bleeding out in a rehab ward hallway.”

“She was killed by marauders, a gang that would’ve vanished if you’d purged Butterfly Effect sooner.”

“A marauder stands before you.”

…

“You favor the good. You indulged Yu Ji-won because in no timeline does an ‘accident’ or ‘mistake’ kill her.”

“You’ve watched too many loved ones die to uncontrollable variables.”

“So you relied on her survival.”

“On the Outer God’s servant. On the Anomaly’s power. Because of them, you were being saved.”

“When you learned that very same Yu Ji-won had tortured an innocent girl named Kim Ji-soo and dozens of drifters—”

…

“Dang Seo-rin is” “dead” “The Saintess” “killed her” “Cheon Yo-hwa” “your disciple” “Lee Ha-yul” “your sister” “Noh Do-hwa” “Jeong Seo-ah” “everyone” “you love” “because of you” “Had they become Anomalies, hundreds of deaths if not more might have been averted” “Your obstinacy” “Pride” “Failure” “Murderer” “Bystander” “The mirror” “is before you.”

…

…

…

“—Sorry, mister—”

“Cutting the feed.”

I opened my eyes.

A gasp.

My body, why was it in this position? I didn’t see an unfamiliar ceiling but, instead, an unfamiliar floor.

The breaths rattled through the lung’s rib cage.

Yes, I was face-down. And yet, most of my vision wasn’t gray concrete—it was a washed-out green.

Gasping breaths, a breath huffed, “G-Guild… Leader…”

Ah-ryeon.

She was pinned beneath me, her two hands clamped tightly around my throat.

“Mm...”

A pained breath.

And yes, she was suffering.

Even after having lost my Aura control, my grip strength remained. It crushed her windpipe mercilessly.

Crack—her neck snapped. *Grind*—her trachea and esophagus splintered, over and over.

Red handprints bloomed.

Yet her breathing didn’t stop. A faint thread of air still slid between the breaks.

Like a survivor’s groan beneath earthquake rubble.

“I-it’s... o-okay.”

Heal. Mend. Regrow. Restore.

She didn’t die. My hands severed life, but her power re-knit bone the instant it broke, racing by me by several steps, stitching the lifeline back together in a crescent-thin razor of possibility.

And she smiled.

“I... mm, I—”

Drip.

The bruises and handprints were not the only things covering her, but also water that couldn’t evaporate fast enough. Her face was soaked.

Drip, drop—again and again.

“...It’s okay.”

She reached out like a child walking home in the rain, stretching a hand beyond her umbrella to feel the sky. Her fingers traced the wet path, then pressed a palm to my cheek.

“It’s okay…”

I let go. My palms still burned with the heat of her newly-won breath.

Only then did the room come into focus.

What had been immaculate before I blacked out was a wreckage now. Chairs were overturned, the table flipped, the door swung wide. Ah-ryeon and I lay slumped on the threshold, cans and food wrappers littering the floor around us.

Someone was breathing heavily at the door—Dok-seo. She gripped the doorknob, panting hard.

Her hoodie and cap were filthy.

She straightened, cracking her back. “Whoa, that was seriously crazy close! Took an author of my caliber to keep control. Whew. Ask me to do that twice? Yeah, no thanks. Priestess duties? I’m half-quit already, anyway.”

“Dok-seo…” I began, but she cut me off.

“Let’s skip the apologies. We both knew what we were doing, you and me… Seo-rin unnie’s more shaken than she thought she’d be. She stepped out—I forced her to rest.” She dusted off her hoodie and straightened her crooked cap, then looked straight at me. “We are going to save her, the Saintess stuck in the 267th cycle, captured by Nut.”

No hint of wavering existed in that gaze.

“Up you get, mister. Steel yourself. The world’s already broken, but you came because even one life is worth saving. The enemy’s the worst match-up for you. A regressor’s natural predator. Scratches and tears are expected. And none of us—not me, not Seo-rin, not Ah-ryeon—are weak.”

Dok-seo held out her left hand to me, her right to Ah-ryeon.

“So don’t bother with sorrys. Save it for if we fail.”

“...How long was I under?”

“A week.” Then she sighed. “Yeah, it was rough.”

Seven days and nights. She hadn’t left this room once, orchestrating the illusion for our sake.

I turned. “Ah-ryeon... Thank you.”

“Ah. Uh-heh-heh. R-really, it wasn’t bad at all! Totally fine!”

“Still... Thank you.”

“Of course.” She beamed, the bruises on her neck were already erased. “I know, Guild Leader. I’ve known for ages.”

We took Dok-seo’s hands, rose together, and stepped outside.

“Haah.”

“B-beautiful...”

From the widest boulevard to the narrowest alley, the city called Utopia was steeped in the flower field of A Hundred Blooming Blossoms that Ah-ryeon had summoned.

Awakener: Sim Ah-ryeon

Corrupted Alias: The Victim

Has joined the party.

Chapter 357

The Missing IX

Sinnoa

Spring came.

Summer came.

Autumn too. Winter as well.

In a city that shouldn't exist, on a timeline of cycles that shouldn't exist, flowers that shouldn't bloom were in full bloom.

For Dang Seo-rin, the Lord of Utopia, it could only have been a harsh season.

If you analogized it to the *Cthulhu* TRPG, her character sheet proudly listed [Flower Phobia] and [Plant Phobia].

'Ahh! On that window! On that window! Flowers!'

'Daangkiiiiyaaaah!'

A sanity check might have been triggered in other circumstances, but surprisingly enough, Seo-rin remained silent. Even as her companions fell into Corruption one by one, the Lost One of Time and Space, the Great Witch, sat quietly.

Perhaps a bit too quietly.

There on a bench on the beach, she seemed to be enjoying the flower viewing—watching the city, where the vegetation of spring, summer, autumn, and winter had mixed, losing any sense of seasonality.

She sat as if entranced by the flowers.

"Dang Seo-rin."

“...Ah, Undertaker. On a walk?”

“Something like that.”

Only when the breath drew near did Seo-rin turn toward me.

Her gaze was somehow lost.

Even if a person was lost, they could still sit. In silence, she shifted her hips to make room, and I, in turn, silently sat beside her on the bench. After entrusting a moment of silence to the summer cherry blossoms falling at three centimeters per second, I softly drew in a breath of spring with my lips.

“I heard from Dok-seo. Your heart took quite the blow during the week Ah-ryeon was Corrupted.”

“What hardship? I just clicked my magic at the right times— No... Hmm.” Seo-rin shook her head. “You’re right. There’s no need to put on a brave face in front of me. I did go through a lot. More specifically, I was a bit shocked.”

“Could you tell me what kind of shock?”

She pursed her lips. It was not a sign of refusal or rejection, but her choosing her words carefully so that she would neither lie to me nor to herself.

“Until now...” she began slowly. “I believed I was the only one, the special one to you. Somehow.” When I didn’t respond, she continued, “I mean, doesn’t that make sense? Even after turning into a monster wearing human skin like this, you still told me you’d stay by my side.”

Seo-rin flicked her hand in a wave, and the citizens strolling through Utopia’s gardens all turned their backs and vanished. They had acted in obedience to their Lord of the Realm’s command.

Before Yu Ji-won received the divine possession as a Miko, those citizens had barely maintained their humanity, now they revealed their true natures completely.

The aurora shot up by the silver-haired Miko rippled in endless waves above us, dyeing the night sky of the failed worldline.

Once again, it told me that this was objectively nothing more than the aftermath of a bad ending.

“But Dok-seo… that brat who dragged you through agony and back made me realize something. Ah.” Seo-rin forced a bitter smile. “What it means that you’ve suffered nine hundred ninety-nine failures… I was just one failure among those nine hundred ninety-nine failures.”

“Dang Seo-rin.”

“No, it’s not self-pity. I’m not blaming you. Quite the opposite. I should have foreseen from the start how cruel the suggestion to bring you back for the 1,000th time would be—but I didn’t. I’m just reproaching myself is all.”

She looked down at her hand. As guided by winds of fate, the wind carried a blue hydrangea, a white petunia, baby’s breath, a sunflower petal, and a scarlet spider lily, placing each gently into her palm.

“I hoped I wouldn’t become a burden to you.”

“…I’ve never once considered you a burden.”

“I didn’t want to see you cry.”

I had no answer to that.

“When I died by the Ten Legs, when I got caught in the Meteor Shower, when I screamed away on the frontline, I didn’t want to know what expression you’d have.” Seo-rin looked up at the sky and said, “You know what? When I locked myself in a sealed room for about four days, the Student Council President busted in. She actually tried to kill Dok-seo.”

…Did she actually? Yo-hwa was one of the most emotional personalities in the Regressor Alliance. It was entirely plausible.

“But Dok-seo, that child, deployed a transparent barrier and just blocked the whole building.”

“Absolute Barrier. It’s Dok-seo’s power.”

“Yeah. It looked like Dok-seo had already Fallen. Damn, the Student Council President struck with all their might, but it didn’t budge.”

I grimaced. “That brat. She’s a troublemaker who surrendered her Outer God to humanity. She must’ve already reached the peak of her Miko powers by the time she was pulled into the 173rd cycle.”

“Is the Saintess precious to you?”

It was an ambush.

Seo-rin wasn’t looking at me. After all, the city of Utopia was like her eyes, ears, even her innards.

I nodded. “Yes… She’s precious.”

“From the moment you realized this was a bonus stage, your first thought was about saving the Saintess in the 267th cycle?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been thinking about her all along. You’ve always wanted to save her. So you made your decision without hesitation. Right?”

“…Yes.”

I took something from my pocket. It tinkled, quiet and cheap.

It was a silver bell, one from the lobby of Busan Station. This 9,900-won silver bell stayed by my side in any given cycle.

Only then did Seo-rin turn and gaze at the bell. Her violet eyes seemed to feel its warmth. A moment later, she murmured, “It’s hard… I want you not to be hurt. I want you not to suffer because of me. But at the same time… I want you to think of me, always. Yet if you always think of me… you’ll think of my death too. It’s all contradictions.”

“I don’t blame anyone for falling into contradictions,” I said firmly. “I’m the weak one, after all.”

“You idiot. No one thinks that.”

“To hide contradictions for oneself, or reveal them for others. I believe only that matters.”

Seo-rin was silent for a moments, then rose from the bench. “Yeah, you’re right.”

On the Great Witch’s head sat a pointed hat; in her hand hung a well-worn broom.

“You’re right,” she muttered again. “You haven’t forgotten how to fly yet, my guardian?”

She smiled.

“Today, we’ll fly.”

Of course, I’d long since withdrawn from the Samcheon World, so I was a poor mage without a dedicated broom.

Yet it mattered not.

“Ready, Undertaker?”

“Always am, Seo-rin.”

With a tap of Seo-rin’s foot gracing the ground, the broom shot up and I gently wrapped my arms around her waist from behind.

If it were a bicycle or motorcycle, helmets would be required for the passenger, but alas, the muggles on the Korean peninsula hadn’t applied traffic laws to brooms. Thanks to that, though, I could watch the world’s greatest witch-pilot’s flight skills with my bare face.

“How far are we going?”

“That’s a secret,” Seo-rin said with a giggle. “I’ll give you one hint: a place stuffed with the world’s tastiest cheese.”

The altitude climbed endlessly higher.

In the mid-atmosphere, we even collided with a curtain of auroras. Each hue in the aurora hissed as if a living snake.

Just as they discovered us and swerved to attack, the bands of aurora paused. Then, clearing a path for our passage, they formed a hole in the empty sky.

Seo-rin huffed in interest. “Looks like even the Void Poison covering the Earth is free-passing for you, my guardian. Charming existence from long before the world was doomed?”

I remained silent.

I didn’t proclaim that if I hadn’t stopped that girl Yu Ji-won back then, the whole world would’ve drowned under Leviathan’s rain and perished ages ago. The ENFJ Dang Seo-rin would’ve called me a son of a bitch, plucked out my eyes, and sent me free-diving from the stratosphere to the Pacific.

“Be careful. From here on, it’s space.”

“Mm.”

After passing through the troposphere, stratosphere, mesosphere, thermosphere, and the “aurorasphere,” darkness enveloped us.

Fortunately, Leviathan honored its Miko’s request and granted me the right to use Aura, which I summoned to shield my body.

I frowned as I looked down. In the middle of space unfolded what “used to be Earth.”

“Like I thought... The surface has flattened out.”

“Mm. Conspiracy theorists would freak.”

Flat Earth theory. Geocentrism.

The “sun,” now greatly diminished, orbited around what remained of Earth alongside the moon. In no uncertain terms, they had been Corrupted by Anomalies.

“That’s said to be the work of the Night Goddess Nut’s contamination, right?”

“Ah. It used to be treated as a variant of Masterming or Monster Wave. But it’s officially classified as an Outer God.”

“Outer God… I suppose. It’s not content with Earth or the Sun alone.”

The broom sped up a bit. Eventually, when we landed at our apparent destination, I couldn’t hide my astonishment.

“My goodness. Cheese? Dang Seo-rin, how many people these days even know Wallace and Gromit?”

“Why not? A sequel came out in 2024—the latest one too.”

Seo-rin’s chosen nighttime travel spot was none other than Earth’s only… no, now sole remaining satellite.

We were on the moon.

‘But…’

The moon’s appearance felt a bit off. Well, compared to the completely flattened Earth, it was small potatoes, yet there was a stark gulf between the moon I remembered and this universe’s moon.

“This place is… smooth.”

“Yes. Like a silver platter.”

Originally, the moon should’ve been pockmarked by meteor impacts, a lumpy bread roll texture, but this moon was unnaturally pristine.

No bumps—not a single scratch.

A pure white world.

“A silver platter, you might say. It’s almost...”

I tried to think back, feeling an odd sort of dissonance. I’d seen a similar scene somewhere, but strangely, it wouldn’t come to mind.

I looked around and spoke my honest impression. “It’s like a mirror.”

“Heh heh. Exactly.”

Seo-rin folded her arms behind her back.

In the silence of space, except for our breathing and footsteps, nothing else could be heard. Her voice, humming as if singing a tune, seeped through.

“You know, Undertaker.”

“Mm?”

“No one can eavesdrop here.”

I tilted my head. “What do you mean?”

“Because it’s the moon. Your sole observer. Even the Saintess’s Clairvoyance can’t reach here.”

Silence enveloped us on all sides. In this vast space, only our gazes met—like waves crashing against each other’s pupils and shattering into nothing.

Carried by that current, my heart pounded.

How much had Dang Seo-rin uncovered?

How much...

“Nut, you know.”

She spoke softly.

“You confidently explained and detailed out every other Outer God, yet somehow, when it came to Nut, you trailed off—saying you still don’t really understand her, that her true nature remains a mystery.”

“...Because I truly don’t know her. It’s only natural.”

“Mm-mm.” Seo-rin shook her head. “I told you earlier, you’ve been agonizing over how to rescue the Saintess all this time. But surely, you must have endlessly researched and probed Nut as well. You’re just that kind of person.”

Thump.

“Hey, you know,” he said again, “it’s strange, isn’t it?”

“...What is?”

“Why doesn’t Nut envelop the world in this cycle?”

“...Because Nut is the quintessential Last-Hit Parasite. In this cycle, the Monster Wave didn’t destroy Utopia. That’s why.”

Seo-rin smiled wryly. “Liar. You know? When Dok-seo showed you that illusion, I was right beside you. When Do-hwa died... even before the Monster Wave arrived, Nut appeared first and killed both you and her, right? Monster Wave and Nut aren’t the same. Sure, they might be related, but fundamentally, they’re separate. Even if the Monster Wave hadn’t swept through Utopia, it’s odd that Nut would behave so quietly.”

I...

I regretted it.

I had underestimated Dang Seo-rin.

I never expected her to piece together the full picture from such small clues. I’d let my guard down.

“The more you repeat cycles, the stronger Nut, the Outer God, grows.”

“…”

“No one else can enter your sealed territory—Time Seal—yet somehow only Nut can visit. Right? As if you unconsciously permitted only her entry.”

“…”

“Nut creates ‘a paradise nowhere in this world.’ She abducts people, and those people find happiness in her divine realm.”

“…”

“And Leviathan, who’s always been so docile… the moment you and I traveled across the Pacific, it convulsed as if its territory had been invaded.”

“…”

“Hey.”

She spoke, a sorrowful smile flickering on her lips.

“It’s such a coincidence, don’t you think?”

“…”

“Undertaker.”

She said, turning to me.

“I know. You dressed it up with fancy words like ‘bonus stage,’ but this world—this cycle—was one you vowed to live for me, and no one else.”

“…Ah.”

“But you, without a moment’s hesitation, would never devote everything to someone else—no matter if it were the Saintess—right in front of me.”

“…”

“You’re not that kind of person. No, absolutely not.”

“…”

“The Night Goddess—an entity that feeds on the Regressor’s time, that grows stronger for the one you allow to visit even in dreams, that you keep letting slip away with half-spoken words.”

She spoke.

“She’s just like… me, right?”

Chapter 358

The Missing X

Sinnoa

Aura is an energy that appears in works of fiction as a natural phenomenon of sorts, serving as an all-purpose power. But in reality, nothing comes for free.

By now, you well know that even Aura actually originates from an Outer God, that it is no more than another Anomaly.

And so, here is a question naturally follows:

Then what of **Magic***?*

Originally, Awakeners could be classified as either Aura-type or Magic-type. Although Aura had developed to a monstrous degree on the Korean peninsula—thanks to the influence of a certain regressor—the same could not be said of the situation just across the sea in the Japanese archipelago.

The Great Priestess. Manyo Neko. Phantom Blade. Obsidian Qin.

Among those acquainted with the Regressor, every one of them possessed a magic-based ability. From the outset, they were even known as Awakener “Magical Girls” here.

Thus, the Regressor formed a hypothesis.

If so, might not **Magic** share a similar origin with Aura?

A premonition triggered only after confirming Yu Ji-won’s case. A reasoned conviction.

The Regressor immediately began to investigate.

If there is an Outer God of magic, then a Magic Miko must also exist. And if current circumstances are anything to go by, that Magic Miko is

likely among those around me.

Why were Mikos so plentiful only on the Korean peninsula, of all places? It could not be that the Outer Gods were infused with national pride. Otherwise, the protagonist of this story would have been Jung Sang-guk.

The answer was simple.

To grow strong enough to become a Miko, one must survive to the very end and level up. And the world's best environment for leveling up is none other than being within the Regressor's vicinity.

It was a form of natural selection.

In theory, countless people had the potential to become Mikos of the Infinite Metagame. Yet most fell out early, unable to overcome Anomalies and the Void. But the Miko apprentice, Oh Dok-seo, the one who dwelled near the Regressor, continued to survive.

She acquired elixirs. She mastered the Aura Heart Method. Riding the optimal tech tree arranged by the Regressor, she grew powerful with overwhelming efficiency compared to other competitors.

Thus, it was she who was chosen.

Of course, this alone could not explain the unique case of Yu Ji-won, but that would be a topic for another discussion.

If I can identify the Magic Miko in my midst... I can ambush and capture her before the Outer God reveals its claws.

The decision was swift in its making, and the action as a result even more swift.

The Regressor questioned those around him quickly yet cautiously.

"Hmm? Infinite Void? Well... I've heard she uses Black Magic, unlike the Great Witch of the Samcheon World, but it's not really magic, is it?"

First candidate: the younger Cheon Yo-hwa.

“Strictly speaking, I seize corpses or people, overwrite their data, and then command them like familiars. It only looks like magic. In reality, I handle the data of all things. The question of whether Infinite Void is an Outer God of magic… it just doesn’t feel right, you know? Ehehe. Sorry, sunbae, I’m not much help!”

Candidate rejected. Next.

“Come on, sunbae. It’s not Mastermind—it’s the one running the simulated universe. Doesn’t it look more like a scientist than a wizard?”

Second candidate: the elder Cheon Yo-hwa.

“In terms of imagery, Mastermind is more strategist than mage. Calculating optimal routes by weighing every possibility. If magic is a miracle, Mastermind’s power is strategy—or AI. It’s entirely contrary to the idea of miracles.”

Candidate rejected. Next.

“Hmm… Probably not, right? Also, Cheon Yo-hwa’s a notorious loser.”

Third candidate: Oh Dok-seo.

“Aura and magic are both common tropes in fiction, so at first glance, one might think it’s within the Infinite Metagame’s domain… But Aura’s always belonged to Ji-won. I see that the Infinite Metagame cannot create something from nothing. Its specialty is overlaying ‘fictional elements’ onto pre-existing things, distorting them. Mister, you can make something *look* like magic, but you can’t truly create magic itself.”

Candidate rejected. Next.

Next.

There should be a next.

[Oppa?]

It wasn't Lee Ha-yul.

"Hmm? Guild Leader, what is it?"

It wasn't Sim Ah-ryeon either.

[Mr. Undertaker?]

Nor the Saintess.

No. At that point, the Regressor was already in considerable confusion, for beyond the mystery of just who this Miko was, the bigger problem was who the Outer God of Magic could be.

It isn't Infinite Void. It isn't Mastermind. Not Cheon Yo-hwa, not Monster Wave, naturally not Leviathan.

The Regressor hesitated.

Then which Outer God governs magic?

It was understandable that the Regressor spiraled into a rut of rumination. From his knowledge, only one candidate remained.

The Night Goddess, Nut.

But Nut was sealed by the Saintess of the 267th cycle. Phenomena related to Nut should have, for all intents and purposes, "disappeared." Yet magic still continued to exist.

Why?

Perhaps the culprit was not Nut.

Perhaps there was an enigmatic Outer God even the Regressor did not know.

And yet...

"No."

Cheon Yo-hwa, the Miko who had reached into the simulated universe and temporarily harnessed the power of Mastermind,

affirmed it.

“All the Anomalies that you’ve deemed Outer God-level have surfaced already, sunbae. There are no additional external factors here. Even if there were, I would stop them.”

[It does not exist.]

Once the Infinite Metagame, the one who came closer to the throne of Anomalies than any—Infinite Void, Mastermind, Monster Wave—fully surrendered, its very existence diminished and it could no longer lie.

[The number of Outer Gods is seven. This is an already established fact.]

[Of course, an effective “overlap” in which two Outer Gods are in practice “one” remains possible.]

[“One-Seven” is the number of sorcery. The absolute boundary. Even if you need not understand it, please believe it.]

[On the name of Oh Dok-seo.]

Even if the reliability of that testimony abruptly plummeted at the end, Infinite Metagame had long utterly surrendered. It dared not utter lies.

Then.

Then…

The worst possibility.

Suppose for a second…

Though he dared not think it.

He was the Regressor, a superhuman who had resolved to bear the weight of the world. No matter how uncomfortable the truth, he had to confront it.

Suppose the Saintess's seal was imperfect?

A hypothesis.

The Regressor muttered, as if vomiting the words rather than thinking.

Suppose that Nut's presence, bound by the Saintess's Time Stop, was only half a seal.

The silver bell jingled.

Then what would happen?

It was simple when one thought it through. Affection for the Saintess, dependence, guilt, gratitude—all had merely clouded the Regressor's sight for a moment.

Ah.

Looking back to the 267th cycle, at the moment the world nearly perished under Nut's power, a contradiction was still at play.

Before the Saintess could be reborn as Nut's Miko, Nut had already descended and brought hell to the world. The Saintess Fell only afterward.

It was a temporal contradiction.

For Nut to be powerful enough to turn the world into hell, the Miko sharing Nut's power must have been equally strong. After all, a Miko was the conduit for an Outer God to manifest on Earth. If the conduit were not solid, the Outer God could not cross over.

And yet, Nut... Even before the Saintess Fell, Nut's power was more than sufficient—overflowing, even.

That was it.

The Saintess Fell only *later*, too late.

When did the Saintess stop time and resolve to Fall herself? At the

brink of unredeemable despair, when the world's destruction seemed irreversible.

"I will now prove that hypothesis wrong."

"Farewell, Undertaker."

"I'll see you soon."

At that desperate moment when the Regressor was driven to despair, the Saintess stopped time.

In reverse.

Time itself reversed.

It was not that the Miko Saintess grew so strong that the Outer God Nut fully manifested. It was only after the Outer God Nut manifested that the latecomer Miko Saintess Awakened.

The green light went out.

The red light began blinking.

The Saintess was never Nut's Miko to begin with.

There was only one conclusion.

The Saintess forcibly connected with Nut. Despite not being destined to be a Miko, she stole that position, defying the natural order.

In other words, a rebellion. No, a usurpation.

Only one conclusion.

The one truly bound to Nut was not the Saintess, but someone else.

Only one.

She hated flowers.

If she touched the Udumbara, the world's most splendid bloom, it felt as if everything she had built would vanish.

Instinctively, unconsciously, she recoiled.

She was more suited for magic than anyone.

When the Japanese Magical Girls developed the Word Magic system to fight Anomalies, only she pioneered her own magic, Cursed Song Incantation. Strangely, it was a miracle that only *she* could perform on this Earth.

She was a being who, upon receiving something as an offering, would return something of equal value. If she gathered lives on Earth to create hell, she would build heaven in the Otherworld for the same price.

It didn't matter whether it was "hell" or "heaven." One should have noted that this entity, unlike other Anomalies, was most strict about *exchange*.

One must not be ensnared by the appearance of a flattened Earth.

If one had recalled that "flatness" could also be interpreted as "equality" or "fairness."

○

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●

She...

If it was to make this world equal...

II

● II ○

II

She even created a single sun to balance the weight on the scales.

She was the owner of the golden scales.

She was the greatest witch.

She was the judge who first established **justice** in this ruined world.

She was the Lord of Utopia, who placed **paradise nowhere to be found** opposite **the broken world** on the scales.

In the middle of an intersection where green and red lights blinked, she who said she had lost her entire family stared up at the sky as if alone in the world.

In truth, the name “Nut” did not suit her. A name more fitting must exist.

“...Ah.”

The Night Goddess.

The deity governing sorcery and magic.

The one who presides over the moon and night, crossroads, souls, good and evil, and the threefold Samcheon World of sky, earth, and sea.

Ἑκάτη.

Hecate.

“Hello? Did you lose your way too?”

She was Dang Seo-rin.

Where breath and voice were far from all and only two were allowed to be, the universe was unbearably quiet.

There, on the moon’s surface, which had long since become something other than a planet, its surface unnaturally pristine.

I struggled to pry my lips open to speak. “...It’s still too early to conclude that you are Nut, Dang Seo-rin. You might simply be a Miko.”

“Well.”

Whether she sensed my anxious heart or not, her voice was calm, as it was when she viewed Utopia’s flower garden earlier.

“Actually, I’m still curious. That ‘Miko’ you mention—what exactly is that? Can you really draw a sharp line between Outer Gods and Mikos? ‘All the damage done to the world is the Anomaly’s fault. Humans were only ever randomly destined to be Mikos.’ It’s a rather gentle distinction, but… Undertaker, perhaps that classification you created is actually a projection of your own hopes —or even your own greed.”

Seo-rin waved her finger.

“Shall I play devil’s advocate for a moment? What if it’s the exact opposite—entrusting the desire to reshape the world, to paint it in one’s own colors, to the Anomalies, while Mikos live as ordinary humans, pretending to be innocent victims?”

“…That’s not true.”

“Mm. Sorry. I was just entertaining the idea. But I wanted to point out that your dichotomy of Outer God versus Miko is actually pretty blurry.”

Her mutterings drifted on. If this were a normal universe, that voice would never have reached me.

“Actually, I’ve been uncertain of what I am… ever since that night, after I heard a shard of truth from you.”

“You are human.”

“Perhaps.”

Then she said it.

“Perhaps I’m both.”

And I had no reply.

“Hey, you know, Undertaker. I want to ask you one more thing.”

Déjà vu.

Memories of the past and impressions of the present intertwined.

A crossroads of time, not space.

“You promised you would never harm me no matter what. Even if I became an Anomaly, even if I stained every corner of the world in the Void, even if I razed everything to the ground, you told me you would still stand by my side.”

Dang Seo-rin lips lifted in a smile split half by light and half by shadow.

“Even now, will you still be on my side?”

Chapter 359

The Missing XI

Sinnoa

“Hmm? Why the long face, sunbae? Did something good happen while I wasn’t looking—?”

I still hadn’t answered Seo-rin since our midnight stroll to the moon and back. I doubted she ever expected an instant reply.

I needed time to think.

I began spending more and more time alone, even going so far as to ask the Saintess not to keep watch on me with her Clairvoyance for a while. That was how four days passed with my door firmly shut… until my unruly pupil—dressed in a black sailor uniform and carrying her school bag—popped in without warning.

I stared at her for a beat, then greeted, “Cheon Yo-hwa.”

“Geez, using my full name is embarrassing.” The elder twin beamed. “Call me like you always do. ‘My adorable protégé.’ ‘The very meaning of that brief season when you tutored for pocket money.’”

“That’s even longer than your full name…”

“There’s an old saying: Like father and child, lie teacher and student. In other words, we’re basically already family, you know. I’ve wanted to call you this for ages—Daddy!”

I let a wry smile slip out. If Ha-yul were here, she’d probably explode, complaining that Yo-hwa was stealing her form of address. “How did you know I was here? Did the Saintess tell you?”

“Nah. She respects your wishes too much. She kept quiet, so I just followed my intuition.”

We were in a café inside the abandoned Baekje Hospital. The very place where Emit Schopenhauer chose to die.

Whenever I need to lose myself in thought, I end up here because—

"This is the graveyard that keeps a Regressor's End. The other regressor who left this world before you, your sunbae. He kept nagging you for clinging so stubbornly to something you'll abandon, anyway. So you use him as a mirror to look back at yourself, right?"

"Yeah," I said after a pause. "It really is hard to fool you."

"Ehehe, I *am* your star pupil."

I looked down at the floor at the exact spot where Old Man Scho's body had lain, minus the head. The corpse had already been burned away by my Aura, but the keepsake he clutched to the end still rested there all alone: a smartphone, carrying the voice of the woman he loved.

"I've been wondering what makes me any different from that old geezer."

Yo-hwa gazed at my face, silent as I spoke.

"His death was clean. He wasn't tainted by Void poison, and he didn't resurrect his wife with some inhuman art. While she was still alive, he simply talked with the love of his life, over and over—a remarkably gentle way to live and die... And then, there's me. The path I might tumble down is nowhere near that quiet. I've already come too far, already paid too much."

"Udumbara is always there, sunbae," Yo-hwa whispered. "If that tender world-tree infects you, your Regression, Complete Memory, even the Time Seal—all of it will vanish."

"...Udumbara is Sim Ah-ryeon."

Blink. "Huh?"

"More precisely, it's Ah-ryeon's Grudge Orb. The Bird That Drinks Poison and Udumbara are the same at their core. You know every

Awakener's power blooms from their own scars and resentment."

"R-right, I'd kinda guessed..."

"Instead of drinking someone's grudges, she gives that person life-force. Sound familiar?"

Yo-hwa's ruby red eyes widened in shock. "Why didn't I see it? That's right, when Ah-ryeon fell, all of Utopia turned into a garden..."

"Udumbara isn't a cursed tree that steals an Awakener's power; it simply gathers up their scars."

A life without wounds and scars. The manifestation of that ideal would be a Huayen world where people transform into their own flowers—into plants.

[Maybe I always wanted to become a plant.]

Long ago, someone who'd been hurt more than anyone confessed that wish.

[I wanted to have no choice but to accept everything, to run away from everything that angered me or hurt me. It was my deepest, darkest desire.]

[So, I guess I just became a plant.]

That was the Saintess's self-revelation after she turned into a potato.

Ah-ryeon cherished the Saintess fiercely, even dragging the Eastern Holy State's elite troops under her banner. Perhaps she felt an instinctive— No, an essential kinship.

"So infection by Udumbara isn't an exit. Not in any sense of the word," I told Yo-hwa. "And who knows what it would do to Ah-ryeon, who shares the same root. The more I treat Regression like a curse—like shackles I want to break—the harder Udumbara will cling to me."

"Oh no..."

“If it ever blooms inside me, I might lose all the memories I’ve kept from hundreds of cycles in a single instant.”

Silence settled over the café. After staring at the blossoming four-season garden outside, Yo-hwa finally spoke.

“When I heard you came from the 1,000th—no—the 999th cycle, I honestly felt nothing. It was just some far-off future. But just now, I realized for the first time that you really are a man of the future. The info gap is insane.”

“Is it? You’ve been looking like you’re lost in your own thoughts the whole time, Yo-hwa.”

She lowered her eyes. “Anyway… Our allies are scary strong when you think about it. They’re all Mikos or soon-to-be Corrupted. Feels like someone planned the whole scenario. Sunbae… Why did you deliberately Corrupt the children you cherish so much? What made you agree to Project Collapse?”

I couldn’t say it aloud.

‘The moment Dang Seo-rin completed Utopia, everyone here became her limbs.’

Yo-hwa, too, was no exception. No matter how independently she moved, how self-aware she seemed, she was still ensnared in the Great Witch’s Divine Realm.

Enchanted.

‘But once someone Awakens as a Miko, the story changes.’

Yu Ji-won proved that when she summoned Leviathan. She broke free of Utopia and reclaimed her individuality—barely escaping the Witch’s half-hypnotic cradle. Sim Ah-ryeon as well.

‘In short…’

I’d hidden it from my comrades.

‘This is rebellion against Utopia—an uprising from within.’

In the one-in-a-million chance that Seo-rin would lose control and truly become an Outer God... In the truly, wholly unlikely event that that happened, at the very least, my friends and I had to keep our sanity and fight.

'We have to save the Saintess. This is our only window. But then, what about Seo-rin...?'

On and on, the thoughts spiralled in an endless swamp, the punishment for humanity that bit the fruit of good and evil.

The café floor, once soaked in a regressor's blood, now seemed to beg for my gaze as well.

"Sunbae."

How long had I been lost in that void? Her voice reached my ears like a muffled cry from above the water.

"Hold on, don't turn this way yet."

Before I could answer or look away, Yo-hwa turned her back, and the soft rustle of clothes fell quiet.

Startled, I jerked my head aside, my heart lurching. "Yo-hwa! I've told you a thousand times, stop using my heartbreak as an opening and quit that sisterly seduction tactic!"

"Ahaha. So this happened in other cycles too? I'd love the juicy details."

"You two are going to be the death of me! I must've been an idiot, moving to Sejong for a job that paid this much, yelling about the jackpot I'd landed all the way!"

"But the money was sweet, right?"

"It was extorting cultists! I still want to refund it!"

"Ahaha!" Yo-hwa giggled. "All right, you can look now, sunbae."

I frowned and lifted my head— And my eyes went wide.

“No, I guess I should call you ‘Teacher.’”

Gone was the black uniform sliding to the floor. Standing there in a snow-white school uniform was Cheon Yo-hwa, the little sister of that twin pair, grinning ear to ear.

“How’s my impression of my sister? Pretty good, right?”

I couldn’t respond, my eyes still wide with surprise.

“I don’t know what exactly you’re struggling with, Teacher. I mean, I know it’s about the line between Anomaly and human, but I can’t tell how deeply that line cuts for you. Unlike me, whose life ends with this one, you have so many factors to weigh.” Hands clasped behind her back, Yo-hwa continued, “But just as the border between my sister and me depends on what you believe, I trust you more than anyone to see the other person as they truly are.”

“...Yo-hwa.”

“Who I am doesn’t matter. I decided to entrust my self to whoever watches over me.” A shy smile danced across her lips as she said, “Whether someone counts as Anomaly or human is up to you, just like it was for me and just like it was for my sister... Well, okay, I don’t really like her, but for Ji-won too. And Dok-seo, I haven’t known her long—no clue about her at all. Let’s call her an Anomaly, okay?”

That made me laugh out loud. “Offend Dok-seo and you’re dead. She’s ghost-writing my story and if she’s in a mood, she’ll cut anyone’s screen time. Her grudges last.”

“No worries. I live in the here-and-now, faithful only to the person in front of me.”

“Thank you.” I patted Yo-hwa’s shoulder, just like that winter day inside the student-council room when we shared the white season alone. She chuckled, puffs of breath misting. “Right. Nothing to hesitate over. The scale’s bigger, but I’ll keep doing what I’ve always done.”

“Yes, Teacher.”

“Speaking of Dok-seo... Yo-hwa, I hear you tried to kill her?”

“Ah—”

“Let’s dig just a bit deeper into that bottomless hole, shall we?”

“L-language is amazing, huh? How can you do a little deep dive into a chat hole without an end, and do it all at once too?”

“Yo-hwa.”

“S-sorry, sunbae! Actually, I am Cheon Yo-hwa pretending to be the other Cheon Yo-hwa pretending to be me! How was my little-sister act? Great, huh?!”

I gave her a good scolding.

Before that summer was over...

[Dad.]

Even Ha-yul managed to Fall, freeing herself from Utopia’s brainwashing. Her condition for Corruption was simple: I, the Undertaker, had to be assassinated or die an unjust death at the hands of ordinary people—no one special.

So, just like with Ah-ryeon, all I had to do was screen an “illusion” for Ha-yul.

Since the pattern was the same, there was no need to re-enact the exact scene with someone else’s pain.

Yes, I skipped the timeline. The process of Falling was erased, and only the result remained. All that was left was the fact that Lee Ha-yul Fell.

Everything in between is gone.

[I feel so light.]

Ha-yul straightened her back, emotionless, and raised her fingers in

a peace sign.

[I’ve never been this happy.]

[I’m not alone anymore, Dad.]

[Now, nothing scares me.]

“...You don’t have to pile up the defeat flags that neatly, kiddo.”

Awakener: Lee Ha-yul

Corrupted Alias: The Tuner

Has joined the party.

Night-Goddess Raid Team—COMPLETE.

Chapter 360

The Missing XII

Sinnoa

The Regressor Alliance hatched an audacious plan of Collapse: every one of us would willingly fall into Corruption, yet three members had to be left out.

“Saintess, please help us from the non-Corrupted side.”

[Why? I’m sure I could be a huge help to you.]

“Of course. But our final goal is to rescue the Saintess of the 267th cycle.”

First, the Saintess.

“After we beat the Night Goddess Nut—no, Hecate—we somehow have to break into the 267th cycle, a world where time has frozen forever. But if, at that moment, the current Saintess also exists...”

[...There will be two identical versions of one person in the same frame of time—basically a doppelganger. It would practically be a well-crafted, open invitation for Void-tainting...]

“Thank you for understanding.”

The Saintess exhaled softly. [Mr. Undertaker, you know this. Even if I let myself Fall, there’s still a way I can help you.]

“That option is off the table. Asking the Saintess to sacrifice herself to save the Saintess is nonsense.”

What she had suggested was simple: fall into Corruption first, then pick the right moment and die by suicide.

No doppelgänger, no problem—so she said.

Even through the Telepathic silence, I could feel her dissatisfaction. I allowed myself a wry smile. It was so like her to consider her own life trivial.

“Even setting aside the sacrifice,” I said gently, “we have no idea what could happen if we tried it.”

[You’re worried about a time paradox?]

“Yes. It’s only a hunch, but… if the paradox actually fires, I have a very bad feeling about what the fallout might be.”

At that, the Saintess finally relinquished, and I sensed her nod of acceptance. [If Mr. Undertaker’s intuition says so, I trust it. Very well. I’ll help you from the safest line I can hold.]

Next person off the list.

“Ah— Sorry, sunbae. I’m sitting this one out!”

The older twin, Cheon Yo-hwa, flashed me a sun-bright grin. Amazingly, the very woman who had proposed Project Collapse was asking to be excused. Her face was so smug that I treated her skull to a good old knuckle-grind.

“Kyah! C-corporal punishment is wrong!”

“Hey. Hey. You’ve got some nerve. Ah-ryeon and Ha-yul went through hell to Corrupt themselves, and you just bow out? Huh?”

“A-ah-haha…” Yo-hwa rubbed her own head as an awkward smile broke free on her face. “Um, yeah. People say I have no shame, which is fair enough. But I do have a solid reason!”

“And that is?”

“Nut— Uh, her real name’s Hecate, right? Anyway. We can’t predict exactly how we’ll fight the Night Goddess, but… once the battle begins, anyone who’s Corrupted and fails to break free of the Great Witch’s grip will be turned into her minion.”

I nodded. “Which is why we have to weaponize Corruption. If we

leave you as you are, you'll end up a brain-washed doll for Dang Seo-rin."

"Exactly, sunbae!"

"What?"

Her face hardened, deadly serious. "I'm... going to become a parasite inside an Outer God!"

I stared back at her, entirely silent.

"No, no! Don't make that face! Eh? Eh?" she whined, poking my waist with her elbow. "I've thought it through from every angle, so trust me, sunbae. Please? I have to slip inside Hecate and turn into a lion-hearted—no—a lion heartworm."[1]

"Trust begins with details. Explain the stunt so I can agree."

"Sometimes you can't explain a plan! Honestly! You hide bad news from us all the time!"

She hit me with facts so hard that I lost my words for a beat there. So that was what the others felt with me. Still under mirror-therapy, I watched her slide a thermos my way.

"And this is?" I prompted.

"My blood. I drew it little by little. Drink it before we start."

I stared at her.

She stared back.

"...Yo-hwa."

"I know what you're thinking," she protested. "Handing someone a syringe of your own blood and saying, 'Drink up!' looks insane. It feels like some creepy prank and could easily be misinterpreted. But there is a real, real ritual meaning behind it."

"What are you plotting?"

“Obviously, I’m plotting the brilliant scheme that will save the world under your command, as always.”

“So slamming your blood like a shot is somehow linked to *saving the world*?”

Yo-hwa flopped to the ground, prostrating herself on the spot as if worshipping Buddha. The technical term for this is, of course, dogeza.

“Please, sunbae. Don’t ask, just do it… Do it.”

Then she raised her legs while staying face-down, balancing only on her arms and head. Behold, the evolved dogeza: a “grand-bow.”

She popped her finisher like it was nothing.

“Sunbae, if you refuse the one request of my life, I’ll follow you around in this pose. Forever.”

“You little monster.”

The world was already doomed; birthing a grand-bow monster on top of that was too much. And so, with a deep and suffering sigh, I granted her wish.

Moving on, why no talk of our superstar Oh Dok-seo, you might ask?

Simple: she didn’t need to Fall. She was effectively in permanent Corruption already.

“Oh, yeah. It’s because Infinite Metagame surrendered, I guess? I’m pretty much in ‘always Corrupted’ mode.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve already fused completely with an Outer God. Basically, there’s no point switching between normal and Corrupted versions. And yep, it’s still me—the first shrine-maiden ever to swallow an Outer God. No one left who can rival me…”

Dok-seo sipped cola and stared blankly at the sky.

“When I was yanked into a past cycle, I panicked, but... I’m good now. I actually did wonder why everyone else stayed put and only I warped after you, mister,” she admitted, then shrugged. “I kinda figure Metagame got totally absorbed by me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re the axis of all regression. When you rewind, others can’t chase that timeline. But Metagame’s different. You *know* this, mister. It sensed your rewinds and kept inching after you.”

Right. Maybe regression itself was a cliché of fiction. As the overseer of all stories, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame had tools to answer whatever questions the existence of a regressor could pose.

“So from Metagame’s perspective, this isn’t the 173rd cycle. It’s just the extension of the 999th world where the Regressor called ‘mister’ lives.”

“Huh,” I mused.

“Even in the 999th cycle, there’s no ‘laptop’ here. Normally, Metagame would split half-and-half between the notebook and me. But for this stage, everything that it was and is—all of its power—was absorbed entirely by me.”

Was it my imagination? Dok-seo’s eyes looked harder than ever.

“Once this stage ends, you’ll forget everything—golden scales, contract, and all. But I won’t. Someday, mister, I’ll remember the world after this doom.”

“...Because you’re the slowest prophet.”

“Yep.” She flipped her cap backwards. “Sure, I still haven’t recalled the 555th cycle, let alone started chasing the 1000th. But that’s future me’s problem. Present me’s got work to do.”

“Like handing tomorrow’s you your daily upload schedule?”

“Exactly, exactly.” The self-proclaimed great author grinned and offered up her right hand. “Let’s go, mister. Let’s crystal-punch that bratty girl who thinks she’s the Outer God of this universe.”

I took her hand and mine, and we shook on it—which could have been a stirring moment until someone beside us timidly raised a hand.

“Uh, hyung-nim?”

It was Seo Gyu.

“Sorry to butt in, but is there nothing for me? Like, Corruption or something? Or am I just supposed to stay mind-fogged in this utopia?”

“Ah, Seo Gyu, sorry. For you to rampage, SG Net would have to explode in user count.”

“Oh.”

“But as you know, right now SG Net is a ghost community with only Ah-ryeon logged in. So there’s no chance.”

“Ah...”

The apocalypse’s last muscle-man drooped his deltoids in gloom.

Let us have a moment of silence.

Myself, Yu Ji-won, Sim Ah-ryeon, Cheon Yo-hwa, Lee Ha-yul, and Oh Dok-seo. Six people in the strike team.

‘A party for the ages.’

All of them except me were Corrupted, though not to the point of total nihilism. Ji-won, for example, still treated me as an equal. Corruption has wild-caught and farm-raised grades, perhaps, like martial arts power gained by demonic techniques versus the pure internal energy of the orthodox schools.

‘Even so, they’re indisputably the strongest this world has to offer.’

With this team, we could probably wipe out a Monster Wave in one sweep.

“Mr. Matiz,” Ji-won said, drawing close. She was shorter than usual —strangely unfamiliar yet familiar. “Where is Hecate? I haven’t been able to see Her Excellency Dang Seo-rin lately.”

“On the moon.”

“Pardon?”

“Literally, Dang Seo-rin is on the moon.”

Ever since our last talk she had stayed up there, never returning to Earth.

“She must have steeled herself for our fight,” I explained. “Knowing she can’t fully control herself as an Outer God, she exiled herself as far from Earth as possible.”

“...Whatever verdict you reach, perhaps she has already decided to lose.”

“Possibly.”

Another reading existed, though.

Since ancient times, the moon acted as the wellspring of sorcery. It was a mirror hung in the sky, a hole to the Otherworld. The philosopher Parmenides once said the moon shines because it “always looks upon the sun,” likening it to the universe’s eye. Just as a human blinks, the cosmos’ eye blinks between crescent and full. In other words...

“Hecate may have chosen the battlefield that most favors herself. Is it Dang Seo-rin’s heart that refuses to wreck Earth, or the Outer God’s instinct to repaint the world in her color? I can’t say which will win.”

Right now, Seo-rin stood too close to Hecate. Unless you possess

Complete Memory like I do, a mere human ego can hardly survive inside an Outer God. It was a miracle she still even looked like "Dang Seo-rin." And that miracle existed only because of me. I could recognize that much, at least.

I turned to my comrades and said, "The Outer God named Nut, now called Hecate, never shows herself carelessly."

The strike team looked back—all of them still Yu Ji-won, Sim Ah-ryeon, Cheon Yo-hwa, Lee Ha-yul, and Oh Dok-seo, even under the thrall of Anomalous power. They were the last humans standing in the 173rd—no—the 1000th world.

"Hecate used to cloak the universe in night at the very instant that the world perished. I once thought she was like Infinite Metagame, sniping the last hit... but surely, it tied into Seo-rin's condition."

Ha-yul tilted her head. [So if Dang Seo-rin dies, Hecate descends?]

"Probably. I'm not certain."

Questions remained about their link. Was Dang Seo-rin truly an Outer God or merely a priestess? Either hypothesis left unexplained shadows, a fog of omen around my heart. Yet fog or not, this operation demanded everything.

"To Hecate, this world is post-apocalypse already. Humanity is fused to her Utopia, hence she can appear freely here... But for us, an impossible chance—the epilogue after the ending—has been handed down."

It had been a chain of coincidences.

Dang Seo-rin's power reached Outer-God class, so the golden scales worked near-omnipotence.

She granted my wish to call my future self.

Oh Dok-seo tamed Infinite Metagame. Even if I were to forget this step forever, someday, she alone will recall so that no one—no god—can erase it as having "never happened."

So many “once-in-a-lifetimes” stacked into inevitability. If I was a miracle to Dang Seo-rin, then my miracle stood before me now.

“Our one objective: sever the Outer God from Dang Seo-rin and rescue our ridiculous yet lovable pointy-hat devotee.”

Their gazes were of different colors and different passions, yet each and every one of them was already resolved. As well they should be. After all, this 173rd cycle had fought Monster Waves in endless war. Theirs was a world of veterans.

“If it’s the moon, the trip alone takes ages. I’ll clear a path,” Ji-won said first. She spread her hand, then closed it. The aurora that flowed across the night sky suddenly dropped like a net.

“Wh-whoa!”

“Oh.”

Startled yet compliant, the party let the auroral mesh wrap them, then ascend like a silent elevator.

Dok-seo muttered, “Wow, busted-tier. Ji-won unnie may be pint-sized now, but when she embraces Corruption, she’s the strongest human alive…”

“Thank you.”

“No, I’m the one thanking you! Free cruise into space!”

“Indeed.” Ji-won dipped her chin. “If you truly are grateful, then when you chronicle Mr. Matiz’s life later, please allocate me exceptional page-time.”

“Uh, wha—?”

“I felt goodwill the instant I saw you, Ms. Dok-seo. As befits a self-styled prophet at Mr. Matiz’s side, you radiate an uncommon Aura. I haven’t read your work yet, but I am sure it is superb.”

“Uh, uh! Yeah? Hmm. Well. That’s true. Ji-won unnie’s face is a national treasure! I’ll write you a special feature!”

“Thank you.”

Ji-won, you’re unchanging as ever. Corrupted or not, you sniff out power like a bloodhound and milk it for all it’s worth...

“We’ll soon arrive.”

Even beyond Earth’s atmosphere, we felt no discomfort. The aurora kept weaving, shielding us from harm. Under Ji-won’s command, Leviathan guarded us flawlessly, its auroral net even doubling as a mental barrier. The dragon did, after all, excel at brainwashing and hallucination.

A hopeless foe when an enemy yet so reassuring as an ally, these Outer Gods.

‘Wait. Infinite Metagame never felt reassuring, even as an ally.’

Let’s just file that cosmic horror under the umbrella term of “a big misunderstanding.”

As Ji-won said, the moon—Hecate’s sanctuary—drew closer by the second.

“Wow!” Yo-hwa exclaimed. “Beautiful. Spotless. A perfect mirror hanging in the middle of space...”

The others felt much the same, though they left their thoughts to the silence.

However, I could not be moved by the moon’s beauty. My eyes locked on its surface, on a lone figure still wearing a cone hat and cape.

My eyesight outstripped the team’s. I could zoom in further, clearer.

Far away, Dang Seo-rin seemed to notice my stare, and I sucked in a breath. Across the gulf of a whole universe, she shaped words with her lips, crisp and slow.

You’re here, Undertaker.

Maybe a bit late.

Or perhaps still early…

A chill ran down my spine. She still looked human—gentle smile, calm eyes—and no different from the Dang Seo-rin I knew…

Except for her left hand.

Hm? Oh,

This bothers you?

In her left hand…

There lay something that must not exist.

By every rule of common sense, an impossible sight condensed there.

Got bored waiting for you.

I was looking over Earth,

And it just caught my eye.

Go Yuri.

It annoyed me.

There it was, cleanly severed with pink hair and all. Go Yuri's head was clenched in Dang Seo-rin's left hand as if it belonged there.

The Great Witch smiled.

So I tidied it up.

Footnotes:

1 - Lions, like other carnivores, are susceptible to heartworm

infection, although they are not the primary host like dogs. Mosquitoes transmit the parasite, and heartworms can cause serious health problems in lions, including heart failure and death. Basically, a parasite. It should also be noted that Hecate is associated with lions.

Chapter 361

The Missing XIII

Sinnoa

Go Yuri is dead.

“Hey, mister? Why are you spacing out all of a sudden?”

Go Yuri is dead.

Perhaps this was the ending I had spent a thousand turns of regression praying for. In run after run, I wandered, hunting for some way to handle the “pink entity.” And yet... Seeing Go Yuri’s severed head dangling vacantly from Seo-rin’s hand sent my heart thumping at an ominous tempo.

“Your Excellency? Your complexion...”

Maybe that was inevitable. All this punny regressor had managed so far was to keep Ji-won glued to Go Yuri, and even that only shooed her away. If you asked whether we ever truly stopped her, a question mark was all we could offer.

And now, Go Yuri was dead.

Killed by Dang Seo-rin, as casually as breathing.

Splat. Crack.

Fresh blood dotted the mirror-bright lunar surface.

Seo-rin opened her hand, and in an unhurried arc, slow enough to mistake for a drifting balloon, Go Yuri’s head fell. Her face was just as serene.

「Hmm... Looks like you’ve got a lot of company over there too.」

Lilac eyes, bored to the point of drowsiness, swept across the Void.

She wasn't staring at me but staring past me—at my comrades, glancing back with worried faces.

「It's hard to talk in peace with them hanging around, right?」

Her lips whispered.

「Shall I clear them out?」

"Everyone! Scatter!" I instantly shouted, flinging Aura and the transmission of sound alike.

A rookie might have blinked in confusion, but my party—the last elites of this world, who had even accepted Corruption—were different. Of course, even among raiders, there were differences in reflexes.

Yu Ji-won was the fastest. "I'll handle it."

Then with no forewarning, Seo-rin flicked her hand, and the vast emptiness of the Void itself was cleaved in violet. It was a ridiculous fissure, a slash big enough to bisect the whole team. We could have been annihilated in one blow.

Ji-won charged straight at it without a heartbeat's hesitation, a spectrum of auroras slamming into the attack.

Screeeech...

Sound shouldn't carry in the middle of space, yet a warped static howled like a monster's scream—an ugly shriek stabbing our eardrums.

Impact.

The authority of Hecate collided with Leviathan, and the slash never reached us.

But not without a price.

"Hmm."

Half of Ji-won's body was gone.

The silver-haired girl glanced down and murmured, "So that's why she chose the moon, an environment where she can cast any spell at any time."

Even with half her body missing, Ji-won stayed calm.

"But how strange. The Great Witch's specialty is the Cursed Song Incantation. Melodies layered in advance should be the core of her magic. How can she fire off a grand spell this large on the spot without chanting...?"

"Heal."

Petals sprouted and scattered over Ji-won's wounds, as Ah-ryeon was already beside me, praying without expression. Where the petals passed, Ji-won's body—and even her clothing—were restored.

"Dok-seo!" I shouted. "Hold the rear with Ah-ryeon! If a spell that we absolutely can't stop comes, that's when you pop Absolute Defense!"

"R-right, mister!"

"Ha-yul, take center! Watch ahead and behind, and adjust on your own!"

[Okay.]

"Ji-won! Yo-hwa! You're with me!"

No reply was needed.

The moment her treatment concluded, Ji-won rode her Aura and shot toward the moon.

Fighting in the air—well, in space—put us at a disadvantage. On a battlefield without ground beneath our feet, Seo-rin held the upper hand. She always flew on her broom and so commanded the field. All of our experience, by contrast, was earned on solid earth.

「Hmm-hmm.」

Humming as if amused, she swept her arm through space again. This time I didn't need to shout; the whole raid was already tracking her every twitch.

"I'll block this one, Teacher!"

The same casual blow that had torn off Ji-won's limbs sliced silently between us again—

Between us.

She had aimed for Ji-won and Yo-hwa's throats, but the moment Yo-hwa snapped her fingers, the slashes corkscrewed away. By rewriting the target's perceived data, Infinite Void had made their strikes veer off as though ensnared by illusion.

Yo-hwa laughed. "Ahaha! What an idiot! Has eyes but doesn't know what you use them for!"

Kuuuu-oom!

With her razor-edged laughter, we slammed into the moon.

The boom and tremor were seismic. Any NASA tech would have fainted. Yet that mirror-smooth surface showed not a single crater or scratch.

Astronomers and physicists alike would be out of work.

"Ji-won."

Ji-won knelt the instant she landed and pressed her palms together. "Yes. I know, Mr. Matiz."

Her whole body flashed with aurora. The light ran down her legs—down, ever down. Within moments, a full-spectrum light swallowed the moon. Terraforming— No, Auraforming was the word. Ji-won's Aura rolled across a moon already twisted into Dang Seo-rin's divine realm, making a battlefield perfectly suited for us.

Gwooooo…

Behind the praying Ji-won, a sea dragon of water reared up.

Dok-seo yelped, “Eek!” and slipped. With gravity now Earth-normal, she splashed on her backside.

“Dang Seo-rin.” I stepped forward. *Splash*—water fanned beneath my shoe. “I’m here to return your question.”

Splash. Slosh.

The raiders followed at my back—Ji-won on my left, Yo-hwa on my right, Ha-yul behind, Dok-seo and Ah-ryeon at the rear—forming a triangular wedge aimed straight at Seo-rin.

「Ah. At last…」

「You’ll stay with me, right—forever?」

She smiled wide, yet it seemed I alone understood her. My comrades only tilted their heads.

Yo-hwa frowned. “What’d she say just now?”

[It sounded like someone dragging a crowbar across a car hood. Weird.]

“M-me too, sir. Like a TV full of static.”

Only I’d caught her words.

Odd. Ji-won could lip-read, yet even she was puzzled.

Something was fundamentally off. In this universe, somehow only she and I…

I swallowed my questions and spoke what had to be said. “Yes… I’ll stay with you.”

Her smile brightened.

「Wise decision! If you’re by my side, everything will be fine.」

She leaned against her broom.

「Saving the world is foolish. Think back to the world before it died. Was it worth saving?」

Behind her, the planets spun—Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn all circling a flattened Earth, not a shrunken Sun.

「You can't remember the worlds before cycle four, Undertaker, so you cling to a fantasy of "the world" you must save.」

Uranus and Neptune no longer existed here. Only the ancient sky of magic remained, the planets' shadows sliding over the mirror-moon.

「No one takes responsibility. They think they suffer, yet dump their pain on others without a thought.

Rather than that filthy surface, the utopia we'll build will be far more beautiful. Without fail.」

Light and shadow striped the ground beneath her like a shifting crosswalk.

At the crossroads of the cosmos, she stood.

「And if you stay with me now, you'll never have to suffer hundreds more times.」

I remained silent.

「You fear a time paradox? But why treat time's order as sacred? I can re-assemble space this beautifully, so with you, I can rebuild time as well. That is an Outer God. A miracle granted to humanity! A god truly watching over us has given us a chance to redesign the flawed human race!」

She rejoiced like a child.

「Let's rebuild humans. Let's redesign the world. Again and again, until every being is happy—even if it takes eternity! That is why you exist. You and I share a single destiny—we exist for this!」

Her words painted a vivid vision. One witch and one swordsman, forever piecing together the perfect human. We would tweak intellect, compassion, memory. Lament each failure yet never despair. Because together, even hardship became play.

But every playtime ends.

「Once the world we want is complete, we'll slip away quietly. There'll be no need for a god to meddle with a perfected world. This is better—definitely.」

Indeed. The world she dreamed of echoed the Saintess's wish and Ji-won's hope.

And yet...

"I have a question, Dang Seo-rin."

「Hmm? Ask anything.」

"The children you tried to kill, the people around me. What do they look like to you now?"

She blinked. Memories flashed.

"I love humanity!"

"I hate people. They tick me off."

"The day we first defeated the Meteor Shower, wrapped in endless sunset..."

"Humans are amazing!"

A thread of that tune still flowed in my heart.

The witch who looked just like you swept her eyes over my comrades and said lightly,

「Yeah. They're noisy, aren't they? Honestly, they've been grating on me—so noisy, noisy, noisy. Can't we talk after I wipe them away? Don't worry. I'll remake them later, and they'll be much

prettier.」

...I see.

I listened to my heartbeat, then opened my eyes.

“They each have their reasons, but they chose to come here and fight. They’re a suicide squad.”

「...?」

“Dang Seo-rin would never call such people ugly. What you see and hear right now aren’t through her eyes or ears.”

「...」

“My witch... No.”

I drew my cane-sword. When the walking stick’s sheath fell away, *Do-hwa* gleamed.

Faced with that bright tip, Dang Seo-rin’s smile froze.

“I have come to reclaim my princess, Outer God Hecate.”

Chapter 362

The Missing XIV

Sinnoa

Dang Seo-rin's—

No.

Hecate's violet eyes faded to ash.

「So that's how it is.」

「The "Dang Seo-rin" you picture and the "me" in front of you are separate beings. Someone I can't even recall is lodged in your heart like a splinter.」

「Come to think of it, you've never really looked at me—only at the shadow of somebody else.」

The kaleidoscopic eyes that once gleamed like amethyst lost the line between pupil and iris as the planets soundlessly lined up behind Hecate stopped dead in their orbits.

"Uwaaahhh!"

But to everyone except me, the scene was different.

Dok-seo clutched her ears and writhed. "S-so loud! It's disgusting! What is this noise?! Where's it coming from?!"

Even now Hecate's voice reached me, and only me, clearly. There was no time to ponder why.

Hecate raised her broom and—*crack*—drove it into the mirror-smooth lunar surface.

「Then I'll kill them for you.」

「Everything stuck in your heart like thorns.」

「The ragged pieces of “Dang Seo-rin” that never made it this far. They’re useless, anyway.」

In that instant, innumerable magic circles blossomed in the dark void of space. Tens of thousands of gaping holes were etched at once without so much as a chant.

“Eek—”

Dok-seo’s squawk of panic lasted only a moment. From millions of holes, pitch-black hands shot out and lunged at the raiding party like writhing tentacles.

Ji-won and I moved at exactly the same time. I swung *Do-hwa* left while Ji-won drew her hand-axe right. Parry, cleave—within heartbeats, dozens of slashes severed the black hands.

“Ah.”

There were simply too many.

Clomp! One hand Ji-won missed clamped around her wrist, and the stench of rotting flesh stung our noses. Decay raced outward from the punctured skin.

“Mmph!”

“I-I’ll fix it!”

Ah-ryeon was already in position. She flung healing forth in a panic, and purple globe-amaranths and pure white lilies blossomed where flesh had rotted away. However, the spot the black hand had touched kept rotting all the same.

Before Ah-ryeon could even gasp, Ji-won swung her axe with a blank face, and with a splut, a heavy chunk of flesh went flying away—Ji-won’s forearm.

“It’s a curse,” she said evenly. Red and white petals burst from the stump, regrowing the arm at once. “I don’t yet know how it

bypasses Ah-ryeon's healing. President."

Cheon Yo-hwa snapped her leg out in a kick as she shouted, "Leave it to me!"

She went about cleaning up the attacks Ji-won and I had missed while deliberately left an opening for a black hand to grab her ankle. The skin there rotted in a heartbeat. As calmly as Ji-won had, Yo-hwa severed her own foot, then snatched up the decomposed left foot.

"It isn't a simple curse, Teacher! These black hands are perfect clones built from our own biological data!" Her red eyes, able to read the fabric of creation, flashed as she explained, "The trait is Infection! Because each hand shares our exact body, when Ah-ryeon heals us the hands get healed at the same time!"

"I see."

Every comrade here had once been registered as a citizen of Utopia before escaping Hecate's realm through Corruption. Naturally, Hecate had stockpiled their data.

"Th-then guard your heads, everyone!" Ah-ryeon cried out. "Arms and legs are fine, but regrowing a neck is a pain—!"

"Gyaaa! T-too many! Way too many!"

Dok-seo swung her bat like mad, fouling off the hands coming for her.

"There've gotta be millions! Mister! I-I'm using it, okay?! Absolute Defense—I can pop it, right?!"

I tried to answer no. Hecate was throwing numbers at us precisely to burn Dok-seo's Absolute Defense early.

[No need.]

But someone beat my warning.

Ha-yul.

[Ready.]

Her voice came not from her throat but from the puppet strings. Threads as thin as piano wire, already webbed across the lunar surface, vibrated and carried Ha-yul's words.

[Ji-won unnie. Now, please.]

"Of course."

Now similar in build to Corrupted Ha-yul, Ji-won reached out. A few strands of string looped around her palm. Light welled from the spot as the Aura flooding the moon clung to the threads until hundreds of thousands of strands unfurled like an aurora. From every angle around us came a slicing sound as Ha-yul's web, charged with Ji-won's Aura, harvested millions upon millions of black hands in a single flash.

Ha-yul flicked her hand, staying expressionless.

[Easy.]

Perfect native pronunciation. As expected of a scion of that infamous collaborator clan.

[I advise nobody move carelessly.]

[Heads removed are not my fault. Probably.]

"Hah! Behold the 'Collaborator Princess's Killing Field'!"

[Whoever coined that line can be the first to lose their head.]

A gap opened. I had no intention of wasting it.

I downed the "blood" that the elder twin insisted I drink, ditched the thermos, and sprang forward with a splash. Ha-yul warned me not to act rashly, but I trusted her and pounded the ground.

One step. Two. The water of Leviathan underfoot gave my soles a gentle push. Looking closer, I was only skimming the surface—my ankles never got wet.

Water-Lily Step.

Hecate's face, so far away, rushed toward me.

Flick! Flick-flick!

Ha-yul's wires blanked out wherever I charged, instead swarming toward Hecate's position.

The moon goddess clicked her tongue.

「Cheap grappling tricks.」

She waved her hand, and slash-marks scored the void. The very slash that had taken half of Ji-won at the start sheared through Ha-yul's careful web in an instant. Freed to maneuver, Hecate tried to stop my rush by casting another circle, but...

"Pardon me."

At some point, Ji-won had already positioned herself behind her.

For the first time, dismay colored Hecate's eyes.

Seeing my head-long dash, she assumed "the Undertaker is fastest," but it was actually a feint. While she focused on me and the wires, Ji-won dove under the surface and swam the opposite way. Ha-yul's converging strings had both assaulted Hecate and hidden Ji-won's movement.

It was flawless teamwork.

"My apologies, Director."

Craaaack!

From behind, Ji-won wrestled Dang Seo-rin tight—arms, legs, and Aura binding her like perfect pro-wrestling holds.

「You—」

"Obviously this side has better odds. Blame your win-rate, not my betrayal."

Hecate fought back too late; I was already on top of her.

「 Ah. 」

Without warning I swung *Do-hwa* in a single arc.

First Flash.

The blade forged by a prosthetic-knight-turned-smith who died screaming in this universe cleaved both Hecate and Ji-won without discrimination.

「 ————! 」

God-Slayer.

The title once belonged to a certain pistol, yet the artifact that came closest in my books was none other than my famed sword, *Do-hwa*. With every loop of the world, "Infinite Void" revived, and so early in each run, I slew it at Baekhwa High with this very blade. In other words, except in vacation runs, the more my returns piled up, the more layers of "killed an Outer God" painted themselves onto *Do-hwa*.

Hundreds of divine deaths lacquered onto one edge.

That cursed steel pierced the Goddess of Night.

She did not escape unscathed. By holding Hecate to the bitter end, she paid with her own body, carved to pieces.

She coughed, spitting blood—blue, not red. Taking a God-Slayer hit head-on put even her near erasure, and yet...

"H-heal."

We had Ah-ryeon.

Though everything below Ji-won's waist was gone, lilies flowered to life in boundless blossoms, and her lower half regrew whole. It was a suicidal tactic, possible only because a Saintess of the North bloomed among us and because the team's trust was absolute.

“Teacher!”

Cheon Yo-hwa dashed over with Ah-ryeon and Dok-seo carried piggy-back, then set them down—*Splash! Blagh! Ack! Ow!*—and pressed close to me.

“Did we win?!”

“H-hey! You idiot!”

Dok-seo jerked up from where she’d landed face-down in a puddle. Even her trademark cap slid off her soaked head.

She knew Yo-hwa bears grudges forever, yet she hadn’t even faked formal speech. She must have really panicked.

Wilting under Yo-hwa’s glare, Dok-seo stammered, “N-no, that’s a flag! Say that and the boss never dies... sir!”

I approached Hecate with a splashing step. While the two ran their comedy skit, I’d kept my eyes on her.

‘It doesn’t matter if she dies now or revives whole—both are bad. We need her in suspended animation.’

Only then can we dive into her subconscious and pry the human Seo-rin free.

My collar tightened as someone came up beside me and grabbed my shirt—Ah-ryeon.

“Sh-should I heal her, Guild Leader?”

“Just keep her breathing. Let’s watch a bit longer.”

Hecate floated in the puddle, half of her body missing. However, relaxing would be fatal.

‘She’s the one who beat Go Yuri.’

For some reason, every voice but mine reached her as raw static. The same went for Go Yuri, no doubt. Her supreme brain-washing

could charm anyone, anywhere, but to Hecate, it might have sounded like sheer noise. She herself had admitted she tossed Yuri's head aside because it "irritated" her.

'All living things on Earth felt filthy to her, so paradoxically enough, Go Yuri's hypnosis was sealed.'

Thus, Go Yuri's strongest weapon—Distortion—had been nullified.

'Even so, Hecate's magic feels bizarre. There was no trace of her Cursed Song Incantation lead-in, yet she fires off grand spells chantless... How?'

I stared down at her half-dead face. Then in a blink, a memory flashed before my eyes like lightning.

"Actually..."

Not that long ago...

"I heard a song."

It was back in the 999th run. Given that this is the epilogue extending from the 999th, you could call it the 1000th run.

"A song?"

"Yeah. A song, or maybe a sound. Usually it's just noise. But whenever I approach certain people or places... I hear a particular 'sound' they have."

At the intersection before the fallen-flower park, Dang Seo-rin had confessed.

"Look at the sunset overhead. You see red, right? But I don't just see red. I hear the sunset's distinct sound in my ears. It's kinda like the sound of waves."

The confession puzzled me. I knew she wove magic through song, but only in the 1000th cycle did she reveal that the entire world dissolved into "sounds" for her. The idea that she'd hidden it till then made no sense. She had no reason to.

“I can hear a song from you too. It’s very sad, but also very clear. Really faint... but really strong.”

A hypothesis crystallized.

‘What if when Seo-rin was fully devoured by the Outer God, those “sounds” warped?’

Then it hit me. Humans couldn’t perceive infra- or ultrasonic. Our hearing range was narrow. So what would happen if this universe held sounds only Seo-rin—only Hecate—could hear? To her, they’d be unbearably “loud,” “irritating,” and “grating” noise for any human ear.

‘The premise that no sound exists here is wrong. It’s the opposite—we just can’t hear it. This Void is already crammed with silent choruses she laid down in advance.’

A chill down my spine. Time seemed to drift slowly before my eyes—evidence my mind was racing.

‘Hecate isn’t spamming grand spells chantless! She’s triggering songs she prerecorded all over space! Songs we can’t hear!’

So even now her cursed chorus was singing with the volume turned to zero.

“Everyone!” The party looked over at me as I shouted, “Hecate is not defeated! Her magic is still active! Full defensive formation!”

With no questions or complaints, they snapped into place behind me. Our lines of sight combined to scan in every direction.

Ha-yul’s strings webbed anew. Ji-won’s Leviathan curled around us like a sea dragon. Ah-ryeon’s petals scattered over the water.

The moon lay in utter silence.

‘Think, Undertaker. A hint must be in my memories. My ears hear no song, and neither do the others. Yet somewhere a chorus is playing. Where? Where did Seo-rin—did Hecate—hide her song?’

The now-flat Earth below was nothing but clamorous static to her, my allies—her old allies—included. Everyone but me must have become “unbearable noise.” And so she fled to the moon, away from the din.

‘In other words…’

For Seo-rin, this Void was safe from that hellish racket. As if a gentle lullaby filled that empty space.

I sucked in a breath as another flashback washed over me. The scene coloring my mind now was, in one sense, older than the 1000th cycle yet in another, painfully present.

“Mr. Undertaker.”

Same setting.

“This world is hell.”

The moon.

“The world is hell, yet no one takes responsibility for it. They take no effort to change it, or say it’s too slow.”

Each time I slew Infinite Void at Baekhwa High, Infinite Void planted hallucinations in me: dreams of rail-travel with Seo-rin alone, of tea-time with the Saintess. And in those dreams, the setting was a silver, gleaming moon like this one.

“Just one layer.”

“Just one layer below the surface of that planet… it’s all hell.”

The Pythagoreans said the cosmos were made of ten bodies, and those ten bodies sang a “music unheard by men.”

‘In short…’

The Saintess on the moon, whom Infinite Void showed me, might have been speaking to me inside the universe Hecate had already warped.

If every clue had been foretold since then...

‘The Pythagoreans were more mystics than mathematicians. They believed the ten celestial bodies make sound as they orbit.’

Like heartbeats, like harmonies.

‘Thus, the universe is forever filled with that cosmic music, or so those ancient heretic magi believed.’

Ten bodies, a symphony in ten layers.

‘We humans grow so used to the song that we no longer notice it.’

I looked around.

‘Uranus and Neptune... They’re missing.’

First layer, Earth.

Second, the moon.

Third, Mercury.

Fourth, Venus.

Fifth, Sun.

Sixth, Mars.

Seventh, Jupiter.

Eighth, Saturn.

Unsure where the missing two layers lay, I still shouted to my comrades, “It’s the celestial bodies!”

Dok-seo blinked. “Huh?”

“The planets are singing! Each celestial body in this Void is taking part in a chorus we can’t hear! Until we destroy every last one, the magic won’t stop—Sun, Mercury, all of them! Every planet is an empty shell polluted by the Goddess of Night!”

The moment my words rang out, countless boulders blinked into being from the planets' shadows. Meteoroids packed the Void.

Blink.

Each rock bore an eye.

Blink, blink.

Millions of eyes opened and fixed on us.

One comrade managed a gasp. "Everyone, look out!"

Archmagic—the aspiration of all magicians. The ultimate sorcery.

"A meteor shower!"

A meteor descended.

Chapter 363

The Missing XV

Sinnoa

The meteors did not drift down at a relaxed tempo. Though honestly, given the giant eyes staring down from each of them, it was hard to say they should be called “meteors” at all.

Shrrrraaaaa!

The sky, already cramped by the millions of streaks making up the Meteor Shower, grew even more crowded as tentacles began to sprout from the surface of each meteor.

“Eeeek! M-m-monsters!” Dok-seo shrieked.

I couldn’t blame her. First, there were huge, bloodshot eyeballs glaring right at us, and now, several layers of thrashing tentacles had joined the show—hardly a pleasing sight.

Swaaaaah!

The meteors flared their tentacles like wings and dove in sync. Neighboring stones tangled together, weaving whole swarms in mid-air.

Ha-yul cast out her Puppet Strings. [I’ll block them. Wait, no—Abort—]

She had taken one stylish step forward, only to retreat again two seconds later and announce her surrender. The chunk she had sliced away from one meteor re-formed into “baby meteors,” each with freshly opened eyes and wings.

“Teacher! They’re not just rocks!” Yo-hwa shouted as the Meteor Shower closed in on us as if by divine punishment. “They’re more like clumps of magic! I’m seeing every buff and debuff you can name: Sever, Pierce, Replicate, Repeat, Brainwash, Sleep—”

“Ji-won, conserve your Aura.” I gave the order at once, causing Ji-won’s emotionless eyes to flick toward me. “If they share the traits of the Meteor Shower we know, they’ll try to knock us out or meddle with our heads. Aura has to serve as our last-ditch mental shield until the very end.”

“Understood.”

I turned back to the rest of the team. “All units, gather up around Dok-seo! Dok-seo, you’re on!”

Tears brimming, Dok-seo flung her arms wide and let out a keening cry. Three… two… one second before the grand-spell Meteor made of millions of boulders washed over us—

“Absolute Defence!”

Well, she could have activated the power without screaming its name, but Dok-seo would sooner die than betray her own aesthetics.

Maybe that stubbornness paid off. The subsequent effect was phenomenal.

Wham! Thud! KWA-RA-RA-RA-RUMBLE!

The meteors shattered, ricocheted, and splintered against the barrier the Miko of the Infinite Metagame had raised until dust swallowed everything in sight.

Not a single strand of hair on us had been touched.

[Wow,] Ha-yul blurted out in awe. Even if they didn’t speak up, Ji-won, Cheon Yo-hwa, and the others were all clearly impressed as well. To them, Dok-seo was merely a “mercenary we hired not long ago” and “hardly reliable.”

Only I knew her true worth.

“Dok-seo, how long can you hold?” I asked.

“N-no idea. Ugh. It’s eating a lot of stamina, but Ah-ryeon keeps

spamming heals, so I guess I'm fine... Uh, at least ten minutes! Fifteen if we're lucky!"

I narrowed my eyes.

'In the original tutorial dungeon, Absolute Defence barely lasted a minute. She's managing this because she's fully Awakened as the Miko of the Outer Gods.'

Rumble! Boom!

Meteors kept raining on the translucent shield without pause. I watched as some stones didn't shatter but instead stuck to the barrier.

'The others might be relieved, but this is bad. We just traded away one of our joker cards.'

After a closer look, every tentacle from the meteors was a mass of fingers. Those fingers crawled forward and etched their nails into the shield.

"Kyaaaaa!"

[Too noisy,] Ha-yul scolded both the tentacles and Dok-seo.

"N-noisy?" the latter stammered. "This barrier is basically an extension of my own skin! It feels freaky as hell. I'm gonna hurl..."

"Ji-won, support her."

"Okay." Ji-won spread Aura over the barrier at my command, and color rushed back into Dok-seo's face.

"Huh? Oh, that's better."

"Mr. Matiz's prediction was right—it's psychic interference. If I'd burned Aura first, we'd have been battling at a huge loss now."

Ji-won launched into her usual praise of me, but I had no room to reply. The scratching—what Ha-yul and Dok-seo called "noise"—was, to me, both nails on glass and a warped lullaby:

Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

How I wonder what you are.

It wasn't only noise. It was music only I could hear.

Up above the world so high,

Like a diamond in the sky.

Nails scraped the shield in a clumsy yet recognizable rhythm and pitch, mimicking the famous lullaby.

I turned away to ask, "Yo-hwa, do you hear any singing?"

"Huh? Singing? No, nothing at all, Teacher."

The others were the same. It seemed I alone could catch the "song."

'Come to think of it, I was the only one who heard Dang Seo-rin's voice too. I'm the only person who can understand this Meteor Shower's hymn.'

Old habit drove my mind to analyze the phenomenon, even in the middle of battle.

'Every country has its own verse for that lullaby.'

The fourth verse in English describes the star as "never shutting its eye." In Japanese, the star "blinks and blinks" like an eyelid. Chinese lyrics compare it to "countless tiny eyes." Combine all that, and blinking eyes falling from the sky didn't seem odd at all.

'And what does a mother or teacher do while singing a lullaby? She strokes the child to sleep.'

So fingers sprouting wasn't strange either.

'If I expand this line of thought a little more, I might figure out how to break this meteor strike—'

"Teacher!"

Yo-hwa's call snapped me out of it. Barely seven seconds had passed, yet on a battlefield, seven seconds was an eternity.

My disciple stared at me, worried. "The number of meteors isn't dropping. If we just cower here and defend while she keeps summoning showers, we'll lose eventually."

I nodded. "Right. To break this grand spell, we have to destroy the celestial bodies that are singing out there."

"Do we... have a way to do that?" Yo-hwa glanced outside as the Meteor Shower assaulted the shield even harder than before in screeching wails. "W-we'd have to step outside first..."

That was the problem.

'The clock is ticking.'

Could we really obliterate all those orbiting planets in ten minutes? Borrowing Leviathan's power might help, but the psychic assault from millions of stones would crush anyone who spent too much Aura.

'Dok-seo can move the barrier, but not fast enough. If I dash out alone, I'll have to deal with every trap Hecate laid out there.'

One false step and we'd—

Knock, knock.

A cheery, entirely unfitting knock sounded nearby. I turned on pure instinct—and froze.

"Hiya, sunbae."

There stood the elder twin, Cheon Yo-hwa.

There she was outside the shield, standing in her black sailor uniform right in the middle of the lunar surface, smiling like nothing was wrong as meteors stabbed down all around her.

"I'm late, but I came to help. This thing's in my way, though. Could

you open up for just a—”

Before I could react, one of my comrades swung a kick and blew her head clean off.

Her sister Yo-hwa had done the deed.

“Phew. That scared me half to death!”

Everyone—except Ji-won—stared at Yo-hwa in horror. The one in question sighed lightly and frowned as if wondering why we were glaring. “Huh? What? My sister’s Corrupted. That makes her an enemy.”

“B-but she’s still your sister…” Dok-seo protested meekly, earning her a snort in response.

“She got here on foot with no Aura and while dodging meteors. Does that sound human? Obviously she’s a Hecate puppet.”

“I mean, usually you’d hesitate or cry, ‘Sis! Let her in!’ or *something*…”

“Eh?” Yo-hwa tilted her head. “My sister’s smart. Once she decided not to Fall, she must’ve accepted death. Why hesitate now? If anything, she’d prefer that I finished her myself.”

Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha…

The headless elder twin’s shoulders shook with laughter. Her body flipped onto its back and scuttled away like a spider, giggling madly as it vanished.

Silence filled the shield while meteors continued to crash and shatter above us.

[Dad. What now?] Ha-yul plucked her Puppet Strings like cello wires to say, [Hecate’s penned us in with the shower and dumped every Anomaly she can outside. Can we really smash the planets?]

I bit my lip.

‘If only I could hear the planets’ song. Maybe then, I could cancel it with counter-frequencies…’

I’d realized it too late. Had I recognized the silent chorus the moment we entered space, the tides of this battle would have swayed much more in our favor. With even the ground-side Cheon Yo-hwa turning coat, rushing out there would likely get me killed in seconds—

I blinked. “Wait. Where’s the Saintess?”

Right beside me, Ah-ryeon cocked her head. “H-huh?”

“The Saintess. Yo-hwa’s sister is down for the count, so why would the Saintess be untouched?”

Unlike the strategist sister, the Saintess had terrifying powers. Time Stop went without saying, of course, and her Telepathy alone could torment us endlessly. Had she joined Hecate, we wouldn’t be standing here, getting this chance to recuperate.

Enlightenment settled in quietly as I slowly parted my lips. “Ji-won.”

“Yes, Mr. Matiz.”

“New order. When I count one, two, three—remove all Aura restrictions.”

Ji-won studied me. “Confirming: Currently, Aura usage is locked to our strike team only. You want that lock completely released?”

“Exactly.”

“Hecate may hijack Aura. Her core, Dang Seo-rin, is a mage but hardly ignorant of its existence.”

“I know.”

Ji-won nodded, trusting me so deeply she’d follow even if I switched sides right now. “Understood. When should I free it?”

“Now. One, two… Three.”

In that instant, a miracle greater than magic unfolded.

“Eh?”

Someone gasped. Actually, all of us did, myself included.

The Meteor Shower shattered. The stones that had never once paused fell apart at once, without preamble, until shards of glass-like debris were left to drift through space. The miracle didn’t end there either. Far away, across the Void that had seemed impossible to reach—

Saturn cracked.

Jupiter split.

Mars broke.

The sun fractured.

Venus, Mercury, Earth—

A slash scored the universe.

Every celestial body arrayed in this sky collapsed in a single heartbeat, save for the pale surface beneath our feet: the moon.

Ji-won collapsed beside me, without a hint of warning.

“Wh-whoa?”

Yo-hwa hurried to catch her, but Ji-won’s eyes stayed shut. She was out cold.

Our strike team was just starting to panic when—

“Don’t worry about Ji-won.”

A calm voice and measured footfalls echoed out.

“I drained too much Aura, so she merely fainted.”

The speaker turned to me. Behind her swirled millions of shattered meteors and seven ruined planets.

The corpse of the universe cast its shadow squarely across her face.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Undertaker, ” she said. “You asked me not to Fall, but this raid needed my power. I’ll take responsibility later. For now, let us save Dang Seo-rin together.”

Awakener: Saintess

Corrupted Alias: The Executioner

Strongest member of the Regressor’s Alliance.

Has joined the party.

Chapter 364

The Missing XVI

Sinnoa

Let me digress for a bit.

Once, on SG Net, someone posted a complaint that went something like this:

- Anonymous: Damn. I finally ascended into the Awakener rank of my dreams, and life is still absolute trash...

- Anonymous: Some folks Awaken to be heroes of the battlefield for clicking “heal” once while others only get to have their fingers treated like cheap cigarette lighters...

This is the so-called Awakened Spoon Theory, based on the caste system that once ravaged the Korean Peninsula. The system had simply changed its skin and updated itself, and now, even Awakeners are divided into gold-, silver-, bronze-, and dirt-spoon tiers—or so the theory claimed.

The Spoon-Theory OP fired that shot, and a fair number of comments nodded along.

- Anonymous: Being an Awakener doesn’t automatically make you OP. If anything, Awakeners look down on weak Awakeners way more than normies do. Being a dirt-spoon makes me so miserable I could die...

□dolLHoUse: lighter bro hey o/

□Anonymous: Fact: Even a “human lighter” like that still sits in the top 0.01 % of humanity if you count normies.

□[Oriental Star]TheKindOne: Uh, sorry, but that “heal clicker” isn’t our northern Saintess, right??

LiteraryGirl: Spoons exist for those who cannot live unless they cling to spoons.

Anonymous: Ma’am, how about finishing your serial instead of philosophizing?

OldManGoryeo: Healers stand at the back with their arms folded yet get pampered. If that bugs you, smash that like button lolol

Hmm.

I watched the back-and-forth like an angler watching his float, then typed a casual reply.

- ZERO_SUGAR: Mr. Seo-Gyu.

- ZERO_SUGAR: Please don’t play anonymous here.

Seconds later, the thread disappeared.

Anyway, even though the post was nuked, that didn’t change reality—the Awakeners just had some tact when admitting to it. The gap between ordinary humans and Awakeners is nothing compared to the gulf between low-grade and high-grade Awakeners. True, the members of the Regressor’s Alliance that I recruited mostly boasted gold-spoon shine or better, but...

[Wow.]

Above any gold-spoon there is always a diamond-spoon, and ours was the Saintess. And I’m not talking about the knock-off with the “Made in North Korea” label, but the original masterpiece. Before her brand-name splendor, every other Awakener’s spoon looked one grade cheaper.

[What in the world is even happening up there?] Ha-yul muttered.

It wasn’t just her either. Every strike-team member stared upward, struck utterly dumb. Up there raged an air battle... No, a war in space. Planets that had once been split in two writhed like living amoebas, trying to fuse back together. The millions of “holes” that had turned the universe into a trypophobic nightmare were still

intact. The trembling fissures were summoning Meteors again.

And every single attempt was massacred before it could sprout.

“We can’t keep this up forever.”

Such was the Saintess’s grand feat. Whenever Hecate’s night-sky spell—or the night sky itself—thrashed, the Saintess stomped it flat with Time Stop. One second, one more, and then another. With each passing instant, shards of planets and countless meteors were pulverized.

A witch who governs space versus a saintess who overpowers time. In that very moment, the cosmos was no more than a Go board where black and white stones collided.

“Even as we speak, the burden on Ji-won keeps increasing,” the Saintess noted. “Leviathan’s Aura isn’t infinite.”

“How long can she hold?” I questioned.

“Twenty-three thou... Sorry. One more hour.”

I gritted my teeth. Sorrow sang through me for making the Saintess relive her purgatory within a frozen world, but ultimately, it just meant that I had absolutely no time to hesitate. The only way to fix it was to shave whatever seconds I could off her season in that wasteland.

The Saintess looked at me. “Mr. Undertaker, are you truly sure that Hecate and Dang Seo-rin can be separated?”

I paused, then said, “Yes. I’ll be the one to do it.”

“I believed you would.” Her crystalline eyes seemed to stand alone in the universe. “The method?”

A storm of thoughts flashed through me. Some were plans drawn up before the fight. Others were insights struck during the battle. Yet even then, one knot remained untied in this operation: Cheon Yo-hwa. The elder of the twin sisters, and the architect of Project Collapse. And yet absurdly, when her turn finally came, she

dropped herself from the candidate list.

‘Yo-hwa may be playful, but she’s not shameless enough to bail on an op. If anything, she’s the sort who gets addicted to risk and goes all-in. And yet… she stepped out. The only thing she left behind was that bizarre request for me to drink her blood, then she walked away from the gambling table.’

The realization was quick to hit home.

‘Impossible.’

The conclusion came even faster.

‘If she sees a shortcake, that girl saves the strawberry for last—always.’

So why fold her hand now?

‘Because only by folding can she eat the final strawberry at peak sweetness.’

And when would that final moment come?

‘Right now.’

Even with Dok-seo and the Saintess deployed, we were basically stalling. The chorus from all four cosmic walls was drawing ever closer. This lethal tension was precisely the stage that that dopamine-junkie tactician had lusted for.

‘There’s only one question remaining.’

Could I trust Cheon Yo-hwa?

Doubt painted the edge of my mind for the briefest instant, but no more.

“Find the elder Yo-hwa.”

I made my decision. I would trust myself, and I chose to trust that mischievous, orange-haired gambler.

“Even a corpse is fine. Bring her here—”

“Okay.”

The next instant the elder Yo-hwa’s body was lying there between the Saintess and me, still headless.

“Here she is.” When I stared down at the body without a word, the Saintess continued, “Oddly enough, I sense none of the Mastermind’s power. Aside from Void Poison, she’s practically ordinary—just bewitched by Hecate.”

I nodded and turned to Sim Ah-ryeon. The fight was a race against time now.

“Ah-ryeon.”

“Yeeep?”

“Check on how Yo-hwa is doing.”

“Ah... Just a sec. Mmm.” Ah-ryeon floated a four-leaf clover over her nail and studied it. “N-not dead, at least.”

“And?”

“Hard to say she’s alive either. Part human, part Anomaly, see? Kind of a suspended-animation state... Literally just entranced.”

“Like she’s dreaming?”

“Eh? Oh, yeah. And the missing head isn’t a big deal. I could regrow it anytime...”

“Then regenerate it, but don’t heal her fully awake.”

“’Kay.”

Ah-ryeon knelt before the half-corpse as I looked across to the almost-corpse’s sole relative. The younger twin was gazing down at her sister’s remains with an unreadable face.

“Yo-hwa.”

She was slow to respond. “Yes, Teacher?”

“The Tutorial fairy. Can you summon one here?”

“Y-yeah. I can!” she exclaimed, blinking in surprise. “But the fairies draw from my resource pool, so combat power won’t really go up—might even drop, since they’re all criminals...”

“That’s fine. Call one.”

“Hm-hm, okay! I’ll bring the one closest to you, Teacher.”

Pyonk!

With a comically cheap sound effect, a baku popped out of thin air: the Tutorial Fairy No. 264, red armband and all.

“Hoeeeek! At last, freedom! Freedom! What is a lord, a master? We march from the colony of scorn and oppression to the bright dawn of liberation—”

A meteor whooshed past.

The fairy spun around to find the titanic space duel of Witch and Saintess still in full swing.

“A-ahem. Truly, I was perfectly content under His Imperial Majesty’s benevolent rule. Upon reflection, living my life as a high-school security guard sounds lovely, so I’ll just head back—”

“Shut it.”

“Eeep! S-save the children from bullying!”

One curt phrase from the student council president reduced the fairy to tears.

I grabbed No. 264’s hand.

“Hoek? Comrade Secretary-General?”

“The situation is urgent. Nazi dogs press on Moscow’s doorstep. You’ve got questions—I’ve got no time. Obey orders without a

word.”

The fairy’s eyes went round. “Hoeeek! The Great Patriotic War! For the eternal liberation of the working class, I’ll gladly lay this duckweed life beneath the red flag!”

“See this corpse?”

“Yes, sir! Turns out she’s the final-final boss—the elder sister of the student council president!”

“We’re entering her dream. You lead.”

“At your command!”

“Seriously…” Yo-hwa muttered. “Did they all inhale something? Why are they RPing like that?”

“They’re beings swayed by dreams—humanity’s harshest scarlet sever, you could say. Yo-hwa, assist us in entering your sister’s dream.”

“Ahh. Of course, Teacher.”

The fairy took my left hand, and Yo-hwa gripped my right. The three-link circuit enclosed the half-corpse.

I cast one last glance around, then looked at the Saintess.

“We’ll be back.”

She simply stared at me, quiet for a moment, before she mused, “You’ve thought of a method.”

“Yes. Whether it’s even possible is a gamble, though.”

“That’s nothing new for us.” A faint smile touched her lips. “Go ahead, Mr. Undertaker. I’ll guard the Mr. Undertaker who enters the dream.”

“…I’m off.”

We ended our brief farewell with a nod. The dream-demon master

and minion nodded back.

This time we needed no lullaby to enter the unconscious realm.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

See how beautifully you shine.

Shards of endless, crumbling meteors clawed at the universe's curtain with delicate fingers, singing the nursery rhyme for us.

Yo-hwa parted her lips. "One."

The fairy chirped. "Twoooo."

"Three."

In that moment, a veil darker than the night sky and deeper than the universe fell across my awareness. It was a single curtain at first, then an instant later, it layered twofold, fourfold, eightfold—

I sank.

Plunged. Fell.

Collapsed.

Just as the sea is made of uncountable waves, I fell into a dream composed of uncountable times.

A crossroads of black and white stretching on forever.

.

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.

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.

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Step.

The footsteps reached me first before my eyes even opened, while the world was still wrapped in darkness.

“It was a gamble—I won’t deny it.”

The tread carried a faint hum and a clear thrill.

“If you’re right, sunbae, then I, Cheon Yo-hwa, can’t determine on my own whether I’m Anomalous or human. Hahaha! Schrödinger’s cat? More like Schrödinger’s Anomaly.”

Step.

“So, gamble one: Will sunbae, a dead-serious hater of Anomalies, trust someone who may be nothing but an Anomaly?”

Step.

“Gamble two: Will Hecate, who is devolving into an estranged god, actually absorb me? Considering Dang Seo-rin always saw me as a thorn, the odds existed—but that’s no guarantee.”

Step.

“If that one pays off, my mind and body become a ‘passage’ leading straight into the estranged god Hecate. Naturally, I myself degrade into part of her.”

Step.

“Gamble three, the final of them: How deeply does sunbae understand me?”

...

“Will he brand me irresponsible for proposing the plan, then backing out? Or will he guess that I’m a conscious offender with my own agenda?”

…

“Will he acknowledge that not only am I human, not only am I his comrade and student, but that I—Cheon Yo-hwa, the human—am highly competent?”

Step.

“A fifty-fifty shot. If Sim Ah-ryeon drops early, or Saintess unnie can’t pull the trigger, or the younger twin fails—then the pathway into my dream gets blocked.”

Step.

“I laid every stone I could, but in the end, the only move left was ‘to put my trust in someone.’”

…

“That was the method you taught me, sunbae. Thanks for trusting me.”

Something covered my face.

Five ridges. Fingers. A palm.

Cheon Yo-hwa gently cupped her hand over my eyes.

“Mmm. To be fair, it’s not just you. The other comrades performed splendidly, each in their role.”

…

“So now, it’s my turn.”

I opened my eyes. Even then, my vision was still partly blocked by those black lines—her fingers.

The world I saw came in broken crosswalk stripes.

“One.”

Beneath the little finger, a night sky.

Meteors shattered by the thousands. While I slept, the Saintess kept dueling the Goddess of Night.

“Two.”

Beneath the ring finger, a frozen world.

Oh Dok-seo with Absolute Defence. Sim Ah-ryeon kneeling quietly beside me. Lee Ha-yul casting Puppet Strings. Yu Ji-won lying unconscious. Cheon Yo-hwa intercepting. Everyone motionless—except for the Saintess striding across the field of debris.

“Three.”

Beneath the middle finger, Noh Do-hwa’s corpse.

The tombstone drifted among earthly fragments splintered by the war of the Great Witch and the Saintess. If even one person who makes me “me” was lost, this would be the fate we were all destined to meet.

“Four.”

Beneath the index finger, static.

No form, no color—just the hiss of signals beyond human recognition. The Void always lives between our eyelids.

And under the thumb... lips.

“It might feel a bit stifling.”

At the closest crossroads in this universe, those lips whispered softly.

“But could you leave my hand where it is, sunbae?”

A tiny giggle.

“Kind of embarrassing, but to me, this place is sacred ground—the last four seasons.”

...

“After losing all black, only this curtain remains, draped solely for you. My long curtain call.”

Yo-hwa smiled.

“Well then. Shall we go, sunbae? Let’s lift the curtain and see whether only oblivion still waits there.”

Awakener: Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化)

Corrupted Alias: Shadow Schemer

Strategist of the Regressor’s Alliance.

Has joined the party.

Chapter 365

The Missing XVII

Sinnoa

Allow me a moment to pose you a question.

Let's say you thought the story was galloping toward a happy ending. But then out of nowhere, somebody channels a shaman and proclaims, "Guys, we're doomed! Even if we hammer away at this trash game a couple hundred more times, we'll never clear it! Anyway, have fun!" Cue them dumping spoilers all over the place.

So, how do you react?

Naturally, the answer will vary from person to person. Some will despair at having to grind that already-rage-inducing game hundreds of times more. On the other hand, if you're the depraved type—names withheld to protect the guilty—you might actually grin at the fragrant stench of a forever-broken game and truthfully claim to love it.

As for the student council president's elder sister, AKA the reigning champ of the Regressor Alliance's yearly poll for "Most Sinister Personality" and the person famous for the face that screams "betrayal incoming", Miss Cheon Yo-hwa...

'I come from the 999th cycle, and from a certain angle, you could even call it the 1000th.'

To her, a spoiler from a returner merely marked the level's difficulty.

Yes, that's right. Difficulty.

It was something altogether different from embarrassment, which carried with it the necessity of emotion. Yo-hwa felt no frustration, irritation, anger, despair, sadness, hurt, or puzzlement. Her reaction was not embarrassment but acknowledgement of a conundrum. Like

a gamer facing a puzzle that must be solved, she sensed only the raw difficulty level.

“Those innate blank spots you have, sunbae. The amnesia cut-off at the 4th cycle. We’ll paint causality on that empty canvas in ways that favor us. I love it—it’s very me. Smells of tricky and deviousness, which is right up my alley. But it’s a razor-thin line,” said Yo-hwa.

Was it because her five fingers blocked my sight? It went beyond her face. Even her voice rang out from different places, from and through the tiny worlds cut by those fingers, all at once.

With one hand still covering my eyes—how, I cannot guess—she was guiding me somewhere step by step.

“As you said, this is both the 173rd and the 1000th cycle. The others may be able to bear the consequences, but I walk the razor’s edge. As a human, I—Cheon Yo-hwa, your beloved student—must exist in the 173rd cycle. Conversely, in the 1000th cycle, I cannot exist.”

Exactly. Her fate is to swallow the Mastermind and be hit with a Time Seal. So by the 1000th cycle, the human Cheon Yo-hwa can no longer appear.

“Yet as an estranged god fused with the Mastermind, my position flips. In the 1000th cycle, it’s fine for me to meet you. However small the space, I’ll be in that divine realm sealed by Time Seal. But in the 173rd cycle, I mustn’t appear.”

That was the dilemma Cheon Yo-hwa faced. Human or Fallen Outer God, one side of herself must commit a temporal contradiction.

Ah-ha, Yo-hwa laughed. “Of course I could just say, ‘Screw the time paradox,’ but I feel it too.”

Finally, I asked back, “Feel what?”

“Your gut telling you that we mustn’t casually commit a Time Paradox. If we toy with the cosmic order called ‘time,’ the debts we defer will someday crash down at once. I feel that too.”

Hence the conundrum.

The first thought she had upon hearing the Regressor's confession was simply that this would be hard. Yet from birth, she has solved every problem, no matter how hard—love's puzzle aside.

"I brooded a bit and saw the answer."

This time was no different.

"'Oh? So I just have to die, right?'"

The solution was simple.

"As a human, I exist fully in the 173rd cycle. I'm a weak Awakener, yes, but I am also a non-romantic who lives by brain and strategy. And as the Mastermind—"

I need only exist in a dream.

"Specifically, your dream, sunbae." Her lips curved. "Right? The original Time Seal is no different from a dream only you can experience."

After a long pause, I said, "I see... So you waited until I entered the dream via a Dream Demon."

"Yep!" she exclaimed, her smile deepening. "And sorry, but I evicted my sister and the fairy. If they perceive the current me, it'll be trouble."

So that was why the two who'd dived with me were gone. She'd hidden this from them.

Truly, she commits the outrageous with a straight face.

"Well, someone had to serve as the corridor to Hecate. Now, sunbae, please trample my corpse and go!"

I chose not to grace that with a response.

"Aw, don't make that face. By the way, how did I die? My memory

ends with the night sky falling on Utopia."

"Your sister kicked your head off."

"Eh? Ah-ha? Ahahaha!" Her palm shook the planes of my vision as she remarked, "Wow. I did tell her, you know. 'If sis goes bad, kill her.' Still, to die by her foot! Born earlier, die earlier, I guess."

"Did you egg on the Saintess too?"

"Yep. Told her, 'Fall if you must.'" She noticed my silence then. "I know the frozen world of Time Stop is hell to you. Sorry. But your feelings don't matter much." That faint smile stayed put, its edge dipping into shadow as she concluded, "Mine don't matter either."

"You..."

"I'm weak, unlike our gifted comrades. So all I know is how to pay with my life." I tried to scold her, but her next words stopped me. "Same as you. That's what a regressor is."

I had no response to that.

"Ah. We're close. Brace yourself."

A solemn footstep sounded out.

My limited view made judging distance hard—each gap between her fingers showed a different scene.

Focusing under her thumb, I inferred that we were descending stairs.

"Where are we headed?"

"The Void. The Abyss."

Step. Step. Step.

Down into darkness we sank.

"A dream deeper than dream. The realm you named Dream-within-Dream, the Unconscious World. Heh heh. Each flight down wears

me out a bit... but I'll try my best."

"You okay?"

"I'm fine. But may I ask one favor?"

Step. Step. Step. Step.

Footfalls clicked in varying pitches within the fragmented view.

"Please don't move my hand until the very end."

Many sounds overlapped the steps—her breathing, a small grunt, a giggle.

"Sunbae."

The sounds echoed.

Downward, further, still deeper.

The deeper we went, the thinner Yo-hwa's breaths became.

"When I died, what face did my sister make?"

Step. Step. Step. Step.

"Aha. Figures. She *would* think that we weren't parting forever. What'd be the point of feeling sad? She's always been like that... She believes our twin souls are linked. Too much of a romantic, honestly."

Step. Step. Step. Step.

"I wonder. When I have the Mastermind in my grasp and vanish, what face will she make? She likely won't be able to even conceive of the reality of it, yet she'll still believe our souls connect. That girl..."

Step. Step. Step. Step.

"I'll confess only to you, sunbae. When the Void first dawned... I almost went mad when I heard my sister was trapped at school. But

after you saved her, I was glad.”

Step. Step. Step.

“See, I’m always bored. It’s dull. Successor to a cult—an exotic title, perhaps, but one that’s dull to me. Too many sights too young. My dopamine system’s fried. Maybe it’s just childish bravado.”

Step. Step.

“Would you close your eyes for a moment? Yes, just like that. Just a moment… There.”

Step.

“Sunbae… Sunbae. I trust you.”

“Yo-hwa?”

Silence.

“Cheon Yo-hwa?”

I opened my eyes.

The darkness was gone.

The fingers that had gently shielded my sight, the Final Curtain rather than the Mastermind, were gone.

Yo-hwa was nowhere.

Silently, I looked down. In my palm lay a lone black hair tie.

She said she trusted me. In that last instant, what exactly did she trust? Even disappearing, how did my disciple conclude it was pure faith, not resignation?

“Been a while since I came here,” I muttered.

The Unconscious World. A place you reach only after dreaming within dreams, when time melted away like candle wax. The drain. The Void all humanity shares—the very first Void.

The guide who led me safely here was gone.

“Don’t worry.” I squeezed the black hair tie she left me. Whether driven by instinct or impulse, I didn’t know, but I deliberately spoke to keep my own continuity. “I fully grasp why you brought me here.”

And so, I took a step.

In the Void of Dreams-within-Dreams, space and time lack coherence. Chaos was the Void’s nature, and this realm jumbled even loops. Next to Haeundae’s beach unfurled a snowy field—the Nenet tundra, an impossible sight in the 173rd cycle. Under rubble lay the shadows of Old Man Scho and Adele flickered, visions unseen even by the me of the 1000th cycle. In a desert, Ha-yul played with a doll of me while Ah-ryeon sprouted from a fruit and melted like slime.

“Not now.”

They were residues of time, echoes eroded from piled-up residues. Phantoms no longer real.

“Now’s not the time to think about them.”

White sand crunched underfoot. Not sand ground by the Water of Life but sand vomited by the Void, called White Night. In it, many things were half-buried.

A broken pole. A traffic light frozen forever on red. Petals. Glass shards. Big Ben’s hands.

Beyond them lay the Beginning: the Busan Station concourse, nicknamed “the starting village” by Dok-seo.

If the world truly blooms and withers with each loop, that joke can’t be laughed off.

One step I went into the half-ruined shell. I walked into the wreckage where the shapes of loops I recalled and loops I forgot overlapped. The concourse roof gaped open like Rome’s Pantheon as light and shadow mosaicked the space through broken beams.

And beneath them sat Go Yuri.

“Welcome, Guild Leader.”

She wasn’t looking at me. Her eyes were closed, her face tilted to trace the contours of shattered sky and shadow.

She spoke.

“Sit beside me? It's a bit cramped...”

I sat.

“The sunlight here feels wonderful. You can zone out, empty your thoughts... I’ve loved this spot for ages.”

White dust motes drifted in the ruins, buoyed by the silence. So it was between us. Specks that could never become seeds glimmered in the sun then vanished into the shadows.

“It took exactly one year,” Go Yuri said.

“One year?”

“Yes. Three hundred sixty-five days.”

“...Doesn’t feel like a small time.”

“From your viewpoint, Guild Leader.”

Her eyes were still closed.

“You know well how time’s sensibility varies from person to person... Imagine erasing every scrap of time in a life that leaves no trace in memory.”

Her voice sounded somehow light.

“The breath you took yesterday. The Tuesday you played with a friend whose name and face you’ve lost. Erase it all—and fill time only with scenes truly remembered.”

“...”

“Then, looking back at death’s door, how much of eighty years remains?”

“...It’s hard to fill up even one full day’s worth of time.”

“Yes. That’s normal for humans.”

She raised the back of her hand. A mote brushed her nail.

“To live a lifetime yet collect only a single moment, clutching mayfly-length memories, and still lose even that blink.”

“...”

“I filled all three hundred sixty-five days.”

A breeze blew.

The mote vanished beyond shadow as Go Yori turned toward me.

Our eyes met.

“So for me, this moment is number three hundred sixty-five, Guild Leader.”

Chapter 366

The Missing XVIII

Sinnoa

Go Yuri had always been an unfathomable riddle to me. Her demure way of speaking, her whisper-soft voice, the scent of freshly rinsed apples, even the faint smile that lingered on her face—all of it.

"...So, what is it you'd like to talk about?"

"Oh my, were you really listening to me that attentively just now?"

As I watched her—pink hair framing a masked chuckle behind her hand—I felt it.

Something was different. Indescribably so.

"I'm sorry, Guild Leader. I was just teasing you a little."

"Teasing...? You, teasing me?"

"Yes."

The difference became clear in an instant.

'There's no impulse.'

Whenever that crisp apple scent hit my nose, a tingling electric shock would normally race from the frail edges of my brain all the way to its most vulgar core. The smell was not sliding down my throat, soaking my stomach in fruit stench. No invisible jam was being slathered along the inside of my skull with a butter knife. The ground was not falling away, the sky was not reeling, and Go Yuri's body-heat was not closing in on me with suffocating intimacy. The sudden urge to hug her, to stroke her hair, to comfort her—every impulse was sinking quietly beneath the surface.

‘It’s calm.’

Everything was serene. Go Yuri’s profile, bathed in sunlight pouring through the ceiling, was serene. The half-shadowed throb of my own heart was serene.

All of it.

How long had it been since I’d felt such peace in Go Yuri’s presence?

“The thing in your hand,” she said. “Is that Cheon Yo-hwa’s hair tie?”

“...It is.”

“Wow. Looking closely, it’s the very ribbon she wore the first day she met you, isn’t it? Do you remember?”

I had no idea how Go Yuri could know a memory I myself could not recall. Whether she was spinning a plausible lie was impossible to judge.

She smiled brightly. “It’s a treasure. A *gui-mul*. You would call it a ghostly relic, but take that same word and put it in a different context, and you get a precious object. I think this *gui-mul* is the latter.”

“This hair tie?”

“Yes. Something left behind by someone who kept believing in herself until the absolute end. How truly strong of will. Even in this place where every object is slipping into chaos... it stands out so clearly.” When I didn’t respond, she continued, “People devote an entire lifetime to coloring in an hour’s worth of memories, yet to some, that single hour can be as beautiful as a piece of music.”

Maybe so.

I couldn’t explain the logic behind it, but this thing Cheon Yo-hwa had prepared was somehow letting me keep this mirror-calm, even in front of Go Yuri. In exchange, Yo-hwa had vanished.

True to her word, she only knew how to pay with her life.

“To be honest, I don’t dislike Cheon-hwa at all.”

The confession came out of nowhere. “Cheon-hwa?” I asked reflexively.

“Yes. The elder sister is Cheon-hwa, the younger is Yo-hwa. That’s how I distinguish them.” I had never heard anyone separate their names like that, but Go Yuri carried on as if it were obvious. “If I had to judge, the comrade who resembles me most is Cheon-hwa.”

“Sometimes, you say the most absurd things.”

“Oh, I’m not talking about personality. Our personalities couldn’t be more different. I mean our way of thinking has similar twists and turns.” Then a short little laugh tinkled out of her. “Dang Seo-rin killed the ‘me’ outside. Thanks to her, even if only for a short while, I can act a little more freely.”

Go Yuri rose to her feet. Hands folded neatly before her, she slowly turned toward me.

“Will you come with me?”

I kept silent, simply looking up at her, when she suddenly struck an awkward pose. “Rawr!” she mock-growled—a childish tiger noise.

“And that is supposed to be…?” I questioned warily.

“Ahh. You were staring as if I might swallow you whole. Don’t worry, Guild Leader, I won’t eat you. Mmm… *Although*, that sort of unexpected event could be fun. But asking me to loop another 365 days just for entertainment would be far too cruel a future for me.”

I had no idea what she meant. The unnatural impulses had vanished, but Go Yuri’s unpredictable behavior remained. Still, I stood up to follow.

“By the way,” she began, “you have to step where I step and nowhere else, all right? If you don’t, even Cheon Yo-hwa won’t be able to protect you.”

“You should’ve led with that. Are you stupid?”

“Ahaha!” Go Yuri smiled softly. Being called stupid by me seemed to put her in the highest spirits.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “I don’t mind following. This place is practically your own divine realm, anyway. But at least tell me where we’re going.”

“To Dang Seo-rin’s house.”

I froze, caught mid-crouch just as I was about to stand. My eyes found Go Yuri’s, creased into twin crescent moons.

“Have you ever been there?”

I hesitated for a long moment before admitting, “Seo-rin’s house was a flower shop in Busan. It closed after her family was massacred.”

“Yes. Have you been inside?”

“When I regressed, it was already destroyed. Seo-rin never considered those ruins a home.”

“Yes.” Go Yuri’s gaze narrowed, and she insisted, “Have you been there?”

I had not. “Of course not… Anyway, it’s impossible now. The place no longer exists.”

“Dang Seo-rin was born at home.”

“What?”

She began to walk ahead of me, leaving me behind. I almost stopped her but immediately remembered her warning.

Follow my footsteps.

I placed my feet exactly where hers had tred.

One step. Two steps.

She never looked back, certain I would keep pace—or perhaps signaling that if I slipped even once, that would be the end of that.

“You’re telling me she was born at home... not at a hospital?” I mused. “That’s rare nowadays. Was that what her parents wanted?”

“Who knows? You should know, all of her younger siblings were born in hospitals.”

With each stride she took, the scenery shifted. If I’d had any mischief left in me, I would have joked that her footwork was some advanced technique.

“If Seo-rin was born at home, and if the ‘home’ you speak of is not merely a physical location but a space imbued with ritual meaning, then it too must be part of Hecate’s divine realm,” I realized.

“A sound deduction.”

“Even if this is a dream-within-dream and even if you’re irregular beyond all comprehension, can you really trespass on another Outer God’s territory at will? The mirror in Ji-won’s room can at least—”

“No need for that,” came her matter-of-fact answer over her shoulder. “That Magic Mirror is nothing more than a degraded copy of the moon.”

“What?”

“You thought Hecate descended on the moon’s surface and decided it looked like a mirror, didn’t you? It’s the other way around: The moon resembles the mirror. Ancient people believed another world existed up there in one way or another. The world in a mirror seems to exist yet not exist. A place that is nowhere. All of them, every one of them: utopias.”

Her explanation was easy to follow. Perhaps because, voice and tone aside, the logic she used to discuss Anomalies was almost identical to mine.

As though she were mimicking me.

As though she had learned from me.

Talking to her felt like standing before a mirror.

“I understand your logic,” I granted after a pause. “But then why has the Magic Mirror always appeared near Ji-won instead of Seo-rin? Ji-won has nothing to do with it.”

“Ahaha. Mmm... Guild Leader, you’re usually brilliant, yet sometimes you overlook the simplest points. How troublesome.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Yu Ji-won is beautiful.”

I almost replied, *As beautiful as you*, and would have if not for Cheon Yo-hwa’s hair tie. While I kept my mouth shut, her voice flowed on.

“Guild Leader. To a breathtaking, moonlit beauty like her, it is only natural to bestow a replica of the moon.”

“What? No, uh...”

“You really should look more honestly at the faces around you. I know you feel as if you’ve lived for tens of thousands of years, but if you let basic human senses dull, things get complicated.”

That almost sounded like she was scolding me.

“Did you know? Whenever your other comrades have to wedge themselves between you and Princess Kaguya, they get incredibly tense. Yu Ji-won won’t consider feelings like those, so you have to be the one to step up, Guild Leader.”

Yep. Whatever the reason, it sure seemed like I was being lectured by Go Yuri.

– Undertaker.

I jolted, startled to find Dang Seo-rin standing just beyond Go Yuri’s shoulder.

– Do not be fooled by that thing.

It was unmistakably Dang Seo-rin. Black cloak laundered clean, witch's hat perched—the Great Witch of Samcheon World was staring straight at me.

– If you follow it, you're finished. You know this, right? Cheon Yo-hwa is an Anomaly and so is that thing. The very fact it brought you here is the trap.

"Please don't listen, Guild Leader," said my pink-haired guide, cutting off my silence at Seo-rin's whisper. "Ahh. Well, actually, you can listen if you like... Hmm, no, actually it does matter. But even that's part of your choice... Will you listen?"

– Don't be deceived.

Buildings of sand-laced concrete. Rust-stained signs pointing to a traditional market. Traffic lights flickering red.

Everything behind Seo-rin was collapsing.

– You're misunderstanding something. You think no temptation is reaching you? That this version of it is different? Since when did you trust your own senses so completely in front of this thing?

"Time is short. I'll go ahead, Guild Leader."

Ignoring it all, Go Yuri's heels stepped over the street ruins. Her back receded one pace at a time.

Seo-rin looked at me.

– Even that act is part of the play.

– It's pretending it doesn't care whether you follow, because that indifference works on you.

I...

– Trust me, Undertaker.

– Do not follow it.

I followed Go Yuri's footprints.

– ...Why?

– Why? Why? Why?

Every time I stepped, Seo-rin appeared—by a moss-covered wall, beside a bent storm drain, under a rusted sign.

– Liar.

– You said you liked me. You told me you'd stay with me. Liar, liar, liar, liar—

Her voice became a blood-slick blade carving into my heart.

I could have answered in many ways. This Seo-rin wasn't the real one. If she saw the pink entity, it would mirror my face, so how could she tell us apart? If she used the presence or absence of static as a clue, then all creation still sounded like noise to her—that was Hecate's mark.

– Don't go.

– Please don't, Undertaker.

Seo-rin sank to her knees.

– No. No. Don't go. No...

Yet Go Yuri kept walking and so did I. She glanced back, eyebrow twitching in surprise that I was indeed following. Then a smile touched her lips and she faced forward again, treading across the ruined city.

"A sanctuary—no, a divine realm—always has an outer ring and an inner core," she exposited. "Picture an onion made of countless growth rings. The lower an Anomaly's rank, the thinner its layers. The higher, the thicker. There's a Kafka short story called 'An Imperial Message.' Have you read it?"

“I have.”

“Read it again. It helps with the imagery. Like the emperor’s palace, an Anomaly’s realm is itself a nine-fold palace. To cross a wall, you either march through the gate or clamber over by brute force.”

Something was off. I’d said I’d read it, yet she’d spoken as if I hadn’t, reciting her lecture calmly—as though addressing not only me but another unseen listener.

“In the past, Guild Leader, you slipped into Hecate’s realm through what you might call a dog-hole.”

“A… dog-hole?”

“But shortcuts seal quickly. That’s why you never reached Hecate’s realm again.”

She must have been referring to the 267th cycle, when that cycle’s Saintess sacrificed herself to seal Hecate’s domain.

“You’ve realized patchwork fixes can’t sink the world. A direct assault is the answer. Hecate is the goddess on the far side of mirrors, the Mistress of Utopias. To approach her essence, we must keep stepping onto one *nowhere* after another.”

We exited the market into an intersection that opened before us. There was a potato stew joint, a café, an auto-repair shop. Ruined yet recognizable buildings dotted the street.

I now knew exactly where we were. It was the town where Dang Seo-rin once lived.

“Hecate’s perfect city in Busan—first step.”

– Undertaker.

“This stage that you agreed to forget entirely once it’s over—second step.”

– Don’t go there.

“The moon itself, remade from Earth’s satellite into a planet-sized mirror—third step.”

– Why are you choosing to be fooled?

“The dream of a corpse whose personality has flown away—fourth step.”

Go Yuri crossed a crosswalk littered with scrapped cars. I followed.

Ahead stood a flower shop.

– Please.

The shop was strangely intact. That was both bizarre and natural at once. Bizarre because when I visited this town with Seo-rin, the greenhouse had already been cinders. Natural because in a dream-within-dream, anything could happen.

“It’s no coincidence.”

She read my mind with a voice colder than any since our reunion.

“This is the product of chance that isn’t chance. Cheon-hwa overlaid a simulation of this universe onto the dream-within-dream using the Mastermind’s power.”

“...Yo-hwa.”

“The Mastermind can run simulations beyond time. The dream-within-dream only supplied the material. This greenhouse isn’t an accident—it’s Cheon Yo-hwa’s inevitability.”

“...”

“Listen carefully. Remember it. Don’t miss a single piece.

Without Yu Ji-won, we lack combat strength.

Without Sim Ah-ryeon, we can’t replenish that strength.

Without Lee Ha-yul, Ji-won’s power drains too early.

Without Oh Dok-seo, Undertaker has no time to think.

If Undertaker can't think, the Saintess can't stand.

Without Yo-hwa, there's no passage into dreams.

Without Cheon-hwa, the dream-within-dream loses its shape."

"…"

"Do you understand? You have one chance only. If even one shard —just one—is lost, we can't reach this place."

She looked at me, or perhaps through me to someone else.

Under that multilayered gaze, I asked without thinking, "And you?"

For the first time, she paused. "Pardon?"

"If countless inevitabilities are required to come here, you must be one step yourself. What role are you playing?"

She blinked, entirely unprepared to hear that from me. "Oh dear. Am I, perhaps, counted among your comrades, Guild Leader?"

She giggled, and for some reason I couldn't answer. After studying me, she parted her lips.

"The dream-within-dream, the so-called unconscious world. Its Void that exists yet scoffs at reality is the fifth step."

– No no no no no

"And me." She touched her chest. "As you know, I'm the sixth step, Guild Leader."

My heart pounded with no cause.

"I'm the nonexistent human, the ideal form strolling among you, utopia stuffed and mounted while still alive."

She turned her back to me to gaze at the sign that read *Dang Sect Flower Garden*. Seo-rin once complained that her father's obsessed

with wuxia had led to said name.

“Only the last step remains.”

She reached out, fingers closing on the greenhouse’s steel latch.

Once the door opened, that would be the end.

Go Yuri drew a long breath. “Ahaha. Sorry, I’m a little nervous too… Truth is, climbing to the seventh step is a first for me. It was a massive gamble, and honestly? Even now, I can’t guarantee the door will—”

Her eyes widened, taking in the sight of my hand covering the back of hers.

“Let’s open it together. I’ve guessed who you’ve been talking to all this time. Oh Dok-seo, right?”

Her gaze lingered on me. She breathed, smiled, and spoke. “It has to be the 366th.”

Each word, crystal clear.

“365 days make one year—sun and moon and night sky ruled by Hecate’s symbols. But 365 isn’t enough.”

Not to my present self nor my future self, but straight toward the slowest prophet who would one day spy on this moment. Epimetheus.

“A leap year.”

Go Yuri said:

“The surplus day calendars can’t capture, the empty day, the gateway Hecate’s magic must leave ajar… This door opens only in that instant.”

A strange déjà vu seized me. When I’d declared I would fight Hecate, these words had slipped from my mouth:

“My witch… No. I have come to reclaim my princess, Outer God Hecate.”

Never once had I thought of Dang Seo-rin as a princess, yet in that moment, the title came as naturally as breath. Why?

‘The leap year. The character 윤(閏) meaning intercalary.’[1]

A king (王) behind the door (門). In other words…

‘Open this door and the princess awaits.’

I was certain I’d stood here once before, though no memory contained it.

“Well then, Guild Leader. Shall we see if we’ve succeeded?”

Who had been beside me then?

“One. Two… Three.”

With her palm under mine, we pushed the greenhouse door. Perhaps because no one had come for ages, the flimsy vinyl door refused to budge. As the hinge squealed, Seo-rin’s silhouette screamed within the plastic.

– Aaaaaaaaaaaah!

– No, don’t, no, Undertaker, stop, don’t look, don’t, die, die— No! Undertaker, ah, no…

My hand faltered, but Go Yuri’s other hand covered it. Palm over palm.

We exchanged a silent glance, nodded once, and together pressed on the thinnest vinyl door.

For a heartbeat, the hinge’s groan and Seo-rin’s shriek ceased. Then —

The door opened.

Footnotes:

1 - Intercalary: (of a day or a month) inserted in the calendar to harmonize it with the solar year, e.g., February 29 in leap years.

Chapter 367

The Missing XIX

Sinnoa

Death makes everything disappear.

Take him, for instance. He was born not of the lawful wife but of a concubine.

“We’re all family.”

So said his father, the clan head who once wore a national assemblyman’s gold badge.

“We are one house. One. All of you must grow up to be pillars of this country, so no fighting. Understood?”

While his father lived, he had power enough to define what “family” meant. He never cast out his illegitimate son, nor did he let the boy’s mother drift between rented rooms.

That power endured only so long as his father’s heart kept beating.

“Son, we’re moving again.”

Not long after his father’s death, he helped his mother pack, yet something was strange about it. Yes, how strange indeed for a family “moving house,” that none of his other siblings were to be seen.

‘How odd,’ he thought. Why did only Mother and I have to tip-toe around gathering boxes?

Perhaps the luggage was simply too heavy. Maybe the two of them were the advance unit, carrying the burden ahead of the others.

It took him three full years to realise that he himself was that heavy “luggage.”

“My son, clever like your father.”

He understood many things. Why the new home was smaller than the old, why the neighborhood felt darker, why he would never ask Mother to confirm what he already knew, why silence tasted of guilt, and how guilt was laced with love.

“Clever like your father, but promise me one thing... Never join the army... Never.”

He wanted to know the world.

Sometimes, while rifling through the newspaper, he spotted his “brothers’” names in print. On pages that claimed to weave a net wide enough to catch the world in letters, it seemed the world itself was nowhere to be found.

‘How very strange.’

Death makes everything disappear.

Take her, for instance. She was born the daughter of a prosperous orchard owner.

“Oh, that man! Honestly, oh dear...”

Her father was a womanizer. One day, he brought home a younger half-brother from the orchard, and for some reason, her mother bullied the child mercilessly.

“I can’t live like this! Oh, honestly...”

She hated the sound of her mother’s sighs, so she ran from them. She felt she could only breathe in a place where sighs couldn’t reach. She told her parents she was off to play with friends, but the truth was so very slightly different. Every day was a small escape from home.

In exchange for abandoning the house, she received the world outside: the scent of acacia blooming along the orchard lane, the rattle of a red bicycle her father had bought in secret, the smell of water and wet soil in the ditch between spring and summer.

‘Beautiful,’ she thought each time she returned, carrying all those outside things in her young breath.

The world was lovable.

“Really! Your father will be the death of me!”

In all the world, only human beings seemed to live half a handspan away from that love.

Her eldest and second-eldest sisters both went to study in Seoul. She, on the other hand, chose another city. Mother lamented that her grades were too good to waste, but Father backed her.

“Someone has to stay close to home. You can’t turn them all into Seoul snobs.”

She entered Busan National University. During a campus exhibition, she saw the shadow of a male student dragging fallen leaves along the edge of the quad, and the thought came to her quite unconsciously.

‘How beautiful.’

She loved him, and he loved her.

Love is fearless.

“What shall we name the baby?”

“I’ve been thinking. Help me decide.”

They spoke to each other in polite form. To them, it was a token of respect and affection, but in truth, it was a scar each had inherited from their respective parents. They did not yet know that marriage meant exchanging even the wounds you never knew existed.

“How about this?”

“If it’s a boy, it’s my choice.”

“If it’s a girl, it’s yours.”

There was so much they did not know, and so much yet to learn.

Their hearts pounded. The young couple visited fortune-tellers, leafed through name dictionaries, feeling out their own ignorance one careful fingertip at a time.

“If it’s a boy, San. A single-syllable name.”

“If it’s a girl, Seo-rin.”

A child was born. Her name was Dang Seo-rin.

How strange, how beautiful.

“…”

Death makes everything disappear.

Around the time their second child came into the world, his mother died. Not long after, her father and mother also passed. There were suddenly far fewer people left who could testify about their parents.

No one remembered how his father became an assemblyman, what hardships he had endured, or why he insisted on being “one family” while keeping both a wife and a concubine. No one remembered why, after bearing three daughters in a row, his mother could not accept the son her husband suddenly brought home, or why she pushed her daughters so hard toward good universities.

Death makes everything disappear.

“…”

Dang Seo-rin first learned that death existed when she was seven.

“Seo-rin seems to like flowers.”

“Let’s hope she grows out of eating them.”

“…”

Little Seo-rin could often be found squatting in the flower shop her parents ran. Surrounded by plants taller than she was, she would

gaze up at the suncast shadows falling through the greenhouse film.

‘How strange.’

Sunlight glinted off the glossy green peony leaves in ephemeral sheens.

‘Beautiful…’

Everything was like sunlight. It shone for only a moment, yet it was beautiful. If beauty was that great, why not stay a bit longer? It was strange that it existed only briefly.

The world was strange and beautiful.

So beautiful, yet strange.

“Sis-ter!”

“Da-a-ad.”

Little brothers and sisters. Dad. Mom.

Her family.

From the day the suncast shadow rusted on a peony leaf, Dang Seo-rin decided to accept this “strange yet beautiful something.” She thought that must be the original form of life. In truth, it was the shape that her parents, and their parents before them, had gnawed into the apple-core of life over their own lifetimes—a shape still too large to swallow, now handed down to her.

For millions of years, through hundreds of billions of branches.

‘Live,’ she told herself.

Dang Seo-rin, too, was prepared.

‘Live on.’

Being hurt by people. Hurting people. Fighting. Fearing. Protecting. Abandoning. Forgetting. Remembering.

Just like Mother. Just like Father.

‘Live on.’

Who would she meet?

Would that luck come?

Would she bear a child? What was love? Was love for a partner different from love for a child? Where would she live? How? Would she be wounded? Would she wound? Where would they meet? What songs would she like?

‘I will leave proof that I was here.’

‘The world is so wide.’

As billions of humans before her have done, from ages and millennia past.

Her heart, shaped like an apple, beat fast.

‘Just watch me.’

‘See what I despised, see what I loved.’

‘I am Father and Mother’s beloved daughter, my siblings’ proud elder sister.’

‘My name is Dang Seo—’

And then the Void arrived.

Creeeeeeak!

When we pushed open the greenhouse’s semi-opaque door, a garden drenched in blood opened up to us.

There she was, right there at the entrance. As though she had tried to flee and failed, a child net yet old enough to have passed into high school was skewered on a plant stem.

“This is...”

“Seo-rin’s little sister,” Go Yuri said, half a step ahead of my own thoughts. “You’ve seen her, haven’t you, Guild Leader?”

I had. While purging Infinite Void, I’d wandered through the barrier it cast and glimpsed a vision of Seo-rin with her siblings. This, too, was a vision—yet the mangled corpse before me was brutally real.

“So it really happened.”

“I believe so... Honestly, I’m amazed the door opened at all. Thank goodness LiteraryGirl didn’t betray us.”

Bang!

Something slammed behind us. Turning, I saw a black handprint splattered on the vinyl wall.

Slap! Slap, splat!

Handprints multiplied, clutching the handle, shaking the door, clawing ragged furrows through the film.

“Ah. Mhm.” Go Yuri wore a troubled smile. “They don’t know the meaning of giving up... though with a vow binding them, they probably can’t even if they want to.”

“A vow?”

“Pardon me, Guild Leader, but I’ll stay back to be on guard.” She planted herself politely in front of the entrance, her body blocking the door. “Hogging all your time to the very end wouldn’t be so bad, but you’re going to forget everything that happens in this realm and in this cycle, anyway.”

“...I still have many questions for you.”

“I know. But as I said, you won’t remember this moment.”

Thud! Bang, splat!

Black handprints papered the greenhouse behind her, staining it pitch-dark.

“Repeating the same conversation over and over... I dislike that, Guild Leader. It wears the heart thin. Unless... Would you rather become one with me?”

Splat.

A palm of darkness grabbed Yuri’s ankle, yet she remained unruffled.

“That, too, would be a kind of ending. I wouldn’t mind.”

“Whatever ending you mean, if it’s not a happy one, my own death is already booked,” I flatly refused.

“Aha? Ahaha.” Her lips curved to reveal a crescent moon of white. “Noh Do-hwa. Yes, indeed... How fascinating. The being farthest from Anomalies lays a spell on the being closest to them.”

Slap. Slosh, splatter.

Countless hands engulfed her shoes and ankles but advanced no higher, as though an invisible barrier blocked their climb.

“I understand, Guild Leader.” She pinched the hem of her skirt between finger and thumb and dipped in an elegant curtsey. “Farewell. Let’s meet again somewhere you will not remember.”

“...Thank you for guiding me this far.”

“Not at all.”

Yuri did not lift her head.

“On the contrary, I thank you. Always.”

I turned and took a step deeper into the greenhouse, toward Hecate’s innermost sanctum. After several more paces, I glanced back.

Only darkness remained.

Somehow, I could sense it. With that single step, a whole timeline had split clean away. In an Undertaker-style choice box, I must have seen two options until a moment ago:

[1. Walk to Dang Seo-rin]

[2. Stay with Go Yuri]

Had I not escaped brainwashing and temptation, the game would surely have forced Option 2 on me.

Gripping Cheon Yo-hwa's black hair tie, her final relic, a precious object or a ghostly relic, I hurried on. Beyond lies the secret Seo-rin wanted most to hide, the truth veiled by Hecate's night sky.

'Go.'

Every few steps, another body littered the garden. A boy about high-school age... Seo-rin's second sibling. The child at the entrance had been the youngest brother; she'd tried to save him. Each corpse had been sliced by mutated leaves or impaled on stems—

It was the scene that had branded Seo-rin's life, her lifelong trauma now laid bare.

'Layered bodies.'

Her siblings... and there, on the mother's side. They hadn't run far.

The vision overlayed the corpses. Plants once lovingly tended had been infected with Void-poison en masse. Perhaps they'd been contaminated long ago and the incubation simply ended in this moment.

"Run!"

Who had shouted?

The family lived at the shop. Schools were closed due to the emergency situation, so the youngest and the second youngest were

home.

“Dad!”

“Sani, go! Go call for help!”

“O-o-okay!”

“Big sister is inside!”

Their struggle meant nothing. In those early days, there was too little information about Anomalies. Who would have guessed that plants might turn into monsters?

The father, the mother, the second, the third, the youngest. All slain in moments, within meters of each other. An ordeal beyond what ordinary people could bear—

No, I correct myself. The Anomaly Garden was simply too powerful. Most Awakeners of the time could not even hope to handle it.

My heart pounded as I stepped onto the garden where present illusion and past remnant intermingled, passing by Seo-rin’s father’s corpse with memories linked to every sight.

“My little siblings…”

It wasn’t a distant memory.

“My siblings kept begging me to just abandon the shop and run away with Mom and Dad, but I told them… I told them to trust their big sister, but then I… I had this thing about guilds…”

In the 999th cycle, Seo-rin herself had made a confession in the Garden of Fallen Flowers.

“I kept chasing after this dream of forming one… By the time I came back, no one was home. I went to the shop, and… If I just hadn’t, then…”

When the tragedy struck, Seo-rin had not been at the scene, according to her own testimony. That means that after her family

died, she returned to this place. Thus, the plant Anomaly that had drunk her family's blood was still alive at the time, and for Seo-rin to survive, she'd had to slay it. Obviously, without killing it, she too would have died before she could avenge anyone. So now—

'Could she have done it?'

Could she, an Awakener who was still low-level, with no experience, who'd been ambushed without time even to chant her Cursed Song...

My heart hammered. Thoughts may stop, but heartbeats never do. It pumped blood into my legs, urging the next step and the next.

'If Seo-rin had somehow taken revenge, burning the whole garden, then why did the sight of flowers still drive her into panic? Something's missing.'

Revenge never restores what is lost, but it does make you stronger than your loss. Flowers alone shouldn't break her. She ought to be furious, burning every bloom on sight.

'Yet after successfully taking her revenge, at least supposedly, she still collapsed at the sight of flowers. Why?'

No.

My heart skipped.

No, my premise was wrong. It was the reverse. It wasn't strange that she broke down despite getting her revenge. She broke down because her revenge had failed.

Seo-rin did not avenge them. She must have fled. She'd opened the greenhouse and immediately realized how dire the situation was. Her youngest brother was already dead at the entrance, after all. She raged and she despaired, and yet she was clever. Even in chaos, she accurately judged that she couldn't beat this Anomaly now.

So she ran, vowing to come back. A reasonable conclusion to make.

'But then why didn't she tell me the truth?'

If that hypothesis was right, someone else must have destroyed the garden later. When I visited with Seo-rin, it was ash.

‘Another Awakener, perhaps, while Seo-rin was in shock?’

Yet the Saintess was observing all major Awakeners with her Clairvoyance by then. Had another been present, she would have noticed.

‘And the Saintess never mentioned it.’

She wouldn’t hide a secret of this magnitude.

‘Therefore… she didn’t see the tragedy at all?’

I had never asked the Saintess about Seo-rin’s past. In fact, I’d asked her not to watch during my private meetings with Seo-rin, and she respected that.

Thump, step.

Heartbeat and footsteps resonated until, at some point, I reached the garden’s abyss.

There lay Dang Seo-rin, dead.

My breath seized in my throat. It was a scene of slaughter. Leaves sharp as knives, stems thick as skewers, had shredded her.

Death makes everything disappear.

No one remembered that *he*, who fought a monster for the first time to protect his family, was an assemblyman’s illegitimate son who, without a speck of help from the main house, had succeeded in running a flower shop in Busan.

No one remembered that *she*, who shielded her children, once loved the breath that rose off country roads and smiled when she bit into a peach her father had picked at dawn.

Between that man and that woman stood Dang Seo-rin.

She was quick-witted from childhood and keener still as she grew. When half of Seoul's citizens vanished in an instant and the masses fled Busan for Japan, Seo-rin argued that Busan would prove safer. History had shown that Busan would be Korea's last bastion. Secure a foothold now, fortify it with land and connections, and it would be a far safer stronghold than a Japanese city where they had no ties.

It was the right call, yet no one would remain to remember that rightness.

Death makes everything disappear—lives, loves, futures.

As half of Seoul ended in one blink, the massacre in this Busan garden was merely another day in the Void's routine.

The father. The mother. The second. The third. The youngest.

And the eldest—born for brilliance.

'Ah.'

Dang Seo-rin was dead.

"Ru...n..."

When the garden turned butcher, Seo-rin was struck first. The father could not abandon the child he loved beyond all else. Neither could the mother. They merely tried to save the remaining children, but the stems were too swift. She'd turned her back, shielding the child, and the spike pierced them both.

"Ah... ah... Mom..."

Yet even then, Seo-rin had not died but instead lay dying.

The father fell. The mother fell. The siblings toppled one by one.

Red flooded her sight.

"Dad..."

Death drew near.

Was she afraid? She seemed afraid.

Everything disappears.

Had even one family member survived, she would not fear so much.

Someone would remember.

Someone would remember our family.

“Ah...”

But all of them were dead.

Mother’s lovely smile, Father’s face when he puzzled over pots, their voices, the clothes that suited the youngest, how much she loved her family.

All of it, for a ridiculous reason like this, sank into the Void forever.

...

Seo-rin’s lips moved soundlessly.

No voice emerged. A scream that could not become sound trembled in silence.

No.

‘How unfair.’

O God.

Facing absurdity, she did what humans often do at the last: She called upon the most absurd being humanity ever conceived.

Please, O God. Just once more.

Her empty eyes, already stained with death, looked up through the torn greenhouse roof to see moonlight spilling down.

Give me a next time...

The vinyl quivered, but there was no wind. Perhaps it shook with her own ragged breath.

Everything I have, I will give it all away.

It was a sincere vow yet a contradictory wish. If she gave truly "everything," then even if time was granted, it would no longer be hers.

My name, my life, all my future, every memory... take them all.

Let me live... as a human being.

She meant it. To live as human, she would gladly surrender humanity.

She prayed for the paradox.

Present yet impossible.

I refuse.

I refuse this ending.

The garden fell silent. There was no breathing, no groans. Only plants squirmed, feasting on what remained of humans.

Dang Seo-rin was dead.

"..."

Moonlight tilted.

Moonlight is only sunlight reflected, yet people insist on calling it moonlight, as though a separate world lies beyond the mirror.

A shadow, not the real.

A being known only by an alias, not its true name.

Moonlight poured onto Seo-rin's corpse.

To the moon, it was natural: All things on earth are mere shadows momentarily reflected somewhere else.

Human yet not human.

Alive yet not alive.

Possessed yet bereft.

The light of the night sky at last found an anchor to exist upon the earth.

And in that instant—

"..."

—*Dang Seo-rin* opened her eyes.

Chapter 368

The Missing XX

Sinnoa

The flower garden went up in flames, incinerating with it the Anomaly that had drunk deep the family's blood as it turned into a billow of white-black ash that scattered on the wind.

In the very heart of the infernal blaze stood Dang Seo-rin, stunned. With hollow eyes, she looked around. Her gaze snagged briefly on the bodies of her family, then reached my face and waned into a half-lidded stare.

She smiled. "You saw it, didn't you?"

The flames raged, framing the greenhouse in scorching flames that embroidered shifting shadows across Dang Seo-rin's face. Even that smile, worn only because she had no other expression at hand, was stained in shadow.

"Yeah, that's right. I already died once... Granted, I only recalled that fact a little while ago. Up until then, I thought I'd simply lost my mind when the Anomaly killed my family at our shop, and that I'd beaten the thing to death in that frenzy."

It was memory distortion. Hecate had answered Dang Seo-rin's wish —*"I want to keep living as a human"*—by gifting her a new life, one created by rewritting the memories so that Seo-rin had survived the conflagration in the garden.

No, calling it "memory distortion" might itself be imprecise.

"I... was born in that moment."

Just as Go Yuri had hinted with that strange testimony of hers: that unlike her younger siblings, Seo-rin alone had been born at home.

"A child who lived until then and died then. I took the memories of

the human called ‘Dang Seo-rin’ and was born here, in the midst of these flames.”

“Hecate...”

“Mhm.” Dang Seo-rin removed her witch’s hat. “Moonlight is nothing but sunlight reflected once. I’m the same, an Anomaly merely reflecting the light of the girl named Dang Seo-rin.”

She was an Outer God. This forsaken god, devoid of intellect or reason, had granted someone’s wish of “I want to live on as a human.” The price for fulfilling that wish was the entirety of said person’s being.

Seo-rin’s life. Seo-rin’s memories. Her recollections and love for her family. Her optimism toward the future. Her faint misanthropy. Her hate. Her fear. Her smile. Her voice.

Even the sixty years of life that should have remained.

The god of the night sky took every last bit.

“You know it’s true, don’t you, Undertaker? The Dang Seo-rin you loved... she never actually existed.”

I had no answer to that.

“I realized it just before you told me you’d stay with me even after I’d Fallen. I was truly happy.”

A spark leapt and lodged in Seo-rin’s cloak, then began to fizzle. The cloak, dark as the night sky, was being eaten away little by little as though by insects.

“Of course I’d be happy, I’m well aware of how much you hate Anomalies. To think that your care for me weighed more than all that hatred. Yes, that made me glad... But if I weren’t a human who later became an Anomaly, if I had been an Anomaly from the very, very beginning right to the end?”

The half-burned cloak lost its hold and slid off her with a whisper, like the torn wings of a swallowtail.

“Then it can’t be helped, can it? Even if that means I can’t stay with you, there’s nothing anyone can do.” Seo-rin let out a small laugh. “In the end, you will wipe out every Anomaly alive. That’s what you’re living for, after all.”

In the silence hanging over us, all I could manage was a quiet beginning: “Seo-rin.”

“This is the end now.” Seo-rin looked down at her own palm. The witch’s broom had already been let go and was rolling across the floor. “That child’s wish was simply to go on living as a human. To keep that wish alive, I even altered memories and lived while believing myself to be Dang Seo-rin, yes. But now… the contract is broken.”

Clink.

Moonlight that had reflected the flames cracked across the mirror of the night sky that held it.

Crack, crack!

The fissures spread like a spiderweb.

“They’ve found out I’m not human. That everything was a lie from the start. So Dang Seo-rin no longer exists. Not even the first contract can be kept, this is where the tale of an incompetent, contract-breaking Outer God ends.”

Seo-rin smiled.

“Listen.”

The corners of her lips trembled.

“Why… did we meet only now?”

“…”

“I fell in love. I came to adore all of it—the human life, living among humans. There were lots and lots of things I hated, sure, but still, because you were here, I grew to love this place.”

The moonlight shattered, again and again, and even the flames that had licked up to devour everything broke apart like moonlight and were trapped between the shards of mirror.

Thud.

Seo-rin pressed a hand to her chest.

“It hurts. Right here.”

“…”

“It hurts. It hurts so much I could die. It’s strange, I shouldn’t even be able to die. I’m not truly alive at all, Undertaker. It hurts too much.”

“…”

“I’m sorry.”

At last even the sound of moonlight breaking broke apart on itself, spawning more sound that rippled outward like waves.

——Sorry for taking Dang Seo-rin away.

The shattering moonlight faintly mimicked someone’s voice.

Like that first mirror in this world that stole the sun and produced a counterfeit.

“I’m sorry for sullying your precious memories. Sorry that the one you loved turned out not to be human at all.”

——I couldn’t keep my promise. I’m sorry I couldn’t stay Dang Seo-rin until the end. Sorry that I’m not human.

“For being born this way.”

——Because there was no other way for me to come into this world.

“I’m sorry.”

Dang Seo-rin fades away.

There was never a happy ending for her.

The regressor's world began on June 17. Seo-rin's world was born on June 15.

The two timelines would never intersect.

Like the white crosswalk lines and the black asphalt passing by each other forever.

Going back and using a "blank canvas" to change Seo-rin's past was impossible too.

The Seo-rin the regressor had built memories with up to now was none other than the Seo-rin born on June 15.

Even if the massacre of the Seo-rin family were somehow prevented, the witch the regressor had wanted to stay with would not return.

'No, in fact, coloring that blank canvas was an impossibility from the start.'

It was different from the elder twin sister or Yu Ji-won. At least their stories were painted atop "facts that might actually have happened in the past."

'But Seo-rin?'

The moment you try to stop the family's tragedy, countless contradictions arise. All the causality accumulated over a thousand runs collapses.

In the end, it's a simple story.

There are beings in this world who are denied a happy ending from the very start.

——Huh?

And so Seo-rin's eyes went wide.

The eyes that had calmly accepted extinction both as Seo-rin and as Hecate now opened in disbelief.

The regressor was holding her in an embrace.

“Undertaker? Why…?”

“I’ve finally figured it out.”

He held Seo-rin’s shoulders a little tighter.

“Why the road had to be so hard, why the door leading here was so narrow and the stairs so steep, I’ve understood it all now.”

“What are you talking about…?”

“It was so I could be with you.”

The world was scorching. He shielded her from the flames that were consuming the garden.

The world was deafening. He took on the moonlight that warped sound in her stead.

“The contract isn’t broken, Seo-rin. You haven’t forgotten already, have you? Tonight, beneath this night sky, everything between us will be forgotten.”

“…”

“I will forget your past.”

It didn’t matter if he cast out all the world’s heat and silenced all its noise.

The petals and songs he needed no longer existed there anyway.

“If there’s a past you don’t wish to revisit, I won’t look back either.”

“Ah.”

“I won’t dig into the reason for your silence. Whether you were an Outer God or whatever, it doesn’t matter. You are Dang Seo-rin.”

“But, I... if I don’t disappear—no matter how hard you try, in the end, like this...”

“Then we’ll disappear together.”

I said.

“We couldn’t be born together, couldn’t share a childhood. You’re right. Maybe we met far too late.”

“...”

“But we can still stay together until we die.”

Moonlight slid down.

“From now on I’ll begin a journey of discarding my own pieces one by one, settling all the over-flowing Voids of the world—completely, in a human way.”

“...”

“For a while—just until that day comes—I want you to stay by my side.”

Seo-rin’s shoulders trembled.

“Stay beside me and give it everything you have to remain human. If you try your hardest, I can keep from giving up, forever.”

“Nngh...”

“Not only the sixty years that were originally Seo-rin’s, Hecate, everything that still remains to you, discard them one by one while you walk with me.”

“If... if I do that.”

“We can die together.”

I took Seo-rin’s shoulders.

Then, gently, I pressed my forehead against hers.

“Seo-rin.”

“…”

“Will you die with me?”

There was no applause, no hymn. Only the deferred flames of hell and the clamor of moonlight adorning the Void filled the air.

‘…Yes.’

That was enough.

“Yes…, gladly.”

We had long known we were born into such a world.

“Gladly.”

The night sky collapsed.

The glittering jewels beyond—Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Mercury—celestial bodies of the universe.

The planets that symbolized the Outer God’s power were shattering one after another.

Neither the moonlight nor the earth beneath were exceptions.

The last frame still burning finally collapsed.

With that collapse, even the ground beneath our feet began to crack apart, slowly.

A place of birth and of death, the holy ground of magic.

This place, at once a flower garden and a fire garden, was meeting its final season.

Now that I think of it.

Add up Earth, the Moon, and Saturn and all the rest, and the count still barely reached eight.

Two of the ten notes that should have rung through Pythagoras's cosmos had gone missing somewhere.

"On the scale's right pan, I place my everything."

The secret behind that disappearance was revealing itself before our eyes.

Firmly, Seo-rin laid her right palm over her own heart.

"On the left... your heart."

Then her left hand covered my chest.

A golden light blossomed.

The light formed a circle, sketching an unbroken golden ring that revolved around my heart.

Each time a planet shattered in the night sky, the golden ring embracing my heart widened.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight.

A golden revolution. The vow of a ring.

Circle Magic.

"..."

"Actually, I'd already cast one on you in secret."

And I realized.

"Thanks to this spell... I alone was able to hear your voice."

"Yes. And I could hear yours."

A faint golden loop revealed itself between my heart and Seo-rin's.

Yes.

The remaining two notes missing from the night sky were flowing,

none other than, within our hearts.

Together we made ten.

Constellations were inscribed upon our hearts.

As many celestial bodies as that night sky were singing a silent song inside our chests.

'...Please.'

Caressing the ten strands of heartbeat with both hands.

Seo-rin whispered quietly.

A song for one person alone in this universe.

Melody One.

"May you not grieve too deeply."

Melody Two.

"When you do grieve, may I sense your loneliness."

Melody Three.

"When you feel like dying, may I be at your side at that very moment."

Melody Four.

"May you not... despise people too much."

Melody Five.

"After you dream, may everything feel okay again."

Melody Six.

"Yet someday, may you still find the world beautiful."

Melody Seven.

“Sometimes, let everything go. When you’re exhausted, may you truly rest.”

Melody Eight.

“If the day comes when I hurt you, may the wound heal, and may I always be able to say I’m sorry.”

Melody Nine.

“I love you.”

Melody Ten.

“Together with you, until the day we die.”

“…”

As a regressor, I possessed several abilities.

One of them was called [Resume].

It was the vaguest of the powers I held.

All it really did was let the strength and effort I’d accumulated in a previous run persist into the next.

I unlocked that ability in my tenth cycle.

How I awoke [Resume], though such a trivial power, I had kept to myself until now.

The reason was simple.

In the tenth cycle, after defeating the Ten Legs, the day Seo-rin reached the end of her lifespan and I served as chief mourner at her funeral.

It was before her portrait that I Awakened [Resume].

However.

Looking back now, [Resume] may have been more than that.

Perhaps faint melodies that not even a regressor could hear had been singing inside my heart.

Like the song of Mars.

Like when we soared into Hecate's night sky and none of us could catch the voices of the planets.

The reason I could keep from abandoning the world may have been the few threads of song you planted in my heart.

"My name is Dang Seo-rin."

Not Resume, but—

"[A Spell Laid Upon You]."

A covenant of ten rings.

A grand spell of the tenth circle.

Beneath the crumbling garden, the moonlight, and the night sky—everything breaking save for that golden ring—at the end of the world, at the curtain call of the stage.

The witch who had once been the goddess of magic drew my heart toward her.

"Thank you, Undertaker."

"…"

"That I was able to meet you——"

Sound collapsed, and memory with it.

But it didn't matter.

– Your name?

– Undertaker. It's an alias.

– Someone who goes around burying people, huh? Not bad. The

depth of a person depends on how many corpses they've buried inside their own heart.

From tens of thousands of years before I met you.

– I'll be in your care from now on.

– Companion of my time.

Your voice had always been ringing inside my heart.

Chapter 369

The Missing XXI

Sinnoa

There is an epilogue.

As I have already stressed, this is nothing more than a side story, merely a manuscript that the regressor has never edited.

To confess, had I, like any ordinary scribe, been able to move my brush strictly in chronological order, in fact this would not have been the proper place to speak of an after-story.

The Saintess of the Frozen World.

Was she not still waiting in the regressor's sickroom?

The stretch that was the 999th cycle and the 1,000th stage had yet to draw to a close.

Yet a side story is a privilege granted to only a single chapter. To speak of the Saintess I would need one more side story.

Therefore.

"…"

For the moment let us turn to someone else.

Across the time that has flowed since millions of years ago, across the lives that diverged into hundreds of billions of branches, let us speak of someone who, by chance, brushed against hers for the briefest instant.

"…Huh?"

He was a man without a birth.

He had no father. He had no mother.

Surely parents must have existed, but he could not recall them. He could not even verify their existence.

Because, as a regressor, the price he paid for an infinite future was a finite past.

It is not only death that makes everything go missing. There are things one lets go of simply in order to go on living.

‘Busan Station concourse? Out of nowhere?’

Thus it was only natural that he had forgotten something.

‘What the— I was just drinking with Dang Seo-rin and the world ended?’

He could not remember.

What moonlight had poured over the night sky of a city that existed nowhere. How earnestly his comrades had fought, ready to die, on a satellite as beautiful as a mirror. What kind of life had been there.

Who had worn what sort of smile.

‘…I can’t make heads or tails of this.’

That was the contract required for him to live on.

“You piece of shit! What kind of bullshit is that?!”

‘Well then. First things first, let’s save Seo-gyu.’

Life continued.

Perhaps the regressor had settled all the deferred payments in one lump sum.

There are things every human being is forced to pay as they live.

This universe collects memories at the price of life from every human equally.

Even a regressor endowed with [Complete Memory] could not be an exception, so long as he remained human.

— Still haven't given up, my friend?

That day too he dropped by a café, took a sip of the café au lait that had been placed beforehand on the table, and found a note hidden beneath the cup.

Reading it, the regressor let out a small snort.

"The one who doesn't know how to give up is you, you geezer."

Once, he had had a friend.

A fellow regressor.

Curiously, the two were very different.

Where he had resolved to keep on living in order to remain human, his friend had chosen endless deaths for the same purpose.

Thanks to that, the friend never forgot whom he loved most—and in return forever abandoned the chance to save that love.

He, on the other hand, saved his own love without realizing it—and the price was to forget whom he loved.

Which is the greater pain?

Pain belongs solely to the one who feels it, so its depth is hard to compare.

A person can only choose the kind of sorrow they will shoulder.

Even forgetting is a choice.

From the fact that no one remembers the pain of being born, it follows that every human sets foot in this world having chosen a single, common wound.

He was a man without a birth.

He was human.

“The Constellations don’t exist. The Saintess of National Salvation, the Conqueror of the Alps… they’re all characters I created.”

He lived the life he had chosen. He carried out the flow of time he had decided.

“I awakened about twenty days ago. From that day my hair changed color, and I began having nightmares full of monsters.”

“So you created the Constellations.”

“That’s right.”

He recruited a Observer. He persuaded a Sovereign.

One by one he drew in the humans who would walk beside him.

And so, before he knew it, it was June 24.

“…”

It was time to go meet someone. That whole day had been set aside for a single person.

‘Strange. My heart’s pounding more than usual.’

He tilted his head.

In truth, to a regressor like him, feelings such as ‘freshness,’ ‘novelty,’ or ‘excitement’ were terribly faint.

Of course, they had trodden the same timeline hundreds upon hundreds of times.

No matter how dear the person he was about to meet, there was a limit, no moment could feel like a first meeting.

And yet.

‘…It feels exactly like I’m setting out on a journey.’

For some reason today was different.

Was it because the weather was mild? No, the weather on June 24 was always the same.

Had he processed a different schedule than in previous cycles? Again, no, the regressor's timetable had long been perfected for maximum efficiency.

True, starting with the 1,000th cycle he had awakened a new ability.

I had planned to discuss that difference later, but it had not altered his itinerary.

Everything was the same.

Even so, for some reason, it felt different.

"Hm."

At the mirror he finished straightening his clothes, sprayed on cologne, and allowed himself a faint, elusive smile.

'Such a curious thing.'

Now then.

Let us speak about her.

"…"

She was a woman without a birth.

She had no father. She had no mother.

"Ah…."

Yet she believed she did have a father and a mother.

The moment she opened her eyes—no, the moment she was born—she took the corpses strewn before her eyes to be her family.

“Ah… ahhh… Mom… Dad… it’s… a mountain….”

To be born, and from the moment of birth to carry an eternal wound—

that was the price she had to pay in order to live as a human being.

The flower garden was burned to the ground.

She believed it was because she had lost her reason in anger and incinerated the anomaly.

Swept up in her own flames, even the traces of her family had been reduced to carbonized fragments by her magic.

“Nh.”

Staggering, she rose to her feet.

The first temperature she felt upon opening her eyes was the heat of her tears, the second was the chill of corpses.

The very first thing she experienced after birth was, of all things, the funeral of her family.

“Uh—nnh. Ugh… uuh….”

Unable to cast magic, unable even to muster the will to cast it, she dug the soft earth with a shovel.

She was used to digging soil.

But digging not to plant flowers but to bury family was something one could never grow accustomed to.

She was doing the same thing for the one-thousandth time.

Even so, it could never become familiar.

“…”

After four days spent barely managing to lay her family to rest, she collapsed beside the graves, almost fainting outright.

After a full day unconscious, she opened her eyes in a haze.

A night sky stretched overhead.

‘What… am I doing?’

Pale moonlight settled over her.

Her hair, her mouth, her whole body felt brittle. Ants crawled across her palms, but she could not care.

There are tears that evaporate in moonlight, not sunlight.

‘Why should I keep on living?’

She was the human who considered suicide the earliest in her life.

‘It hurts….’

It was agony.

Though they called her an anomaly, the void, the night sky, or an outcast deity, the very first thing she felt as a human was pain.

Should she just close her eyes like this.

“…”

At that moment.

Flames flowed across her skin—formless, soundless fire.

“I can’t die.”

She muttered.

“If I die… everything disappears.”

Father was dead. Mother was dead. Even her siblings had been brutally murdered.

Accepting their deaths was impossible. How could one possibly accept such absurd, senseless deaths?

Much less—

She could not allow even the traces of their deaths to vanish as well.

‘I will remember.’

She stood up.

Her arms trembled. Her legs shook.

Sleeping a single day had not restored the strength she had lost.

Nor had it erased four days of digging earth with the feeling she might die at any moment.

‘Only I can remember.’

Even so, she rose.

‘Let’s live.’

Because she had wished not to end with such a conclusion.

‘Let’s keep living.’

She washed her hair. She washed her body. She washed away her tears. She laundered her soiled clothes. She folded them. She retched up her tears. She put away baggage. She cleaned the room. She wiped away more tears.

‘Live, Dang Seo-rin. Survive.’

How wonderful it would be if she could not only survive but bring them back to life.

‘You must live.’

Why is it that, for human beings, not only death but even bare life requires resolve.

Armed with resolve and another layer of resolve, she chewed through each second that followed the next.

Perhaps because her mind was consumed by that.

"…?"

One day she came to herself to find she was standing alone in the middle of a desolate crosswalk.

"…Huh?"

Strange.

Only a moment ago she had been buried in guild paperwork.

She had just formed a small group called the Samcheon World, and its leader had been absent for more than five days owing to a family death.

Naturally, the guild members understood her absence. It was an age in which family or friends were lost with terrifying ease.

That, however, did not make the backlog disappear.

"Hmm? Uh, so… where is this?"

In the middle of working she had thought,

Ah, when I finish all this, I really will have no home left to return to, forever.

"…"

She looked up at the sky.

'Where should I live?'

Released suddenly from work, the vaguely postponed worry stepped close.

She wore a vacant expression.

Since the funeral she seemed to have forgotten how to craft precise expressions.

What grand meaning could there be in moving the muscles of one's face.

'I need another place to stay… no, I hate that.'

She would never be able to call a new house home again.

Because when she returned, she would never forget the sight of her family, who had smiled at her only the day before, and her siblings, who had answered her as though annoyed, lying dead.

'…Ah. How about a train?'

An idea flickered.

'Mm, good. A train doesn't look like a house at all, and I can outfit it like a VIP suite if I want.'

Though impulsive, the more she chewed it over, the sweeter it became.

'I'll secure an entire train and turn it into a guild dorm. In this era commuting separately is a luxury.'

'In an emergency we need to muster our fighting power at once, and still keep at least a minimum of privacy…'

'Then maybe I should just occupy an entire station? Divide the guild among multiple trains. If the guild grows later, that certainly…'

It was then.

"Excuse me, are you all right—?"

A voice came from somewhere.

"Hello— over there—"

"…?"

"Are you all right—?"

Goodness.

She had reacted to the voice a touch too late.

She must have been lost too deep in thought without noticing.

She turned her head.

“If you stay there it’s dangerous! No, don’t move either! Please wait right there!”

Far away,

beyond the vast crosswalk, at the far end of the crossing, a man was waving his arm.

“Just a moment, please don’t move carelessly!”

He was yelling something.

But to be honest, she paid no attention to his words.

‘…A song.’

She was listening to a certain sound.

It seemed to be coming from that man.

The closer he came across the crosswalk, the clearer the sound grew, allowing her to locate the source of the song.

‘A heart.’

The song was beating quietly in his heart.

Ever since she awakened—no, since the moment she was born—she had heard sounds from every object in the world.

For some reason nothing could be heard from the night sky,

yet the ground was always full of all kinds of noise and clamor.

“Please wait.”

“…”

The man was different.

A slightly different song was spreading from his heart.

It sounded like a human voice. Like a machine. Like a piano, like a violin, like a cello, as though every melody were layered together.

She found herself thinking,

'…Beautiful.'

For the first time in her life.

'So very beautiful.'

She—

found something in this world beautiful.

He came closer and said something, she too said something to him.

There at the intersection.

He had no past to tell her, no way to say where he had been born or what childhood he had lived.

But she did not need it.

She could not speak her past to him; even if she did, all of it was fated to be a lie.

But that did not matter to him.

He had no birth.

She had no birth.

And yet between him and her, there was life.

A very strange, very beautiful thing.

"I'm called the Undertaker."

“I… I’m Dang Seo-rin.”

This is a tale for such an intersection.

“My name’s a bit odd, isn’t it?”

“No.”

Just as it is not strange for there to be one human who devotes himself to an outcast deity,

it is not strange for there to be one outcast deity devoted solely to a human.

“I think it’s a lovely name.”

Chapter 370

The Receiver I

Sinnoa

Blink. I opened my eyes.

There was no unfamiliar ceiling.

Instead, there was an unfamiliar Go Yuri.

“Did you sleep well, Guild Leader?”

“…….”

“Forgive me, but I happened to peek at the scene of you confessing so fervently to Dang Seo-rin. Whew—just watching had my own heart racing. Really now, do you perhaps possess a hidden skill, something like [S-rank Silver Tongue]?”

It was the worst prologue in history.

For the record, my head was resting on Go Yuri’s lap. Someone out there might envy me, but I have never joined that sort of suicide-wish society.

Naturally, I straightened my back.

And was met by scenery just as unfamiliar as Go Yuri herself.

“Where… exactly are we?”

“As you can see, a deserted island.”

Swaaah.

Lazy waves rolled in.

A sand islet with nothing but a single palm tree, not even an animal in sight.

A stretch of beach in the middle of the boundless sea, the kind Captain Jack Sparrow might have used for a steam bath, spread out before us.

I'd believed that escaping the lap pillow would help me get a handle on the situation—but no.

My faith and expectations are famous for betraying me.

"I'll ask again. How did I—how did the two of us—end up waking on a deserted island when moments ago I was with Dang Seo-rin?"

"Well, because Dang Seo-rin died, of course."

"…"

My heart lurched downward.

Go Yuri, meanwhile, spoke as if it were nothing remarkable.

"I had to push myself hard to save you, Guild Leader. When Hecate collapsed, the universe of the 173rd cycle collapsed with her. You and Dang Seo-rin's remains were both about to fall into a black-hole-like pit, so I—hiya, hiya!"

Go Yuri struck a pose like a mountaineer rescuing someone dangling off a cliff.

"Haaah, I barely pulled it off. I'm not trying to brag, but it was honestly exhausting."

"…I could have just died there."

"Yes. You'd like me to say it wouldn't have mattered, right?"

She smiled brightly.

"But, Guild Leader, doesn't it seem a little sad if the hero who saved the world receives no praise and is forgotten besides?"

"…"

"I think it's sad."

Pat.

She ran her fingers through my hair.

I tried to lean away, but she pulled my shoulder closer, shrinking the distance instead.

“I’m not a child—”

“No.”

“The human heart isn’t like the body. The heart you had at one, at five, at ten—those rings stack up as you grow.”

“…”

“Even if you don’t remember them, the marks remain. Being praised feels good, being patted feels pleasant. Being honest about those feelings is very important for humans. Children are all ill-tempered. If they feel they were denied care, they’ll surely take revenge someday.”

She giggled.

“Normally one of your other comrades would be next to you, but now there’s no one. So I figured I should handle the praise in their stead.”

“…”

“You really did splendidly. My goodness, sinking mighty Hecate! Amazing! I always believed you could do it.”

It was odd.

I couldn’t resist her grip.

Strange as it sounds, by letting her embrace me I felt not consoled but rather that I was the one consoling Go Yuri.

“…I’m not sure defeating Hecate deserves that much praise. I only laid my own heart over Dang Seo-rin’s.”

“Ah-haha.”

The hand stroking my hair stopped.

And then—

“What on earth are you saying?”

Suddenly her eyes filled my vision. They were barely ten centimeters away.

Those pupils that always smiled were now staring at me from an unreadably close gap.

“Did Hecate look easy to you?”

“…”

“In case you didn’t know, Guild Leader, Hecate is the Outer God of Paradox. She put her fingertips on every contradictory way voids and anomalies exist in this world.”

Clamp.

The hands that had held my head and shoulder now pinned my skull between them.

“You purified that Outer God. No matter what strategy anyone devised, her magical shadow slipped away through absurd contradiction. You used every trick and barely, truly barely, caught her. Do you still not grasp the magnitude of that feat? Troublesome—very troublesome.”

“…Right. Sorry. I spoke too quickly.”

Slowly her eyes receded.

Far enough to see her full face, still smiling as always.

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I guess starting the three-hundred-sixty-sixth day got me excited.”

“Try to understand my side, I can’t take your words at face value. I

once let you trick me and ended up dead.”

“Oh dear. Mmm, yes, I’ll apologize for that too. But it’s strange.”

Her look asked, Strange how?

“Noh Do-hwa strangled you five times, yet you trust her fine. Isn’t that discrimination?”

“No. With Director Noh Do-hwa it was karma. But you… wait.”

My head whipped around.

“Five times? I’m certain Director Noh Do-hwa strangled me four times.”

“Ah.” She covered her mouth demurely.

“Oh dear, my mistake. You died only four times. Saying five was merely my foolish slip.”

“…Are you telling the truth?”

“Absolutely! I swear on the honor of the Infinite Metagame.”

Ah, so I am going to be strangled again.

Setting aside the factual violence against Infinite Metagame.

Only one task remained in this stage.

『Rescue the Saintess.』

In that respect Go Yuri’s deed in saving me while the universe collapsed was enormous.

Had I died with Dang Seo-rin—

That momentary relief would have diverted me from helping the Saintess of the 267th cycle.

“I’m a bit late, but thank you.”

“No problem, I wanted it too.”

“Even so, several things puzzle me.”

I looked around. The sea was a clear emerald.

Since civilization’s fall the Yellow Sea and East Sea have remembered they’re children of the Pacific, one shouldn’t judge by the old standards.

“Where is this? The Unconscious Realm? Or the world of the 173rd cycle? Then where are my comrades?”

“It isn’t the Unconscious Realm.”

“And to match your sense of time, it isn’t the 173rd cycle either.”

“What? Another riddle—”

“Strictly speaking, this is the world of the 999th cycle, Guild Leader.”

I froze.

“The 999th cycle? The one where I was drinking with Dang Seo-rin and suddenly everyone disappeared?”

“That’s right.”

She smiled sweetly.

“Strictly speaking, they didn’t disappear. They all went *pop*—wiped out in an instant by Hecate’s grand magic.”

“…Wiped out.”

“It was a paradox.”

Shhh—clear waves lapped.

“A world that is the 173th cycle and not the 173th, the 999th cycle and not the 999th—two runs overlapping. How could it stay intact?”

"…."

"While Hecate still held her Authority, it was fine. Sustaining paradox is exactly an Outer God's magic. But now her magic—"

Tap. She poked my chest.

"—remains only here."

"…Could the whole human race vanish so easily just for being paradoxical? My comrades aren't weak."

"Oh my, are you suspecting me?"

"A little."

She chuckled softly.

"Really, did Hecate look easy? The only reason we managed was that she was confined inside the vessel called 'Dang Seo-rin.'"

"…"

"By the way, the sea around this island? That's Leviathan's corpse, the blood that spilled when it went boom."

That meant Yu Ji-won was dead as well. So it really was the 999th cycle.

"…?"

A faint sense of wrongness pricked me, though I couldn't name it. Talking so calmly with Go Yuri felt odd.

Pushing that aside, I voiced the next question.

"Then what about the Saintess of the 267th cycle? She froze time in Hecate's sanctuary—'Nowhere'—right?"

"Yes. Thanks to that shaky seal she kept Hecate from griefing you with unfair endings."

"And now that Hecate has fallen, shouldn't the Saintess be free?"

“Ummm, about that.”

For the first time since our crash landing, trouble showed on her face.

“As you know, the Saintess forcibly linked herself to Hecate, the Outer God of Paradox.”

“So?”

“In other words, she inevitably became something close to a paradox herself. Oh, freezing time minimized the damage, but still.”

“…”

Watching her skirt the point filled my neck with coiling dread.

“Sigh. With Hecate gone, there’s no one left to govern paradox except the Saintess.”

She pressed a hand to her cheek and sighed again.

“Call her Hecate’s remnants, like how Yellow Turban rebels lingered after the uprising.”

“Don’t throw my own analogies at me. What exactly do you mean the Saintess became paradoxical? Explain so I—”

“U-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

A hearty laugh burst out behind me.

On what I thought was a two-person island, another presence—of course I spun round.

“At last! Finally! Liberation is here!”

And I saw it.

A slightly shorter figure, if the Saintess were younger, maybe a second-year middle-schooler, she would look like this, identical features, but a ‘kid’ standing proud, hands on hips, roaring with laughter.

“Behold!”

Tchakk! The kid struck a flamboyant pose.

“Absolute Spirit Leviathan is dead! Gone! The Form-Terminating Infinite Void shows not a hint of presence! Ahh! And that detestable foe—the Nightmare Abyss Nut—has vanished!”

“…”

“Now only I—only the rightful Leader of every void, I, the [Monarch of the Crimson Horse], shall rule this world! Ah-hahaha! Wahahahaha!”

“…”

Crrreak. My neck turned like a steampunk gear.

Pointing at the aqua-haired kid, I looked at Go Yuri.

“Don’t tell me… that’s…”

She gave a dazzling smile.

“Yes!”

“No, right?”

“It is!”

“Tell me it’s not.”

“Shall I swear on the Infinite Metagame?”

“See! I really am going to be strangled a fifth time! No, focus. Seriously?”

“Seriously-seriously.”

She beamed.

“When the paradox struck, the void toxin of ‘Saintess and yet not Saintess’ occured—what do you think happened first?”

"Oh, please—"

“It’s something you’re already familiar with.”

Potato. Potato sprout. Potato statue. That potato.

“Exactly! The Saintess split into separate personalities, each a [Constellation].”

"……."

“Wahaha-haha! Hrk—cough, cough! Bwah-ha-ha!”

Now beside me, the kid was slapping my backside.

She even wore an eye-patch, the classic chuunibyou accessory.

Anyone could guess whose influence made the Saintess manifest the [Monarch of the Crimson Horse] like this.

“And of course it’s not just Mr. [Monarch of the Crimson Horse]. Ms. [Collector of All Anomalies], Ms. [Librarian of the Great Library], Ms.[Succubus of the Grand Arcade], Mr. [Morning Star of the Second Coming], Ms. [Understanding of Anguish]—they’re all here, every one of them at least ocean-class! Congratulations!”

“…”

“Not that it’s surprising, the Saintess was absurdly strong to begin with, and she spent practically an eternity linked to Hecate. Truly the strongest Awakener.”

“…”

“So, Guild Leader?”

Her eyes sparkled.

“Isn’t it fascinating?”

Shit.

Chapter 371

The Receiver II

Sinnoa

Constellation.

The word that originally meant “zodiac sign” has, in modern fiction, evolved into labels such as “voyeur,” “hard-core KakaoTalk addict,” “age-gap fetishist,” or “shut-in NEET.”

The Saintess eagerly adopted this Constellation concept. The instant the Apocalypse broke out, a deluge of messages was pushed to every Awakener on the Korean Peninsula.

Naturally, among them were Awakeners whose hobbies were web novels and webtoons.

They shouted at once, “Wow! You know about Constellations? For anyone who doesn’t, let me explain— in the series <The Tutorial Is Too Hard> the idea is formally established—” and so on.

In short, they shared their knowledge with everyone else without the slightest filter.

Please, try not to blame them too much. When would life ever again grant a chance to prove that web-novel reading is a loftier pastime than studying Spanish?

Thanks to their devoted efforts, the word Constellation became common sense in the post-Apocalypse world.

Even so, one question kept nagging at me.

“Bwahahahahahaha!”

The author of the Constellations, a lead actress juggling multiple roles, and the Saintess who had probably read no more than a couple of web novels in her life—

How well-versed could the woman herself really be in Constellation stories?

“Hah, kek, keugh. Gup! Puhahahah, ha. Hoo-ah-ah… ah, whatever. I’m exhausted.”

Flop—

The eyepatch-wearing chuunibyou kid collapsed onto the sand. Even her bob cut, brushing her jawline, differed from the original.

I inched toward [The Monarch of the Crimson Horse].

“Excuse me, but are you perhaps the General of the Left?”

“Ung? General of the Left? What’s that?”

“…Then have you heard of a pig named Dong Zhuo1?”

“Ah?! Dong Zhuo?! I personally slit that mangy cur’s throat! What, are you another nobody who worships this hero that is I? Aiyaah, how troublesome. Shall I graciously make you my servant?”

“…”

A sigh welled up from the bottom of my heart.

‘This is no Lü Bu!’

The character sheet—

The character sheet was an utter mess!

Strictly speaking, [The Monarch of the Crimson Horse] refers to Lü Bu Fengxian2, history’s greatest unfilial son.

And Lü Bu’s rank was precisely General of the Left.

Yet the Saintess, for all she built a Lü Bu-based Constellation, had never been a Three Kingdoms buff!

‘My lady Saintess, you who know so much… how could you neglect the Romance of the Three Kingdoms!’

It was like a VTuber whose lore says she's a high elf yet whose hobby is pruning bonsai World Trees.

At that level of lore-collapse you're practically begging the viewers not to get immersed.

Thus, even though Lü Bu had materialized in real life, the Three-Kingdoms flame in my heart could only grow colder and colder…

"Hey, you self-styled general."

My eyes were as dead as an otaku staring at a defective figure with the paint job half-finished.

"Aaang? Self-styled?"

"Right. What do you think of the 'Saintess'? For reference, I am her one and only close friend."

"Ah! The Saintess! Ooooh! She is the parent who gave birth to me—my Mother!"

…Was that a vow to decorate my severed neck in the name of filial piety?

"It so happened all us sisters got split apart. Hmph. We must re-fuse to restore Mother Saintess."

The delusional chuunibyou kid who thought she was Lü Bu rattled on cheerfully.

"So this hero was busy fighting other fools, when suddenly a tremendous aura was felt here. I dropped everything and came running."

"I-I see."

"Aah! Huhuhut! I wondered what kind of weasel Mother's lover would be, but seeing you in person—those muscles are nicely firm, not bad at all!"

Pow, pow.

The Monarch of the Crimson Horse—calling this brat Lü Bu was an insult to the Han-era rank—leapt up and smacked my butt.

“Her lover, is it? More importantly, why do you keep slapping people’s behinds? That’s harassment.”

“Ah? Sorry, sorry. Your glutes are outstanding! I acted on impulse. It’s my first time seeing such a specimen up close, and I just had to give it a whack. Wahaha. Next time I’ll restrain myself and settle for your vastus lateralis!”

Is “don’t hit me” not on the menu?

‘Wait a second.’

Watching Go Yuri quietly unfold a bright smile across from me, a sinister thought dawned.

‘In short… this kid’s a personality spun off from the Constellations the Saintess role-plays.’

Meaning she’s the Saintess at her core.

If this Sword Marquess + Oh Dok-seo chimera had certain impulses, there was a very high chance the ‘original’ shared them as well—

“Gyaaaah! Begone, fiend!”

“W-What! Fiend?!”

[The Monarch of the Crimson Horse] jumped in fright.

“Have our sisters already found this place? Where are they! Show yourselves!”

“N-No, that’s not it. A theory I desperately need to launder from my brain just popped up…”

That was when it happened.

A voice made me freeze.

[*The Collector of All Anomalies* marvels at your insight.]

Huh?

[*The Collector of All Anomalies* pays you respect and reveals herself.]

A wave rolled up the empty beach and ebbed away, leaving a human shadow where nothing had been.

She, too, was the Saintess's spitting image.

But unlike the usually blank original, she somehow looked gloomy, somehow seemed as though she'd keep smiling forever.

"My, my. Hoho. Caught me, did you?"

For some reason she rubbed me the wrong way.

The self-proclaimed Lü Bu pointed at her at once.

"Aaaaagh?! You there! Collector!"

"Hoho, yes. How do you do, my beloved sis. It delights me to see you so full of energy."

"How dare you call me sis without permission! I've never had a sour-tempered little sister like you!"

"My, how sad. Fengxian sis, weren't we all loving siblings?"

[The Collector of All Anomalies] shrugged theatrically.

Using such words about someone who looked like the Saintess felt rude, but just watching her made my stomach acid bubble up.

"If Mother, now asleep, were to see us she would be heartbroken. Sigh. Are we truly incapable of being filial even once? You and I?"

"..."

Frankly, if Lady Saintess saw this live she might acquire an urgent desire to die.

“To insult this hero! Hey, Mother’s lover! Don’t be fooled! That snake gobbled up both the ‘Saintess of National Salvation’ and ‘The Chancellor of the Red Cape’ alone! She’s the most vicious of all us sisters!”

“Ufufu. Yet Fengxian sis, did you not cleave ‘The Conqueror of the Alps’ in a single stroke?”

“Ha! That was an honorable duel! Unlike you, pretending to ally with someone only to stab them!”

“Please say I merely used humanity’s weapons—intellect and strategy. Now, let the idiot sister be. What do you say, Mr. Undertaker?”

[The Collector of All Anomalies] offered me her hand.

“Me? Why me?”

“A foolish question, hoho. Obviously, whichever Constellation you side with is highly likely to become ‘Mother.’”

The Collector fluttered her lashes in a deadly wink. Her mystic eyes practically compelled one to answer with a critical hit.

“That idiot sister is a brainless spearman… utterly unfit to be your partner.”

“What?!”

“I, on the other hand… hoho. As you know, Mr. Undertaker, I’m a veteran who has collected countless anomalies. I’m sure I can help you along your way.”

Arms spread, the Collector declared,

“I am your destined guide! Take my hand, Undertaker! Together we shall conquer every anomaly in this world!”

I nodded.

“Go Yuri.”

“Yes.”

“Sic ’em.”

“Yessir ♪～”

Chomp!

A mouth of living shadow gaped open on the sea’s surface and swallowed [The Collector of All Anomalies] whole.

“Mwooooo?!”

The Collector thrashed, to no avail.

Crunch!

Crackle!

A few ominous noises later, the shadow devoured its prey without leaving a trace.

Another wave foamed over and the shadow vanished. The beach returned to normal.

“Uh. Uhh? Uh…?”

The self-styled Lü Bu’s gaze wavered.

Go Yuri produced a napkin, dabbed her lips, and bowed gracefully with a bright smile.

“Yes, that hit the spot.”

“…”

“A delicacy, really. Ah, the Collector’s soul can be retrieved any time, so don’t worry. Still, it would be better if you, Guild Leader, disposed of her yourself. Miss Saintess’s mental health might suffer otherwise.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

When I turned, my eyes met those of the self-styled Lü Bu. The brat was still gaping at the slasher flick that had just played out before her.

Then something astonishing happened.

“B-Brother…!”

Thud.

Without hesitation the pseudo-Lü Bu dropped to her knees in the sand.

With a grave face the kid wailed,

“No! Father!”

“…”

“If you’re Mother’s lover, then of course you’re this Fengxian’s father! U-Until now this fool failed to recognize the heavens and dared to act up!”

Thwack—sand sprayed onto my cheek. *Thunk! Thwack!* Her forehead strikes threatened to rename the place Samjeondo.

“Please spare this unworthy child’s life! Though I am but a slow-witted bear of a girl, this Lü Fengxian will become your unbeatable warhorse in your grand design!”

“Here you go, Guild Leader.”

“Thanks.”

I wiped my cheek with the napkin Go Yuri handed me.

Then I squatted, bringing myself eye-to-eye with the kid who now had at least three fathers.

“Hey, General.”

“Y-Yes-heh? I’m not really—”

“No. You are the General of the Left. I’ll ask some very important questions—answer them. Understood?”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“What do you think of Cao Cao[3]?”

“Eh-heh? Mengde? That fellow—born a eunuch’s whelp without even a— and forever wallowing in inferiority toward noble Yuan Shao, then butchering innocent civilians so history would call him the paragon of filial piety because Yuan Shao beat him to it… He’s history’s biggest piece of trash! If people want a model of filial devotion they should look at me first. Huhut! Never have I seen such a twisted lump of inferiority.”

“Hm.”

I nodded.

First test passed.

“Then what about Liu Bei[4]?”

“Ha? Xuande? That guy came from dirt and got a little success; people like that insist only their own words are right, then lose their base. Wahaha! With ears as long as a donkey’s, pampering only his own circle—”

“Go Yuri. Sic ’em.”

“—is what some blind fools claim, but they’re idiots! The moment I met Xuande I knew no wiser, more virtuous lord exists! Ooh! This unworthy servant merely got lucky and took Dong Zhuo’s head, while Xuande is the true hero of this chaotic age! Ah! I betrayed him for a moment’s greed—this, this! You worthless Fengxian! Hup! I must smash my forehead and apologize to Xuande’s very soul!”

“Mm.”

I nodded.

Second test passed.

I clasped the shoulders of this genuine [Monarch of the Crimson Horse]—the one and only Lü Bu Fengxian across all parallel worlds—and hauled her up.

“From this moment on, you are Lü Bu!”

“Eh? Uh, but I was already Lü Bu…”

“I have zero desire to be your father, but you’re still a shard of the Saintess, so how could I treat you coldly? From now on you may call me hyung.”

“Ah. Uh, yes, respected Brother…?”

Though this remote desert island lacked a peach tree, a lone palm would suffice for a brotherhood.

My ambition was grand indeed.

‘If I forge Lü Bu into the mightiest Constellation and return her to the Saintess, the Saintess will surely grow to love the Three Kingdoms!’

I shivered at my own stratagem.

Come to think of it, the 1,000th run had been slated as a vacation.

Somehow Hecate got involved and now I was fighting Constellations, but the more perilous the situation, the more one should enjoy it.

Look, Go Yuri over there has been grinning from ear to ear for ages.

“Brother Fengxian! No matter what happens I’ll see you restored as the Saintess’s main body—just trust this hyung!”

“Aah. Um, yes! Wahaha! Of course I’ll only trust brother!”

“Good.”

I slapped the shoulder of the sworn brother I welcomed after Seo Gyu with hearty gusto.

“Now then, little brother, to clear the third test let’s start by memorizing the Official Histories of the Three Kingdoms, shall we?”

“…Yep?”

Shards of Constellation left to rescue the Saintess:

Four more to go.

Footnotes:

1 - **Dong Zhuo** (died 192 ce, China) was a general whose seizure of power and tyrannical rule ended the Han dynasty (206 bce–220 ce) and divided the Chinese empire. In 190 ce Dong Zhuo burned Luoyang, the capital, and removed himself and the emperor to the ancient capital of Chang'an (now Xi'an).

2 - **Lü Bu**, courtesy name **Fengxian**, was a Chinese military general and warlord who lived during the late Eastern Han dynasty of Imperial China.

3 - **Cao Cao**, courtesy name **Mengde**, was a Chinese statesman, warlord, and poet who rose to power during the end of the Han dynasty, ultimately taking effective control of the Han central government.

4 - **Liu Bei**, courtesy name **Xuande**, was a Chinese warlord in the late Eastern Han dynasty who later became the founding emperor of Shu Han, one of the Three Kingdoms of China.

Chapter 372

The Receiver III

Sinnoa

It was truly a beautiful day.

The birds were chirping, and the flowers were blooming.

On a day like this—

"…Xu Shu[1] said to Liu Bei, 'There is a man called Zhuge Kongming[2], truly a Crouching Dragon. General, you really ought to visit him.' And Liu Bei replied, 'Then you bring him here….'"

A brat styling herself Lü Bu really ought to be rattling off Pei Songzhi's[3] unabridged, fully annotated Records of the Three Kingdoms by heart.

"Hup!"

Streeetch—

She flung both arms high and gave a huge stretch; the crisp air felt as though it seeped right down to every muscle cell.

Where, exactly, was this freshness coming from?

Without doubt, from listening to a masterpiece of the century in Saintess-nim's ASMR voice.

"Go Yuri, our destination still isn't in sight?"

"No, Guild Lead— I mean, Captain! There's nothing but sea on every side."

"Hmm. We set the course exactly this way, so why is our progress so meagre?"

“Ahaha, sorry, Captain. I think you’ll have to push the engine a little harder.”

Just now we were travelling by boat.

Calling it a “boat,” though, was generous, it was really only a dinghy.

The materials were a single palm tree, the lone bit of vegetation listed on the desert island, and the scrap metal the tide had coughed up.

I threw the dinghy together, painted it scarlet, and, as humanity’s last invention, christened it “Red Hare.”[4]

So we set out across the boundless ocean astride Red Hare.

Crossing the sea of a ruined world in a single craft, surely a fatal dose of romance.

“Good. Engine! Give us still more speed!”

“Eek!”

My part aboard was Captain.

Go Yuri, as navigator, was in charge of tracking the other Constellations’ positions.

[*The Monarch of the Crimson Horse* sheds tears.]

For reference, Lü Bu was back there rowing like a fiend, serving as both ASMR and engine.

Thanks to her, Red Hare boasted tremendous speed. Never had Koei’s Romance of the Three Kingdoms naval stat of “C” for Lü Bu looked more mistaken.

“By the way, Yuri—”

“Yes?”

“If we skip killing the Constellations this run and just move on to

the next cycle, what happens?"

"Mm. It would make conquering Hecate feel pointless. We went to the trouble of sinking an Outer God, only to leave the fragments that took her influence untouched."

"A leftover-embers job, eh?"

"Ah. Nice metaphor."

Embryos of flame left alone soon grow as big as the original inferno.

"And… mm. This is only my guess, but if we're careless the Constellations might really come to exist."

"The Constellations come to exist for real?"

"Until now they were just parts Miss Saintess acted. But if we let the next cycle start like this—tada! Look, star-sign monsters actually peering down at the world have appeared."

"Mm."

My brow furrowed.

"That would be bad."

"Yes, decidedly bad—"

In the past I might have answered, "Eh? Constellations just help Awakeners level, so isn't that a gain?"—but not now.

If the world's genre turns into "Constellation-fic," the side-effects follow inevitably:

Why Constellations help Awakeners, how Awakeners can fall and become Constellations, the premise of beings watching this world like a livestream, and so forth…

In other words, the very cosmology of the universe warps.

Exactly as Go Yuri had warned—ignore it and we'd just breed a

fresh Outer-God-class monster.

“Not to mention—”

“…Guan Yu[5] and Zhang Fei[6] sulked—*hic*—some bookworm pops out of nowhere—hng! Acting familiar with the Lord…so Lord Liu Bei soothed them, saying gasping ‘Gaining Kongming is fish finding water….’”

Mutter mutter mutter.

A glance back showed the Hulao Pass grasshopper panting as she rowed Red Hare.

Her eyes were starting to look like dead fish, turning more water-type than earth-type.

‘I can’t let such half-baked Constellations run the world.’

A little while later—

“Ah! Captain! I can finally see it!”

Go Yuri waved both arms.

Beyond the horizon lay a vessel so huge Red Hare looked like an ant.

An enormous cruise ship floated there.

Humanity of the 999th cycle was extinct. A healthy cruise ship was itself a ghost story.

There was no need to wonder long who captained it.

As we drew near, a familiar telepathic message arrived.

[*The Dream Demon of the Grand Pleasure Palace* invites you.]

[Welcome to Earth’s final paradise.]

A confession of ancient shame: once, I was deeply, hopelessly into

Constellations.

Back before the 35th cycle.

Until then no Awakener worshipped them more ardently than I did… Old Man Scho watching me was aghast.

– Hey! Brat! I told you to stop hanging around those spirits or whatever and you're muttering to yourself again! That's addiction, do you hear? Addiction!

– Oh, come on, old man. You just don't realise there's really a Constellation watching over us. Ms. Saintess of National Salvation genuinely exists.

– Pah. Rubbish! If transcendents guarding humanity existed the world wouldn't have gone to hell!

Scho, in the end, was right.

After swallowing the red pill that Constellations were only humans, an unspoken pact arose between the Saintess and me.

1. Whatever the other Awakeners thought, in front of Undertaker she would never pretend to be a Constellation.

2. Conversely, I would never nit-pick or mock the Constellations' settings and acting.

A gentleman's agreement, in short—

A pledge so the regressor and the Saintess could preserve each other's dignity.

Hence…I actually didn't know in detail what sort of appearance or speech Constellations like [Dream Demon of the Grand Pleasure Palace] or [Collector of All Anomalies] used when performing for other Awakeners.

Naturally: nothing compelled the Saintess to endure mortifying embarrassment by showing me her master-class in Constellation roleplay.

She wore a blank face around me every day. Still, the Saintess was human. She possessed that profoundly human emotion, “shame.”

And then—

“Myo-ooong! Welcome-nya! Nice-to-meet-nya!”

Today, I witnessed the ghastly truth the Saintess had hidden with all her might from the regressor.

“First time seeing you face-to-face-nya! Undertaker-nya! I’m the Dream Demon-of-the-Grand-Pleasure-Palace-nya!”

“……”

“Ah, that look is scary-nya! Myo myo myo. By the way-nya, unless you defeat me with the concept called ‘fun’ I’ll just keep reviving, so please refrain from pointless killing-nya!”

Boing, boing.

A mint-haired girl, a few years older than [The Monarch of the Crimson Horse] and strongly resembling the Saintess, had rabbit ears flopping atop her head.

I raised a hand.

“Time-out.”

“Myoo?”

“I’ll be back shortly. Wait right there.”

I jumped off the liner and returned to the dinghy. On deck, Go Yuri and Lü Bu were boiling cup-ramen.

“Huh? Brother, back already? G-gasp, did you drop the enemy in a single instant?!”

“Since when was she like that.”

“Eh?”

“Her. Dream Demon of the Grand Pleasure Palace… that crazy speech pattern. Since when?”

“Uh… always?”

Slurp. Devouring the last spicy beef bowl noodle on Earth, [The Monarch of the Crimson Horse] tilted her head.

“Dream Demon of the Grand Pleasure Palace, among us sisters she’s ‘Myomon.’”

“nya… mon…?”

“Yep. We sisters are concept-mad nut-cases, but she’s the worst. Wahaha! Brother, do you see now why I want the rest dead?”

said Lü Bu Feng-xian.

I turned my gaze. Go Yuri was elegantly eating Earth’s final Bean Paste Noodles (cup version) with chopsticks.

“This is a lie.”

“Oh my.”

“Myomon? If she’d been talking like that, no way I’d have missed it. SG Net would be buried in posts: ‘Why does that Dream Demon talk like this?’”

“Ufufu.”

Even while eating she never got a drop of black sauce on her lips; Yuri smiled demurely.

“Guild Leader, aren’t you underestimating Miss Saintess?”

“What?”

“Whenever Miss Saintess talks to someone, she always first casts [Time Stop] and rehearses her lines.”

“I know that.”

“Right. That’s how serious she is about her dignity.”

Go Yuri’s smile brightened.

“In other words…while you surf SG Net she can pop [Time Stop] and hide any posts she doesn’t want you to see.”

“What?!”

A shockwave burst in my brain.

What on earth was this pink monster spouting?

“Your IP and account name carry special restrictions. Mr. Seo Gyu or the Saintess can freely ‘edit’ every post or comment that shows up on your phone.”

“Wh-wh-WHAT?!”

A second impact rocked me.

“F-from when?!”

“From the start.”

Go Yuri drained even the broth, pressed her hands together and said, “Thanks for the food.”

“There are 171 banned words on your account, starting with ‘myo.’ Mr. Seo Gyu couldn’t refuse the Saintess’s request, so you’ve always been looking at a censored SG-Net.”

“……?!?!”

“And if anyone looked about to mention a Constellation trait around Mr. Undertaker, she just zapped them with telepathy and smoothed it over.”

Impossible. Absurd.

I was certain my ID had admin powers, yet that too had been Seo-gyu’s trick?

“Want one more bombshell?”

“T-there’s worse? Don’t. My sanity won’t hold.”

“Even though you finally learnt all this in the 999th cycle, once the run ends you’ll lose the memories under Miss Dang Seorin’s contract, and fall right back into eternal ignorance ♪~”

“Gyaaaaa!”

I screamed.

“Gyaaaaaaa!”

I kept screaming as I bounded from Red Hare onto the cruise ship.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Myo-ong?! Eep—why scream in my face-nya? In Mother’s memories you were more serious and dandy, like Tom Ford Oud Wood—unexpected-nya…”

“I’m the surprised one! ‘Unexpected’ doesn’t begin to cover it!”

“I don’t understand-nya…”

I crumpled to my knees.

“A lie. A lie. Yes. That treacherous pink thing brain-washed me to slander the Saintess…”

“Ah, that-nya!”

Flap. The Dream Demon’s rabbit ears twitched, alive.

“The being near you-nya. Why travel with something so terrifying-nya?”

“…Terrifying? Lü Bu—your sister—follows her fine, doesn’t she?”

“That’s what’s strange-nya!”

The Dream Demon darted her eyes around, then lowered her voice.

“Originally [The Monarch of the Crimson Horse] went out precisely to intercept that being-nya. [The Collector of All Anomalies] planned to back her if needed nya. Yet they both lost all hostility so naturally nya.”

“Mm.”

That was Go Yuri’s nature.

One was compelled to feel unconditional goodwill toward her.

Across the regressor’s long life only two people broke the rule: Yu Ji-won, whose face no-one could recognise, and Hecate, whose voice sounded like static.

“Yuri herself probably can’t control the power. Anyway she’s cooperative now, so no need to worry too—”

“Really nya?”

Blink—Dream Demon’s eyelids and rabbit ears leaned toward me.

“Undertaker-nya, how can you be so sure-nya?”

“Ah. Explaining it all is long, but I picked up a limited-time artefact. While I have it, Yuri’s brain-washing can’t touch me.”

“Let me see it nya?”

“Of course.”

I slipped a hand into my pocket.

The black hair-tie—Cheon Yo-hwa’s keepsake, left when she sacrificed herself, descending the stairs of the unconscious world—

“Hmm?”

The hair-tie.

“…?”

It should be here.

I remembered tucking it in my inner pocket so I wouldn't lose it.

"…"

It wasn't.

I rifled every pocket. Apart from the silver bell my fingers touched nothing.

A chill sliced through my brain.

'Wait. Come to think…'

Cheon Yo-hwa's memento was forged in the unconscious world, not in reality.

If this is no longer the 173th cycle but reality fixed as the 999th cycle, naturally her keepsake must vanish.

Such a simple fact—

'…I hadn't realised until now.'

As though forgetting felt natural.

Even though I'd long known that "real-world Go Yuri" and "unconscious-world Go Yuri" were different.

"…"

I fell silent.

The rabbit ears in front of me flopped.

"Do you truly believe that being is your ally nya?"

Footnotes:

1 - **Xu Shu**, courtesy name **Yuanzhi**, originally named **Xu Fu**, was a Chinese politician of the state of Cao Wei during the Three

Kingdoms period of China. He was born in the late Eastern Han dynasty and used to be a vigilante swordsman in his early life.

2 - **Zhuge Liang**, also commonly known by his courtesy name **Kongming**, was a Chinese statesman, strategist, and inventor who lived through the end of the Eastern Han dynasty and the early Three Kingdoms period of China.

3 - **Pei Songzhi**, courtesy name **Shiqi**, was a Chinese historian and politician who lived in the late Eastern Jin dynasty and the Liu Song dynasty. His ancestral home was in Wenxi County, Shanxi, but he moved to the Jiangnan region later.

4 - The **Red Hare** or **Chi Tu** was a famous horse owned by the warlord Lü Bu, who lived during the late Eastern Han dynasty of China.

5 - **Guan Yu**, courtesy name **Yunchang**, was a Chinese military general serving under the warlord Liu Bei during the late Eastern Han dynasty of China. Along with Zhang Fei, he shared a brotherly relationship with Liu Bei and accompanied him on most of his early exploits.

6 - **Zhang Fei**, courtesy name **Yide**, was a Chinese military general and politician serving under the warlord Liu Bei in the late Eastern Han dynasty and early Three Kingdoms period of China. Zhang Fei and Guan Yu, who were among the earliest to join Liu Bei, shared a brotherly relationship with their lord and accompanied him on most of his early exploits.

Chapter 373

The Receiver IV

Sinnoa

“Oh, you’re back? Guild Leader?”

“…”

Go Yuri welcomed my return from the cruise liner with a perfect, hundred-point smile.

Lü Bu was sprawled at the stern of our little skiff, snoring *drrrrng*—her nose blaring like a siren while she napped away.

Tilt. Go Yuri cocked her head.

“Whatever became of Ms. [Dream Demon of the Grand Pleasure Palace]? Since you came home safe, it looks as though you won.”

“…Ah, yes.”

I opened my right hand.

Fwoosh, light blossomed. Seeing it, Go Yuri pressed her palms together with a soft “Oh my.”

A tiny meteorite on my palm was radiating pearly-white light.

“A Star Fragment! It’s the drop you get for felling a Constellation. Waaah, as expected of you, Guild Leader! I knew you’d succeed. What sort of game did you use to topple [The Dream Demon of the Grand Pleasure Palace]?”

“We just wagered on who had better luck. We rolled a die: odd numbers meant my victory, even numbers hers. A pure gamble, free of any outside interference.”

Tilt.

Go Yuri's head tipped once more.

"Uh-oh. But if an even number had come up, wouldn't that have been bad?"

"Hmph. In the worst case I still have a secret weapon called you. Even if I'd lost to [The Dream Demon of the Grand Pleasure Palace] and been reduced to a slave, you would have come to rescue me. Right?"

"…"

Tilt.

"Yes, that's true! Ufufu. Still, Guild Leader, as I always say, depending on me too much isn't healthy, you know? You must remain the protagonist of this stage."

"I'll be careful."

I was about to slip the Star Fragment back into my pouch but hesitated.

"Come to think of it, how should I store this? You already swallowed [The Collector of All Anomalies]. Should I hand this over to you as well?"

"Hmmm."

Go Yuri's gaze slid from my face to the fragment and back again.

"No. That's a trophy you earned yourself, Guild Leader. I think it ought to stay with you!"

"Very well. I'll keep it."

"Great. Let's head for the next port of call!"

I strolled along the gunwale and flicked Lü Bu on the head. The comically over-inflated snot bubble popped with a bang.

"Geh-hyeck?! Wu—Yuan Benchu[1] is a hypocrite! Cao Mengde is a

spiteful villain jealous of a hypocrite! Only Lord Xuande2 truly acted for the people! Long live the Han! Long live Shu Han!”

“It warms my heart to see you using sleep-learning so constructively. Now back to your post as the engine.”

“…Yessir.”

“Oh? What’s with that look?”

“And what’s wrong with my eyes, exactly?”

“They look as though you’re pining for a former sister who filed her change-of-address inside Go Yuri’s stomach. Seeing such beautiful sisterly love makes me think that reuniting separated families might be the noblest deed of all.”

“Yahoo! Driving the Red Hare is the whole purpose and meaning of my life! Engine, fire! Overwhelming engine power! Wooooong! Lü Bu is happy!”

The kid, her face alone the spitting image of the Saintess, began rowing with such fervor that even Roman galley slaves would have gasped in admiration.

Rumble-rumble-rumble—

Once we had put some distance between us, the cruise liner in mid-ocean crumbled apart.

That casino liner had been all but a personal relic of a Constellation. Its collapse proved that [The Dream Demon of the Grand Pleasure Palace] was dead.

“Uwaaah! B-balance! Brother! Keeping our balance is murder, sir!”

[*The Monarch of the Crimson Horse* screams from the depths of her soul.]

It was not the Pacific, no.

By now, in the 999th cycle, the whole surface lay submerged, so

calling it Panthalassa[3] was more accurate.

The wave kicked up by the sinking mega-liner tossed our skiff this way and that.

Blue spray, like cherry petals, brushed across Go Yuri's cheek.

"…"

Watching that, I remembered—

—the private conversation I had just shared atop the liner with [The Dream Demon of the Grand Pleasure Palace].

"We may have split into assorted Constellations, but in the end our essence traces back to Mother Saintess nya."

Flap-flap.

[The Dream Demon of the Grand Pleasure Palace], whose face was the Saintess's twin save for the rabbit ears, spoke.

"True, Lü Bu-nya is far more violent than Mother. And I myo am frank about desire and pleasure beyond the original. Even so, essence is essence nya."

"What are you getting at?"

"The unbreakable rule that we exist for humanity."

Hop—she jumped down from the baccarat table in the liner's casino.

"Think of it as the Three Laws of Robotics, nya. Mother Saintess isn't foolish. She anticipated 'monstrification,' where Constellations slip her control and run wild-nya."

"…"

"Undertaker-nya, why did you decide the moment you fell into this ruined world that you had to hunt us Constellations nya?"

“Because if I let things be, you would degrade into Outer-God-class monsters bearing the very title Constellation for real.”

“Sound analysis, myo. But are you sure you reached that conclusion entirely on your own nya?”

I was not.

If you thought about it, neither [The Monarch of the Crimson Horse] nor [The Collector of All Anomalies] had ever truly threatened me. For ocean-class anomalies they were disconcertingly mild—

—true to their origin being the Saintess.

“…Was my train of thought guided? Without me even noticing?”

“‘Manipulated’ would be the precise word nya. And it wasn’t simple brainwashing either myo.”

“What is Go Yuri after? Why egg me on to cull Constellations?”

“No idea, nyoom.”

[The Dream Demon] shook her head.

“To be frank… I expected ‘it’ to board the liner at your side and was terribly on edge nyan. Obviously so myo.”

“…Because the longer I act alone, the greater my chance of shaking off Go Yuri’s conditioning.”

“Exactly, myo.”

Even so, Go Yuri had let me leave her side without protest.

In fact, in a way she seemed to want me not to rely on her too much.

Paradoxical.

She was brainwashing me at will, yet kept handing me chances to escape her grasp—an uncanny situation.

I frowned.

“In its own way, it’s an opportunity.”

“Nyoom?”

“…In my long life as a regressor, I’ve mostly avoided Go Yuri.”

True, I had discovered that the Leviathan Priestess—the silver-haired psychopath—acted as a vaccine against Go Yuri alone.

But every vaccine has a shelf life.

Across the next centuries or millennia, Leviathan’s aura would see less and less use.

Just as Hecate was fated to wane, Leviathan too would fade quietly from the universe.

“It’s nearly time I faced her head-on.”

“…”

“If I’ve decided to enter the ‘narrow gate’ for the sake of saving the world, I inevitably have to investigate the riddle called Go Yuri. Perhaps… the 999th cycle is, where she is concerned, a kind of tutorial stage.”

“Nyo-ho-hong.”

[The Dream Demon] laughed oddly.

“If so, what a colossal prologue! Needing 999 play-throughs just to attempt the tutorial—what kind of outrageous boss is that, nya!”

While she laughed, the exact opposite question flashed through my mind.

If a boss had to wait alone on her stage while 999 rounds of the game revolved before a player could reach her—

—what was in that boss’s heart as she waited?

“Good, myo! If Undertaker-nya is resolved to fight that being, we’ll do everything we can to help nya.”

“‘We’?”

“Myooong. As I said, Mother Saintess isn’t foolish nya.”

The rabbit-eared Constellation grinned.

“And we daughters who share her source—aside from Lü Bu-nya—aren’t hopeless idiots either myo!”

She flicked a casino chip.

The black-and-gold chip spun, then landed perfectly on her palm.

At that very moment—

[*The Morning Star of the Second Coming* is watching you.]

[*The Librarian of the Great Library* is watching you.]

[*The Understanding of Anguish* is watching you.]

My mouth fell open.

“No way?”

“That very way, nya. With that terror stalking around, do you think we’d idle away our time in civil war, nyoom?”

——The Constellations were already cooperating.

More precisely, only those who agreed to cooperate had survived.

The rest must have been exterminated after fierce fighting. Maybe even among the allies there had been casualties.

“Yet I sensed none of that from Lü Bu…”

“Ah, she’s one-hundred-percent dumb by sheer stats, myo.”

“…”

“Try talking ‘strategy’ or whatever and she’ll only set off filial fireworks for her parents. We agreed from the start to use her, nya. Lü Bu-nya is bound to believe she was acting on her very own will, myo!”

An idiot.

Yet precisely because she was foolish, she remained safe from Go Yuri.

If she understood nothing of the current schemes, the chance of leaking info to Go Yuri dropped to zero.

“And [The Collector of All Anomalies]?”

“A scout, nya. We wondered if brute force might work, tried it, and got crushed like me—nyoom. A waste of talent myo…”

So that was how.

“Oh, but that jerk was unlucky-nya, so part of me feels refreshed. Serves her right, myo.”

“…”

Is the Saintess perhaps suffering extreme self-loathing and fragmentation??

“I see. Then my goal, besides saving the Saintess, is to learn every possible way to resist Go Yuri’s brainwashing—for this run and the ones to come.”

“Nyoom. Agreed.”

“So what will you do? Say our duel ended in a draw and postpone your culling?”

“…”

Grin. [The Dream Demon] smiled.

“Undertaker-nya really is always kind to Mother, nyoom.”

Except for the face, nothing in her manner or aura resembled the original, yet the faintness of that smile felt like the Saintess's.

"Just curious, myo, but any chance you'd like to share a kiss with me?"

"……"

I take it back. Including the smile, she resembles the Saintess in no way whatsoever.

Seeing my expression, the Dream Demon burst into uproarious laughter. When she finally calmed down, she spoke.

"Well, if it were Mother, she'd be glad she could still help Undertaker-nya even after falling to a monster. And unlike a certain idiot, I'm a genuine filial daughter, myo, so I follow Mother's will to the letter."

"…Considering what you said twenty seconds ago, I can't endorse that claim."

"Have you heard the tale of Jing Ke[4], nyoom?"

The topic changed without warning.

"Jing Ke… The assassin who failed to kill the First Emperor?"

"Exactly, myo."

The Dream Demon chortled.

"If you're going to assassinate an emperor, you must first lull him, and to lull him you need a convincing tribute nya. Undertaker-nya, it's been fun, nyoom."

Before I could grasp her meaning, the Dream Demon summoned a sword—

—and, without hesitation, pierced her own throat.

"…"

No blood sprayed.

She was not human but an anomaly.

Right after her head severed, pitch-black fluid dripped like candle-wax. Soon her whole body melted away, leaving only a lone meteorite gleaming.

An anomaly could kill itself.

I'd long known that fact, yet it was never the sort of shock one grew used to.

[*The Morning Star of the Second Coming* recommends you pick up the Star Fragment and return to the skiff.]

[*The Librarian of the Great Library* informs you the Dream Demon's death was pre-arranged.]

[*The Understanding of Anguish* wishes to discuss avenues for communication with you from now on.]

"…"

I bent down and picked up the meteorite. Warm, as though it still held the sun's heat.

"All right."

In the empty casino, I muttered toward allies who were not present.

"So the alliance has flipped."

Number of Constellation fragments remaining:

Three.

Footnotes:

1 - **Yuan Shao**, courtesy name **Benchu**, was a Chinese military

general, politician, and warlord who lived in the late Eastern Han dynasty. He occupied the northern territories of China during the civil wars that occurred towards the end of the Han dynasty.

2 - The **Xuande** Emperor, also known by his temple name as the **Emperor Xuanzong of Ming**, personal name **Zhu Zhanji**, was the fifth emperor of the Ming dynasty, reigning from 1425 to 1435. He was the son and successor of the Hongxi Emperor.

3 - **Panthalassa** was a vast superocean that surrounded the supercontinent Pangaea during the late Paleozoic and early Mesozoic eras, roughly 300 to 200 million years ago according to Wikipedia. It encompassed nearly the entire Earth and is considered a precursor to the modern Pacific Ocean.

4 - **Jing Ke** was a youxia during the late Warring States period of Ancient China. As a retainer of Crown Prince Dan of the Yan state, he was infamous for his failed assassination attempt on King Zheng of the Qin state, who later became Qin Shi Huang, the Qin Dynasty's first emperor.

Chapter 374

The Receiver V

Sinnoa

When we come to discuss her, it is fair to say that even her name alone feels decidedly ominous.

Yu (妖): sinister yet enticing, seductive yet uncanny, a syllable that lures in demons, foretells an early death, and is therefore monstrous—yet, above all else, beautiful.

Ri (理): the principle that governs such things.

Go Yuri.

The logic that rules over eldritch anomalies.

…No normal parent would ever saddle a child with a name like that.

From the outset, Yu (妖) carries the nuance of dying young—of "perishing before one's time."

Who would ever give their beloved child a character that screams ill fortune? One might as well cast a curse instead.

"Come to think of it."

"Ye—?"

"I've never once heard you talk about your family, Yuri."

While we were sailing toward our next destination, the [Morning Star of the Second Coming], I asked the question as casually as I could.

"Well. In times like these it's hard to imagine any family surviving

intact, and frankly I have to wonder whether you ever truly had one."

"Ahaha."

Go Yuri, who had been peering past the horizon through a pair of binoculars, let out a faint laugh.

"Guild Leader does have a habit of tossing off remarks that dig right into a person's heart. You're awful."

"…I was insensitive. Sorry. So you did have a family?"

"Yes. I did. Quite a large one, actually."

A large family? The phrasing sounded odd.

Did she mean she'd had so many brothers and sisters that it was practically a clan?

'A bustling Go Yuri household—little brothers, big brothers, older sisters everywhere. They'd probably start by dropping a colony on Earth as a housewarming gift…'

Lost in silly thoughts for a moment, I stared blankly ahead, just as the bow of our dinghy sliced a clean line through the ocean.

The sea of this world, overflowing with Leviathan's blood, was eerily calm; the wake our little boat left behind was likely the only wave for miles.

"Guild Leader, do you remember your own family?"

"No. Not at all. I'm not sure I've mentioned it, but I'm suffering from a sort of amnesia."

"Oh dear. For their dutiful son who even made it into a top university to forget them… that's tragic."

My heart lurched.

"…Do you know what university I attended?"

“Ahaha, of course. If it weren’t an elite school, do you honestly think the pseudo-aristocrats of Sejong would have hired you as their daughters’ private tutor?”

“…”

On that point I too had long been puzzled.

‘…Why on earth did the Cheon family choose someone like me, a complete nobody, as tutor to their daughters, their precious heirs?’

The gap in status was simply too large.

As was clear with that summer I spent with Yu Ji-won when she was fourteen, my own family was anything but wealthy.

During my college years I’d lived alone in a tiny rental across from her hillside neighborhood, a seven-pyeong* room in a run-down multiplex. (*Roughly 23 m2)

I was probably covering the rent on my own, surviving on student loans.

‘Meanwhile, Cheon Yo-hwa lived in a mansion sitting on 14,990 pyeong of land. The cult followers had an entire private community.’ (**Roughly 49,524 m2)

‘They even ran their own school corporation, grooming the next generation of believers.’

The class divide was obscene.

Even if the old me hadn’t been penniless, it was impossible to imagine I’d had the connections to mingle with a provincial noble house.

Prestigious university or not, entrusting their treasured heirs’ studies to some random “just a college student,” and a male tutor at that—there was simply no reason.

‘Something doesn’t add up. I’m still missing a piece.’

A riddle unsolved.

“If Guild Leader can’t remember his family—”

Go Yuri spoke again while my thoughts chased their tail.

“—then I can’t talk about mine.”

“Hmm? What does that mean?”

“If whatever I say makes you remember them, you’ll just be sad. Either discover them yourself, or remain unaware forever, that’s how it should be.”

“…But I asked about your family, not mine.”

Go Yuri offered no answer.

Still smiling gently, she lowered the binoculars.

“I think we’ve arrived!”

I turned my head, and the sea split like the miracle of Moses.

Just as in Exodus, the seabed gaped open. Down there, a massive structure showed off its majesty.

“…”

It was so familiar that for a moment my voice simply left me.

And no wonder.

“…Why is every other building in the world underwater, yet the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun[1] is perfectly intact?”

“This too must be the grace of the Supreme Dignity. Wow. Not even the Great Deluge dared swallow the North’s holiest shrine!”

Even when the world was whole, that place alone would have been branded a nexus of anomalies and void. Fitting that the [Morning Star of the Second Coming] was waiting for me there.

[The Morning Star of the Second Coming].

Among all the Saintess's alt accounts, it had the most fanatical followers and by far the most convoluted lore.

Outwardly, that account wore the face of Mo Gwang-seo: the kind of middle-aged Korean man you'd get if you asked an image generator for "middle-aged Korean male" and clicked refresh a dozen times.

More precisely, it was an anomaly that merely borrowed the "shape of Mo Gwang-seo."

Well, this palace was practically a mummy dungeon to rival the Pyramids. Like building, like owner.

"Welcome, Undertaker."

So I could hardly help being startled.

"To greet you not with Clairvoyance but with my own eyes is a first. I've long wished to meet you."

"…Uh. Ms. Saintess?"

Seated upon the throne was, by anyone's eyes, the Saintess as she might have looked at ten.

The problem was her speech.

"That title refers either to my poor mother or, in another sense, a pitiable daughter. I am no Saintess."

Unlike the equally child-sized [Monarch of the Crimson Horse], the Constellation before me was remarkably composed.

My head spun.

"First off, where is Mo Gwang-seo?"

"Who knows? I do not. When the Great Deluge came and the world sank, I awoke with my siblings—yet Mo Gwang-seo was already

gone.”

“…”

“But you spoke down to my other sisters, and now you use honorifics with me.”

“Well, yes. I always used proper honorifics with the real Ms. Saintess. As for the knock-off and Bunny Ears… recognizing them as the Saintess would only demean her, so I refrained.”

“Ha-ha.”

[The Morning Star of the Second Coming] laughed.

Somehow the laughter brimmed with authority, but coming from a child half the throne’s height, the dissonance was wild.

“The sisters may feel slighted. Each of them carries one aspect of Mother.”

“That’s something we’ll need to ask the Saintess herself later.”

“Hmm? A fair point.”

She stroked her chin.

“You do try to listen to others. Even as a regressor, you still respect people. I admire that.”

A meaningful smile.

“Of course, no matter how hard you listen, there are some whose words you can never be sure you’ve truly heard.”

“What do you mean?”

“That being. The one you call by your own chosen name. Whatever it says, you can never be certain those words are truly its will—an absolute anomaly.”

Go Yuri.

“Why does that being appear to you as a woman with pink hair—an appearance that belongs to no one in this world?”

“…”

Once again, I alone had come inside. Go Yuri was still outside, tying the dinghy.

“The simplest answer,” she continued,

“is that your type is pink-haired girls—ones who laugh easily, sit demurely, can debate the Three Kingdoms, play janggu, and cheer for Shu. If that’s your ideal, it makes sense.”

“My tastes are perfectly ordinary.”

“Well, that’s a debate for another time, but something about its appearance is too odd to be mere preference.”

The Constellation narrowed her eyes.

“If that being could change at will, then at least once it should’ve shown someone else’s face—Dang Seo-rin’s, say. Don’t you think?”

“You plan to have Oh Dok-seo steal a peek at the side story someday, right? No comment.”

“And yet you say it has kept the exact same face since before the fifth run. So very peculiar.”

A fair point.

“If someone else could draw your greatest affection, shouldn’t its face have changed to them at least once?”

“It’s not the only strange part.”

There were couples in this world.

To the lonely that might feel cruel, but ‘people who love each other’ do exist.

“For such a person, Go Yuri should look exactly like their lover. At

the very least, someone should see her as a real-world celebrity. Yet…"

"There is none."

The Constellation spoke with certainty.

"No one ever mistakes that entity for anyone who truly exists."

For example—

It was awkward to admit, but whether anyone liked it or not, the person Sim Ah-ryeon 'loves most in the world' is me, the Undertaker.

I won't label that feeling. Ah-ryeon's mind isn't easily caged by a single word.

"…To Ah-ryeon, Go Yuri ought to look exactly like me—or at least resemble me. Yet Ah-ryeon never confuses the two of us."

Click. She nodded.

"The same with Yu Ji-won. Even if she can't recognize faces, if that being could turn into whoever best draws her affection, it would have become you."

"But Go Yuri never managed to become me."

"Indeed. We must conclude she lacks that power."

Why?

Of course, one exception exists.

As mentioned, the [Admin of the Infinite Metagame] claims Go Yuri looks like me—the Undertaker.

…Utterly baffling.

"Therefore,"

The Constellation hopped down from the throne.

“Before I die by your hand, I will risk everything to see that being.”

“…”

“Until now I avoided looking for fear of being brainwashed. But I’ll die anyway—so on my sisters’ behalf I’ll witness it myself, and then die.”

She fixed me with her gaze.

“So that my final words, my dying scream, might leave some clue to its identity.”

“…It will probably do no good.”

I shook my head.

“Go Yuri’s brainwashing even affects language. Whatever you try to say will reach me already censored.”

“We have a countermeasure.”

“A countermeasure?”

“In this world, and across all your cycles, only now does it become possible.”

She covered her right eye.

“As you see, I’ll watch using Clairvoyance only with my left eye.”

“……?”

“And at the same moment, my sister, the [Understanding of Anguish], will watch using only her right eye.”

She grinned.

“And we’ll share our visions.”

“W-wait. That means—”

“In my left eye I’ll see ‘the being as viewed by Morning Star,’ and in

my right eye ‘the being as viewed by Understanding of Anguish.’”

“…!”

My own eyes widened.

“So the Go Yuri who always shows just one face might appear in several forms at once?”

“Exactly.”

“If the contradiction cracks, we might glimpse its true face.”

“But aren’t you sisters all fragments of the Saintess? Won’t you see the same ideal?”

“We share an origin, but each of us has her own taste. A simple example: little Lü Bu is fascinated by your backside, while I prefer firm thighs—I’d like to try a lap pillow.”

“Excuse me?”

“We’re mirrors shattered by Hecate, both the Saintess and not. If we perceived that pink-haired being identically, then we’d collapse into ‘one Saintess.’”

Something sounded off, but as if nothing odd had been said, she continued.

“So while someone else’s vision might overlap, ours never will. Because the moment it does…”

“…the paradox Hecate built would crumble, Mr. Undertaker.”

The voice was not mine.

From behind a massive pillar stepped another figure—her face that of the Saintess, but perhaps ten years older.

“And you are…?”

“Please call me [The Understanding of Anguish].”

Her ankle-length hair swayed as she spoke in a near whisper.

“And there’s no need to learn more. I’m only here for this operation.”

She strode forward and, without hesitation, clasped my right hand.

As I blinked, [Understanding of Anguish] looked up at me with steady eyes.

“Mr. Undertaker knows that sufficiently enhanced clairvoyance can be shared.”

“…Ah.”

Indeed—cycle 107, when the Saintess first fell, she’d briefly shown me her third-person sight.

“So I’ll project what I see with this right eye into your view,” she said.

[The Morning Star of the Second Coming] took my left hand.

“And I’ll overlay what I see with my left eye,” she added.

They spoke in unison.

“We’ll show you.”

“We’ll overlay them.”

“Human eyes are first-person, but our Clairvoyance is third-person.”

“With two angles, the pink-haired being’s single face should blur.”

“A trick possible only in a run with multiple clairvoyants, as monstrous as us!”

“This might be the last chance to see that being.”

“It’ll likely lash out, try to ruin us—but, Mr. Undertaker, we want you to look.”

Identical faces, identical eyes, living along different timelines… they looked up at me together.

“Someday.”

“So that even that being can be conquered.”

“…”

For a long while I said nothing.

My lips were sealed, but my heart pounded madly.

I could see Go Yuri.

In this run where the Saintess was broken into Constellations—in this bizarre post-calamity epilogue born of Hecate—I might at last witness Go Yuri’s real face.

Yet—

Would she want that?

Everyone has a face they choose to show.

If I tear away her unknown visage, would that not bring her sorrow?

That worry weighed on me.

– Ms. Dang Seo-rin killed the me outside.

Her words on that bench in the unconscious realm resurfaced.

– Thanks to that, even if only briefly, I’ve been able to move a bit more freely.

“…”

Go Yuri is not one.

The Go Yuri in reality, in the unconscious, the one I see, the one Sim Ah-ryeon sees, the one the Constellations see—they are all

different.

A kaleidoscope of glass shards.

But has she ever wished for this?

Always forced to wear countless faces, never once her true one—could she really welcome that?

Is this truly the right state for her?

"…All right."

With effort, I spoke.

"I have no idea what will happen, but… I'll accept your plan."

Grip. Fingers tightened around mine.

"Then,"

"Please close your eyes."

The point of no return.

When Cheon Yo-hwa kissed me in the Classroom of Four Seasons. When Yu Ji-won called me "Mr. Matiz." When Dang Seo-rin bound my heart with eternal magic.

That instinct—that certainty—enveloped me once more.

If I take one more step—

I will tread a road with no way back.

"…"

I shut my eyes.

Darkness filled my vision.

Then, alternating by my left and right ears, the Constellations counted.

“We’ll count to three.”

“Do not open them.”

“One.”

“Two—”

“Three.”

And then—

Go Yuri appeared before my eyes.

Footnotes:

1 - The **Kumsusan Palace of the Sun**, formerly the Kumsusan Memorial Palace, is a building near the northeast corner of the city of Pyongyang that serves as the mausoleum for Kim Il Sung, the first Supreme Leader.

Chapter 375

The Receiver VI

Sinnoa

Go Yuri's true face.

To insist I had never once imagined it would be a flat-out lie.

Yes… let me confess frankly.

Whenever I was idle I would picture what Go Yuri might really look like.

Was she an anomaly? A genuine human being?

Did she have a blank, featureless head like Slender Man? Or was her face nothing but churning noise, like the Abyss itself?

Perhaps, just perhaps, she had once been one of my own companions, fallen and corrupted until "Go Yuri" was all that remained.

And so—

"……?"

Bzz-zzzt—

The instant my sight linked with the Constellations' and I saw what their third-person clairvoyance was seeing, I could hardly trust my eyes—nor even the [Clairvoyance] that was sharing the image with me.

"J-Jeong Seo-ah?"

There, a tiny child was standing.

Jeong Seo-ah. Anyone with a prodigious memory might recall the

name, the little girl from the bakery in Haeundae who always ran up to me and gave me sugar-coated doughnuts, a pint-sized assassin whose dream was to become the Empress of Insulin.

‘Jeong Seo-ah? Go Yuri? Why… how?’

Moreover, every time a cycle changed, Seo-ah’s gender and appearance changed as well. It had to, because her baker parents conceived their child after the apocalypse, and the timing of a pregnancy naturally shifted from run to run.

‘That’s… Seo-ah from the 19th cycle.’

A being only I could recognize. Even her parents would not have known her if the cycle were different, yet there she was, in the 999th run, in front of the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, poking curiously at the parted walls of water like a child at the Red Sea.

‘What in the world…’

Was that Go Yuri’s true form?

Just a cute sugar-bomb terrorist whose lethal doughnuts threatened me with hyperglycemia, and yet she was supposed to be the star of the “pink entity”?

My understanding, painstakingly built over countless regressions, began to crack. Static crawled across my view like an old CRT screen.

Bzz, bzzt-bzzt. Bzz.

The black was Seo-ah’s shadow—alive, tentacular, climbing to swallow her whole.

The white was Seo-ah’s face—skin melting like candle wax, dropping onto the shadow in thick plops.

After black and white crossed—

“Ah?”

She changed.

A face at once familiar and impossible to grow used to.

– …

The so-called Undertakeress—my female self whom Dang Seo-rin and I had met on the flight to Salar de Uyuni.

– …Seo-rin.

Undertakeress looked up at someone.

Toward a shadow creature made of black-and-white noise—unrecognizable. She reached out with her right hand, gently stroked the thing's cheek.

– Sorry.

At that word, the shadow drove a dagger down. Thud! From the breast that blade pierced burst a spray of blinding white noise—blood.

White droplets spattered, and the shadow's sooty black spread like ink in water.

When black and white had mingled—

Bzz-bzzzt, kshh, bzzt-bzzt!

A wholly different scene unfurled.

– All units, advance!

A man's voice.

The face was familiar, yet my brain buffered a moment before it placed him.

– Guild Leader Lee Baek! A meteor shower's coming down!

– It matters not! If we falter here, the Great Witch of Night will wipe us out anyway! Fear no losses—forward!

Lee Baek. The thug from the Busan-Station tutorial who always split survivors into cliques—his power, Lion's Roar.

That I failed to recognize him at once even with [Complete Memory] was no wonder. His whole demeanor was transformed.

'Why is that punk… like this?'

First, the expression, it was stalwart. All the greasy bravado of a hoodlum was gone. His eyes stared straight at reality.

– Left flank! Draw the meteor fragments away!

– Yes, Guild Leader!

– Right flank! The Witch's main body is hiding nearby—find it and annihilate it!

– Aye, My Lord!

…What on earth was happening?

Lee Baek was commanding a vast battlefield with nothing but [Lion's Roar]. Awakeners moved as a single organism under his orders.

– Undertaker.

– Hm.

From behind came the one called Undertaker. Lee Baek looked at him with absolute trust, a look that had never once passed between the real Lee Baek and me in ten thousand years of cycles.

– The final blow is yours.

– As always.

– Can you manage it? The foe is the Great Witch.

– That question is meaningless. If I can't, I die.

Behind Lee Baek stood Undertaker; behind him, another presence

flickered like a shadow. It murmured, and both Lee Baek and Undertaker nodded at once. I tried to see who it was—

Bzzt-bzzt-bzzt-bzzt-bzzt!

Black-and-white static devoured the world.

From the left of my vision a white fluid splashed. Something burst with a wet pop. And I knew, instinctively, that it was happening not inside the "screen" projected by Clairvoyance but outside it.

"…Mr. Undertaker."

I opened my eyes.

My left hand—[Morning Star of the Second Coming] had been holding it moments ago. The Constellation still held it, yet her wrist had lost all weight. Her body dangled in empty air like a puppet on a broken swing.

"…"

"The Morning Star is dead."

I turned right.

[Understanding of Anguish] was not unharmed either. White blood trickled from her mouth, eyes, and ears.

"I won't last long either, so…"

"Exchange… information."

"…Yes."

Cough—white liquid spattered from her lips. She seemed to gather the last of her life into our interlocked fingers.

A vision attempted at the cost of life.

The Constellation reported the result.

"We… saw nothing."

“Nothing.”

“Yes. Only swirling black-and-white static. Of that being itself—not a glimpse.”

“…”

A critical clue… even fragments of the Saintess, degraded to ocean-class anomalies, had failed to observe Go Yuri’s essence with their full [Clairvoyance].

Yet—

“Mr. Undertaker… you saw, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

Why only I could perceive it, I did not know. Perhaps someday I would. But through the sight they had fought to share, I had seen a part of Go Yuri.

“…Good… to hear.”

Understanding gave a faint smile.

“Mr. Undertaker… please… the one that still… remains…”

[*The Understanding of Anguish* wishes you good fortune.]

Sluuush.

Her body, already melting like wax, collapsed completely.

Left hand. Right hand.

“…”

What last words had she tried to leave me?

‘The one that still remains… take care of it.’

Whatever “it” was, I felt the outline in her broken breath.

"…I understand."

One fragment of a Constellation remained to me now. Only one.

Clap!

Go Yuri smacked her hands together.

"My goodness. A pair of nasty Constellations lying in ambush, and the mighty Guild Leader wiped them both out in one go. Amazing as ever!"

…I edited what had happened inside the palace and told her a more palatable version. She accepted without suspicion—or perhaps she simply didn't care whether she believed it or not.

R-r-r-umble.

Soon the parted sea crashed closed again, like the clap of Yuri's hands.

From the stern Lü Bu howled, manning the oar.

"Uooohhh!? As if I'd let my Red Hare sink! Red Hare is unsinkable! Not like the nags of commoners!"

"Kyah-aa-!"

With Lü Bu's rowing skill, already S-rank on water, the dinghy shot clear of the collapsing trench. The route was as wild as any roller coaster. Go Yuri screamed with delight while white spray, as pale as Constellation blood, lashed us on all sides.

"…Go Yuri."

"Yes?"

"By our bearings this must once have been Pyongyang. So Busan is completely submerged, isn't it?"

"Ah, yes, probably. After all, the uninhabited island where you first

woke up was Busan."

I peered overboard. The water was unnaturally clear, streets of a drowned city lay visible below. Empty underwater avenues, smashed windows, lampposts—with not even fish gliding between them. No sign of life at all.

"I see."

I chose my words with care, wearing a regretful expression.

"I guess I'll never again buy bread at that Haeundae bakery."

"Ah. That place was a gem."

Go Yuri volleyed back my remark as naturally as tossing a volleyball.

"I loved their croissants most! Mmh, peeling off those thin layers and biting down, so crisp."

"…"

After clearing the Busan Station tutorial, Go Yuri had vanished. Only later had sightings popped up in Daejeon. Chronologically, she could not have tasted any croissant there, for the bakery reopened much later.

"And inside, all pillowy and soft… like your tongue was lying down on a little bed."

Yet the expression melting across her face as she reminisced overflowed with life. She spoke of memories from a street that no longer existed.

"…Personally, I liked the owners more than the flavor."

"Eh?"

"Every morning at seven they swept the walk, greeting passers-by with big smiles. They met as exchange students in Hawaii, I think."

Go Yuri was watching me. I swallowed, not with my mouth, but with my heart.

"…Their kid was wonderfully polite too. I only wish she'd stop using me as the guinea pig for new recipes."

"Fufu. Guild Leader does exude that hard-to-approach aura. Children rarely dare get close."

"Isn't that too cruel? She calls me oppa."

"You have to understand, Guild Leader. Whether it feels unfair or not, you've lived tens of thousands of years by lifespan alone. If you still insist on being called oppa… hahh. You'll pioneer a new frontier in the domain of humanity's conscience…"

A drop fell into my chest.

In the 999th cycle, this very run, Jeong Seo-ah was a boy. Not a little girl.

"…"

My heart thumped.

"…Well. Thanks to that boy Seo-ah I'm used to being called mister now."

This time I pictured the cheerful boy of the 999th run. As always, [Complete Memory] supplied a crystal-clear recall.

"Cute kids chirping 'mister, mister,' and their cuteness just overruns my dignity."

"…"

Thump. Thump-thump.

My racing heart would not calm.

Just now I had uttered two statements blatantly at odds with each other. A moment ago I'd said a girl named Seo-ah called me oppa.

Immediately after, I added that a boy named Seo-ah called me mister.

A contradiction. An odd exchange. Any ordinary person—say, Noh Do-hwa—would have barked, “What nonsense are you spouting?” right away.

“Ahaha.”

Go Yuri—

“——Maybe that’s because you actually don’t mind being called mister, Guild Leader.”

—answered as though nothing whatsoever was strange.

“…Me?”

“Yes. Think about it. When Oh Dok-seo calls you mister, you feel quite a bit of closeness, don’t you?”

As if there had been no oddity in our entire conversation.

“More than anything, you honestly don’t care about age.”

Go Yuri was smiling. As if teasing me.

“I even know why, you see?”

“…Oh? And why is that?”

“Because of Ms. Saintess. She used [Time Stop] so much her lifespan keeps stretching abnormally.”

Go Yuri was smiling. As if finding me impressive.

“If you fretted about your own age, you’d inevitably force Ms. Saintess to count hers the same way. So you’re being considerate of her.”

Go Yuri was smiling. As if she understood me.

“…Is that what you think?”

I managed to reply, but I had no composure to move my tongue.

Every five seconds I pivoted the images in my mind with [Complete Memory]—Noh Do-hwa of the 53rd run. Switch. Sim Ah-ryeon of the 95th. Switch. Yu Ji-won of the 777th. Switch. The Saintess of the 107th.

Over and over, like turning a kaleidoscope, swapping memories at a resolution only I could achieve.

“Yes!”

Go Yuri was smiling.

“That delicate consideration of yours moved Noh Do-hwa.” “Because Sim Ah-ryeon is surprisingly sensitive.” “A natural at telling lies from truths.” “Which made things hard for Yu Ji-won,” “yet also led her to listen to your voice.”

Go Yuri was smiling.

Go Yuri was smiling.

Go Yuri was smiling.

“And Ms. Saintess already knows—she won’t say it out loud, but she knows you’re thinking of her. Wahh. I find that relationship truly beautiful!”

“…”

Ah…

My soul, not my lips, released a sigh—black in color.

‘This is not a conversation.’

No one could have realized it, unless they, like me, had lived through contradictory timelines. Unless they, like me, possessed flawless recall of each one.

‘…I’m not talking with her at all.’

There was no such thing as “Go Yuri.”

I could neither see her nor hear her.

Her thoughts, tastes, hobbies, likes and dislikes, memories, shared recollections—none of it could pass between us.

‘She merely reads the sights of the timelines I’ve walked and, matching them, enacts the perfect dialogue, the perfect action…’

It was not mind control. It only became **mind control as a side effect**.

‘Whoever she speaks with, she reads their deepest interior and resolves it.’

The optimal conversation.

The optimal counseling.

In other words: the optimal route.

Strategy Guide.

That was Go Yuri’s authority.

Within it, her own will and desire did not exist.

“…”

I thought about the being before my eyes.

Has she ever, even once, conversed with someone?

“Huh? Guild Leader?”

Go Yuri—

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

—was smiling.

Footnotes:

Chapter 376

The Receiver VII

Sinnoa

Shall I bring up a slightly different topic.

Everyone has, at least once, fallen into the fantasy of [Character Making] themselves.

For example, if you're of the Harry Potter generation, you've probably day-dreamed about your avatar (for some reason sorted into Ravenclaw House) enrolling at Hogwarts.

Bloodline? Noble. Appearance? Naturally a peerless beauty—absolutely a peerless beauty. Luck? Top-tier. The rest of the settings… huh, who cares? ONLY the peerless beauty. Even if you have to pile on every negative trait imaginable to scrape together enough points, you absolutely refuse to give up that peerless beauty. Your body is frail, you cough delicately all the time (people have to notice by pure coincidence, of course), and you're actually afflicted by an incurable disease and a curse? All the better… and so on.

It makes no difference even if you're not imagining yourself entering a particular fictional universe.

TRPGs, role-plays, whatever.

At the very least, you wish that the real-life *you* could turn into someone a bit more ideal.

'The greatest version of myself I can picture.'

Opportunities to sketch an original character in your head are surprisingly common.

Now, let's add one more layer of imagination.

Imagine that a person called A really gained the ability of [Character Making].

Of course, an ability called [Character Making] doesn't exist in reality.

I'm not speaking in circles just to confuse you.

To put it bluntly, this is not an accurate account of Go Yuri.

I'm only using [Character Making] as an example so you can picture it easily.

Even so—if such an impossible fantasy came true, what would happen next?

First of all, the fact that you'd check off 'peerless beauty' as your very first trait is so obvious anyone could predict it without being a prophet.

After that, according to your taste, you might deepen bonds with a childhood friend, bump into a literary girl in a hidden archive, secretly help a genius artist who's perfect on the outside but a bundle of yandere nerves on the inside, or be doted on by a sibling who's unusually kind only to you.

Just design your life however you like.

– Life is wonderful!

And then, just when you're enjoying that beautiful life to the fullest, an unfortunate bit of news arrives: the Void comes calling.

– Uh-oh?

The genre shifts.

No matter how lovingly crafted your OC is, they can only panic. How can a whole universe change this suddenly?

Thankfully, the panic doesn't last long. The odds are high that you already invested in something like 'Mental Fortitude: A-class' during

[Character Making].

– Ahh, so that's what the hidden setting was?

Above all, to your surrogate A, this sort of genre drift feels like a cliché in itself.

– I've seen this somewhere before!

– Well, it can't be helped. Let's give it a go… saving the world.

Now A starts paying attention to traits they barely glanced at when they first did [Character Making].

'Swordsmanship Talent.' In a modern story you figured you'd never need such a trait, but things are different now. Pick it. Slot it in. Talent cap? Obviously S-class.

'Magic Talent.' Same story. Scribbling even more cheat codes onto an already happy life might offend A's aesthetic sense, but next to a grand event like the end of the world, personal qualms are trivial. Pick it. Slot it in. Talent ceiling? SSS-class.

Far beyond an OC and into the territory of an undeniable Mary Sue —a munchkin that anyone would complain about—the overpowered build is now complete.

– Now then! How do you like me!

And the Void arrives.

– Huh?

The difficulty feels a bit off.

– Hmm?

Still, there's no need to worry.

A has a cheat key:

Unlimited [Character Making] ticket service!

Spin the gacha as much as you like! Apart from having to invest your time with each spin, it's practically free! Good grief. The devs must be crazy!

So what's left?

You.

– What, I have to pick even more traits…?

A hint of dissatisfaction.

A lone Mary Sue stomping everything flat by herself is way off A's taste.

Even so—what choice is there? The world must be saved.

Because the childhood friend whose bond you painstakingly built, the literary girl who makes you light-hearted just by her presence, the genius artist who shows a real smile only to you, the sibling who'd dive into Hell for your sake—

If you don't save the world, they all die.

And it won't be a peaceful death either.

– Mm.

For yourself. For others.

For the life that has already become precious.

– Fine, just a bit more.

'Charisma.' You never wanted to stand out, but if you're going to block the Void you have to unite humanity. Mediating between countless people with conflicting interests already makes your head spin and your chest feel tight, but—

– Just a bit more.

'Natural Socialite.' Then all you need is a trait that lets you enjoy socializing itself. Now hanging out with scheming power players

isn't painful. Sure, as a human you still get stressed, but—

– A bit more?

'Indomitable Will.' In that case, nullify the stress itself. More precisely, impose upon yourself a steel will that never collapses even under stress. Traits like 'Diligent' and 'Conviction' are bonuses. Willpower beyond anything your past self could have imagined.

– Just a bit more.

'Graceful Speech.' The ability to speak at any time and place without losing dignity or courtesy, so no one ever underestimates you. But some people positively dislike formal manners, so—

– Just a bit more!

'Psychological Insight.' If you can sense someone's psyche instinctively, you can tailor your response. 'Mind Reading.' Read their thoughts outright and you can judge not just instinctively but with intellect. 'Status.' By reading even the opponent's talents and disposition, you remove any room for misunderstanding.

– Just a bit more.

– Just a bit more.

– Just a little…

There are countless roads to unhappiness, but only one path to happiness, so they say. Tolstoy said something similar.

Road. Route.

The sun sets but the road is still long.

It can't be helped. The journey is urgent, yet the sun is already sinking.

If letting the sun set is the law of nature, then walking the road is the law of humanity. And Nature—the world—now hates humankind. So why should I place nature's law above human law?

– Huh?

Somehow I feel more erudite.

Now you can quote both Anna Karenina and the Records of the Grand Historian with perfect ease.

You couldn't read classical Chinese at all before.

Since when?

…You're not sure.

Was it when you took 'Culture' as a trait? Or when, to recruit a particular someone, you chose 'Calligraphy' as a shared hobby?

Or, or, or—

– …Huh.

Déjà vu.

– …

Once, your family badgered you to get into a prestigious university. Studying was boring, but the world is harsh, they said, and a top-tier diploma is indispensable. Lacking the courage to ignore that brief, persuasive logic, you probably took the trait 'Scholastic Ability.'

Once, you hated people, hated forcing yourself to smile, but you had no power to trample those you disliked and no nerve to face them without a smile, so you probably took the traits 'Sociability' and 'Smile.'

You didn't hate it.

You didn't love it either.

Things you merely 'didn't hate' piled up.

Before you knew it, perhaps the heap had grown into something close to 'hate.'

– …Just a little more.

No need to worry.

A has a cheat key:

‘Optimism.’ ‘Bright Smile.’ ‘Sense of Happiness.’ ‘Carrier of Happy Virus.’ ‘Stress Immunity.’ ‘Dopamine System Immunity.’ ‘Unquenchable Hope.’ ‘A magic switch that turns sadness ON/OFF.’ ‘Be Happy.’ ‘Healthy Self-Love.’ ‘Ability to forcibly redirect your train of thought.’ ‘Be Happy.’ ‘Don’t grieve over failure.’ ‘Don’t despair over frustration.’ ‘Cherish success.’ ‘Never lose curiosity about the world.’ ‘Be Happy.’

And what remains after all this?

Everything.

– …

Just that… you are no longer there.

The rowboat fell silent.

“…”

“…”

The reason was simple.

After that last exchange, I’d stopped talking to Go Yuri.

I’d realized that any conversation was meaningless.

“…”

A faint smile.

Go Yuri likewise didn’t open her mouth first.

She must have decided that, with me as I am now, the best way to draw goodwill was ‘silence.’ She kept only a faint smile on her lips.

So on the broad sea only the sound of oars stirring the water broke the hush.

“Uh. Um.”

Shifting around awkwardly—

Lü Bu glanced away.

“…Ah, right! Brother! Now only [The Librarian of the Great Library]’s star shard is left, isn’t it! Wahaha. That means either she or I will become the final Constellation. Brother, whom will you choose?”

“We’ll see when we get there.”

“As expected, Brother, you’re cautious! Ha-a! But I! Even if I’m reborn as the one and only Constellation, I swear I will never betray you, Brother! Am I not the very model of a loyal retainer!”

“Right.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Heh-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha….”

Lü Bu’s expression slowly flattened.

“Ehh, this is bad news.”

When I still didn’t react, Lü Bu glanced up at the sky like a dog whose owner had scolded it.

[*The Monarch of the Crimson Horse* voices serious doubts about the current mood.]

[*The Monarch of the Crimson Horse* does not understand your sudden change of heart.]

I couldn’t explain.

Lü Bu had already come into too close contact with Go Yuri. Even if he understood my explanation, he would never be able to abandon his attachment to her.

In the end, until we reached our final destination, the rowboat was steeped in silence.

“Whoa, hey. We’ve arrived.”

The Tower of Babel.

Lü Bu moored the boat to that structure standing in the middle of the sea. As usual he tried to flop down and stretch out, but I stopped him.

“You’re coming with me this time.”

“Huh? Ah, yes. Understood.”

Just as I was about to disembark with Lü Bu—*tug*.

Something gripped my clothes.

When I turned, Go Yuri was gently pinching the hem of my collar with her fingertips.

“…”

In her other hand she held out a star fragment.

[The Collector of All Anomalies]. It was the residue of the Constellation Go Yuri had devoured on the deserted island.

“You’re kind, Guild Leader.”

Go Yuri parted her lips.

“No matter what we say now, you can never know what I truly meant. The ‘real me’ is cut out of the dialogue, and only the ‘Go Yuri’ created by your imagination is left smiling.”

“…”

“So there’s only one way to communicate with ‘me.’ Silence. If no words are exchanged, your silence itself shows you’re keeping quiet for my sake.”

She gave a bright smile.

“Thank you.”

“…”

“It’s so like you to find a method anywhere, Guild Leader, but you don’t have to be considerate. I’m actually more comfortable if you keep talking to yourself. It’s a kind of pleasant white noise!”

Was that truly Go Yuri’s feeling?

I couldn’t tell.

I even tried using [Mind Reading] as an experiment, but it had no effect.

Like a warped mirror, like a broken kaleidoscope, the being before my eyes only refracted my own psyche.

“…I’m sorry.”

After accepting the star fragment, I murmured quietly.

“Huh.”

“To talk with you, I’d have to face you while holding your real form in my mind. But for me now, that’s impossible. I… can’t know your true face. I’m sorry.”

“Huh. Huh.”

“Forgive me.”

Go Yuri’s lips slowly opened.

“□□□□ □□□□.”

But no voice came out. Even her lips didn’t move. In the pitch-black well beyond, there wasn’t even a sign of a tongue.

“□□.” “□□□ □.” “□□□□.”

I couldn't reach her.

The Void.

"…"

Closing her lips, Go Yuri smiled. And she never spoke again. She only waved her hand, as though bidding farewell.

I stepped out of the rowboat.

When I climbed the Tower of Babel and glanced back, the boat moored at the steps was drifting all alone, with no one on board.

"Brother."

"Mm? Yes?"

"Do you remember who was with us just now?"

Lü Bu tilted her head.

"Huh? What are you saying, Brother? Ever since the deserted island, haven't the two of us siblings overcome every ordeal together! Wahaha!"

"…I see."

"Yep! The moment this little brother lost his Sky-Piercing Halberd yet still defeated [The Collector of All Anomalies] must be recorded in Brother's heroic chronicles! I truly hope your personal Prophet will do it justice!"

The instant Lü Bu said that, for some reason my own memory conjured up an image of this kid actually clashing with [The Collector of All Anomalies].

Vaguely—at some unknown place, maybe that deserted island. But the image was vivid.

'Just as I thought.'

If I didn't possess [Complete Memory], my original memories would

already have been entirely painted over.

‘Perhaps it isn’t a coincidence that I was given this kind of memory.’

Threads of inevitability woven like spider silk.

Feeling one of those flimsy strands catch my ankle, I climbed the tower steps.

A short time later.

“Welcome, my master.”

A certain Constellation awaited me in the tower’s innermost chamber.

Seeing me freeze for a moment, she spread a fan and hid her lips.

“Your face has hardened. Why? Were you expecting [The Librarian of the Great Library] instead? Oh dear, how disappointing.”

“…Why are you here?”

“Oh my, do I really need to explain? That crude, barbaric, stupid miko must have followed ‘that side.’ Naturally, that leaves me by myself on ‘this side.’”

The white girl.

Despite her aristocratic speech and bearing, shackles bound her ankles, wrists, and even the slender neck beneath her face.

“Ahh. Truly! Free of that wretched brat—oh my, pardon. Free of that wretched apostle—the very air feels different.”

This was the first time I’d met her in reality.

Even so, I could speak her name without hesitation.

“…The Admin of the Infinite Metagame.”

“Yees.”

Click—the fan folded shut.

“I’ve been waiting, regressor. My detestable master.”

Unlike the other Constellations, whose beginnings were lies from the outset, the outcast god who alone was a true Constellation smiled fearlessly.

[*The Admin of the Infinite Metagame* greets you.]

Footnotes:

Chapter 377

The Receiver VIII

Sinnoa

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame].

Once, she demoted this entire world to a mere “game,” re-classified every anomaly as a “monster,” and labeled Awakened folk “NPCs,” thereby securing near-invincibility for herself, that outcast god—

“Phaa. I’ve always wondered from inside the screen! Just how good is this thing they call chocolate cake? Every time that chewable miko ate it she’d sneer, ‘A clump of pixels like you will never taste this, pity,’ and my nerves would fray, fray, fray!”

…was now, in splendid Homo Sapiens form, munching cake.

For the record, I baked the dessert.

The instant we met she folded her fan with aristocratic grace and asked, “Might I trouble you for a sample of your culinary skill?” like some noble heiress placing an order.

Fortunately the Tower of Babel keeps a stock of ingredients.

I improvised a full course from what was left, and, as you see, she’s reaping happy chemicals in overdose.

“Did the Librarian tease you like that?”

“Yes! Really… that plebeian; filth beyond the word ingratitude. Mmm—this chocolate, the faint bitterness followed by a brush of sweetness on the tongue—irresistible….”

“Sorry to cut into your gourmet discovery, but first things first.”

“Mm?”

“Your diction. That gaudy noble-lady lilt—where did it come from?”

A natural human question.

“To my memory you never had a Young-Lady trait. Even the character that became the template for ‘White Girl’ was technically a noble daughter, but she never spoke in that rootless style.”

“Hm.”

The Admin speared another bite of cake, head tilting in the same posture.

“I didn’t choose it because I like it. Partly the [Young-Lady] tag stuck on me, as you said, but mostly the chewable miko forced the trait.”

“What?”

“Please don’t make that face. What did she say… Ah—‘The old man lacks a noble-lady character; you’ll be perfect for it.’ Something like that.”

“…”

“She shoved a setting sheet not 5,700 but 57,000 characters long down my throat, as if training ChatGPT. If she had time for that circus, I’d prefer for her to write another line of her novel.”

Dok-seo, Dok-seo! Dok-seo…

“By her logic, overlapping character traits are the worst catastrophe. Thus, I am a catastrophe.”

“So in short it’s all the Librarian’s fault.”

“Well. Until she met a certain ‘someone,’ my miko’s psychosis wasn’t this far gone.”

The Admin’s eyes began to narrow at me, so I hurried topics.

“Constellations have materialized, but I didn’t expect you to remain. Why haven’t you messaged me until now?”

“Oh my, have you forgotten already?”

Tap tap—after wiping her lips, the Admin lowered her lashes.

“To me, ‘Undertaker’ is always two people.”

“Ah.”

“Normally my miko would tag whichever is near her as the ‘real’ one, but the world has nicely ended. Two masters in one boat, I couldn’t tell which was genuine.”

“And now?”

“No.”

Her smile warped into resignation, like sneering at herself and me alike.

“For all I know you’re the pink entity. Or truly the Undertaker. I can’t decide, so I'll converse assuming you’re my real master.”

“…”

“If you’re fake and I miss it, apologies in advance. Because of me your chance to beat the pink entity will vanish forever, but please accept it as karma and be magnanimous.”

I frowned.

“Vanish forever? Explain.”

“Like this.”

Shrrk.

She extended claw-like nails and slit her own chest straight down.

No blood flew.

Inside, static hissed.

Grotesque enough, yet stranger still:

"……?"

I could read the static.

Once it would've been meaningless noise, now faint shapes formed.

Noise filling her torso… on closer look every flicker was a 'letter.'

L A P O T W I R E K I D O B A S E L O T Y G R A L P O R E S Y N
O T I K E R A B L W I N E D O R O S T L A K Y B E S I O N T E R I
P A L Y N O K E D I T O L A R E S Y L A P O N O B L R E K I T S Y
W I D O K E R A L Y S T N O T E P O R E D I L A K Y I N R O S E
B A T I G R A L P O S Y N O K E L A R E B L W I T Y

Plop!

She thrust a hand into the typographic swarm, into her own chest.

"Hmmm. Ah, here?"

Fishing around, she pinched letters between finger and thumb.

"Found them."

Six letters:

O T P A P L

They wriggled on the tabletop.

She skewered and rearranged them:

L A P T O P

Lined up, they tore with a rip—*shraaak!*—and a laptop sat there.

The bound item I receive each time I restart at Busan Station.

She beamed.

“Here, detestable master. A laptop that survives regression… my personal ark. With this—”

“Incredible. You just turned letters into a thing?”

Blink.

Her head tilt turned even steeper.

“Pardon?”

“What you did just now.”

“Er… master, are you saying you could actually see it?”

“……?”

My turn to tilt.

“Of course.”

“What exactly did you see?”

“You slit your chest, letters writhed, you plucked the six reading ‘laptop.’”

“…”

Her face hardened; she had meant to unveil the laptop, yet now propped her chin, grave.

“…”

“What’s wrong?”

“…‘Sudden’ better suits you, master. Even with the chewable miko gone, me wearing a perfect human shell is odd.”

“…?”

“Regressor, my detestable master.”

She fixed her stare.

“The authority you glimpsed isn’t something human eyes parse easily.”

“I still don’t follow.”

“…That my true body is letters, that you casually perceived it—that alone is bizarre.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Odd, no? You never had such power.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmph. You don’t grasp the weight yet. Fine, let’s do a test.”

She reached in again, drew out nine letters, stretched them:

W H I T E G I R L

Chin on hand, she smiled.

“Go on, poke around.”

“Poke?”

“If you truly see them, you can touch them.”

“…”

“Prove it.”

Easy enough. I pressed a finger on “W H I T E G I R L.”

Twitch! Letters jerked, the Admin’s shoulders quivered.

Watching, I kneaded ink from ‘W’ and ‘G,’ reshaping:

B L O N D E G I R L

At once the letters leapt up the Admin’s body—arm, shoulder, neck, cheeks, hair—like cockroaches.

“Ah?”

Where they burrowed her hair’s whiteness turned gold.

“…Not a lie, then.”

She sighed, twirling new, fuller golden hair.

A weary smile.

“Congratulations, detestable master.”

“…”

“You’ve become a monster’s monster.”

“Yes.”

“Any workaround?”

I shook my head.

“It’s a contract—with Hecate, with Nut.”

“Oh my.”

“Try to record anything about Hecate and it counts as a breach. Directly or indirectly, there’s no loophole.”

Even if one existed, breaking the contract was unthinkable.

She laughed behind her fan.

“Understood. But… information unrelated to Hecate, without any mention of the 173rd run, but only events of the 999th—what happens then?”

Snap—the fan closed.

“If it concerns the pink entity alone, could we not leave clues inside my laptop?”

I almost sprang up.

“Information on Go Yuri!”

“Yes. To me, data on that pink entity equals ‘data on the Undertaker.’ It fits the laptop just fine.”

Ohoho.

“As you know, that laptop preserves the Undertaker’s chronicle across runs. Therefore we can stock it with pink-entity intel.”

“…!”

A spark in my head.

‘Right… she can’t tell me from Yuri, so she can record Yuri perfectly!’

Brilliant.

Details of Dang Seo-rin were too bound to the contract, but—

Clues on Go Yuri from the 999th cycle could reach my next self.

“Of course, the contract might wipe everything anyway.”

“It’s still worth trying.”

“And one more safety measure…”

Click.

She powered on the laptop.

It should have nothing installed, save the text files for my chronicle. Less software means fewer authorities for her.

Yet—

“To keep the 999th-run data safe, shall we add a safeguard?”

The once-empty desktop showed a single unfamiliar file:

“Library Society.”

While my eyes widened, she continued, smiling like a debutante seasoned in intrigue.

“Any Constellation we miss this run devolves into a true anomaly, correct? Then—”

“…we turn that to our advantage.”

“Indeed. The Great Library floods daily with hundreds of data items.”

“In that ocean we’ll scatter the clues to defeating the pink entity. The hints which you found in this cycle.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 378

The Receiver IX

Sinnoa

[The Librarian of the Great Library] will be left behind as a bona-fide Constellation.

The goal is singular.

Go Yuri, who only managed to seize a clue worthy of the name after reaching the 999th run, a being whose real name remains an enigma.

All of this is to pass information about her down to the next ‘me’.

“How do you like it, Master?”

Admin of the Infinite Metagame, the very person who came up with the operation, flashed a self-assured smile.

“Please humbly admit that the only strategist in your party is no longer just that blasted puppet-master behind the scenes.”

“…I get that Dok-seo is your priestess, but do you really have to hate Yohwa that much too?”

“Oh my, you are absolutely right, Master! After all, you only got handed [Mind Reading] by her, twisted my century-long master plan in a single stroke, ruined the most promising priestess worse than anyone, and even made me sign a humiliating instrument of surrender—but sure, there isn’t a single reason in the world for me to bear a grudge, is there?”

“…”

Leaving the blazing-with-rage Admin of the Infinite Metagame aside for the moment, I ran the numbers on the operation’s success rate in my head.

‘Not bad.’

No—better than merely ‘not bad.’

There were, however, several side effects and loopholes that could be foreseen once the plan was set in motion, and I rolled each of them across my tongue in turn.

“Very well, Admin of the Infinite Metagame. Let’s assume, as you say, that [The Librarian of the Great Library] indeed ascends as the one-and-only authentic Constellation.”

“Yeees, sir.”

“In that case, she’ll have inherited not only the remnants of the Great Witch Hecate but the Saintess’s traces as well. If we leave her be, won’t she become ridiculously strong down the road?”

“Hmm. You’re worried about a rebellion, aren’t you? Then the constraints have to be strong—very strong.”

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame tilted her chin, as if she had expected such objections and was nonetheless happy to play the red team in our thought experiment.

“From what I’ve heard from the other Constellations, you’ve already gathered the fragments, Master.”

“Ah, you mean these?”

“Um, Master, sorry to say, but could you please not play so casually with an anomaly’s main body?”

She paled when she saw the Constellation fragments I’d just fished out of my pocket.

No one had ever pointed it out, so I hadn’t noticed, but apparently even touching these shards counted as the outrageous misconduct of a monster in her book.

“Haa… Well, perhaps it’s for the best. The pieces that end up in your grasp are, so to speak, the Constellation’s core—the very

essence.”

“Ho-oh.”

“In other words... by using these fragments you can design the Constellation’s ‘settings’ however you like.”

“For example, something like [Must Never Be Hostile Toward Humanity]?”

“Exactly. You can impose as many rules as you fancy, right down to something akin to the Three Laws of Robotics.”

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame grumbled from behind her fan.

“Honestly. The original plan was for me to tweak the settings with my authority, yet the already unfair gentleman disappears for a bit only to come back even more upgraded. The world really is, hopelessly, unfair.”

I ignored the complaint—it was beside the point.

‘So I’m entering the settings.’

I define the essence of the anomaly.

With my fingertips, I create an anomaly.

“...”

A pitch-black unease rose from below my navel, but I clenched my fist.

It was something that had to be done.

I could not abandon the strategy against Go Yuri like this. I could not squander the chance that had finally arrived in the 999th cycle.

“...Right. If I have no choice but to create this anomaly, I have to configure it so that it harms humanity as little as possible.”

“Hmm. Speaking as someone who already surrendered, I’ll warn you it won’t be easy. You’ll have to brace for some collateral

damage.”

“No. There is a way.”

I looked straight ahead.

“I’m going to put you to use, Admin of the Infinite Metagame.”

“?”

From that day on, the days of writing the setting bible for [The Librarian of the Great Library] began.

[Eeeeeeeek!]

A high-fidelity soprano rang out of the laptop speakers—none other than Admin of the Infinite Metagame’s fury-stricken groan.

Only a short while ago she had enjoyed the freedom of the outside world; how had it come to this?

As if she’d changed jobs back into a VTuber, the avatar of a noble lady on the laptop screen was gnawing on a handkerchief.

[I finally thought I’d gotten a real body, and now—again! Again you shove me into this rice-grain-sized studio apartment! My goodness! Do you truly lack even a shred of human compassion?!]

Slurp.

I leisurely sipped the canned coffee I had salvaged from the Tower of Babel’s storeroom and looked down at the laptop.

“Every VTuber is either a reincarnate or a reincarnation candidate. You’re simply walking the path allotted to you.”

[Eeeek! T-talk about frightening out of nowhere.

“Enough. Get ready.”

I held the Constellation shards up to the laptop screen, beckoning for her to hurry up and eat them.

[Haa. So bull-headed, honestly…]

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame let out a sigh.

The moment the noble-lady avatar stretched out her arms, the fragments that had definitely been ‘outside’ the screen migrated to ‘inside’ it.

Piro-ro-ro-rong ♪

On the white desktop the shards were now lined up like icons, transformed into clumps of pixels.

“Is there any reason to sigh? This isn’t bad news for you either, it means a bit of your mark will remain in [The Librarian of the Great Library].”

[Yes, yes. That’s why I’m cooperating, otherwise I’d never have returned to this solitary-cell existence.]

“Hmm. Strictly speaking, you’ve sworn unconditional obedience to me, so when I give an order, you follow it first and complain later.”

[Could you perhaps share that wretched unpleasantness of yours not only with anomalies like me but with the humans around you as well?]

I cracked the knuckles of my interlaced fingers.

I clicked on a Notepad file.

“All right.”

[Yees.]

“Let’s get started.”

The fragments broke apart.

As the pixels shattered, black dots appeared.

The moment my fingers clacked on the keyboard, those black specks birthed from the shards were dragged along and turned into

letters, like ink.

Just as I had rewritten Admin of the Infinite Metagame's core in my own handwriting, I would now define the essence of [The Librarian of the Great Library] through typing.

The first line of the setting bible read as follows.

※ This work is a piece of fiction. Any institution names, work titles, personal names, or trademarks that appear are entirely fictitious.

Why did that feel so familiar?

Yes. The restriction that it was nothing more than 'fiction.'

A way to ensure that, even if an anomaly-cum-constellation called [The Librarian of the Great Library] did come to life, it would inflict no damage on humanity or reality.

[Hmm. Your brain does work well.]

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame craned her neck to peer at the Notepad file. Her avatar hung from it like someone clinging to a wall.

[Seeing as I'm an Outer God who once ruled over 'fiction,' I've been pretty much completely neutralized already.]

[Therefore, now that [The Librarian of the Great Library]'s sphere of action is limited to fiction, she will never unleash unexpected explosive power.]

"Exactly."

Only powerful anomalies had value, so I once thought.

Even a weak anomaly gained a fresh purpose by virtue of its weakness.

"To lock her inside 'fiction' I'll need not only the fragments' ink but your assistance as well."

[Yes. In a sense... you could call her my daughter?]

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame made an odd face.

[Her original is that Saintess, her maker is you, and I am her helper. Three parents, how lucky the child is to have so many.]

“Let’s keep going.”

Even if I managed to save the world, this anomaly would probably persist somewhere in it, forever taking the form of a ‘creative work.’

The parameters for that entity continued.

1. [The Librarian of the Great Library] records every anomaly and every tale of the uncanny. The method of recording varies each time.

2. Every ghost story circulating through reality or cyberspace has either been authored by [The Librarian of the Great Library] or penned unwittingly by someone she has enchanted.

2-1. [The Librarian of the Great Library] cannot reveal these facts. She records the stories, nothing more, and must not be concerned with proving her own existence.

Juru-ru-ruk.

Every time another line was entered into the setting bible, ink seeped from the shards, and a white ichor trickled from Admin of the Infinite Metagame’s avatar.

From my fingertips as well.

“...”

The letters ‘Under’, ‘ta’, and ‘ker’ tumbled into the screen one after another.

‘In the past, even my eyes would never have been able to see such a sight.’

Just how did such a perspective suddenly open up to me?

I still lacked the answer, but what mattered now was that it was useful to me.

“When I think about it.”

Tap-tap-tap.

I muttered while hammering endlessly at the keys.

[Yes?]

“From the very start, [The Librarian of the Great Library] was defined as the Constellation presiding over the Library Society, whose leader is a character called the Duke of the Black Library—whose true identity is…”

[Master, that’s you, isn’t it?]

“Right.”

Tack, tack-tack.

“To pass off the strategy methods for anomalies to the Awakeners in a manner that sounded plausible, I used the façade of a ‘Library Society.’ The whole setup was my design from start to finish.”

Tack.

“I could have entrusted the imaginary Duke of the Black Library to someone else, like [The Dream Demon of the Grand Pleasure Palace] or [The Morning Star of the Second Coming].”

[And yet?]

“Why, then? I kept the hidden lore that ‘the Duke of the Black Library is actually the Undertaker.’ There was no need to, but unlike the other Constellations, [The Librarian of the Great Library] alone possessed my identity.”

[…]

“And now, [The Librarian of the Great Library] is literally being born at my hands.”

Tack.

“All of these coincidences...”

[Feel almost like inevitabilities.]

“Ahh.”

I smiled.

“How many failures must there have been before reaching this inevitable path? Imagining them makes me want to bless myself for having arrived at this moment.”

[Hmph.]

“Then your presence at my side now is hardly a mere coincidence either, Admin of the Infinite Metagame.”

[...]

“Because you demoted everything in this world to fiction, I could hand over the clues about Go Yuri in the form of a creative work. Perhaps you too were necessary—for me, for us.”

The keyboard clattered.

“A pity.”

[What’s a pity?]

“I’ve felt gratitude toward you for the first time in my life, yet once we pass on to the next cycle I’ll forget it forever, that’s the pity.”

[...]

“So oblivion was this frightening after all.”

Stare. On the screen, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame was gazing up at me.

That gaze no longer felt awkward.

“To remember every minute of one’s life, I had thought that was the punishment and curse laid upon me, but perhaps it wasn’t after all.”

[Whichever path we start on, every human ends up bearing their own heaven-ordained punishment.]

Admin of the Infinite Metagame’s voice murmured through the speakers, the quality now slightly degraded.

[If there had been no yearning or lament for worlds other than this one, an Outer God like me would never have been born.]

“So, round and round, you exist because of humanity’s incorrigible nature?”

[Yes. Cursed, isn’t it.]

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame looked up at the sky.

I suddenly wondered.

How did the world ‘outside the screen’ appear in Admin of the Infinite Metagame’s eyes?

[Which is why your author Hecate concluded that humanity’s nature had to be remodeled entirely. It seems she failed though—thanks to you, Master.]

“…”

[Since you’ll forget anyway, I’ll confess now: I didn’t surrender to you solely to survive.]

“Then why?”

[I wanted to watch.]

Hee-hee, a laugh laced with static.

[Your epilogue.]

"…"

[I acknowledge your effort. Yes, I concede defeat. But when it all ends, what will you obtain? A single human? Humanity? A world of billions, each harboring billions of curses?]

The defeated Outer God—now closer to human—smiled with her eyes.

[I've come to want to see it at any cost, even if I must discard all my authority, the moment you fall at the very end.]

"That will never happen."

[And whom you'll end up dating, and if you do, how many holes will get punched in your gut.]

"Please spare me that at least..."

[Oh my. I need some sort of spectator sport to add a bit of fun to a life fallen from godhood to servitude, don't I?]

Kyaruruk.

It was a laugh that fit her form from long before, far more than the noble-lady guise she bore now.

Time passed.

The setting bible was enormous; I needed meticulous and subtle coding to ensure that under no circumstances could [The Librarian of the Great Library] evolve into a dangerous anomaly.

'How much time has passed?'

It was hard to sense time.

As I said, every letter I wrote drained 'something' from my being.

In martial art terms, it was like innate true qi.

Just as the fragments that formed the core of the Constellations were being used as ink, something that formed the backbone of me,

the regressor known as the Undertaker, was being consumed.

‘...But it doesn’t matter.’

It will all reset anyway.

‘I mustn’t write a document directly about Go Yuri, the chance she’ll notice is too high.’

Call a ghost and a ghost will come.

It was the most basic of spells.

‘Now I think I see why Go Yuri suddenly adopted the identity of a ‘tiger.’

There must have been several reasons.

Perhaps she needed the concept of dragon-tiger contention in order to oppose a dragon like Leviathan.

She might have borrowed the legend of the Jangsanbeom[1], which can mimic any face or voice, to express that trait.

Go Yuri.

A name permitted only to me.

‘...Everyone has their own way of calling Go Yuri. Ha-yul has her own term, Dok-seo has hers.’

Therefore I must not call her ‘Go Yuri.’

If I do, she’ll realize from ‘over there’ that it was none other than the Undertaker who summoned her.

The instant I call her, she perceives it.

‘What an absurd spell.’

A bitter laugh escaped me.

‘Therefore, when drafting the Library Society document, I must not

mention the name Go Yuri.'

'As if writing in cipher, so that only I can understand it.'

An epithet.

'One that the next me, or even the me hundreds of cycles hence, will be compelled to click the moment I see it.'

I pondered.

'...This is it.'

I hammered the keyboard.

'With this, even if I lose my memory—even if I regard the flood of data in the Library Society as nothing more than rootless scraps of information whose source I can't trace—'

'—I'll still take it seriously.'

'Others will see nothing but a meaningless string of characters.'

'But the Undertaker—that is, I the regressor—could never dismiss such characters as a joke.'

I wrote the document about Go Yuri.

I penned Go Yuri's story without ever using the name Go Yuri.

It seemed a narrative style that suited her quite well.

With each character I typed, the fragments of the Constellation melted away, and in no time they were gone.

[...]

Even the avatar resembling a noble lady—

—had, at some point, fallen silent altogether, becoming a blurry mass of pixels.

But.

‘Finished.’

Tak.

I hit Enter.

The moment I wrapped up, a sudden wave of fatigue hit—no ordinary fatigue, but a sensation close to spiritual depletion.

Through dimming vision I could just make out the laptop with its screen now dark. Had the Admin of the Infinite Metagame also spent her soul to the very end?

If so, then this was the regressor’s will.

A guidebook for one solitary strategy.

‘I’m counting on you… the next me.’

I closed my eyes.

Footnotes:

1 - An urban legend about a mysterious creature resembling a tiger that appears in the mountains of Jangsan Mountain in Busan Metropolitan City in Korea.

Chapter 379

The Receiver X

Sinnoa

I was dreaming.

Inside the dream, Go Yuri and I were amicably riding a tiny boat, so the very moment I saw it I realised at once that it had to be a dream.

‘Ha, an impossible sight.’

Even if I died and came back to life (and that is no exaggeration), there was simply no way Go Yuri and I would end up in the same place, much less in a space this cramped.

I am the Undertaker. Believe it or not, I’m the sort of young man who actually listens when grown-ups warn him to steer clear of dangerous neighbourhoods.

‘And what’s with that oarsman?’

‘She looks like the Saintess but has an eyepatch on, and that way of speaking… heavens. Could she be some bizarre hybrid of Dok-seo and the Saintess?’

‘What a blasted dream.’

Just as I tried to swallow a dry laugh, my eyes flickered—not my physical eyes, but the eyes of my mind, blinking like a lamp.

‘Wait. I have never experienced anything like this. Then is this scene… being spun inside my dream by some anomaly that slipped in?’

Because I possess [Complete Memory], a dream for me is either a replay of reality or the appearance of an anomaly, there is no third option.

A “trip with Go Yuri across a world drowned beneath the sea” was obviously not a replay of reality.

That memory did not exist inside me.

‘…’

It did not. It was not. It had never been.

With every kind of negation—of being, of statement, of action—I peeled away the sight before my eyes.

That was what my head did.

‘…Yet what is this feeling?’

My heart failed to follow suit.

The pounding would not quit.

‘The outlines are bleaching ever whiter, or should I say they’re drawing farther away?’

‘The colour of the sea, the look on Go Yuri’s face… I feel as though we were discussing something important.’

‘Ah.’

Realisation moved slower than my heartbeat.

‘I see.’

‘So this is what it feels like to forget.’

The world faded at frightening speed.

The blue of the sea, the slime on the gunwale, the ripples raised by the oarsman, all of it turned white, like fine sand on a beach.

Yes.

I was forgetting something.

“…”

My stomach churned.

“Mr. Undertaker.”

A voice rang out in the whitened world.

When I turned my head, the Saintess with long, sea-coloured hair stood there alone.

“Saintess?”

“Yes.”

She was the only one in this white world. Thus, the spot where she stood felt like the very centre of existence.

“What is going on? Has an anomaly broken into my dream again? Or is an anomaly wearing your face to show me an illusion this time?”

“…”

The Saintess did not answer.

Instead she looked straight at me.

Somehow, she seemed sad.

“…Saintess?”

Sadness—an expression rare for one who almost never shows emotion.

While I stared in puzzlement, she exhaled a small, steadying breath.

Strange. If she needed a moment she could have frozen time with [Time Stop].

“…Mr. Undertaker, you are dying right now.”

“Pardon?”

“Literally. Just as your life was about to end outside, I stopped the world so I could buy us a brief moment to speak.”

Confusion washed over me.

Me, dying outside? It made no sense, after all—

“I hardly dropped dead out of nowhere. Moments ago I was simply drinking with Dang Seo-rin…”

Huh.

Her eyes saddened further.

“…The 999th world has already met its end. So has the 173rd. That’s why the agreement you and Lady Hecate made—the promise—is beginning to carry itself out.”

She murmured.

“This place is an interlude Lady Hecate and I barely carved out with our authority—a tiny gap between instants.”

“Right, I was living in the 999th cycle. But the 173rd? That’s already long finished.”

“…”

And Hecate?

It was sudden. Of course I knew the name, she is a goddess of Greek myth.

But no being I knew bore that epithet.

Most epithets for Awakeners or anomalies were coined by me. It is not my habit to fling divine names about.

Names are basic spells. Grant someone a mighty name lightly and they may indeed grow too mighty.

The only goddess name I have ever borrowed is ‘Nut’.

Thus, in the regressor's lifetime—in my lifetime—no character named Hecate existed.

I can swear that nowhere in all my memories has the word Hecate appeared.

"…You truly don't remember."

The Saintess reached out.

It was the first way humans ever found of bridging the gap between selves.

"But that's all right."

Jingle.

Somewhere a bell chimed.

She clasped both of my hands.

"Even if it's missing from your memory, the mark remains in your heart. If not today, you will recall it someday."

"…"

"Just as you found me again in this 999th cycle after being apart since the 267th."

My eyes widened.

Only then did I grasp the source of the bell.

"…!"

On the Saintess's wrist, which held my hand, hung an ornament she would never normally possess.

A silver bell.

The souvenir I always buy in the Busan Station concourse, across all cycles, only one Saintess has ever worn that bracelet.

I stared, dumbfounded.

Perhaps she read my gaze, for she formed a faint, unfamiliar smile.

"…I told you we'd meet again soon, didn't I?"

"…"

"You kept your promise, Mr. Undertaker. No matter how many cycles, no matter how long it took, you swore you would come to save me—"

Jingle.

Her words were replaced by the light ring of the bell.

I had drawn her into an embrace.

"…"

"I'm glad. Truly… glad."

A quiet sob fell in the white world.

Why I was about to die in the 999th world, why the Saintess had postponed that death, why the Saintess of the 267th cycle stood before me—

I did not know.

Nor did I need to.

Someone I had lost forever had returned. The luck of meeting her like this left me only gratitude.

Even once more—

I wanted to meet her.

"…"

Hesitant fingertips brushed my back.

For a moment…

the hands that had paddled empty air now held me.

“…Ah.”

A soft murmur seeped from the Saintess.

Neither of us could see the other’s face.

She was probably closing her eyes, embracing the only darkness allowed in this whiteness, seeking human warmth.

I too asked in the white darkness.

“Was it hard?”

“…I was all right. It was only a moment. I closed my eyes. In this place where time has stopped I simply waited.”

“Truly?”

“…To be honest, I felt a little. From the 999th world onward time began to move again for some reason, so through Lady Hecate’s eyes I could faintly sense you.”

“I missed you.”

“Yes. I… missed you too.”

The sob shook loose.

But the Saintess swallowed.

“I’m sorry. I want to talk more… spend more time, but our reprieve is brief.”

“What do you mean?”

“There is much you won’t understand. You have lost much. Yet the sacrifice wasn’t meaningless. Mr. Undertaker, you achieved something tremendous.”

Steadily, as if stitching each word, she went on.

“Don’t worry. Don’t be sad. Now it’s not your turn but your comrades’. One day Oh Dok-seo will definitely witness ‘this very moment’.”

“The Dok-seo…”

I understood at once.

[Side Story Creation]—the power to revisit any part of my chronicle at will.

In game terms, a [Replay Room].

“Either way, you will not remember this moment. That is the contract.”

“I understand.”

I did not know what had happened, could not even guess what the ‘contract’ meant.

But I was not omniscient. I could not be omnipotent. It was fine not to bear and grasp everything myself.

I had comrades.

“You truly did well, Mr. Undertaker. I too will shrug off the shackles of this frozen world and return to the regressor’s timeline like any ordinary person.”

“…”

“But first, there’s something we must do.”

She stepped back.

“One last chance remains.”

This was not a farewell. Without caring who moved first, we squeezed each other’s hands.

“A chance?”

“Because you gathered my shards so diligently, because Lady Hecate freed herself… I am now stronger than ever, almost beyond precedent.”

She added, though I barely understood, that only by relinquishing this power would Hecate’s sacrifice gain meaning, likely words meant for Dok-seo.

“Oh, and I was busy cleaning up Lü Bu because you forgot to wrap her up.”

“Lü Bu?”

At my reaction she smiled faintly.

“Thanks to that I could use an immensely reinforced [Time Stop] to create this interlude—and even a variant of the Utopia.”

“…”

“The same goes for [Telepathy], Mr. Undertaker.”

Her eyes locked on mine.

“With my current power I can—just once—overstep time and space and leave a ‘message’ for someone.”

My jaw dropped.

“…Incredible. If true, that power is colossal.”

“It is true,” she said firmly.

“Not only to the future. I can send [Telepathy] to the past as well, to the days before you ever began life as a regressor.”

“…”

“Using this chance is the final quest of cycle 999. This one-and-only chance, this miracle… I want to decide with you how to use it.”

Why, I wondered.

It was a crucial choice and an extravagant gift, practically an extra sheet of canvas.

I ought to have pondered deeply, yet the moment she spoke, the destination flashed into my mind—instinctive.

"…"

"…"

I looked at the Saintess.

She looked at me.

Wordless. I felt sure she had reached exactly the same thought.

"Saintess, do you remember?"

I smiled.

"When you were still acting as a 'Constellation' to me—wearing the mask of the [Saintess of National Salvation]—when I travelled up to Seoul for our first meeting."

"Yes."

"Back then I asked you similar questions every time."

The oldest memory:

– I would like to ask about the Constellations first.

The 36th cycle.

When I discovered the [Saintess of National Salvation] was actually human, I asked why she acted as a Constellation.

– What exactly are Constellations? Are they real transcendents? Are you their agent, Ms. Saintess?

Those were days when I was far less experienced.

Before our relationship became what it is now, we had that conversation.

– Constellations… do not exist.

– They don't exist?

– Yes. The Saintess of National Salvation, the Conqueror of the Alps —they are all characters I created on my own.

– Why would you do such a thing?

Then she answered.

– I awakened about twenty days ago.

An Awakening earlier than others.

– Since then my hair changed colour, and in my dreams monsters appeared in nightmares, too vivid to shrug off as illusion.

She went further.

– I don't know why, but I was convinced it would truly come to pass. So I asked myself what I could do. Not stockpiling cans or bottles of water, but something only I could accomplish.

Looking back, isn't it odd?

I didn't see it then, but afterwards I came to know her nature.

The Saintess is never drawn to superstition, never favours irrational impulses.

She is almost always calm.

Would someone like that, because of a few vivid dreams, sincerely believe in the end of the world and prepare for it?

"It was now."

"…Yes. Probably."

“It was now.”

The Saintess was no prophet.

Nor a fanatic.

For a rational person to truly believe in the apocalypse, convincing dreams alone are nowhere near enough.

Even so, she began acting as a Constellation.

She formed a plan.

Executed it.

Met me.

Stood here now.

Had there been no reason—had she dismissed the dreams, formed no plan, taken no action, and thus not been watching someone in the Busan Station concourse when the Void arrived, had we failed to cross nine-hundred-ninety-nine wheels—

this moment could not exist.

“I’ll send [Telepathy].”

I will pass on a message among the stars—

“To the Saintess of the past.”

—To you, before you even knew you were made of starlight.

Footnotes:

Chapter 380

The Receiver XI

Sinnoa

I was dreaming.

"…Another weird dream."

She sat up and covered her eyes.

It was a time when no one had yet called her a Saintess, and she herself could not have imagined it, therefore all I can do is refer to her simply as "she."

"…Haa."

And yet she was still her.

With a light toss of her chin she shook off the nightmare she'd had during the night, then tied her hair back with a band.

Perhaps it was the hang-over from the sleeping pills, but her mind felt slightly murky.

Just as she peeled one of the bananas she had bought yesterday, planning to get breakfast over with, her fingers stopped.

[How curious.]

A voice only she could hear.

[It's always been I who was observed by ■■'s ■■, yet this time I'm the one observing Sain■. The feeling is rather odd.]

[That's not me, it's the past me.]

[Mm. Isn't that even more interesting?]

[I find it embarrassing, though.]

“…”

She frowned.

For several days vivid nightmares had unfolded every time she slept, and now, as if that were not enough, she was beginning to suffer hallucinated voices and visions while awake.

[It seems you still can’t properly make out our voices.]

Bzzz—crackle.

Static, broken by noise, rolled round her ears like tinnitus.

[Yes. The me from back then couldn’t make it out, either. Even if my ability had already grown into a full authority, I guess the message still isn’t clear enough. I’m only sorry.]

[There’s no need to apologise. This alone is more than enough.]

[But as for Mr. ■■……]

[If that were possible, the Saintess of today wouldn’t exist. I’ll leave that part to Dok-■. Proper conversation will be in tonight’s dream —]

Bzz-crk, bzzzz.

The tinnitus rose to a peak, then died as though its strength were spent. Only then did she finish peeling the banana and breathe out a sigh.

…In psychopathology, hearing voices is not a good sign.

Humans possess an instinctive sense, distinguishing “outside” from “inside.”

Hallucinations arise when that basic line blurs.

In other words, the dream state.

She was, in a sense, sleep-walking while wide awake.

…Maybe, without realising, she was far more cornered than she had thought.

"…"

But it doesn't matter, she told herself.

She tapped open the Calendar app on her smartphone.

The month lay blank—no schedules at all, only empty squares.

She claimed social anxiety, yet played guitar in a band with friends. In a modern society full of lies she alone upheld the true meaning of "outsider."

One square alone was not empty.

[6 June]

[END]

A modest entry. "End." Truly an ending.

Its meaning was literal.

On that day she intended to die.

Her daily routine never changed.

Up before dawn. The moment she rose she ate a banana. A hoodie chosen with no thought for fashion. A jog along the riverside.

Feed for the fish in her aquarium. Feed for herself. Breakfast. Shower. Open the stock app and check the markets. At the same time read finance articles.

Her earnings were likewise fixed; she never made more than a million won in a day.

It was not a task she pursued with burning willpower—merely a habit.

Once, in a beast's frenzy, she had fired her entire fortune like bullets, but at some point she ceased to see meaning in piling up more.

A dopamine detox.

The age of beasts was over; now was the age of sages.

Others might have tried to buy a house on the Han riverside, or clung to some other plausible goal.

She did not.

Yongsan. An old multiplex in Dongbinggo-dong. She had no thought of moving.

Liquidate assets. ON.

The decision was swift.

Of the 9.78 billion won she owned—being in the early or late nine-billion range mattered to her more than one might think—she donated 93% of it.

It was the happiest time she'd had all year.

Perhaps the happiest in her life.

She did not disregard the value of money, she simply refused to let donations flow someplace absurd.

So she spent time and information—choosing seven reliable NGOs, eleven welfare foundations, and one academic group, dividing the money among them.

That "research" took quite a while.

She even posed as a volunteer and inspected orphanages in person, caring above all whether the director was the right sort of person.

Again, she did not despise the value of money.

She despised only her own value.

[Wow, you made ten billion won in stocks? You were soaring even before the world ended, ■■.]

[Please. It's embarrassing, don't react to every bit.]

[No, it's incredible. If Ji-■ had talent like yours she wouldn't need to slave away at modelling.]

[Ah… well, that person refuses to count human emotion as a variable. In a way she's the least suited to the market.]

[I see.]

…Another hallucinated voice.

"Haa."

But the detective game and the anonymous benefactor game ended here.

After wiring the final donation, her heart felt lighter—her bank account, too.

[The truth is, I'm not completely at ease. Right up to the end I worried what to do with my fish.]

[Didn't you find anyone to take them?]

[No. I was… reluctant.]

Crackle, crackle. It was too loud.

With practiced hands she drew out sleeping pills.

Prescription zolpidem—one tablet… no, two. And one barbiturate hypnotic smuggled in through a broker.

"Mmm…"

A ripple of hallucination washed over her, like a pleasant wave. As the bedroom swam before her eyes, her consciousness slid down, down—

and in the next instant,

“Ah.”

she realised she had plunged once more into the heart of a nightmare and let out a breath.

“…Why is it you keep showing me nothing but ruins?”

Perhaps it was her resolve to die.

The nightmare was always brimming with death: a city that must be Seoul turned to ashes by a nuclear blast, grotesque monsters slaughtering people.

It unnerved her to think her own unconscious might secretly crave such sights.

[You’ve come.]

While she gawked at the ruins and carnage like a B-grade movie, a voice rang out.

She turned.

[Can you hear my voice?]

Beneath a fallen wall white “shadows” writhed—look closely and they almost resembled human figures.

One seemed male, the one addressing her now was, perhaps, female.

“Yes, I hear you.”

[Good. No matter how I tried while you were awake, my voice wouldn’t come through right.]

“Your voice?”

She knitted her brow.

“Sorry, but even now the sounds you’re making don’t really sound

human.”

[…]

They were mechanical—

far more unnatural than any AI voice: within the single word “voice” every syllable leapt a different way.

The shadow stirred.

[I know you’ve decided to die.]

She was not surprised.

It was a nightmare, a dream, an echo of her unconscious.

Anything she knew herself would appear in it.

[But I’d like you to postpone your death, just for a little while.]

“I’ve delayed it several times already, on the off-chance I might change my mind. It wasn’t impulsive. I chose carefully.”

[I know.]

“…”

[Even so, please, once more, delay your decision. I beg you.]

A faint awkwardness prickled.

She had never poured her feelings out violently to anyone, yet somehow this white shadow stirred her heart.

“You know this, you know that—amazing. Seems you know an awful lot.”

So, uncharacteristically, even in a dream, words close to sarcasm slipped out.

The white shadow hesitated.

[…More than you do now, yes.]

“Must be nice, knowing so much.”

[It isn’t, really.]

Words spilled from the shadow.

[…No. It isn’t. I already know what will come of this conversation, and I have no power to change it.]

[I can’t tell you about Mr. ■■■■, or about Mr. ■■■.]

[I can’t hand you stories you don’t yet know.]

“…”

The shadow writhed.

Perhaps that twisting was it breathing in and out, she thought.

“I can’t say I follow, but…”

She stared straight at it.

“Fine. Why do you urge me to live? I understand the possibility—deep in my unconscious mind there may still be a strong desire for life, so you appear like a lucid dream to show me illusions.”

[…]

“So I’d like to hear. If you are my last lingering desire, what joys, what pleasures could possibly lie ahead that make you cling so stubbornly?”

Silence settled.

Meanwhile the dream flowed on—near and far, cities shattered, people died.

Only the white shadows and herself—

set apart from everything like a quiet uninhabited isle.

[…I'm sorry.]

Slowly the shadow parted its lips.

[The life you're going to live… won't be very happy.]

An unexpected answer slipped out.

"Pardon?"

She had thought the dream would lure her with sweet words, telling her life was beautiful.

[You'll do something very noble. Many lives will hang on it.]

[But the work is not as beautiful as you imagined, not as lovely as you hoped.]

The mechanical voice rolled on.

[People aren't consistent.]

[Even someone who rejoices that you saved their life— their gratitude isn't always strong.]

[When they find out you were human, not a ■■, some feel betrayed.]

[Betraying others is easy, betraying oneself is… a little easier.]

[So no one can know you.]

[No one will recognise you.]

"…"

[That is the life you will walk.]

[Even as others manage daily life in a ruined world… daily life won't come to you.]

[Your heart will grow dull.]

[I'm sorry. Before it dulls—while you still have even a little love for the world—you must have wanted to lay this down.]

[I'm sorry for blocking you.]

"…"

Her stomach churned.

[You'll go through many hells.]

[You thought yourself capable—now you'll learn, point by point, where you are powerless.]

[You liked people who smiled beautifully, one of them will kill without a flicker.]

[If your own life is worthless, you at least wish to help others a little, all of it crumbles. Your service, your donations, meant nothing.]

[The world still ends.]

"…"

[Everything will grow worse.]

[The more you know,]

[…the more you see,]

[your heart will shrink.]

[I'm sorry.]

[You were never invincible.]

Her lips parted and closed.

"Then why, in the world…"

A question that had festered in her heart since long ago—

“…are you telling me to live on?”

She could not fathom it.

So she was curious.

“Rather—why are you, who say all this, still alive instead of dying now?”

[…]

The white shadow stirred.

Instinct told her it had closed its eyes, drawn a deep breath—

though it had neither face nor form beyond a pale lump.

[You are going to meet one person. And then—]

The shadow opened its eyes.

[You are going to like that person.]

Footnotes:

Chapter 381

The Receiver XII

Sinnoa

[You are going to like that person.]

That person?

"…"

To her, it was almost impossible to believe such a prophecy. From some angles you could even call it an insult.

In fact, it probably bordered on verbal abuse.

Proof of that lay in the shock she felt. as if someone had cracked her across the head.

"…When you say I'll 'like' someone… Are we talking about love? A romantic feeling?"

[I understand. It must be hard to believe.]

The shadow spoke.

Its tone implied that it had already mapped every gear and spring of the tangled emotions inside her.

Just as that arrogant manner was about to grate on her again, the speaker cut the ribbon with its tongue first.

[No wonder. It's because your tastes are really, really exacting.]

"Excuse me?"

[I'm only stating the facts. I've never met anyone with preferences as finicky as yours.]

Robbed of her timing, she was left speechless. What on earth was

this lump of shadow spouting?

“I’m sorry, but I have perfectly normal standards. I almost pointed that out earlier, you clearly don’t know me.”

[Is that so? Well, first off, isn’t basic self-care a given?]

“Of course it is.”

She answered instantly.

“Even on nights when I’ve taken sleeping pills, I never skip my dawn run. Even when I feel lazy I still go. Not because I enjoy it, but because I need a baseline level of fitness.”

[And would you agree that amassing enough wealth to support your life also falls under basic self-management?]

“Naturally.”

Again her reply was immediate.

“Modern South Korea rests on capitalism. There are many ways to define it, but personally I see capitalism as a system that quantifies life in money. Some find that reductionism suffocating, others liberating. Yet once a society grows past a certain size, any system breeds side effects. Imagine an ancient order that measured every life solely by individual martial prowess—that would have been just as violent as capitalism. Human society is violent by nature; we have no choice but to live in a violent world. If in that hypothetical age honing one’s martial skill was a basic virtue, then in a capitalist age husbanding one’s property is the basi—”

[I see. So that’s what it feels like.]

The shadow murmured, sounding somehow like a sigh.

[And, unexpectedly, you care about appearance too.]

“Pardon?”

[No, wait. That could be misunderstood. Appearance is secondary,

of course. I don't mean you like someone because of their looks; I mean you like the looks of the person you've come to like.]

"That makes no sense."

[Also, you believe every decent human should have compassion for the weak.]

"Isn't that obvious?"

She frowned.

"Compassion is one of humanity's basic conditions."

[You also think a good memory is essential, because without it a person may forget their own past and lose consistency.]

"That's perfectly true."

[And you need to be able to dive deep into philosophical conversation together, right?]

"The word 'philosophy' may be antique, but philosophical questions have never vanished from humanity. Everyone tackles philosophy from some crooked angle of their own life."

[They should like keeping fish as well, shouldn't they?]

"Raising fish is like tending a garden: a pastime that grants diligence and meditative time together. Stillness in motion, motion in stillness—an important mindset."

[Even if they don't love the world, if the world demands their life, they should be ready to lay it down—yes?]

"Yes."

[In short, you want someone exactly on your level, because you think you yourself aren't anything special, but just an ordinary human.]

"Why do you keep pointing out things that are only natural?"

[…And if that person happens to brim with a little extra energy, you'd call it a bonus, since you're so static. Yet here's the paradox—you'd also like them to love stillness enough to spend an entire day indoors without a single complaint.]

"Naturally. Humans are multifaceted. I'm aware of my contradictions, and since I'm aware, they'll be resolved one day."

"…"

Silence.

After a long pause and several sighs, the shadow spoke again—slowly, as if reluctant.

[Your standards… are simply too high.]

"Excuse me?"

[Your basic problem, the source of every difficulty, is that you grossly overestimate what a being called 'human' can do. You want everyone to perform exactly as much as you do.]

"Doesn't everyone?"

[No.]

"Then they must be inhuman."

[See? That reaction, that's the issue.]

"If my standards are wrong, then the world is what's wrong, not I."

[There you go again.]

"I get it. You're saying I'm the problem, yes? Fine. I'll die, then. I've been completely refuted."

[…And yet, for all your fussiness, you'll still come to like that person.]

"…"

This time it was her turn to go silent.

Toward her, the shadow continued:

[Nothing in this world is obvious. Your standards, your wishes… none of them are givens.]

[Even the tiniest things are miracles.]

[And for you, a slightly larger miracle is waiting.]

"…"

[Please stay alive just a little longer.]

She couldn't answer.

It wasn't something she could promise lightly.

[While you're watching that person, you'll learn a little more about how to cherish yourself.]

[…You'll even live that dream of studying together—just the two of you, reading side by side.]

[You'll come to like things you've never liked before.]

[You'll learn something from that person every single time.]

It was an impossible picture to imagine.

[You'll read the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, for example… books you could have lived your whole life without opening, praising historical figures by force—doing things you never once expected to do.]

"?"

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms? That old classic only grown-ups read?

[■■, ■■■, really, ■■?]

[I’m sorry, but please be quiet a moment, Mr. ■taker. Anyway, Mr. ■■■’s voice isn’t coming through.]

[■■■.]

[If you keep on like this I’ll swap my allegiance to Sima Yi.]

“…”

The second shadow, which had sat meekly by all this time, gave a slow wriggle. Judging by the outline, it seemed male, but it soon quieted again.

[Now, while you wait to meet the greatest miracle, let me tell you a few smaller ones that will pass the time.]

A white shadow stretched out.

It wrapped her hands firmly.

[Put your palms together.]

She did so.

[Yes—just like a prayer. Good.]

[With your hands like that, you can send messages—only to people you know, and only to those who have awakened special abilities.]

Messages?

[Think of it as KakaoTalk. At first there’s a character limit and sending your voice is tough.]

[But you’ll adapt in no time.]

[Just as I did.]

“…”

Ridiculous.

Was it telling her she was about to awaken some super-power? Like

in a Marvel movie?

[And when you close your eyes—]

[You can see through someone else's vision. That one takes longer to master. At first you'll get a touch of motion sickness every time you share someone's view.]

"…What—"

[But don't worry.]

The shadow still clasped her hands warmly.

[You can practice whenever you want. In fact, you possess the ability to stop time.]

"…"

[Try them, one by one.]

The white shadow squirmed.

[At a bank. In a deserted mountain. At a zoo. On Hongdae's Gyeongui Line Book Street.]

[Surprisingly, it will be fun.]

"…"

She thought the shadow was smiling.

[And one day, you'll become me.]

"You are—"

[I'll be waiting.]

[Until the day I become you again.]

Everything around her turned white.

From the warmth on the back of her hands she knew instinctively

that this strange dream was ending.

“Ah.”

And that she had already held similar conversations more than once.

Because it all happened in dreams, there was no guarantee her brain, dulled by long use of sleeping pills, would remember any of it clearly.

I must remember.

She prayed with all her might.

I must remember—the conversation, the feelings I felt.

She pressed her hands together as if in prayer and wished.

It was a preposterous dream, full of absurdities, yet she did not want to forget a single part of it.

If only that white warmth that had wrapped her hands… please… just that much.

[One more thing I didn’t mention… ah.]

[Once you practice stopping time, you’ll probably find yourself with a surprising amount of free hours.]

Oblivious, or indifferent, to her desperation, the white shadow spoke in a leisurely tone.

[When that happens, taking up web novels or webtoons wouldn’t be a bad hobby.]

“Pardon?”

Web novels? Webtoons? Out of nowhere?

[There may be hints in them for how to use your abilities.]

“What on earth—”

[Fighting!]

And then…

…everything went white.

She was dreaming.

“…Another weird dream.”

An everyday morning, the same as any other.

But when she sat up in bed, she met a slightly odd sight.

“…?”

Her hands were clasped.

She had fallen asleep with her palms pressed tight together, as if praying to someone.

Why in the world am I in such a pose?

“…Must be the sleeping pills.”

She felt sure she’d had a significant dream.

Yet nothing would surface.

“Haa.”

Recently the nightmares had grown worse. Maybe it was time to quit the pills.

She felt like scolding herself.

The instant she let out a sigh, an absurd sound slipped between her lips.

“Uh?”

It was astonishing.

[I’m pathetic.]

Because right there in the empty air, where nothing should be, proper letters floated.

And that wasn’t the end.

[Huh? Letters? Is this a dream?]

Words kept appearing in mid-air.

Her voice grew even stupider.

“Eh?”

[Eh?]

“…”

[…]

“What on earth—”

The moment she stretched out her hand, as though it had all been an illusion, the letters vanished.

“…”

Why?

A hallucination? But it had been too crisp to be a hallucination—no wavering.

Sleeping pills? Taken to excess they could deepen hallucinations, but the ones she used couldn’t cause visions the morning after.

Then why had those vivid letters vanished in an instant when nothing had chan—

“Ah.”

She looked down.

Her hands. Her palms.

With a sinking hunch, she resumed the praying pose on the bed.

[No way?]

"…"

As if on cue, letters bloomed again.

She muttered blankly.

"…Impossible."

[Impossible.]

"Could it be—"

[Am I insane?]

"…"

Spellbound, she spent the whole morning testing this sudden mania.

Glancing at the wall clock, she found it was noon, already midday.

"Super-powers? No, impossible. That can't… except… it actually—"

She still didn't know.

That what she had just experienced would one day be called an "Awakening."

That most Awakeners had to endure enormous trial and error just to learn what their power was.

That she, by contrast, had grasped her abilities' nature far too easily, absurdly fast.

That others would call it luck and envy or resent her, claiming it was coincidence.

But in truth, it was inevitable.

“…”

She still didn’t know.

That come summer, she would fall in love with someone.

Footnotes:

Chapter 382

The Receiver XIII

Sinnoa

“At last, it’s finished.”

“You’ve worked hard.”

“Soon, even this intermission will be over.”

“That’s a pity.”

“I’m sorry. It seems I used up too much power. My eyes can hardly see… Could you hold my hand?”

“Of course.”

“Haah…”

“I never imagined talking to my past self would be this exhausting. Back then I was truly young—far too young.”

“Mm. Don’t worry. I’m sure it was conveyed well enough.”

“Do you think so?”

“Certainly. This isn’t empty consolation. It was conveyed so clearly that the Saintess reached this place.”

“…You’re right.”

“To be honest, I don’t clearly remember what I heard in that dream.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. It’s just… so much time has passed.”

“Ah.”

“It can’t be helped. Unlike Mr. Undertaker I don’t have [Complete Memory]. Hundreds of years, thousands, tens of thousands…… Every precious memory has faded.”

“…I see.”

“That’s why I turned to diaries so often. What happened, which memories must never be lost—just like reincarnated protagonists jotting down their past-life knowledge…”

“…”

“For me, perhaps this very world was an otherworld from the start.”

“Is this the notebook you used as a diary? It’s terribly worn.”

“I’ve looked through it more times than I can count. Especially when I used [Time Stop] to block Hecate—no, Nut. When I had to live in a world frozen for 2,000 years, it helped me a lot.”

“…”

“It was a little hard.”

“Of course I have no regrets. If I hadn’t stepped in, the world would’ve perished and your regression been endangered, so I had no choice. It’s just… one day I awoke and realized I couldn’t recall other people’s voices.”

“It grew harder to picture Ms. Noh Do-hwa’s tone in my head.”

“Ms. Cheon Yo-hwa’s laughter wouldn’t surface.”

“Mr. Undertaker’s voice… slipped away from memory.”

“So, in that stopped world I would often—no, constantly—climb to the roof of Tower of Babel and look at you all. Even if I couldn’t summon the voices, faces at least—though you were like statues—were still visible.”

“In fact.”

“When I decided I was strong enough, when I thought it was time to lift the [Time Stop] and face you again, I worried a lot.”

“What worried you?”

“Whether I could…… properly act like the me from 2,000 years ago. I wasn’t confident.”

“Would the language I speak be intelligible? Would my expressions look strange?”

“Would I look… like a monster?”

“I was a bit worried.”

“But think about it, Mr. Undertaker, you’re the same. You endured an equally long time… So whichever way it turned out, it wouldn’t matter.”

“Even if I’d become a monster, we could just be monsters together.”

“And if we could remain human… we’d remain human together.”

“…”

“It’s all white. Everything.”

“Saintess.”

“Yes. Your hand…”

“Right here. I’m still holding it.”

“Mr. Undertaker has actually gained a new ability.”

“Eh?”

“You won’t understand yet… but Ms. Dang Seo-rin cast an incredible—truly incredible—spell on you.”

“A spell powerful enough to move a universe. Born of the sole wish to stay by your side despite being a monster—truly miraculous.”

“While that spell is singing in your heart, you… will be able to hear the voices of the anomalies.”

“The voices of the anomalies?”

“Yes. Just as only you could understand Dang Seo-rin-ssi’s voice… from the next cycle on you’ll comprehend the anomalies’ screams.”

“…”

“Perhaps, mine as well.”

“The fact we can talk so easily may also be thanks to Ms. Dang Seo-rin’s magic.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s all right. It’s your miracle. Surely… as you said, another comrade will recognize it someday.”

“It’s amazing.”

“…Talking to my past self, I realized this.”

“In the end, what I needed to keep living might have been just a single human being.”

“Somewhere in this world, if at least one person hasn’t given up…”

“If a beautiful human being could exist.”

“Even if it’s only one.”

“…If I have seen—am seeing—that proof with my own eyes, I won’t choose death. Never.”

“Thank you, Mr. Undertaker.”

“Always, always… forever. I’m grateful I met you, grateful you lived.”

“Always…”

“Forever…”

“Again, there. At the convenience store.”

‘…’

“Saintess?”

‘…’

“Saintess.”

‘…’

“…”

“I was always grateful too. Thank you for waiting until we could meet.”

“I’ll come find you again in the thousandth summer.”

“Miss Ye-ji.”

There is an epilogue.

As I stressed last time, this story, too, was a manuscript the Regressor never reviewed.

Precisely for that reason, there were many points where I could pound the typewriter freely.

For example.

“Saintess, from now on you must hide your real name not only when playing the Constellations but also in daily life.”

“Eh? Why is that?”

I can now reveal in full the part of that first-meeting conversation the Regressor deliberately [CENSORED].

Why hide anything?

I proudly fancied myself a scoundrel.

“A name is the most basic ingredient, and the frame, of any spell.”

The 1,000th cycle.

The Regressor who etched a feat for the ages, conquering Hecate, travelling with Go Yuri, rescuing the Saintess, remembered none of it.

The moment he opened his eyes in the waiting hall of Busan Station he blurted, ‘Huh? I was just drinking with Dang Seo-rin, so why—?’ panicked, then in the restroom, ‘Wait? Why can’t I feel the Saintess’s warmth even though I touched the mirror?’ utterly confused.

Facing a situation too baffling to grasp, he simply copied what ordinary people do.

Ah, whatever. Let’s stick to the routine.

“From now on, Saintess, you’ll play a key role in the peninsula’s spiritual infrastructure, so you mustn’t reveal your weak point to anyone.”

“…”

Thus, as in any cycle, the Regressor went to persuade the Saintess.

Near Jamsu Bridge.

Beneath the parasol of a ruined convenience store, the Regressor and the Saintess were having their thousandth ‘first meeting.’

“So Mr. Undertaker already knows my real name? Even though I never told you?”

“Of course. I heard it in the 36th cycle. After that we skipped introductions.”

“I see.”

Up to here, events matched other cycles.

However.

“Then… would you call me by my name just once?”

“…Pardon?”

For some reason.

The Regressor saw a brand new response, never observed before.

Across the table, the Saintess sipped a canned drink and stared expressionlessly at him.

“Sorry? Did I mishear?”

“I asked you to call me by my name.”

“Uh…… Saintess?”

“Not the title, my real name.”

She spoke remarkably straight. She always pronounced perfectly by abusing [Time Stop]; she would never stutter like a northern knock-off Saintess.

She was genuine.

“I believe you’re a Regressor, but I still need to verify whether you truly know my name.”

“Ah……?”

“Besides, if this is the 1,000th cycle, the 36th is ages ago. We could update it once, couldn’t we?”

“Update? Update what… hm.”

About to argue, he closed his lips.

He hadn’t used [Mind Reading], he simply reached the conclusion.

‘Indeed. I’ve been making an unreasonable demand.’

He had just told her, ‘Give up being addressed by your real name for life.’

Since he’d never been called by his own name, it hadn’t struck him, but it might be lonely for her.

‘Was I too insensitive?’

A brief self-reproach.

“Kh-hm.”

He cleared his throat.

Tens of thousands of years had passed since he last said her name, so it felt strangely awkward.

Blankly—

Her gaze felt embarrassing for some reason.

“…”

“…”

At last he opened his mouth.

“…Well.”

“…”

“Um.”

“…”

“…Ms. Ye-ji.”

Blink.

She blinked.

Finding no change, he tried again.

“Ms. Ye-ji.”

“…”

“Ms. Jeong Ye-ji.”

Jeong Ye-ji.

A tiny white sandbank that surfaces where the current bends.

White crafted by time.

It seems a thousand summers were needed to speak that white name.

“…”

While he shyly averted his eyes, something more disconcerting happened.

Squeeze.

Warmth covered the hand he’d left on the table.

“M-Ms. Y-Ye-ji?”

He was genuinely flustered.

The Saintess had taken his hand!

Today was supposed to be the ‘first meeting,’ after all.

“Um. Why all of a sudden…?”

“…”

Yet she did not release him. No—she interlaced their fingers.

And intently examined his face.

If Constellations were real, messages would be exploding.

She murmured.

“I still don’t quite know.”

“…?”

“But maybe I understand a little.”

“……??”

She let go and bowed her head.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Undertaker. I had something to check.”

“Uh… no need to apologize. I was just startled. You never initiated physical contact at our first meeting before.”

“Was that so.”

“Ah, yes.”

“…”

“…”

Imagine the greatest awkwardness, insert it here, and endure five seconds.

“Well then, shall we return to the main topic?”

“Yes, let’s.”

Afterwards they discussed how to run the Constellation system and what the Regression Alliance would be.

To the anomaly-slayer regressor this part would be vital, but the historian thought otherwise.

It mattered not a whit.

Instead, the side story values another part.

For example:

“Ah, right. Saintess.”

“Yes?”

“When I go to Busan next, please don’t observe me with [Clairvoyance] for one day.”

Here. This part.

“Of course. Even though we’re allies, I won’t spy if you don’t want me to.”

“Ahaha. Thank you.”

“But I am curious. May I ask why?”

“Ah. I’m meeting someone, purely for personal reasons.”

“…”

Originally she answered, ‘All right,’ and kept her word.

Thus she realized days later that Dang Seo-rin stood by him. For someone as noble as the Saintess, harboring ‘that’ feeling toward one who already had a partner would be unthinkable, so she neatly arranged her heart.

It wasn’t hard.

Controlling emotions still mere seeds is easy.

She even liked romanticists like Dang Seo-rin.

The monster-lover Regressor knew nothing, but the Saintess had cheered Dang Seo-rin on for countless cycles.

With all sincerity.

“…”

But what miracle is this.

From the 1,000th cycle on, she checked his warmth the moment

they met. In truth she measured her own heart.

There was no need, it was warmer than the Han River.

“I see.”

She nodded slowly.

“All right. I promise not to watch you that day.”

“Ah, thank you.”

She smiled faintly.

“Think nothing of it. I look forward to working with you, Mr. Undertaker.”

As you can guess,

that became her monumental ‘first lie.’

Footnotes:

Chapter 383

The Suicidal I

Sinnoa

Have you ever, perhaps all of a sudden, for no particular reason, out of the blue and through no fault of your own, found yourself seized by a premonition like this?

——Something has gone wrong.

What, exactly, has gone wrong? That was hard to explain. Why the situation had arisen was even harder to grasp.

And yet I could feel it.

Not with my head but with my heart.

——Something… something truly crucial had gone irretrievably wrong.

Yes.

In short, I had recently started to sense, from somewhere I could not pinpoint, that I was utterly doomed.

“Undertaker. Good mor-ning.”

“Ah, Dang Seo-rin. Good morning.”

“Fuaaah. Honestly, the weather’s gorgeous these days, isn’t it? It used to be tricky to go walking because the fine dust turned up whenever it felt like it, but I guess even the end of the world has its upsides.”

“Mm.”

“Oh! One of my guild mates said the plum and cherry blossoms are in full bloom all around Beomeosa Temple. Want to go today? We

could grab lunch there, too."

"Uh. Th-that sounds good. Fine by me. Yesterday and the day before we definitely tore around everywhere for flower-viewing as well—"

"What?"

"I'll pack sandwiches."

"Yup!"

"…"

"What?"

"Nothing. I was just going to ask what kind you'd like."

"Hey, anything tastes good if you make it!"

"Right."

…Dang Seo-rin was acting strange.

Granted, Dang Seo-rin had always been strange.

Whenever the impulse to travel or play hit her, not even the entire Samcheon World guild charging in could stop her.

But—

"Isn't the frequency kind of weird…?"

And that wasn't all.

No matter how much spontaneous wanderlust she possessed, ever since we entered the 1,000th cycle the intensity had ramped up.

"Undertaker! Good mor-ning."

Last winter she suddenly wanted to see Hokkaido's Christmas tree, so the two of us went off on a Japan trip (post-apocalypse Japan boasts S-class travel difficulty, let me repeat).

And that wasn't all.

"Undertaker, another glo-rious mor-ning."

Last summer she whipped up a giant water park at Haeundae with magic, rented the whole thing for the two of us, and splashed around all night long.

And that wasn't all.

"Good moooorning, Doc!"

A fortnight ago she actually resurrected the National Singing Contest, took contestants from every guild and faction, built a special stage in Tower of Babel Square, plunged all of Busan into a frenzy—and then hauled me onstage for the final duet.

"Undertaker! Goo—"

"Today is a very—"

"Good morning!"

Every single day. Day after day after day after day.

Almost daily, Dang Seo-rin dreamed up and carried out wild events.

By now even the narrator from the TV show Master of Living would be running in "having fun" mode.

Thanks to her, the citizens' happiness index had been soaring like a civilization devouring every last luxury resource.

"Huu. She really shows up at dawn every single day to offer a morning greeting…"

Of course one particular Busan citizen (a former level-7 public servant) who harboured fundamental doubts about the idea of "happiness" had a different view.

"I can't even tell whether she belongs to Samcheon World or the National Road Management Corps anymore. Wouldn't it be simpler

if the two of you just lived together?"

"…I apologise, Director Noh Do-hwa. I'll just go down to the Samcheon World station every morning, say hello and come back."

"Well, I didn't mean to nit-pick quite like that… anyway, it's none of my business. Show us some fancy footwork, will you…?"

"?"

Yes.

For some reason, in the 1,000th cycle Dang Seo-rin seemed to have jammed the button marked "Change course: massively strengthen diplomacy with Undertaker."

I had no way of knowing it yet, but it actually hadn't started only in the 1,000th.

Since the 1,000th cycle—and onward—it had been this way without a break.

"Why on earth?"

"I eliminated every opening for a butterfly effect, didn't I?"

Confusion upon confusion.

In the end, unable to stand it, I once leaned on the courage alcohol lends you and asked her point-blank.

"Seo-rin, why are you trying so hard to spend time with me?"

"Hmm. I can't help it. I keep hearing good music from you."

"Music?"

"Mm-hm."

I already knew that Dang Seo-rin intuitively perceived the world in terms of sound.

Still—was the music she sensed from me, Undertaker, really that

good? From a normal standpoint it was absurd. How good would a song have to be to shrink the distance between two people overnight?

“Here.”

Pok.

She extended her arm and pressed a fingertip to my chest.

“From right here—truly. I hear a wonderful sound. Part humming, part a cappella… It really calms my heart.”

Then, cheeks flushed with drink, she laughed he-he, completely fearless.

“When I’m beside you, it feels as if lies and bluffing vanish on their own. So, I like it.”

“…….”

Alert alarm.

According to the special laws of the Republic of Korea, the person in charge of an alert alarm—a civil-defence warning issued when enemy attack is expected—is Doridori Dad, the beaver who has mastered the greatest Sound Technique in *Bonobono*[1].

Even if an enemy launches an unexpected “heart-thump attack,” Doridori Dad’s alert must be triggered, and Doridori Mom must immediately be dispatched to whack every hostile entity on the shins.[2]

The end.

If it wasn’t obvious from that nonsense, my brain’s language centre was in total panic.

“Dang Seo-rin! What’s going on? I don’t think we were ever this close!”

And that wasn’t all.

[Hello, Mr. Undertaker.]

[Good morning.]

At some point, every time I woke up a Saintess-brand KakaoTalk arrived as though she'd been waiting.

"Ah, yes."

At first I didn't think much of it.

The Saintess is the one who got granted humanity's wish to "subtract sleep time from our lifespan," so having cast off sleep she can run [Clairvoyance] twenty-four hours a day. Working out when I got up was trivial.

The problem came next.

"Saintess, good morning to you as well."

[…….]

"Saintess?"

[…….]

"Um."

[…….]

"…"

[…….]

"…Good morning, Ms. Ye-ji."

[Yes. I hope you have a pleasant day too, Mr. Undertaker.]

"Right…"

Why on earth!

Why (why)! How come (how)! for hundreds of cycles the Saintess

had never fussed over names yet (why)! Starting with the 1,000th cycle (why)! She suddenly cared about forms of address (why)!

While the refrain echoed in my skull, I clutched my head.

“So you came to me for counseling…?”

Oh Dok-seo muttered, chewing a cheese stick.

“Yeah.”

“Hm. You picked the right woman, mister. I don’t know how you found out, but I happen to be a dating master.”

“Really?!”

“Sure. I’ve cleared thirty-six classic dating sims and twelve of the latest.”

“…”

“Oddly enough the heroines I support never get their own routes, but that’s not my fault—the scenario writers have no taste.”

“What is your favourite heroine in *Tsukihime*3?”

“Satsuki4, obviously.”

“*Tsuki ni Yorisou Otome no Sahō*?”

“Nanami5.”

“Who’s the true strategist—Zhuge Liang, Pang Tong or Xu Shu?”[7]

“If I must pick, Beopjeong[8].”

“…”

And here I was forced to rely on a lunatic with terminal Sub-Heroine Syndrome.

Again I wondered if my long regressor life had gone wrong somewhere.

“Why? You’ve got others.”

“Could you ask Ah-ryeon?”

“Ah.”

“Would you get a straight answer from Yu Ji-won or Noh Do-hwa?”

“There’s Ji-soo.”

“You want me to dump this on a kid who’s busy healing awakened folks’ trauma? I’m human too.”

“Mm.”

Oh Dok-seo folded her arms and thought.

“What about Mr. Seo Gyu?”

“He’s the Saintess’s mole.”

“Ah.”

“Every day he says ‘Boss, my lips are sealed,’ and the next morning the Saintess already knows. It’s happened more than once.”

“What about Ha-yul?”

[ABSOLUTELY OPPOSED!]

Flash.

The instant Lee Ha-yul heard my dilemma she grabbed her sketchbook and launched a picket protest.

[OPPA NO REMARRIAGE!]

“Wait, remarriage? Old man, you’ve never been married, right…?”

Oh Dok-seo glanced at me.

“Of course I haven’t! The most fatal cliché among the 108 ways to break a regressor’s heart is falling in love or having a child, only to

have the memory erased in the next cycle! I'm not insane!"

"But you do have those 'non-existent memories' from before the fourth cycle."

"…"

Oh Dok-seo poked a finger.

"You sealed the people closest to you first with [Time Seal]. Odds are high you sealed your spouse first."

"…At the very least, no such memory exists!"

"Huum. Interesting."

[ABSOLUTELY OPPOSED!]

[Oppa is too valuable for anyone ordinary.]

[If Oppa dies, civilisation rebuilding collapses—proved as follows.]

[If the Saintess dies, we can last twenty years. If Dang Seo-rin dies, no problem. BUT Oppa? We start by surrendering Pyongyang, Seoul and Sejong to the monsters. QED.]

[If you must remarry, I recommend this puppet. Highly capable, all-purpose.]

"No. Are you nuts? That doll maid is secretly your mother."

[I don't see a problem?]

"Hm."

"Now you see why Ha-yul never made the counsellor shortlist?"

"Okay. Got it."

Oh Dok-seo made a wry face.

"Turns out I'm the only colleague with a neutral viewpoint."

“Exactly. That’s why Seo-rin noona and the Saintess keep looking after you.”

“Gasp. Was that why?”

Oh Dok-seo was shocked.

“I thought they spoiled me because I’m cute!”

“…”

Strange. Why do I have so little luck with people?

“Excuse me.”

While we were still deep in discussion a small voice spoke. All three of us—me, Oh Dok-seo and Lee Ha-yul—whipped our heads around.

There stood Cheon Yo-hwa, the elder twin, wearing an ambiguous smile.

“I’m happy you dropped by, Sunbae, but barging in together and chattering like a marketplace is a bit much.”

“Mm.”

“I get that you’re in a bind, but do you have to discuss it here? Honestly this is my sanctuary—I’d like it to stay dignified and mysterious…”

Right. We were huddled in the forbidden zone where Cheon Yo-hwa had been placed under [Time Seal].

“Sorry, but there’s no help for it.”

“Why, Sunbae?”

“Anywhere else, even a sealed room, the Saintess can peep in with [Clairvoyance]….”

“Ah.”

Cheon Yo-hwa’s brows drew together.

“Didn’t she usually stop when you asked her not to watch? That’s how I remember it.”

“She did, but for some reason in this cycle she keeps watching. Just my impression, but.”

“Hu-u-m.”

One eye closed—her thinking habit.

“…True. Up till now she surrendered on her own, so it was odd. In fact she has the biggest advantage.”

“Biggest advantage?”

“Yes. She knows every weakness of the people around you. She knows who said what, who did what.”

Cheon Yo-hwa gave a tiny snort.

“She always looked calm and blank, so I could never read her. Turns out it was only a matter of time.”

“……?”

“It’s just my little sneer, Sunbae.”

She smiled with her eyes.

“Instead of worrying, why not treat this as a chance?”

“A chance?”

“Yes, a chance. Once you’ve conquered the entire Void, you’ll have to try the romance you’ve kept off-limits, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“When that day comes, how will everyone react? That, too, may be knowledge a regressor needs.”

Is that so?

“And since it’s the 1,000th cycle, your vacation run, why not…”

Cheon Yo-hwa beamed.

“…conduct one experiment. Try a ‘fake’ romance, just once.”

Footnotes:

1 - **Bonobono (ぼのぼの)** – A long-running four-panel manga by Mikio Igarashi that began serialization in 1986. It follows the laid-back everyday antics of a young sea-otter and his woodland friends and has been adapted into multiple TV anime series (1995; 2016-) and a 1993 theatrical film.

2 - **Doridori Dad / Doridori Mom** are a beaver couple from Bonobono. Doridori Dad is famed in-series for his exaggerated head-wagging “dori-dori” shout; here they are jokingly cast as Korea’s civil-defence alert team.

3 - **Tsukihime (月姫, “Moon Princess”)** – A 2000 adult visual novel by Type-Moon that laid the foundation of the Nasuverse; remade in 2021 as Tsukihime –A piece of blue glass moon–.

4 - **Satsuki Yumizuka** is a minor classmate character in Tsukihime. Fan adoration for Satsuki’s brief screentime spawned the long-running meme “Give Satsuki a route!” because she had no dedicated romance path in the original game.

5 - 달에 다가서는 소녀의 작법 (月に寄りそう乙女の作法, **Tsuki ni Yorisou Otome no Sahō**; common Korean abbreviation “달작법”) – A 2012 Japanese PC visual novel by Navel, often rendered in

English as The Etiquette of the Girl Who Approaches the Moon. The story follows a boy forced to cross-dress and serve as a butler in an elite girls' school.

6 - **Nanami Nanai** is a side-heroine from *Tsuki ni Yorisou Otome no Sahō*; a devoted maid whose popularity belied the fact she, too, lacked a full romance route until later fandisc content.

7 - **Zhuge Liang, Pang Tong, Xu Shu** – Historical strategists from the 14th-century novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Thanks to Koei Tecmo's Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Dynasty Warriors game franchises, modern players debate which adviser was Liu Bei's "true" mastermind—the very topic parodied in the dialogue here.

8 - **Beopjeong**, born Pak Jaecheol, was a Buddhist monk and writer from South Korea.

Chapter 384

The Suicidal II

Sinnoa

After weighing every possibility from every angle, we chose Sim Ah-ryeon as the perfect partner for the Regressor's "pretend romance."

I decorated the classroom, Cheon Yo-hwa's personal sanctum, with mountains of flowers I had prepared in advance, then invited Ah-ryeon in.

"I love you. Please go out with me."

"Eh? N-no, thank you."

"…"

I was shot down at the speed of light.

Do you know when a human being reaches the utter depths of misery in this Solar System?

When they're broke? When they're sick? When their pinky toe slams into the corner of a desk? When a heated thread on SG Net mobs them with insults? When their dreams come crashing down?

Sorry, but none of those are the right answer.

The true answer is the instant—three seconds after you confess—to Sim Ah-ryeon, that knock-off Saintess of the North, that hateful name, and get rejected on the spot.

"Ah… uh… ugh……"

I collapsed flat onto the classroom floor and trembled. If an amoeba had seen me, it would have rejoiced at finding its long-lost relative,

my movements were that pitiful.

“Huwaaaaaaah!”

“W-whoa, you scared me.”

Thud!

Ah-ryeon flinched as I suddenly flipped over and smashed my head against the floor.

“W-why are you doing that, Guild Leader? Even if a cockroach popped out, you should swat it with your palm, not your forehead.”

“I see. Then may I take your advice and headbutt something once, Ah-ryeon?”

“Eh.”

For the record, Oh Dok-seo, Lee Ha-yul, and Cheon Yo-hwa were already rolling around at the back of the room like human vacuum cleaners.

Their laughter was pure noise pollution. Narratively, I wanted to mute it.

But I couldn’t ignore the sight of Ha-yul stumbling upright, scribbling [hahahahaha] in her sketchbook, tumbling again, then standing to scrawl [hahahahahahaha] on a fresh sheet.

“She, she dumped him! He just got rejected by Ah-ryeon unni!”

“Pffft-phuh-khya-hahaha!”

[hahaha haha]

“Just yesterday he boasted, ‘Ah-ryeon will say yes without me even asking, so there’s nothing to worry about!’”

“Kkyeut, hu-ha, hu-huf-huf.”

[hahahahahaha ha haha]

“Dumped… in three seconds flat!”

“Eek-huf, hoo-ha, huf, hahaha!”

“The Undertaker’s first confession in his entire life! The first time in the Regressor’s tens of thousands of years that those words crossed his lips! ‘I love you! Please date me!’ And the target waaas… Sim Ah-ryeon! And yet… he got dog-level dumped.”

“Hit-hik, stop, it’s too… too funny, I-I’m dying…! He even timed it for her birthday… Decorated the entire classroom with nothing but mountain lilies! Honestly, collecting those lilies probably took way longer than the three-second rejection—hik, hit…”

[haha ha ha ha ha]

“…”

Those bastards. Die. Please. Just die.

No, what needed to die wasn’t them, but me. My damned brain.

More precisely, this moment, forever taxidermied into my soul as a record of the 1,000th cycle, needed to disappear.

“Fine. It’s my fault. I’m just a fundamentally flawed being. I’ll go see Udumbara right now and reset this regressor life. Don’t stop me. I’ll just live the thousandth cycle one more time.”

[hahahahahahahahaha]

“F-fact is… Mister, we already defeated Udumbara in this run, so you have to wait until next cycle to delete your abilities.”

“I’ll kill myself.”

“Huf, a regressor who commits suicide over being dumped by Sim Ah-ryeon! Wow. Has any other regressor ever died for such a magnificent reason? I-I don’t think so, Sunbae… You’re writing a brand-new chapter in regressor history!”

[hahahahahahahahahahahahaha]

Why?

This was supposed to be the vacation cycle, the one designed to take care of my mental health. So how did my mindset get wrecked instead? Where did it all go wrong?

“Mm. Hmmm.”

While pandemonium erupted on all sides, only Sim Ah-ryeon tilted her head in her usual calm.

“U-um, Guild Leader. Could you please explain what’s going on…?”

I explained everything.

“Ah. So, in other words: one day, after preventing the end of the world, you’d finally be free to date, but seeing the current chaos you’ve realized you’re afraid of the karmic blowback. Therefore, before entering the ‘ending cycle’ you want to learn how to handle that karma, that hate, that aggro in advance. Step one of the plan is to pretend to date me, check how everyone reacts, and devise concrete countermeasures—figure out whether they’ll back down gracefully if you’ve got a partner, or, if not, exactly what kind of incident they’ll cause. Is that right?”

“Yeah…”

“Ehehe. G-Guild Leader, you’re seriously trash!”

“Those punks bamboozled me!”

I pointed to the back of the room, where the “Oh-Cheon-Ha” trio were pouring juice for one another, patting themselves on the back for masterminding such an amusing scheme.

“I didn’t even plan on doing this! But Cheon Yo-hwa! And Oh Dok-seo! They egged each other on and slyly gaslit me!”

“Mm.”

Ah-ryeon didn’t even turn to look at them, she just hmm-ed and cocked her head.

“C-certainly, if it were confirmed that you and I were dating… an enormous amount of aggro would pour in. Hup. Just thinking about it makes my mouth water with anticipation…”

“That’s one of the reasons I chose you.”

Sim Ah-ryeon was a notorious attention addict, a mutant who actually felt ecstasy when others showered her with hatred, contempt, and resentment.

“Since things are already ruined, let me ask frankly: why did you dump me the moment you heard the confession?”

“Eh.”

Ah-ryeon made a complicated face.

“W-well, dating you means I’d have to care about clothes and hair and stuff… and you’d probably interfere with my lifestyle habits too… It sounds… bothersome.”

“Hmm.”

Congratulations, Ah-ryeon.

This Guild Leader’s psyche rarely gets scratched, but your words just carved wounds that will never wash away. Maybe you should quit being a healer and switch to a DPS.

“I l-like things just the way they are! No hassle, just leeching off you, Guild Leader… Ehehe. No matter who you date, I’ll still be right here…”

“Yeah. That’s just like you, but…?”

Huh? She’d stay the same no matter who I date?

Just as I was about to ask what she meant, Cheon Yo-hwa approached with a sunny grin.

“Come on, Sunbae, don’t be so disappointed! Sure, your hobby is gathering the most mentally twisted people on the peninsula and

stealing their hearts, but that hobby can still run into difficulties!”

“If you’re trying to comfort me, could you at least wipe that huge smile off your face first, Yo-hwa?”

“Ah, sorry. Let me change the classroom motto real quick.”

Yo-hwa borrowed a page from Ha-yul’s sketchbook, climbed onto a desk, and altered the motto.

Needless to say, the motto now read only [hahahaha] in Ha-yul’s elegant handwriting.

“Hoo-ah. Done! Now, Sunbae, let’s discuss this seriously again.”

“Seriously? After looking at that motto??”

“As you can see, Ms. Ah-ryeon is sadly out. Even if you dated her, I doubt Dang Seo-rin or the Saintess would take it seriously.”

Cheon Yo-hwa pressed on.

“By the same logic, Ms. Dok-seo won’t work either.”

“Aw, why not! I’m totally date-able!”

“With Lee Ha-yul, people will just assume Sunbae’s gone insane, so that’s a double no.”

[Objection noted.]

“Personally I’d love for you to date my cute little sister, but even if we spelled out that it was a fake relationship, she’d go completely off the rails. She’d spend all her brainpower just trying to knock you over, forgetting the entire operation.”

Scribble, scribble.

Yo-hwa borrowed another sheet, once again transforming the ha into modern art, flipped to the blank backside, and wrote something.

“So, I recommend the following candidates.”

I looked.

"…"

I raised my head and looked at Yo-hwa's face this time.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Wrong question. Are you sane?"

"Yes!"

"Let's drop it. Really. On reflection this was nonsense from the start. Yeah, that's it! I must have gone crazy for a moment because you hoodwinked me, Yo-hwa."

"Hm-hm."

Cheon Yo-hwa smiled with her eyes.

"Sounds easy, doesn't it, talking about people's feelings and consideration, spinning fancy words? But do you really think you're being considerate of anyone's feelings by just putting this off forever?"

"…"

"If you were an ordinary person, and the people around you were ordinary, you wouldn't need these worries. But we're Awakeners—each of us flirting with the level of Corruptor or Miko."

Yo-hwa shrugged.

"It's only because you keep calling us 'human' that we stay that way. If something snaps, we might act in ways we ourselves can't predict."

"What kind of actions…?"

"Ah-ah—The world has been saved!"

Yo-hwa adopted a theatrical tone.

“The Regressor lived! All his companions lived! Hurrah! But—huh, look at that. The regressor is pledging eternity to someone who’s not me?”

“…”

“I’m pissed off? That’s not a happy ending. I don’t need a world like this, let’s flip the board and start over again!”

“No, no matter how angry they are, that’s…”

“And now, an interview.”

Yo-hwa mimed a microphone with her hand and lunged at Sim Ah-ryeon, who squeaked and hid behind my back.

“Eek.”

“Ms. Ah-ryeon. We’d like to do a quick interview. Will you oblige?”

“W-what is it?”

“Suppose this sunbae, your Guild Leader—swore to spend his life with someone who isn’t you. How would you feel?”

“N-not really… I don’t feel anything. That’s the Guild Leader-nim’s freedom…”

“But wait, the partner says she absolutely cannot have you anywhere nearby. She asked the Guild Leader to sort out the relationship, cut off contact, and gradually drift apart. Once you sense that, what would you do?”

“Ah, aah. T-talk! Cooperation! I’m really a worthless being! Please, let’s compromise somehow…!”

“Ms. Ah-ryeon tries her best to propose compromises, but good grief.”

Yo-hwa beamed.

“The partner absolutely refuses to accept any of it.”

“Th-then… ah! Maybe just the internet or phone? Videocalls? Um, contacting only through remote means…?”

“No. Romantic feelings depend on distance, and behavior like yours, clinging to the Guild Leader at all hours, is intolerable. Distance means not only physical space but also KakaoTalk, messenger, every channel. The partner is a very nice person and understands your feelings and state completely, but the Guild Leader is hers now. She asks you to back off. What do you do?”

“Pardon? I’ll… kill her.”

‘…’

“Eck.”

“Eh?”

My gaze, Ah-ryeon’s gaze, and our cracked voices crossed all at once.

“Uh. Ah-ryeon?”

“Y-yes?”

“Kill her? What do you mean?”

“Uh, w-well. You said there’s no room for compromise… If I can’t talk to it, it’s not intelligent. And if something unintelligent—some object—blocks my path… then it’s an obstacle, and obstacles have to be removed…”

“She’s a person too!”

“Hmm. That’s her claim…”

“I—the Guild Leader—think she’s a person too!”

“Mm. Thinking that is your freedom, Guild Leader.”

Ah-ryeon scrunched up her face and shut her eyes tight.

“I-I’m sorry! I don’t want to be like this either! It’s just… that’s reality. To be an adult you have to accept reality. There’s no helping it…”

“…”

Yo-hwa spun around and looked at me, utterly dazed.

“See?”

“O… oh.”

“Sunbae, you tend to take your own romance too lightly. Thinking, ‘I’ll just decide after I see the ending,’ and so on.”

“So I’ve been too naïve?”

“Sunbae, you’re trapped in a preconception. Whoever you date, whoever accepts your heart, is an endlessly secondary issue.”

“Then what on earth is the essential issue?”

“It’s that whoever you date must be someone who can tolerate Sim Ah-ryeon hanging around you for the rest of your life.”

“…”

“Otherwise someone dies. One of the two of you.”

Is this for real?

“You think only Ah-ryeon’s like this? What about Ha-yul?”

Lee Ha-yul nodded and flipped her sketchbook with a blank face.

[I have already reached an agreement with Oppa.]

[Oppa is my family, and family members are beings who live together.]

[Since I belong to Oppa’s family, a mere third party obviously cannot decide where I live.]

"…"

"As I said yesterday, Oh Dok-seo is the only one with normal sensibilities—at least regarding this issue."

"Eh? Uh, well, I'm just like Mister's kid sister, right? No need to actually live together. It's enough to meet up and shoot the breeze when I'm bored."

Hmm, Oh Dok-seo furrowed one eyebrow.

"But sometimes I'll crave the coffee or sandwiches you make. Oh, that's right! Mister! Just run a café! One only acquaintances can visit. Then I just drop by as a customer, drink coffee and eat sandwiches whenever I want, and leave! I can work on my novel there with my laptop. Kiyaah—amazing. Honestly, it's a perfect solution, right?"

"Sure. In someone's eyes that's a daily café date. You heard that shameless speech, right?"

"…"

"Amazingly, that stance will probably be among the most moderate viewpoints you'll encounter from here on out."

"…"

"So accept it."

Cheon Yo-hwa spread both arms wide and made a playful peek-a-boo pose.

"From now on, Sunbae, you have to find a partner who's fine with Sim Ah-ryeon hovering nearby, okay with Lee Ha-yul living together, and unbothered even if Oh Dok-seo barges in every single day!"

"Does such a person even exist!"

"No. That's why you have to look. Starting now, little by little, diligently, consistently, until you reach the regressor ending."

Silence.

After a long pause, I nodded.

“I see.”

Regressor Undertaker’s Ending No. 1: “Live single until death” – is highly probable!

Footnotes:

Chapter 385

The Suicidal III

Sinnoa

It seemed I was destined to be single for the rest of my life.

「Please don't come looking for me.」

「Human relationships are a jungle in the desert.」

「I'd like some quiet for a while.」

「Sincerely, the Undertaker.」

I pinned that one brief letter to the wall of our hide-out in the Inunaki Tunnel and left.

From today on, I—the Undertaker—was opening Chapter One of my runaway-teen saga.

ShaaAAAA—

Saipan Island. Waves shattered on a beach once famous as a resort, and my heart shattered right along with them.

The reason I chose a distant foreign island was simple: even the Saintess's Clairvoyance couldn't reach this far.

Born alone, yet even to be alone required effort—

I muttered to myself, lonely:

"So this is solitude."

"…"

"How should I describe what I feel now? I only ever meant to live each moment earnestly, yet this is the result. Life never gets easier, no matter how long you live."

"…"

"You know, I honestly don't care if I never have a romance in my entire life. Why must every feeling between a man and woman be translated into that one word, love? Wine doesn't all taste the same; human emotion comes from countless vineyards and varietals mixed together."

"…"

"In fact, trying to define my ties with the people around me using those two syllables—'ro-mance'—is violence, pure and simple. All we do is prove each other's existence."

Crashhhh—

The breakers smashed again. They kept flinging themselves at the island, fearless of breaking, just like humankind, just like me.

"Hrm…"

Noh Do-hwa narrowed her eyes.

"Fuck, I closed my eyes for one second in the office and opened them here on some random scrap of island. When does our illustrious Regressor plan on explaining that?"

Trust Noh Do-hwa. Even faced with this beautiful coast and my tragic monologue, she offered no reaction at all.

"P-please think of it as a little vacation."

"Oh? These days a vacation automatically skips immigration while the traveler's asleep. What a marvelous era. If only it hadn't also skipped the traveler's consent, I might have praised this technological leap."

"Gasp! Look at this, Director!"

Like a pirate discovering buried treasure, I dug in the sand. There, amazingly, lay a wooden chest. When I opened it, rows of exquisite vintage wines were sorted by country of origin.

“Holy—this is insane. Do you see these bottles? Some of these masterpieces are impossible to buy now.”

“…”

“The world must have left this gift to celebrate our arrival. And—whoa! Jazz records, the very ones you love! That’s it, vacation mode activated!”

“Want me to end your life?”

No sale.

Hard to believe, a hardcore alcoholic who downs vin chaud every dawn didn’t even blink.

“Don’t worry. I packed sunscreen and all your personal toiletries. I filled an entire suitcase with the exact same products and already set them up in that picture-perfect cottage.”

“Hm…”

“Well? Isn’t it flawless, Director? I mean it, how many humans today get to enjoy a trip like this? You’ve worked yourself half to death. You deserve to rest!”

“…”

“…”

“So, you shit-weasel. What’s your real point?”

“I heard a few things from the older of the twin sisters, and—”

I explained.

“—in short, she thinks you’re the one and only talent who can pull this mission off. Of course, that’s her opinion, mine differs. Ha! Director is far too busy to play along with this kind of—”

“In summary, you want me to collude with you, fool everyone else, and stage a fake romance?”

“Put bluntly… yes, that’s one way to phrase it.”

She throttled me.

“Well, I get the gist.”

Not until the next morning did Noh Do-hwa sit at the same table as me.

For the record, three of the wines from the treasure chest had already vanished overnight.

“If you’re serious about facing the ‘Ending,’ you have to think about the ‘world after the Ending,’ and sooner or later your trash-heap of relationships will have to be sorted out.”

Clink. She tipped her glass.

From the corner of the cottage, an HMV gramophone dripped mournful jazz.

“But what I don’t get is this: Cheon Yo-hwa—the strategist, right? The one you sealed away and booted from reality?”

“Yes, that’s her.”

“Why did she recommend me of all people?”

Do-hwa’s brows knit.

“Awakener Undertaker, you know I have zero intention of stepping into the swamp you built. I loathe it. Why not ask Team Leader Yu Ji-won? She’s smart enough to manage the mess.”

I wondered the same. That’s why I’d asked Yo-hwa if she was sane.

Logically speaking, there was no way the mighty Noh Do-hwa would join such a scheme.

“Yo-hwa told me to give you this note.”

“Hm…?”

I drew a slip of paper from my pocket.

On it, in handwriting imitating Yo-hwa's, stood a two words:

'Reverse thinking.'

Do-hwa's brows drew together.

"Reverse… thinking?"

"She said you'd figure out the reason yourself once you saw that."

"…"

"Don't overthink it, Director. She likes acting superior. Showing a note and calling it the key to the plan—what does she think she is, Zhuge Liang?"

"…"

Do-hwa didn't look at me.

Ting—

She set her glass down and tapped the rim lightly with a nail.

Slowly. Over and over.

Ripples quivered inside the crystal, and in her jet-black pupils the wine reflected as a wavering shade of gray.

"By any chance…"

"Yes?"

"Is there another note?"

"Er."

I swallowed a sigh and produced another slip.

"I didn't want to hand this over, but Yo-hwa said, 'If the Director asks for a second note, give her this.'"

"…Open it."

"Here."

Two lines were written on the second note:

'Simply trust one human being.'

'A wager.'

A sneer tugged at Do-hwa's mouth.

"Hmmm…"

Sneers were as natural to her face as sunsets to the western sky, yet this time even that law of nature felt strained.

"Wait. Did you truly understand that message, Director?"

"More or less."

Her voice said "more or less," but her eyes were different: the sarcasm aimed with surgical precision at an orange-haired schemer who could not be present.

A long silence passed.

"However…"

She opened her mouth carefully.

"All right. I need to confirm whether I'm following. Since she called it a duel, I'll place my stake too…"

"Your stake?"

"Open the third note, Undertaker-nim."

"…"

"If I'm right, the last note will contain something truly vile. Then I'll join your ridiculous 'fake' scenario with everything I've got."

Do-hwa glanced at me.

“But if it says anything else, well. I’ll forget every bit of nonsense I heard on this island.”

I blinked.

“Really?”

“Yes. I won’t hold it against you or tease you. We’ll call it a simple vacation.”

That was exactly what I wanted.

I drew out another slip. I’d never said there was a third note, yet she accepted it as natural.

And then—

“Heh.”

The moment she read it, Do-hwa laughed.

Deeply, darker than her own eyes.

‘Cowardice of the defeated.’

‘If you want more, see the back.’

She flipped it over.

A longer sentence filled the reverse:

‘Miracle logic: Invoice yourselves as debt to get what you want. Then claim it’s separate. Detach! Booster! Launch!’

‘Good thing this person is kind, right?’

Rip. Rip.

She tore the note to confetti.

Then something even wilder happened: she dumped the scraps into

her wineglass and drank them in a single gulp.

“Uh.”

While I gaped, Do-hwa swallowed the paper, wiped her lips with the long sleeve of her doctor’s coat, and said,

“Undertaker…”

“Y-yes?”

“You have a real knack for collecting absolute bastards. Fabulous. Had I not met you, I’d have died not knowing this little land crawls with such dogs.”

“…”

It was obvious—at least to me.

Anyone else might miss it because her face looked normal, but I saw it clearly:

Noh Do-hwa was genuinely angry.

Maybe “angry” was too broad, let’s call it “pissed off.”

Which amazed me.

“My God. Three scraps of paper actually pissed off the Director for real? What sorcery is this, Cheon Yo-hwa?”

“Fine. Undertaker. I will gladly join your ‘fake’ romance.”

She stood.

“On one condition.”

“A condition?”

“Yes. Just one, so don’t fret.”

Turning her back, she approached the gramophone, flipped through the LPs, and pulled out Piazzolla’s “Libertango.”

“If we start dating, from that instant every word I speak and every move I make will be a lie.”

“Excuse me?”

“Exactly what you heard. Even if I say ‘I love you,’ it’s a lie. In fact, I intend to speak and act only falsehoods.”

“…”

“Holding your hand? A lie. Saying I’m happy? A lie. Until this cycle ends, I will never, ever show my true feelings again.”

Every act, the reverse of her heart—

Saying “I feel good” would really mean “I feel awful.”

A romance that was counterfeit in the literal sense.

“Ah. Of course, I won’t stop you from misunderstanding. Delusions are a personal liberty.”

“…”

“Well?”

Still she kept her back to me.

“Will you date me anyway?”

In that instant, I still didn’t grasp the meaning of Yo-hwa’s notes, but a different certainty kicked in, like instinct.

The Noh Do-hwa before me had made a monumental decision—one she’d avoided or hesitated over in every other cycle.

If I missed this chance, she would never reach it again.

Trusting that certainty, I answered at once.

“Yes.”

“…”

Crrk.

She dropped the needle. The vinyl began to haul jazz up from the depths of the earth.

“Very well. From this moment…”

Do-hwa slipped off her white doctor’s coat. When she turned to face me—

Noh Do-hwa was gone.

Only a single person remained, smiling brilliantly, like a flower in full bloom.

“Shall we drag everyone else into hell together, Mr. Undertaker?”

“…”

From that day forward, the most dangerous fake romance of our lives began.

Footnotes:

Chapter 386

The Suicidal IV

Sinnoa

We first made our way back to the Korean Peninsula.

And for a few days we lay low, quietly holding our breath as if to say, “Nothing happened at our resort, nope, not a thing.”

All of this was at Noh Do-hwa’s insistence.

“Hmph. Even if we start dating, nobody will care if we proclaim ‘Day 1’ on a deserted island now, will they…?”

“Our aim is, after all, to observe how the rest of humanity reacts, and to discover the perfect strategy that suits those reactions. Wouldn’t you say so…?”

“So.”

“Go back to Busan and spend about a week acting as if a mouse has died, please…”

Naturally I wondered what scheme lay behind those words. When I asked the perfectly reasonable question, Noh Do-hwa merely lifted the corner of her lips in a faint smile.

“Just sit back and watch. Things will get rather entertaining…”

Because of that—

I returned to the graveyard on the roof of the Tower of Babel, to the classroom where the elder twin had been Time Sealed, and began interrogating Cheon Yo-hwa.

“How on earth did you persuade Noh Do-hwa?”

“Ahaha. Well. Even if you ask me, I’m not sure.”

Cheon Yo-hwa sat on a classroom desk, swinging her legs.

“As you know, ‘the me from back then’ and ‘the me now’ are different. Every time you enter or leave this place, I reset.”

“…Even so, your essence doesn’t change. You must have an idea.”

“Hmm-m. You said you passed her some notes, right? May I see what was written on them?”

I wrote them directly on the blackboard.

‘Reverse thinking,’ ‘Simply trust one human being,’ ‘A wager,’ ‘Cowardice of the defeated.’

‘If you want more, see the back,’ ‘Miracle logic: Invoice yourselves as debt to get what you want. Then claim it’s separate. Detach! Booster! Launch!’ ‘Good thing this person is kind, right?’

At first Cheon Yo-hwa tilted her head, but as the white letters multiplied her expression gradually changed.

“Ah-ha.”

“You understand?”

“Yes! And your handwriting is truly beautiful, Sunbae! If you’d been born in the Middle Ages you’d have lived comfortably as a scribe. You were born in the wrong era, Sunbae.”

“…Not that, brat.”

“Ahaha. Just joking, just joking.”

Cheon Yo-hwa chuckled.

“Mm-hmm. Most of this would seriously damage Ms. Noh Do-hwa’s honor, so I must keep it secret. Still! Don’t worry! There’s exactly one part I can explain.”

“Which part?”

“You said Ms. Noh Do-hwa asked if a second note was ready right

after receiving the first, yes?”

I nodded.

“Right. That was my first question, why did she assume there would definitely be another note?”

“Obviously! From Ms. Noh Do-hwa’s point of view, a person named Cheon Yo-hwa pushing her toward romance with the Undertaker is automatically suspicious!”

Chk.

Proclaiming “Here comes the answer arc,” Cheon Yo-hwa proudly declared.

Then, apparently to mimic Noh Do-hwa, she scowled, produced a monocle from somewhere, and put it on.

“Hrrmm? Cheon Yo-hwa? The self-proclaimed comrade who was Time Sealed? Why would she recommend I date someone? What gain could there be?”

“…”

“On top of that, she’s openly confessed for ages that she likes the Undertaker. Now she wants to help me date him? Oh-ho. Something stinks.”

The kid’s impersonation skills were unexpectedly high.

Cheon Yo-hwa removed the monocle.

“Sunbae. Ms. Noh Do-hwa never moves unless she first grasps the other person’s real intent and desire. She always assumes a trap.”

“Mm.”

“So the second note was written to bare my own heart.”

Its content was simple:

‘Simply trust one human being.’

‘A wager.’

Cheon Yo-hwa flashed a bright smile.

“Ms. Noh Do-hwa is wondering whether Sunbae can truly reach a happy ending.”

“…”

“So she reserved a bad ending in advance. But against that, I replied that I ‘simply trust this one human being, the Undertaker.’”

I see.

“Hence ‘a wager.’”

“Exactly!”

Cheon Yo-hwa beamed.

“Can Sunbae—the Undertaker—really draw out ‘an ending that every last one of us can completely accept’? And beyond that… will even ‘Noh Do-hwa’ be included in that ‘every last one’?”

“…”

“Ms. Noh Do-hwa doesn’t believe in that possibility. Naturally so—it looks impossible.”

Indeed.

Noh Do-hwa always distrusted happiness, rejecting the very word ‘happy ending.’

With a 99.9 percent probability the world would not escape destruction, and so she naturally bet on that side.

Meanwhile—the girl before me was the exact opposite.

She was the type to stake everything on the 0.01 percent chance.

Not because it was ‘hopeful’ or ‘romantic,’ but because, very simply, the lower the odds, the greater the thrill when you win: the logic of

a gambling addict.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t explain the other notes. You’ll need to hear those from Ms. Noh Do-hwa herself. Hehe. Of course, you can obtain them with her mouth—or with her lips, if you like.”

“Yo-hwa, do you….”

“Yes?”

“Do you truly believe I can reach a happy ending? Why? How?”

The smile faded from Cheon Yo-hwa’s face.

“Sunbae. Humans are always looking for a reason for defeat they can accept.”

Even so, a faint echo of her smile lingered at her lips.

“If I lose because of you, I can accept that defeat without any question. In fact, I’d gladly lose.”

“…”

“To believe in someone—if that belief is genuine—means you’re ready not only to trust in their success but also to embrace their failure. Just as you trusted me, trusted us.”

Cheon Yo-hwa said softly,

“I trust you too, Sunbae.”

A week passed in a blur.

Given my recent narration, I may seem to have focused only on human relationships.

But that’s merely because I tackle one theme per episode.

In the 1,000th cycle there were incidents far more serious than my social experiments, and I intend to cover them in the very next episode.

Thus—

[By the way, Mr. Undertaker.]

[Did you enjoy your vacation in Saipan?]

"…"

Even if the Saintess sent me such a message, it would be wrong to assume her interests were confined to 'this sort of thing.'

She was the Saintess. She ceaselessly strove for the security and ethics of the Korean Peninsula.

Only occasionally, about once a day, did she strike at my heart with a razor-sharp question.

"Ah, yes, well. You could say I enjoyed it. It was genuine rest, a proper vacation."

I fought desperately to keep my expression steady.

"Besides, Ms. Saintess, you know full well that even if you set up a playground, Director Noh Do-hwa would never play."

[Indeed, that is true.]

"So I built a hut and left her to rest thoroughly. Unless she's forced, that woman never rests."

[…]

I felt it—the gaze of suspicion. The silence.

Yet I absolutely refused to let a hint of emotion show on my face.

The experience of a regressor is no joke, unless it's a catastrophe on the level of 'confessing to Sim Ah-ryeon and being rejected,' nothing rattles my mental fortitude.

[I see.]

After a very brief silence, long enough for the Saintess to 'pause'

and examine my face from every angle, her message continued.

[Then the fact that Ms. Noh Do-hwa purchased a large quantity of going-out clothes yesterday has nothing to do with the time you spent vacationing together on a deserted island?]

How could I not be startled by that remark?

“P-pardon?”

[Exactly as I said. Yesterday Ms. Noh Do-hwa, accompanied by two staff members, bought a set of bright, fashionable outfits.]

“Uh, I… this is the first I’ve heard of it. Didn’t she usually just throw on whatever rags, cover them with a doctor’s coat, and call it a day?”

[Yes. She claims it’s because she can’t be bothered. To the public she’s popular for setting an example of frugal living.]

Honestly, if the Regressor Alliance had to arrest only two fashion terrorists, Sim Ah-ryeon and Noh Do-hwa would top the list.

“Hmph.”

[…It seems you truly didn’t know, Mr. Undertaker.]

Perhaps my stunned expression erased the last shred of her doubt. The Saintess continued.

[I apologize. It looked as if Ms. Noh Do-hwa’s feelings had shifted dramatically. I ended up questioning you as if interrogating.]

“N-no problem. Director Noh Do-hwa is of supreme importance, after all.”

[Yes. And in addition, today there is a hairdresser… no. Never mind. I’m sorry to disturb you during work.]

“?”

The ominous signs did not end there.

“Mr. Matiz. We have an emergency.”

That evening, Yu Ji-won barged into the guild dormitory. Since her room was next door, invasion was easy.

“Huh? What’s up?”

“It is an extremely serious matter. Director Noh Do-hwa has….”

“Noh Do-hwa?”

“…been possessed by an anomaly.”

“?”

Yu Ji-won’s face was deadly serious. I suspected she’d looked more relaxed even while slaughtering her own parents.

“Uh… Ji-won, maybe you don’t know, but Director Noh Do-hwa isn’t the sort who gets possessed easily.”

“I thought so too. But after serving at her side for the past week, I reached an unavoidable conclusion. The current Director is… abnormal.”

“What exactly is abnormal?”

“Shh.”

Yu Ji-won glanced around, then leaned close like a spy passing Soviet secrets.

“The Director asked me whether her clothes suited her.”

?

“She knows I worked as a fashion model in my youth—mainly look-books. Few people in the Corps rival my eye for style.”

“It’s nice to see you still advertise yourself as naturally as breathing. And?”

“About a week ago, she began with, [Now that I think of it, Team

Leader Yu has good fashion sense, doesn't she?]—and next thing I knew, she summoned Busan's hottest designer and pattern maker."

???

"What on earth are you saying?"

"I share precisely the feelings you're experiencing now, Mr. Matiz. And that's not all."

"There's more?"

"Yes. It's hard to phrase, but… her way of speaking."

"Her way of speaking?"

"Originally the Director's tone was like gathering all of humanity's pessimism, hauling it into her mouth, and letting it dance on her tongue."

"Ji-won, you've been reading a lot, your prose has improved."

"Thank you. But since a week ago, the Director's speech has… um."

"What? Don't leave me hanging."

"…"

At that moment Yu Ji-won shut her mouth, clearly distressed.

"…I apologize, Mr. Matiz."

"Huh?"

"I thought it urgent to brief you, yet the Seoul Yongsan control tower seems to think otherwise."

My jaw dropped.

"You're telling me the Saintess telepathically stopped you from finishing that sentence??"

"I'm sorry."

“No, Saintess? Ms. Saintess? Could we have a quick talk? What is going on!”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Matiz.”

Yu Ji-won used every surviving facial muscle to display the utmost contrition.

“Even if I withdraw now, your affection for me will not change. Regrettably I have not forged such bonds with others.”

She bowed.

“Thus I must focus on the variable of ‘other people’ rather than the constant that is you. Politics and human relations hinge on controlling variables. I shall take my leave. Have a good night.”

“Ji-won? Ji-won. Ji-won! If you start talking, finish! Hey! Yu Ji-won! Dobongsan, you little—!”

Thud.

“…”

Left alone in my room, I could only gape.

What the heck? Seriously, what the heck?

That question was answered the very next morning, the day the promised week ended.

Dawn.

After spending a sleepless night in anxiety, I left the guild, exited the Inunaki Tunnel, and found Noh Do-hwa waiting at the entrance.

“Huh?”

Noh Do-hwa offered a faint smile.

“Good morning, Mr. Undertaker.”

"…"

"I thought I'd go for an early walk again today, and suddenly you came to mind, so I waited a little."

Objection.

Noh Do-hwa had never waited outside for me to emerge from the tunnel. Such an event was impossible under classical mechanics.

Nor did she ever end her sentences with gentle ellipses or greet someone with a mild 'Good morning.' Such an event was impossible under quantum mechanics.

Furthermore, Noh Do-hwa wearing a shy, breeze-hidden smile was equally impossible.

Her usually messy black hair—half-dried and sticking out in every direction—was now smooth as silk, swaying gently in the wind. She brushed it back with the back of her hand and smiled again—also impossible.

And finally—

Noh Do-hwa, who always wore a battered doctor's coat over whatever rags she owned, now donned a perfectly fitted outfit—clearly commissioned from a designer and pattern maker who had poured their talent and hours into crafting it—yet still radiated the feel of 'everyday, casual wear.' Impossible.

In other words—

"Noh Do-hwa… Director?"

"Yes, Mr. Undertaker."

The woman before me had become beautiful.

So beautiful that even Yu Ji-won, whose looks were an impregnable fortress, might retreat half a step.

"I know you're busy, but… I recently found a place with delicious

sangria.”

Seeing my shock (and finally noticing she wore no monocle), Noh Do-hwa blushed faintly and, somewhat shyly, continued.

“If you have a little free time, would you like to take a walk with me?”

“…”

Mo Gwang-seo, Lord Jesus Christ.

What in heaven’s name is happening to me?

Footnotes:

Chapter 387

The Suicidal V

Sinnoa

What, really, makes the greatest masterpiece.

According to the opinion of a certain writer, Ms. Oh, whose credibility ranks dead last in the world.

“In the end, the novel you loved when you were a kid is, for you, the greatest masterpiece. Nothing else can beat a work that’s been taxidermied inside your memories.”

“Why’s that? Memory only does one of two things, mister. Either it slaps on a filter that scrubs every blemish from a selfie, or it preserves that one blemish in ultra-high definition. The masterpieces of the past are always the former.”

If I accept that claim, then sadly I’ve already missed the window to remember the <Harry Potter> series as the crowning masterpiece of my life.

It wasn’t only <Harry Potter>.

Because for me, the Undertaker, every scrap of information about my childhood got sorted into the recycling bin labeled “memories that don’t exist.”

Even so, on the timeline of my memories, <Harry Potter> still stands as the very first novel I ever encountered among all the books I have read.

Back when I was still pure—namely, before I was tainted by that otaku Oh Dok-seo—I was already under Commander Dang Seo-rin’s orders to read and reread <Harry Potter>.

If I have to pick the single most memorable scene, it was the moment the character named “Hermione” made her debut at the

school ball.

– Wait, Hermione was that pretty?!

– Gah! No way! How can that bookworm with the permanent turtle neck suddenly become the belle of the ballroom!

– Just yesterday I was chatting with her like nothing. Can someone like me still stay by Hermione's side as her friend…?

It was, quite literally, the classic hidden-power-nerd cliché.

She had always possessed the looks to conquer the social battlefield if only she dressed up, yet until now she'd simply kept her distance from the mundane world to probe the truths of all creation—

But because the ignorant masses never stopped bad-mouthing her, the Grandmaster Hermione chose a single instant to unleash her hidden cultivation and rearranged the entire jianghu pecking order in one stroke.

I nodded and turned the page.

'Mm. This is sweet.'

Back in my 5th cycle, when I was still quite young, I never caught on.

Yet that very scene served, for me, as the archetype that would later shape the genre called "romance fantasy."

Even before I met Oh Dok-seo and was formally introduced to rofan, I had—like prophets sensing God's will before Christ spread the Gospel—already been baptised in the DNA of romance fantasy.

And what is the flower of rofan? Without a doubt, the high-society ball. Mandatory debutante. No theories or objections accepted.

For the record, I stayed firmly on the Harry-and-Luna ship till the very end.

A hero born as the prophesied child yet forever tormented by "fake

news," and beside him Luna Lovegood, the daughter of a paper that printed nothing but "fake news," yet who alone saw through to Harry Potter's essence—surely they are the one legitimate couple skewering the series' irony…

But I digress.

So why was I suddenly reminiscing about Hermione's ballroom-debutante scene?

"…?"

Tilt.

Because the very person now strolling down Haeundae beside me—who sensed my stare, met my eyes, tilted her head, and softly smiled—Director Noh Do-hwa herself—

"If you keep staring at me like that, even I'm going to get a little embarrassed, Mr. Undertaker."

…was live-action inheriting the very roots of romance-fantasy cuisine right before my eyes.

I snapped back to myself with an empty laugh.

"Ah, my apologies. You just look so unfamiliar I stared without meaning to. But, um."

"Yes, go ahead."

"Are you… truly Director Noh Do-hwa?"

Noh Do-hwa—or whatever anomaly I was seeing—covered her mouth with a hand and laughed quietly.

"Mmm-hm. Seeing you this flustered makes all my preparation feel worth it. But it's a little sad too."

"Sorry?"

"If you fail to recognise me just because I dressed up a bit, that's

lonely, you know. Or do you, like Team Leader Yu Ji-won, suspect I've been possessed by an anomaly?"

As I stammered, Noh Do-hwa's eyes curved into a smile.

"I'mreallyNohDo-hwa."

"…"

Her smile was as warm as spring sunlight, yet my head went ice-cold.

That single sentence yanked me by the hair and hauled me out of my daze back into razor-sharp reality.

'Right. That's how it was.'

Flustered? Why be flustered?

Noh Do-hwa herself had released the trailer over a week ago.

– If you decide to date me.

– Every word and every action of mine will be fabricated.

– Holding your hand is a lie. Saying I'm happy is a lie.

– Until the day this run ends I will never, ever, reveal my true feelings again.

A declaration of fake love.

It had started as a simple suggestion to pretend to date, yet Noh Do-hwa piled extra conditions on top.

However hollow the lies might be—no, precisely because they were hollow—

If I chose to date her, I would be allowed to see nothing but the "fabricated Noh Do-hwa," never the real her.

'I see. So this is what she meant by falsehood.'

By producing an entirely different self she could keep every shred of sincerity out of the romance, while feasting on my embarrassment.

That's Noh Do-hwa for you.

Truly an elite talent at teasing her partner straight into hell.

In that case, I too had a stratagem.

"I'm sorry to have disappointed you."

I clasped Noh Do-hwa's hand—gently, as though handling precious porcelain.

Then I spread across my lips a smile more perfect than anything on earth.

"I was so taken by you, Ms. Noh Do-hwa, that I blushed without realising."

"…"

"From now on I'll try to act like my usual self, too. Ahaha. Though it won't be easy, what with my heart pounding nonstop."

At that moment.

Cutting through all the lies and acting, a razor-sharp exchange of looks flashed between Noh Do-hwa and me, between the Director of the National Road Management Corps and the Regressor.

– And what kind of cheap trick do you call this?

– A secret art.

Heart-to-heart. The screech of naked intent.

I was, after all, someone who could interpret even the screams of anomalies. Cracking a human's gaze didn't require me to loosen my wrists.

– Countering the fake romance.

– Ah, so you'll play the fake Undertaker and pit fake against fake until one of the real ones breaks? Is that it?

– "Win before you fight," says the Art of War. For one like me who values human intimacy, light physical contact is routine. You, Director Noh Do-hwa, brand yourself a voluntary outsider and avoid human relationships. There's already a density gap in our lives. This battle is mine to win.

– Oh, screw you. Fucking bastard.

The instant those eye-beams crossed, Noh Do-hwa, as though nothing happened, softened her gaze again, folding her brows like curtains in shy fluttering.

'…Terrifying.'

An acting ability of truly fearsome calibre!

Who could look at this Noh Do-hwa and imagine she's that Director? No wonder even the Saintess or Yu Ji-won made a fuss.

'However.'

I kept that perfect smile glued to my face.

'I, the Undertaker—while I may not boast the inhuman acting chops of Oh Dok-seo's "Side Story Creation," I'm still skilled enough to not bring shame to my long, long life.'

What if I'd hesitated, dithering?

I'd still be floundering in confusion, feeding nothing but Noh Do-hwa's twisted voyeurism.

I could not allow that.

'Well then. How will she strike back?'

We had already left the seaside path behind and were nearing the entrance to Jagalchi Market.

Even at dawn it was crowded. At this rate, the sight of us holding hands would be put on public display before all Busan citizens!

A split-second crisis.

"…"

Squeeze.

"…!"

Amazingly, Noh Do-hwa did not answer with a barbed line or teasing wordplay.

She forewent her specialty.

Instead, wordlessly, she demonstrated with action.

'Interlaced fingers?!'

Yes.

Not content with casual hand-holding, Noh Do-hwa wove our fingers together, changing the battlefield through the tactic commonly called "locking fingers."

'Director Noh Do-hwa is locking fingers?!'

A scream made entirely of French rang inside my skull. I felt like a soldier witnessing the Wehrmacht's first blitzkrieg.

"…"

Unable to contain my shock I tried to force eye contact again, but it misfired.

The entity presumed to be Director Noh Do-hwa simply dipped her head thirty degrees, as if steeping embarrassment upon embarrassment like tea.

Even a regressor's eyes found no flaw in that acting.

'Have you lost your mind, Noh Do-hwa!'

I shuddered.

‘Just how badly did Cheon Yo-hwa’s message scratch you that you’re willing to dive this deep into hell? Aren’t you afraid of creating black history!’

And then it hit me.

‘…Gasp! When all is done I’ll be the only one left who remembers this!’

From Noh Do-hwa’s perspective, even if a black-history event was born she had nothing to fear.

A few years on, once she embraced the world’s end, everything would reset with an “oh well, I’ll just forget.”

‘Ah, damn it!’

If the fake-dating front escalated into a black-history battle like this, I alone was doomed to shoulder all blame.

Around the moment my mind began buzzing blank—

“Ah! Undertaker, good morning. What brings you to the market toda—huh….”

Thud.

At the market entrance, someone wearing a witch’s hat, someone who looked very much like Dang Seo-rin, was clutching a basket stuffed full. She had three attendants as well. The moment she spotted me and ran up to greet me, she suddenly dropped the basket.

Thump, roll roll roll…

Apples spilled from the basket, bright red and perfectly ripe, scattering across the ground.

Just like when Don Corleone was gunned down in The Godfather Part I.

My own feelings were not much different from Don Corleone's failing heart.

"…"

"Uh, you, uhh, you…."

Dang Seo-rin's finger, pointed at me, trembled violently.

"You—"

"Seo-rin."

"You, youuu!"

"Seo-rin. This is a misunderstanding."

"Youuuuuu! Who is thaaaaaat!"

The Heavenly Demon Dang Seo-rin's sonic arts tore the sky above Jagalchi Market in an instant.

Every gaze zeroed in on us.

"W-what? What's going on?"

"What in blazes is that noise?"

Mutter mutter.

The vendors who had been up since dawn stared at us wide-eyed, as if they'd just been woken up a second time.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

I almost envied Don Corleone—better to take a few bullets. This was hell.

"Who is she! You, who are you?! Do you know whose hand you're holding?! Huh? That's the Undertaker! Undertaker! Undertaker! Do you even know that?!"

"Oh?"

A soft chuckle slipped from Noh Do-hwa, perhaps the dirge that backs hell itself.

“Of course I know, Guild Leader Dang Seo-rin.”

“You know who he is and you… you know who I am and you still?!”

“Certainly. But it hurts my feelings. We used to chat whenever we bumped into each other at the dawn market. It’s only been a few days and you no longer recognise me?”

“Huh?! I-I don’t know anyone like you!”

“Guild Leader Dang Seo-rin.”

Srrk.

Noh Do-hwa drew a monocle from her bosom and set it over her eye.

With her other hand she kept our interlaced fingers, then leaned in and hooked her arm through mine.

“It’s me. Noh Do-hwa.”

“What?!”

“Noh Do-hwa.”

“…”

“Noh Do-hwa.”

“…….”

Cause.

To Dang Seo-rin, everything in the world translated into sound. Each object had its own timbre, and a unique tone resonated from Noh Do-hwa as well.

In other words, even if everyone else saw the current Noh Do-hwa

and shouted “Fake! Enemy of the sect!” Dang Seo-rin alone could not.

Naturally, treating the Undertaker at her side as “fake” was also impossible.

“Ubbuh-bubbuh-buh—”

Result.

Dang Seo-rin fainted.

“Great Witch!”

“Seo-riiin?!”

“Hehe.”

Her attendants and I rushed up and shook her, but her runaway consciousness refused to come home.

Vendors gathered from every side, clamouring “What’s going on!” “Oh dear, Great Witch!” Even now Noh Do-hwa stuck to my side, adding confusion to the chaos.

It was bedlam—no, a literal market scene.

– *Click!*

At that moment an ominous sound hit my ears.

“H-haaa… whoa, h-holy crap…”

On the market floor, now a sea of people, I heard a voice all too familiar—one I dearly wished were not.

“Extra… sensational scoop, extraaa…”

My eyes locked with Sim Ah-ryeon.

“……!”

Gooseflesh spread across my skin.

I nearly forgot to wake Seo-rin.

“Ah-ryeon!”

“H-hieeek… s-scary.”

Click click click.

“Ah-ryeon, what are you doing! Ah-ryeon!”

“I-it looked fun so I followed you… heehee. Holding back my sleep the past few days to get up early really paid off… The early bird gets the worm… and not just any worm either, a huuuge, squirmy earthworm…”

“Ah-ryeon! Don’t go! Ah-ryeon, where are you heading!”

“Wiggle wiggle wiggle. Hehehe. D-delicious. Such a delicacy… The worm keeps wriggling and wriiiggling…”

Sim Ah-ryeon ignored me and slipped through the wall of people with her own footwork. I couldn’t abandon the scene to chase her.

Later that very day.

A post went up on SG Net.

– OldManGoryeo: [Image] Undertaker ← If this bastard two-times the Great Witch of Samcheon World and the Director of the National Road Management Corps he’s basically begging for suicide lol hit like lololol

(Likes: 3,103)

“……”

And thus SG Net logged the highest like count since its founding.

Footnotes:

Chapter 388

The Suicidal VI

Sinnoa

Sssk.

– [Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: I used to like the Undertaker because he always charged to the front and took down monsters faster than anyone, but fuck, he had the nerve to look away from our Great Witch? My back of the head still stings, lol (400m)

AnonymousMischiefMaker: I knew this would happen

"…"

Even if I look over there.

– [NRMC] ForbiddenBooksDept17: Rumor's been circling Tower of Babel for days. They say the Undertaker confessed to the Director first. (500m)

Anonymous: fr??

[NRMC] ForbiddenBooksDept17: Yep. Was it a week ago? The Director took a short vacation. She went with the Undertaker, and apparently that's when he confessed. (500m)

Anonymous: wow

[Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: This little punk, lololol (400m)

Anonymous: Isn't this fake news??

AnonymousMischiefMaker: I knew this would happen, I just knew it

"…"

Even if I glance that way.

– dolLHOuse: It's real (1,200m)

Anonymous: wtf, a deep-layer source just verified it lolololol

Anonymous: So you're telling me the Undertaker was flirting with the Great Witch of Samcheon World, but behind her back he sneaked off on vacation with the Director of the National Road Management Corps and traded confessions?

Anonymous: lolololol

Anonymous: But why is everyone logging out and commenting as guests??

Anonymous: Because anyone bad-mouthing the Undertaker with their guild nickname showing in this situation would have to be crazy lolol

Anonymous: fr lol most guild masters probably owe that guy all sorts of favors

AnonymousMischiefMaker: I knew this would happen, and I knew that I knew it from a very, very long time ago, too

"…"

Every single post.

No matter how far I scroll on my smartphone, all I see is yesterday's exclusive scoop.

Flame war. Combustion. No, a five-alarm inferno.

The community was ablaze.

– Anonymous: Any awakeners living in Busan? I saw the photos last night—since when was the Director that pretty??

Anonymous: fr… I had no idea who she was. if OldManGoryeo hadn't explained in the post I would've never guessed

– [Baekhwa] NewspaperClub2: Breaking)))) Café Azit closed indefinitely!!

Anonymous: lmao

Anonymous: Undertaker barista has rage-quit!!!

Anonymous: Nooo, damn it, my daily joy—my iced Americano!!

"…"

Ahh.

My head went fuzzy.

Even so, I clung to my sanity.

'If I lose it here too, annihilation! Everything ends!'

The door of hope has not yet slammed shut.

Modern times are different from the past. These days the only community left on the internet is SG Net. Compared to the golden age, it's literally just a handful.

If I unleash the power of "SuchafuckingGarbageMan" here!

"Seo Gyu!"

"Ah… hyung."

Basement of the National Road Management Corps. I barged into the monster prison where Seo Gyu had been appointed as chief warden.

But for some reason the look in Seo Gyu's eyes as he greeted me was troubling.

As if he had resigned himself to 'Well, it's finally here.'

Sensing danger, I immediately activated the patented technique of a regressor. I 'pasted' the regressor's information straight into my brain.

“Right! My little bro! Wow, your shoulders get broader by the day. How do you end up with delts like that when all you do is smash cereal? Huh? It’s pure talent, talent. That’s real dinosaur DNA!”

“Ah. Thank you…”

“Your outdoor gym at Haeundae is popping off these days. Yeah? The members’ bodies are, whoa, if they were civilians back in the day they’d have entered competitions. Feeling stiff anywhere lately? Should I ask Uehara Shino to whip up some S-rank joint supplements?”

“Uh! N-no, I’m good, hyung.”

Inside my skull a siren shrieked.

Seo Gyu usually lit up at shoulder compliments, but he was lukewarm. That was beyond abnormal.

“Uh, uh-huh. Hmm. Anyway. SG Net’s been a little noisy lately…”

“Yes. Not just lately, it’s been on fire from last night straight through this morning.”

“Hmph. SG Net was founded so we could easily share info on anomalies.”

“It was, once.”

“Well. Hmm. I’m not sure it’s right to let fake news completely unrelated to our community’s purpose incite awakened ones like that.”

“…Hyung.”

A complicated look clouded Seo Gyu’s eyes.

“This place is, in the setting, a community run by Constellations. No matter how hot the boards get because of news about you, hyung, the Constellations have no reason to interfere.”

“Gasp, I’ve got a great idea. Let’s stage a blackout! Seo Gyu. We

claim a ‘Blackout Anomaly’ appeared, shutting down smartphone access across the board!”

“Hyung…”

Huh? Weird. We weren’t even talking about Three Kingdoms trivia, yet Seo Gyu was looking at me just like back then.

“Please start facing reality.”

“W-what?”

“What good is sinking SG Net? No matter how much the kids there scream, it doesn’t affect you. The problem isn’t SG Net, it’s people around you like Dang Seo-rin noona or Chairwoman Cheon Yo-hwa, right?”

“…….”

“I’ll quietly make sure baseless rumors stay buried. So please, hyung, forget SG Net… uh?”

Seo Gyu stopped after glancing at his phone.

Every human born on the Korean peninsula has a special auditory device built in.

Just from the single syllable ‘uh’ we can instantly tell if it means affirmation, surprise, hesitation, and a rainbow of other nuances.

Seo Gyu’s ‘uh’ just now translated crystal-clear: ‘We’re screwed.’

“W-what is it? Why’re you like that?”

“…Hyung, um. You should probably take a look at the SG Net post that just hit the recommendations.”

I logged in.

– [EasternHolyState] NorthernSaintess: I have a confession for all believers, so I’m posting this. (1,200m)

“…”

The title alone sent a chill creeping up my spine from my tailbone.

Needless to say, '[EasternHolyState] NorthernSaintess' was the nickname Sim Ah-ryeon used. Not OldManGoryeo, but the alias when she pretended to be the Saintess.

'But Ah-ryeon said using that ID was boring and she hardly ever touched it.'

Why now of all times?

I tapped and read the body.

– I was informed that a rumor has been spreading on SG Net since yesterday.

– The rumor claims that someone called the "Undertaker" is dating, or in a similar relationship with, the Guild Master of Samcheon and the Director of the National Road Management Corps.

– I wish to say a few words regarding this, so I have taken the difficult step of posting. As I am unfamiliar with community culture, please forgive any breaches of etiquette.

– Please, believers, do not be swayed by the incitement and defamation in this virtual space; stand firm in your faith.

– Because the Undertaker—far beyond what I deserve—confessed to me, Sim Ah-ryeon, who has been given the title of Northern Saintess, just last week.

– "I love you. Please go out with me."

– …It was an extremely passionate confession. Even my heart fluttered without meaning to.

– But I am one who devotes herself solely to the love of God. After hearing Mr. Undertaker's confession, we agreed to pursue a platonic communion of souls transcending the flesh.

– I trust him.

– If you think about it logically, someone who conveyed his feelings to me last week could not possibly be sharing romantic moments with others this week in full view of the public.

– Once again, I earnestly ask all members of the Eastern Holy State to refuse fake news.

– In the name of our Lord Mo Gwang-seo, Jesus Christ. Amen.

"……."

"Hy-hyung, this is obviously bs, right?"

Seo Gyu watched my face.

Meanwhile the post's upvotes kept climbing: one hundred, two hundred, three.

Especially the comments from members tagged with [EasternHolyState] multiplied exponentially.

– [EasternHolyState] KindServant: ?

– [EasternHolyState] LowlyServant: Saintess??

– Anonymous: So that bastard even messed with our angel who knows nothing of the world?

– [EasternHolyState] BraveServant: Is this real?

The wind blew.

Into the flames of the board, a wind was blowing.

Pure headcount-wise, if you count awakeners by guild membership, the Eastern Holy State was overwhelming number one——

Until now they had treated the flaming board as "those Busan guys at the southern tip doing crazy stuff" and merely spectated.

But they were beginning to realize the burning house was actually theirs.

“Come on. No matter how crazy the world is, there’s no way you confessed to Ah-ryeon, hyung.”

Seo Gyu laughed.

“Ahaha. So it’s a lie, right? Seriously, Ah-ryeon doesn’t know where the line is. If it’s false I’ll nip it in the bud right away… huh? Hyung? Why aren’t you answering? Hey, stop joking. Hyung. There’s no way, even if the sky falls, that you said those kinds of words to Ah-ryeon. Hyung? Hyung? Hyung?! Seriously?! Are you serious?! Hyyuuung!”

I left the basement.

It was absolutely not running away.

I was deeply moved by Seo Gyu’s words. Fretting over anonymous reputations in cyberspace? Far better to pour my attention into my precious people nearby.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

“Saintess!”

I glanced around the corridor to make sure we were alone and spoke at once.

“Why did you ignore my calls all day and only speak to me now! I almost rushed up to Seoul!”

After two days of silence, the saintess telepathy finally reopened.

[I’m sorry. I did everything I could to dissuade Sim Ah-ryeon, but I couldn’t stop her.]

“No, it’s fine. Ah-ryeon is a fake, a knockoff, a phony saintess at best. As long as the true Ms. Saintess stays by my side, I fear nothing.”

I was desperate.

Yes. If I could at least bring the saintess over to my side in this

situation, hope remained.

“More importantly, Saintess. In the name of the Constellations, could you put in a good word with Dang Seo-rin? Doesn’t Dang Seo-rin tend to trust messages from the Constellations? If you would just __”

“Oh-raa.”

A voice drifted from down the hall.

“Mr. Undertaker. What are you doing here?”

It was a storm.

This was the Tower of Babel, and there was no way the Director wouldn’t know I’d come to the basement, so of course the odds of running into her were high.

Noh Do-hwa today was again in “Hermione” mode. Semi-formal suit attire. Different vibe from yesterday, but her beauty unchanged, perfectly styled.

No, this is not the time to admire fashion.

“Ah. Director Noh Do-hwa. Good morning.”

“Yes. Good morning.”

“Please wait a moment. I’m in the middle of a call with the Saintess __”

“Hmm. Are you, now?”

Softly. Noh Do-hwa came closer and, like yesterday, casually linked her arm through mine.

“Got it. I’ll just wait right here like this. Go on with your call.”

“Uh…”

[…]

While I stood flustered, Noh Do-hwa glanced up at the ceiling and spoke.

“Huh, how odd. Miss Yongsan. weren’t you talking with my Undertaker? It’s awkward when you suddenly message me instead.”

“…”

“Sorry. As I told you for days now, I prefer face-to-face communication unlike you, Miss Yongsan… I don’t think I can give you a proper answer.”

After a pause, the saintess’s voice came back to me.

[All right.]

She pronounced each word crisply, syllable by syllable.

[I’ll come down to Busan today.]

[Since Ms. Cheon Yo-hwa was already preparing hundreds of guild members at Baekhwa Girls’ High, I’ll join them and head down together.]

[See you shortly, Mr. Undertaker.]

[Ms. Noh Do-hwa.]

Click.

The telepathy cut off.

“…”

I turned to look at Noh Do-hwa.

The dark circles under her eyes were nowhere to be seen; she smiled with a freshness that was downright dazzling.

“Oho. Miss Yongsan and even Cheon Yo-hwa Student Council President. Looks like the Tower of Babel will be crowded with guests for once. Fufu. Shall we browse the market today and pick out gifts for them?”

"…"

That evening.

"All right, all right. Attention everyone!"

Bang, bang, bang.

Tower of Babel's grand conference room. A gavel echoed; the attendees were a star-studded lineup.

'Chief Warden of the Monster Prison', Seo Gyu.

'Director of the National Road Management Corps', Noh Do-hwa.

'Great Witch of Samcheon World', Dang Seo-rin.

'The Strongest Awakener', the Saintess.

'Baekhwa Girls' High Student Council President', Cheon Yo-hwa.

'OldManGoryeo Villain', Sim Ah-ryeon—who shamelessly showed up wearing her saintess robes.

Plus Lee Ha-yul and Yu Ji-won. And even Fairy No. 264 (why are you actually here?).

Not only the members of the Regressor Alliance but even Dang Seo-rin were present!

Just with the people gathered here, we could probably take a shot at world domination. In fact, tally up the number of times we've destroyed the world and it easily breaks into double digits.

In this weighty space, for some reason Oh Dok-seo sat at the head table presiding over the meeting.

"Given the gravity of the issue, Mr. Undertaker ought to serve as chair—but—"

Oh Dok-seo pointed the gavel at me.

Off to one side of the room, I was tied to a chair, limbs and torso and neck all bound. Lee Ha-yul had used her Puppet Threads, tougher than any rope in existence.

“Mmph! Mmmph, mmphh.”

For the record, my mouth was gagged too.

Oh Dok-seo wore a sorrowful expression.

“——Unfortunately, the Undertaker is attending as the defendant, so I, Oh Dok-seo, will preside against my will. Any objections?”

“Mmphhh!”

“None? I’ll take that as unanimous.”

Oh Dok-seo nodded, solemn and grave.

“Then, given the urgency of the current situation, namely the possibility that Samcheon World, Baekhwa Girls’ High, and the Eastern Holy State might form a triple alliance and attack the National Road Management Corps, we shall commence the meeting immediately.”

“…”

This place…

was hell.

Footnotes:

Chapter 389

The Suicidal VII

Sinnoa

People each had a role of their own.

Even when my voice failed to reach anyone, when nobody cared, a moment always came when I had to accept that role for myself.

“Mmff, brbrmmf brrmf!”

So I fought back.

The obstacle sealing up my body and my mouth was Lee Ha-yul’s Puppet Thread, the strongest fiber known on Earth.

No matter how wildly I, the Undertaker, writhed about to prove the earthworm DNA stamped onto my genes, snapping that thing was nearly impossible.

But if I drew on aura here—!

“Shh, quiet.”

Noh Do-hwa, seated right beside me, murmured into my ear.

“Please stay still, Mr. Undertaker.”

“Mmrf?”

“You aren’t really going to toss aside the grand cause of sealing Leviathan and unleash your aura just to defend your rights in this chaos… are you?”

“…”

“Hehe. Kidding. I know better than anyone you’re not that vulgar, Mr. Undertaker.”

Oh, heavens above!

“Hol-o-oon a min-uut-e!”

Thud. Someone sprang up in the conference room; a white sailor uniform fluttered.

It was Cheon Yo-hwa, who an hour earlier had dragged hundreds of Baekhwa Girls’ High students into the “Busan Landing Operation.”

“First off, I hate this seating plan. Why is that girl sitting next to Teacher like it’s natural?”

Cheon Yo-hwa’s crimson eyes burned.

She had already dunked one person on the way here, and you could almost feel her resolve not to miss a two-for-one sale on adding another.

“Vacate Teacher’s left and right seats. Now. Or it’s war.”

“Uh, President Cheon Yo-hwa? Over just that? Are you serious?”

“Why? Need proof?”

“Ah—so you are serious. Very well. This court orders both seats beside the defendant, the Undertaker, to be cleared immediately.”

Bang bang—the gavel sound effect rang.

“Hng.”

Noh Do-hwa flashed a smiling gaze, feigned regret, and slid one seat over.

Cheon Yo-hwa still snorted but closed her lips. Sealed or not, “intent to kill” and “murderous aura” were already manifesting around her, so it hardly mattered.

“Thank you for tidying the seats. Now, as pre-agreed, the Saintess will speak first.”

Bow.

The Saintess opposite us stood and dipped her head.

Incidentally, only yesterday Dang Seo-rin had swallowed the red pill that no Constellation existed and the Saintess was acting, and, on top of that, learned the Undertaker was a regressor. Fainting again after that one-two mental punch was no surprise.

“Honourable Judge, esteemed jurors, I must first remind everyone that thanks to Noh Do-hwa an old promise among us has been broken.”

Huh, an old promise?

“Indeed!”

I had no clue what she meant, yet assent exploded across the room.

Cheon Yo-hwa even looked ready to tie on a red band and start picketing, and nearly every attendee nodded.

“Your Honour, on this side contract I request testimony from the witness holding the document.”

“Request granted.”

Apparently I alone was ignorant of this “promise,” for Oh Dok-seo smoothly produced something.

The evidence looked painfully familiar.

“Mmgh?”

“A laptop?”

Yes, the Infinite Metagame Admin’s laptop.

Oh Dok-seo toggled the power, and

[lolololololololol]

—as if the camera had watched everything—the desktop wallpaper was plastered with ‘lol’.

[I-knew-it-lol] [If you're an Outer God watching this, smash that like] [I'll go first lol] [Mastermind: the GOAT 'Faker' Cheon Yo-hwa] [We worship]

[What-you-staring-at?] [Not-done-laughing-yet]

[*lolololololololololololololololol*]

That… that little—

"Ahem, witness. This is a court. Unrelated comments are excess, please refrain."

[Oh my. Do you speak, O glorious Judge, vaster than the cosmos itself?]

"Yes. Since your marinade's still raw, next time we'll feed you only sub-two-star Three Kingdoms fanfics on SG Net before AI training."

[Apologies……]

Are you doing that behind my back, Dok-seo?

"Everyone here's busy. Testify quickly."

[Yes.]

Cha-ak. The white-haired noblewoman on-screen hid her lips behind a fan, the tinny speaker filled the room.

[As the Judge already knows, this 'side contract' was drafted in the 925th cycle.]

The 925th cycle, the run where the Infinite Metagame Admin surrendered to me, when the Invisible Dragon rampaged in the Daegu desert.

[Similar verbal pacts existed previously.]

[But once I grew 'safe' by surrendering, I was officially entrusted with safekeeping the document.]

Oh Dok-seo nodded.

“Please state its contents plainly, witness.”

[Certainly. The side contract is:]

[A pact that until we’re clear of complete world destruction, no one will actively form a romantic relationship with the regressor, the Undertaker.]

[More exactly, until he himself sincerely seeks romance, we won’t force anything on him.]

[And the one who proposed this was the serialization dropper posing on the bench—]

“The Three Kingdoms.”

[—but actually a perfect grand writer with unmatched talent: Oh Dok-seo.]

???

[The grand writer feared that even a hairline crack could shatter the regressor party.]

[Thus Grand Writer Oh Dok-seo…]

“Yo, my GOAT. What’s up?”

[I feel rather like you. What is it, miko brat?]

“Since you surrendered, you can inherit documents next run like an ark outside time, right?”

[Restrictions exist, but broadly yes. Why?]

“Then could you sneak over files besides the old man’s chronicle?”

[Possible, but nothing harmful to the Undertaker—surrender’s condition.]

“Fine, that part’s okay.”

[……?]

“Because the file helps him.”

[……??]

“So, Saintess unni, here’s my idea: we draft an agreement and pass it to our next-run selves.”

“…”

“Honestly, how busy is the old man? Even ten bodies fall short. If some emotional bomb drops? Haah. Were I him I’d quit.”

“…So wishes to deepen ties with the Undertaker are postponed until the world-ending threat is gone—yes?”

“Yup!”

“I think it’s a fine idea.”

“Knew it! Now, I’m most worried about President Cheon Yo-hwa. Help me persuade her—”

“All right! Everyone gather!”

“…”

“…”

“You’ve all read the contract. I’ll read it: The seven of us—Saintess, Noh Do-hwa, Cheon Yo-hwa, Sim Ah-ryeon, Yu Ji-won, Lee Ha-yul, and Oh Dok-seo—swear to guard this pact. We shall not deepen relations with the Undertaker into true romance, and if any of us breaks it, we’ll actively exclude her. Uh, yes, Ha-yul?”

[Why’s Seo-rin unni missing?]

“Ah. Dang Seo-rin isn’t in the Regression Alliance. Even if we sign in the 925th cycle, she won’t hear it in the 926th. She’s already limited, forcing this too would be cruel.”

[Okay. Got it.]

“Great. Continuing. Even someone like me, without feelings, must watch the signatories faithfully—oh, crap. Ah-ryeon unni?”

“Um, well, w-what if Dang Seo-rin makes the first move on Guild Leader and he gives in?”

“Uh… I combed the past and that never happened.”

“T-that’s the past. I’m talking about the future… maybe that’s too hard for you… hmm…”

“Ah. Damn. Fine. Ah-ryeon unni has a point. If that happens, we meet fast and plan. Okay?”

“Umm… y-yes…”

“And! Never! Tell the old man this happened! Ever!”

“W-why?”

“Because I ship Nohtaker; if he learns we schemed, he’ll just start dating Seo-rin unni to end everything.”

“…”

“…”

“Guys, don’t look at me like that, okay? My motives don’t matter, only helping him does. No? I’m the only trash? I’m giving you hope —maybe not now but someday—through this contract! You should thank me! None of you would tolerate two-timing anyway!”

“T-trash…”

“Oh. Fine.”

“Then let him date, wipe love each run, and enjoy full-course despair.”

“…”

“A tragedy? Great. All his efforts end in love a regressor can’t keep. My taste too. Let’s have kids. Why not? Hey, let’s decide the order. President Cheon Yo-hwa, you date him next run!”

“…”

“Then Ms. Ji-won. Then Saintess unni. One love, one despair. Infinite failure. Masterpiece, right?”

“…”

“A man repeating life for a fleeting moment with his beloved. That’s essentially Schopenhauer, isn’t it? See! He was right! The old man suffered 900-plus runs for nothing. Right, Sim Ah-ryeon? Hey! Sim Ah-ryeon!”

“I misspoke.”

“Good. Sign. I don’t care if you’re an empress or King Sejong. I just want this story’s end, real life gives enough stupid angst.”

“…”

“Ah, signing’s optional. Except the next-run me inherits it. So… please. Unnies. Ha-yul. Even if we hate each other sometimes, let’s not wound one another behind the curtain. Please.”

Silence fell on the room.

“…”

“…”

People each had a role of their own.

Even if their voices reached no one, when nobody noticed, a moment came when they accepted that role.

Oh Dok-seo was the same.

“We’re all patients, infected by Void Poison to some extent.”

From the bench, Oh Dok-seo rested her chin, fatigued yet sharp-eyed.

“We all know we’re partly insane. Once emotion hits, you want to possess, monopolise, feelings so fierce they barely seem human; sometimes you’d hand yourself over to them.”

“…”

“But, are you sure you can handle it?”

Her fingers stroked the laptop.

“Almost everyone here is a shrine maiden. Are you certain the feelings you have are truly yours alone, untouched by the Void?”

“…”

“Let’s delay things a bit.”

Thud. Oh Dok-seo shut the laptop.

“For us, twenty years tops. Mister waited tens of thousands. I don’t know love well, but I know promising to walk the same timeline is part of it.”

“…”

“When every last bit of the Void is gone and humans can face humans properly, we’ll pick up the epilogue then.”

Her gaze drifted once around the room and settled on me.

She shrugged.

“Sorry, Mister. I’d rather you not see us like this, but here we are.”

“…”

“No, that’s cowardly. Truth is, I showed you on purpose. I figured you suspected, but I wanted to jolt you harder.”

The Puppet Thread sealing my mouth came loose on its own. I spoke.

“Was I too naive?”

“No, too trusting. It’s your best and worst point.”

Oh Dok-seo sighed.

“To you, twenty years is a blink, but for most, waiting that long in silence rots them inside.”

“…”

“I hated piling more weight on you, but hiding it felt ruder. So I used shock therapy.”

She scratched her cheek.

“If you show zero interest in romance, everyone copes, focuses on work. But when Dang Seo-rin gets close, dominoes fall, some lose control.”

“…”

“And asking you to pick one person now, before averting the apocalypse, is cruel. Embarrassing. So… sorry, Mister. This was my real aim.”

Oh Dok-seo spoke.

“Couldn’t Seo-rin unni join the Regression Alliance and stand with us?”

I paused.

Her eyes, tinged with some sorrow, faced me squarely.

“Inside your heart, the final words tenth-run Seo-rin unni left… Let’s finally lay them to rest.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 390

The Suicidal VIII

Sinnoa

「 *Undertaker.* 」

「 *If at all possible, do not tell the next-run me that you are a regressor.* 」

「 *I'm greedy and a devout follower of the God of Impulse-Buying—* 」

「 *So the idea of 'I'll throw away this run for the sake of the next one' simply won't take root in me.* 」

「 *If I find out I still have hundreds of years of lifespan left, I'll definitely burn it all on the present run.* 」

「 *Only at the very end.* 」

「 *Until the truly final crisis arrives, guide me so my lifespan keeps accruing interest.* 」

And so it was.

The conference room, moments ago ablaze with the heat of world-ending fury.

One would have thought someone's lovely neck would soon be decorating a gallows, yet, astonishingly, it was all settled in a single "Silence!" from the great author Oh Dok-seo.

Even this regressor's eyes had not foreseen that development.

"True… even when she'd gone rogue, Dok-seo threw out Heavenly Demon Lord Footwork, so in a way she's the textbook 'hidden powerhouse.'"

“No. I think she’s actually the proof of ‘the quiet ones are the scariest when they snap.’”

Tower of Babel. Terrace.

There the Saintess and I were getting a breath of air alone for a moment. Oh Dok-seo had adjourned the meeting for about thirty minutes.

“Dok-seo, quiet…? Search the whole peninsula, and I bet even old man Jo Yeong-su would give up finding anyone more uncontrollable than her.”

“She only lets all her defenses down in front of Undertaker-ssi.”

The Saintess spoke.

“When Dok-seo deals with other people she usually volunteers to be the one who gets pushed around. I think that’s the posture she learned for interacting with others.”

“Then why is she always making trouble for me?”

“…”

The Saintess didn’t answer.

Instead, she cast a glance down to the plaza ten floors below the Tower of Babel.

Packed solid.

Hundreds of Baekhwa Girls’ High guild members, Samcheon World guild members and even the Eastern Holy State’s holy knights were crammed shoulder to shoulder.

– Undertaker, awaken! Awaken! Awaken!

– Drag that bastard out! Drag him out right now!

– Everyone! Our northern Saintess! How noble and pure she is! To mock! To harass! Huh! Such a shameless unbeliever is hiding inside

that Babel Tower!

– Unbelief! Hell! Unbelief! Hell!

– Why the Tower of Babel, you ask? The very name the Lord used to punish human arrogance! Do you think it was attached by chance? For the sake of the Saintess, who has risked her life for us until now, we must repay this grace and tear the tower down!

– Ooooooooo-!

– Divine wrath! Divine wrath! Divine wrath!

"…"

Honestly, it was a little frightening.

Ah-ryeon, just how much propaganda did you pump out in the Eastern Holy State?

Samcheon World and Baekhwa weren't groups to lose out in the madness department, but even they had quietly edged back to the outskirts of the plaza, cowed by the State's fanaticism.

"This time… it looks like Dok-seo didn't tell anyone and went ahead alone."

Against the riotous roar below, the Saintess's voice drifted across the quiet rhythm of the terrace.

"Eh?"

"I actually suspected, when Mr. Undertaker whisked Ms. Dok-seo and a few others off the roof of Babel Tower a while ago, that it had all been arranged in advance."

She was referring to the crystal gravestone bearing the trace of the [Time Seal]. No one but me could see it.

"But seeing your reaction today, it really does feel as if Ms. Dok-seo rammed ahead on her own."

“Why? At least talk it over with Ah-ryeon or Ha-yul, why do it alone…?”

“I’m sorry. Offering a guess with my own lips might be disrespectful to Dok-seo-ssi.”

The Saintess gave a wry smile.

“That’s also why I didn’t dare approach you these past few days. I was busy checking with the members of the Regressor Alliance one by one, trying to understand what on earth was happening.”

“Ah…”

“But now I understand. I think Ms. Dok-seo wanted not only you, Mr. Undertaker, but also me, to face reality and reflect on ourselves.”

Reality? Reflection?

“To discover just how impatient I am. How people can be so oblivious and indifferent not only to others’ feelings but to their own.”

The Saintess still kept her gaze hanging in mid-air.

Because she spent most of each day using [Clairvoyance], her sense of ‘sight’ had to be different from ordinary people’s.

For her, ‘direct gaze’, looking someone straight in the eye, was an angle that actually required practice.

“When I saw Undertaker-ssi dating Noh Do-hwa… my heart shook. I was startled by how strong the feeling was, not realizing I had it.”

“…”

“Obviously it had to be a disguise set up by someone’s scheme. Even if I considered the worst case, it was the work of an anomaly. So there was no need to react emotionally; the thing to do was determine if it was a human disguise or an anomaly’s phenomenon. …I judged that way and I acted that way.”

A mutter.

“I thought I understood everything, and yet it turns out I still didn’t understand myself. And…”

The Saintess turned her head. The water-colored light of her eyes looked straight at my face.

“…”

Suddenly.

As I met that gaze, this thought rose in me.

True orientation. The correct direction. In a house, for instance, good orientation is a south-facing room that sunshine pours into.

Then what is the true orientation of a person’s gaze?

Perhaps it is the direction where the one who lets the brightest light seep into your life and your time is standing.

“To learn about the parts of me I still don’t understand, I think the way isn’t digging deeper into myself, but overlapping the direction of trying to understand someone else.”

“…”

“I like you, Mr. Undertaker.”

The Saintess smiled softly.

“I’ll wait until the day I can hear your answer.”

On the way back to the conference room.

“Ah. Mr. Matiz.”

I ran into Yu Ji-won in the corridor.

The usual expressionless face. She was carrying a silver tray piled with paper cups of instant coffee.

“Have you finished speaking with the Saintess?”

“Yeah. Ji-won, you’re doing coffee delivery?”

“Yes. Normally I would have ordered a subordinate, but given today’s illustrious attendees I decided to do it myself.”

Yu Ji-won said without so much as a blink.

“If I’d asked Mr. Seo Gyu he would gladly have obliged, but I volunteered on purpose.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Mr. Seo Gyu is the type who’s touched by small considerations like this. When I serve the coffee cup by cup in the conference room he’ll surely exclaim, ‘No, you should have told me to do that!’ and I’ll reply, ‘You finally made it up from the dungeon, so please just relax for once.’”

“…”

“Seo Gyu’s favorability toward me will rise without fail. With a single coffee errand I dramatically increase the chance of recruiting the Warden of Anomalies to my side in an emergency. Nothing but profit.”

Honestly, I had never met, and probably never would meet, another human as strangely diligent as Yu Ji-won…

“Let’s walk.”

“Yes.”

Step. Click.

Our two sets of footsteps echoed together on the corridor leading back to the conference room.

They never fell out of sync. The speed and stride were perfectly identical. Not a centimeter ahead or behind.

"…"

It was something she had learned.

One summer in middle school, after meeting a man who introduced himself as 'Matiz,' she had analyzed his walking speed and stride and grafted it onto herself.

To Yu Ji-won, the person Matiz had never once been physically absent, even in all the years she hadn't seen his face.

"A lot of people kicked up a fuss in this incident."

"Yes."

"But you stayed quiet from start to finish."

"That is only natural."

Her voice came from about forty centimeters to my left shoulder.

"Natural? What do you mean?"

"First. Director Noh Do-hwa would never start openly dating Mr. Matiz unless she had completely lost her mind."

"…"

"From what I have observed, the Director's likelihood of entering a romantic relationship is exceedingly low, and even if she did, the probability she would flaunt it before others converges at absolute zero."

"Can't argue with that."

"Second."

Yu Ji-won spoke as usual.

"Mr. Matiz would never decide to date someone without consulting me first. That probability is likewise zero."

"…"

“A single event might pierce extreme odds, but for two events to coexist requires truly astronomical probability. Believing the romance to be real is the irrational position.”

Though her tone was calm, I felt a strange embarrassment, so I changed the subject.

“Ah-ryeon said if I started dating someone who wouldn’t accept her, she’d kill the partner.”

“As expected of Sim Ah-ryeon.”

“What about you, in a similar situation?”

“You keep positing highly improbable scenarios, Mr. Matiz.”

Yu Ji-won tilted her head.

“There is no way Mr. Matiz would love someone who won’t accept my existence.”

“…”

“Of course, human beings are creatures of emotion. Even if Mr. Matiz’s reason rejects it, his feelings could resonate.”

But, a whisper flowed,

“Comparing the time spent in such a love with the time spent with me, the latter has far greater value to Mr. Matiz.”

“All correct, so I can’t refute.”

Step. Click.

“Others seem to interpret your avoidance of romance as the regressor’s pain—the inevitable farewell—”

“Hmm?”

“My view is a little different.”

Yu Ji-won said.

“Mr. Matiz simply feels that the way of life we are sharing now is the happiest, and thus had no need to choose romance.”

“…”

“In your mind, even now, are the people being sacrificed by anomalies. Starvation. Thirst. Necrosis. You remember countless deaths.”

Step. Click.

“To you those deaths are past, present, and future all at once. Colors that will never fade. Therefore, you comprehend more clearly than anyone how precious, how joyful, this brief peace with the people around you is—the scant twenty-odd years granted each run.”

“…”

“I trust your judgment. If you are living like this, it means this is the optimal state. And I am not the kind of person who, while in the optimal state, bewails her lot as unfortunate.”

“I see.”

“Yes.”

Step. Click.

For a while the corridor echoed with two sets of footsteps and a single rhythm.

Yu Ji-won retrieved the pause she had placed in her words and opened her lips.

“Some may call this the ‘normal ending,’ claiming there exists a happier one beyond. But for me, this moment alone—as a normal ending—is enough.”

Suddenly.

「 *Vice Guild Leader, Your Excellency.* 」

A memory of the past overlaid the present.

「*If the me of run five was happier than the me of run six, isn't there a fair chance the me of run seven will be a little happier still?*」

「*Please leave a will telling the next-run me to try her utmost to live a happier time before holding the funeral…*」

「*Mm. Won't I be a bit happier next run?*」

For someone like me with Complete Memory, the past was always equal to the present.

「*I think I can be a little happier next time.*」

The 'Yu Ji-won' of the past and of the present wore the exact same face and the exact same expression.

So I ended up asking the exact same question without thinking.

"Ji-won."

"Yes?"

"Are you a bit happier now?"

Our steps stopped.

When I turned my head, she too had turned hers. When two sides meet, it seems to become a front.

And then—

"——'Happiness' is a strange word."

A different answer came from Yu Ji-won's lips.

The overlap of past and present began to crack in my regressor's vision.

Little by little.

"Everyone uses that word as if the concept were fixed, yet for one

person it means affection, for another, lust. Power. Shade in midsummer. A glass of good liquor."

"…"

"People sign the concept of happiness in their own handwriting, so happiness looks less like a word and more like a blank space."

Little by little,

the 'current' Yu Ji-won drew closer to me.

"If that is so, then even someone like me, setting aside all other words, must have the freedom to sign the blank called 'happiness' however I wish."

At some point the silver tray in her hands had been passed to me, and at some point I had accepted it without a word.

Thus lightened, she rose on tiptoe and leaned her face near the nape of my neck.

A breath.

It was not a gesture of affection or desire.

"…"

Confirmation.

Authentication.

Proof.

A quiet breath confirmed the scent clinging to my skin.

In this world humanity was not a single species; each person was a different race, and this was a rite permitted only to the race called Yu Ji-won.

Satisfied that the perfume of seven hues still lingered unchanged, she slowly withdrew.

“I too have filled that blank with the name ‘Matiz.’”

“…”

“And I know my name is written on your page, in your own script.”

Yu Ji-won smiled.

“So, yes.”

An artificial yet more beautiful than nature, human smile.

“I am happy now, Mr. Matiz.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 391

The Suicidal IX

Sinnoa

The meeting was quietly entering its final stretch.

From Dang Seo-rin's point of view the last few days had been nothing short of chaos.

First came the bombshell that Undertaker and Noh Do-hwa were dating, then the revelation that Undertaker was actually a Regressor, and on top of that the real reason he had never "regress-outed" until now was the sealed will her tenth-cycle self had left behind. Taking three fastballs to the head like that would have rattled anyone.

Even so,

"…It feels cowardly, you know. I ought to be angry that you hid it from me all this time, but in the end you were keeping the secret because of a promise you made to me, not anyone else."

After hearing the whole story Seo-rin could only sigh as though she had no other choice.

"Do you realise how foolish that is? Promise or not, who on earth tries to keep faith with something agreed thousands of years… Wait. Was it thousands of years ago?"

"No. It was tens of thousands of years ago."

"Good grief. How does anyone honour a promise that old to this very day?"

Her expression was a tangle, anger and joy, sorrow and wonder, all vying for the front seat.

She would need time to settle those feelings.

So I voiced only the question that had to be asked now.

“Seo-rin.”

“…”

“As Oh Dok-seo pointed out, I have followed the will your tenth cycle left behind. No, I have tried my best to keep it. I believed doing so would prove that someone called you once existed in that distant past.”

Silence blanketed the room.

The Saintess at the table, Yu Ji-won, even Sim Ah-ryeon, who chased dopamine wherever she went, all held their tongues.

“And now that we have reached the thousandth cycle, I want to ask for your decision again.”

“…”

“May I keep telling the next you, and the one after that, that I am a regressor?”

The silence lingered.

“Tenth-cycle me must have… I do not know exactly, but I think she trusted very little.”

After letting the weight of my question sink all the way down, Seo-rin finally opened her mouth.

“All sorts of things. Faith in myself, whether I could fight anomalies without burning through my whole lifespan… Faith in you, whether you were as precious as this world.”

“…”

“But you waited tens of thousands of years for me. If I could not even hold out and watch how this world ends, that would be pathetic.”

“So.”

“Right.”

She clasped my hands.

“I will endure, no matter what.”

“…”

“I have no idea how much lifespan you have already stacked on me, but that span does not belong solely to me. It is yours as well, the result of you guarding my will. Therefore,”

Seo-rin smiled,

“The life you protected, I want to spend it when you want me to. My lifespan, I leave it in your care.”

Warmth flowed through our palms.

“Bravo!”

Clap-clap-clap-clap-clap!

From the judges’ dais Oh Dok-seo sprang to her feet, hammering her hands together, tears streaming for some reason.

“Yes, this is it, *sniff*, absolutely moving. See, all you have to do is talk. If you just talk you can move forward, so why, why not talk, huh? I despise stories that drag out conflict you could solve with an honest conversation, it is manure, total manure. If you claim to care for each other why must hurting each other be inevitable? Only conflicts that survive true dialogue are real conflicts. Hrk, uncle, sob, I always trusted you, dang it!”

“…”

Except for Dok-seo and one single other person, no one in the chamber joined her standing ovation.

Rather, the prevailing mood was “for the love of all things, do not

lump me with that one.”

In short, it ended in a way everyone could accept.

“Tch.”

Cheon Yo-hwa still rested her chin in her palm, looking somehow hollowed out.

Her head and her heart never stopped rubbing each other raw.

Stories about Yo-hwa could wait for another time; a heavy emptiness still draped over her and that shadow deserved its own episode.

Therefore,

my gaze fixed on a single person.

Clap, clap, clap, clap.

“…”

With a flawless smile, no shade over her face, no shadow at the corner of her lips, she applauded right after Dok-seo.

Only Noh Do-hwa.

An epilogue had to be told.

This one was not short.

Quite a long one, in fact.

Let us go through it step by step, in order.

“Brothers and sisters, please calm yourselves.”

The first piece of cleanup was, of course, soothing the Awakener mob in Tower of Babel Plaza that looked ready to lynch me on the spot.

The Northern Saintess ascended the podium, showing off the saintess robe she had changed into ahead of time, a holy smile on her lips.

“There is no doubt about Sir Undertaker’s feelings. He loves me, and that love is not some vulgar romance but the pure Mo Gwang-seo style compassion that embraces my entire being.”

– What.

– Wait, really?

– See, I told you so!

Murmurs swept the crowd.

The paladins who had been one step from declaring a crusade downgraded at once into woodland critters.

I, a man of common sense, had no idea what “Mo Gwang-seo style love” was, but apparently it carried profound meaning for them.

Sim Ah-ryeon beamed.

“Yes. It is just that Sir Undertaker’s boundless compassion has taken root in many people besides me, like the Guild Leader of Samcheon World or the Commander of the National Road Management Corps.”

“…”

“I sincerely support and bless this man’s love.”

She hopped off the stage, trotted over to me, looped her arm through mine and flashed the brightest grin imaginable.

“So please, brothers and sisters, bless him as well, amen.”

“…”

From that day on the Eastern Holy State had a single archenemy, not heretics, atheists, anomalies or even the Road Corps, but one

man called Undertaker.

Every dawn when I made my patrol through Inunaki Tunnel, I found the entrance on the Holy State side piled high with anonymous letters.

[Die.]

[Miss Saintess is so innocent that she was momentarily deceived by your devilish tongue, but my eyes will not be mocked…]

[Die.]

[I have relatives in Busan. Just last month they sent me a photo of you having lunch with the Great Witch of Samcheon World. If you still possess the conscience God grants to all men—]

[Die.]

"…"

Paper was not a resource one could squander freely in this era, so the sheer waste made it clear how sky-high their hatred rose.

"Ah-ryeon."

"Y-yes?"

"I can endure no longer."

"…?"

At last I made my decision.

–ZERO_SUGAR: ☆★ Great shock! The true identity of OldManGoryeo the vile troll! She is actually the Northern Saintess! Exposé! ★☆

It was, without exaggeration, a nuclear move.

If anyone thought this Guild Leader would stay passive forever, they were sadly mistaken.

I curled a bitter smile.

The post was perfect.

The fact that OldManGoryeo and the Northern Saintess had never been active at the same time, that assuming they were the same person solved every mystery, the copious evidence attached—everything immaculate.

Even the title was crafted to bait clicks no matter how you tried to resist.

‘How long did you think you could rule the forum as a tyrant? Die for once, Ah-ryeon!’

Comments began to pour in.

The greatest scandal in SG Net history. The fanfare of doom, its overture blaring.

–Anonymous: Ignore the troll.

?

–Anonymous: What is this now…

–[Baekhwa] PressClub2: Do not feed.

–[EasternHoly] KindSoul: lol, this jerk used to spin fake homeland stories, now he smears the Saintess for attention, what a life.

Anonymous: What bait is it this time?

[Samcheon] MeteorIsIceMagic: I said ignore the troll, 400m.

[EasternHoly]KindSoul: sry sry

–Anonymous: You fools realise giving him attention is exactly what he wants.

–dolLHOuse: Not easy, 1 200m.

That was all the reaction to my magnum opus.

“Uh…”

One-hundred-and-twenty-one downvotes.

Only two upvotes, one of which was mine.

–OldManGoryeo: Hooeheehee! Turns out I was the Supreme Being of the Eastern Holy State all along? While I was not looking I became the Northern Saintess and was out there saving lives >_<)!!

–OldManGoryeo: As expected the only one who cares about me here is ZeroCola-chan, people are so cold! Big like. Let my love reach you, ZeroCola-chan, take my heartttttt ♡

–OldManGoryeo: Starting today, I am dating ZeroCola-chan! Day 1 ♡♡♡ (D-1)

The other upvote was from Sim Ah-ryeon.

“…”

Why? How?

Enraged, I posted again.

–ZERO_SUGAR: Come on, guys. Set emotion aside and look at the evidence. OldManGoryeo equals NorthernSaintess, I am telling you.

Anonymous: Ignore the troll.

This time there was exactly one reply.

“What? Why?”

Unbelievable.

Had the public finally lost all ability to distinguish fake news from real?

Very well. I hated to stoop to this, but I had no choice except to post side-by-side photos of Ah-ryeon cosplaying in the Holy State and slacking off in our guild base, showing how different she looked

—

[Mr. Undertaker.]

[Forwarding Mr. Sim Ah-ryeon's exact message. I left out the stuttering.]

['Guild Leader! I just wrote a post claiming ZeroSugar equals Undertaker and I am playing press-submit-or-not-submit, do you want to join the fun?']

[That is what she says.]

"…"

[What should I tell her?]

With a long press I quietly tapped Delete Post on my screen.

This was not just my defeat.

It was the defeat of the last truthful voice of journalism in this age.

In other words, the thousandth cycle was so peaceful that I had the spare nerves for SG Net drama.

It was not only me who felt this way.

"Wow, the thousandth really is different, incredibly calm," Oh Dok-seo agreed.

"You call it record-breaking calm? How would you know what other cycles were like?" I asked.

"Ah, actually I set Infinite Metagame in mirror mode and whenever I am bored I use my Side Story Creation ability and enter V-Tuber mode."

"Oh?"

"I mainly possess 'past-cycle me'. I ask what I was thinking back then, what situation I faced, how I acted, what results came, what I

regret. It is fun research."

I nearly quipped that spending all her free time like that must be why she never sits still to write.

"The other cycles were absolute chaos. Stuff you never saw behind your back. For the honour of my comrades I will stop there."

"…You went through a lot."

"Eh, the others take things too seriously. I, on the other hand, see them as 'characters' in the Undertaker saga, so there is fan affection mixed in, not that stressful."

She scratched her cheek.

"Anyway, ever since the last meeting the back-room friction has practically vanished."

"Hmm."

"Look at Samcheon World and Baekhwa Girls' High, they hardly bicker any more, right?"

Now that she said it, it's true.

It had been too trivial to detail in the main text, but in reality and on SG Net Samcheon and Baekhwa fought every other day.

Guild Leaders for the title of strongest magic Awakener on the peninsula, guild members for the honor of strongest guild.

"Indeed, I have not watched Seo-rin and Yo-hwa jab at each other on the forums for quite some time."

"See?"

Dok-seo chuckled.

"If I had known things would improve this much when I spoke up, I would have done it sooner, not waited till the thousandth cycle. Ah, I feel like I lost a thousand years of my possessor life."

“Mm. Dok-seo, you occupy a position similar to a ‘book possessor’ but strictly speaking you are not one.”

“Hey, you get it by feel, right? By feel!”

She laughed, nudging my ribs, looking truly happy. Apparently she had suffered more quietly than I realised.

“Tra-la-la, tra-la-la, tra-la-la, tra—”

In high spirits she hummed The Song of the Birds while clacking away on her typewriter, promising to write a story for the first time in ages, and left.

As I savoured the cocktail of pride and self-reproach that came from recognising that tune—

[Mr. Undertaker.]

The Saintess contacted me the moment Dok-seo was gone.

[I have something to tell you.]

“If Ah-ryeon is pestering you to relay another message, please, I beg you, just tell her to spare my life.”

[No, that is not it.]

Her voice was low.

[Ms. Dok-seo is truly enjoying herself for once, so I chose this timing to avoid interfering.]

“Yes?”

[I am sorry to say, but the reason relations inside the Regressor Alliance have improved is… not Ms. Dok-seo.]

[Of course I believe she provided the first push, at least I believe so. However…]

[People, that is, relationships, rarely change with a single declaration.]

I blinked.

“What are you saying?”

[Someone else has been moving quietly behind your back, adjusting opinions, allocating time, patching rifts between the alliance members as much as possible.]

“Who would that be?”

[Ms. Noh Do-hwa.]

My heart lurched.

Independent of my will, the Saintess’s voice flowed in.

[It is Ms. Noh Do-hwa.]

Footnotes:

Chapter 392

The Suicidal X

Sinnoa

Noh Do-hwa.

There was once such a woman.

Do, the wave.

In the character for wave, it is the part that holds the meaning of a ceaseless swell.

It is not calm water at all but the heaving that never rests, like surf.

Since ancient times water like that has been a hell one could hardly cross, a demon's lair that stole lives again and again, so perhaps the forebears called it water on which a person's span of years was laid.

Do-hwa, a river where those waves run.

Noh Do-hwa, the road that crosses such a river.

"Eh?"

The fork that had just touched a chocolate cake stopped in mid-air and Noh Do-hwa looked my way.

Then she smiled brightly.

"What are you staring at so hard, Mr. Undertaker?"

"…"

"If you want a taste you can just say so. Here, aah—♪"

With practiced ease Noh Do-hwa cut off a neat bite and held it out to me on the fork.

In countless bits of subculture this would be the scene with the sign that says, “Dear customer, please feel your heart skip here,” yet my heart was surprisingly still.

When I took a mouthful of that extravagantly precious chocolate cake, Noh Do-hwa propped her chin on her hand and gazed at me as if I were something lovely.

“Is it good?”

“Yes, it is delicious.”

“Hehe, thank goodness. Work has kept you so busy we could hardly have any private time. Going on a date with just the two of us on such a fine day, I like it.”

“…”

For a moment the hesitation in my mouth mingled with the sweet-bitter scent of chocolate.

“…Is it good for you too, Ms. Do-hwa?”

“Mm?”

Do-hwa blinked.

“Of course. The cake is wonderful, and it has been ages since I enjoyed dessert with you, Doctor-ssi. How could I dislike it?”

“…”

That could not be.

Noh Do-hwa disliked sweets. She allowed only the faint hint that drifted out of certain drinks, and from the first she had rejected desserts ferociously.

Unless her palate had flipped overnight in the thousandth run, she could not be eating chocolate cake with that happy face.

Therefore.

“Mmm. The bakery here really is excellent no matter when I come.”

The Noh Do-hwa smiling in front of me was lying.

From the cheerful lift of her brows to the angle of the hand holding the fork, from the outfit chosen for a date to the tone she used,

even this moment that looked as though someone had cut out the piece of daily life labelled ‘happiness’ and pasted it on with care,

all of it was false.

“Ah.”

Perhaps spending time in the bakery had been a mistake. At the entrance Dang Seo-rin walked in, saw us, and came to a halt.

It was no coincidence. This place was one of her regular haunts.

“What the—”

A short while ago, if she had seen us sharing cake like lovers, she would have screamed.

“—Noh Do-hwa and the Undertaker!”

But not now.

Smack.

Seo-rin walked over without hesitation and slapped palms with Noh Do-hwa, no anger, sorrow or caution on her face.

Her heart had clear fences.

To anyone once acknowledged as family, her side, an ally, Dang Seo-rin gave endless generosity and friendship.

“See? I told you last time this place is really good, that delivery doesn’t compare at all!”

That friendship was now in the look she gave Noh Do-hwa.

This, too, had happened only in the thousandth run out of all the cycles I crossed.

“Yes, it is definitely different. I used to have a bias against cakes, but eating it here I finally get the appeal. Hehe, thank you, Ms. Seo-rin.”

“Haha. Ah— I shouldn’t block your date! Undertaker, don’t forget lunch tomorrow! Bye!”

“Uh, yeah, okay…”

“Do-hwa, have fun!”

Seo-rin waved and trotted off to the owner. Until she left with her reserved cake she never spared us a glance.

“…”

Not long ago I remembered a talk with the Saintess.

[Ms. Do-hwa has been adjusting the others’ schedules behind your back, Mr. Undertaker.]

– Adjusting schedules?

[She told them this.]

[I have no intention of monopolising the Undertaker. We are dating but I will not take it to the physical level.]

[It is fine for all of you to spend time with him.]

“…”

[I understand your possessiveness, but if you let me coordinate I will manage the calendar so none of you feel left out. Please trust me.]

[Except.]

– Except?

[Do not show the Undertaker any hint of it, ever. That was her order.]

"…"

[I am sorry. Even telling you this breaks the promise I made, but I thought you had to know.]

[After this I will keep silent.]

If the Saintess was right, Noh Do-hwa was still backstage managing the relationships inside the Regressor Alliance.

So that Dang Seo-rin would not feel left out. So that Cheon Yo-hwa would not explode. So that Lee Ha-yul would not be shunned. So that Sim Ah-ryeon or Oh Dok-seo would not grow lonely.

Oh Dok-seo once said that the nerves and clashes inside the Alliance were as nasty as a hardcore soap opera.

Yet Do-hwa was doing it, as if a difficulty of that level could not hinder her once she made up her mind.

Compared with leading the National Road Management Corps and ruling a ruined peninsula, it was child's play.

Effortlessly.

"Huh. You keep staring at me, Mr. Undertaker."

Noh Do-hwa leaned over the table, wiped my mouth with her thumb.

"You had chocolate on your lips."

"Ah."

"You said you would patrol the Void this afternoon, right? Please be careful."

She playfully licked her finger and smiled.

"While you are gone, I will guard the city and the towns."

Time passed.

Everything was perfect.

Dang Seo-rin had joined the Regressor Alliance at last, and I no longer had to tiptoe around using her as an asset.

Impossible.

The constant friction between Seo-rin and Yo-hwa, for some reason, vanished. They were not friends but they recognised and understood each other. Noh Do-hwa always smiled between them.

Impossible.

Sim Ah-ryeon, who had once viewed other people like dust, learned bit by bit how to draw near. Oh Dok-seo later told me Noh Do-hwa had worked to exhibit Ah-ryeon's paintings.

Impossible.

Lee Ha-yul opened her guarded heart not only to me but to Noh Do-hwa. It was natural. Do-hwa had fitted her with a prosthetic leg, and if that same woman spoke with warmth, how could a girl who had always wanted family refuse.

Impossible.

"Wow, mister, I feel really happy these days."

"…"

"People don't fight, the Alliance unnies get along great. Even ones who used to clash fatally are fine now. This has to be a miracle, right?"

Everything was perfect.

Time flowed.

The day the Monster Wave smothered the last human stronghold,

Dang Seo-rin was there, Cheon Yo-hwa was there, everyone was there.

They met death, yet it was hard to find unhappiness on their faces.

Humans may not live forever, but if they die with those they love they accept the end with humility.

The lines broke and broke again, and at last we fell back to the roof of the Tower of Babel, the last barricade.

“Ah.”

“…”

“They have all gone ahead, Mr. Undertaker.”

Only Noh Do-hwa remained beside me.

Naturally. She had no fighting strength, yet she was too valuable to lose, so she had stayed in the safest rear.

With clothes torn here and there she smiled faintly.

“Still, I did not see how the other runs ended, but… these days felt very happy.”

“Is that so?”

My voice rasped out thin. I could not help it.

To seal Leviathan we had to suppress aura as much as possible.

Even without that handicap the Wave had been close to impossible. With aura sealed, clearing that nightmare was beyond hard.

“Were you happy, Ms. Do-hwa?”

“Yes.”

The answer came at once.

“I met precious people.”

Still smiling, she pressed her right hand to her chest, as if to prove it with the beat of her heart.

“In a world this broken there are still those who fight for themselves and for someone else, and… I met the man I love, and I can die with him.”

“…”

“Mr. Undertaker.”

She opened her eyes wide.

“Were you happy too?”

Silence.

Boom, boom, behind the steel door the flesh of monsters pounded without end.

“…”

This was the last moment.

We were holding thanks to the puppet strings Ha-yul had set at the cost of her life, but soon they would break through.

“I have thought about it constantly.”

I spoke.

“Yes?”

“The turning point. When you accepted that strange message from the elder twin.”

“…”

“What words did Cheon Yo-hwa use, and why did you decide on a fake relationship with me. I could never understand, so for decades I kept wondering.”

“Hmm.”

She tilted her head.

“Is it that hard? I like you. I love you. I kept pretending not to, then her message provoked me, became the trigger, and we started dating.”

“…”

“The fake part is only the label. We pretend but our feelings are real, we grow closer, truly fall in love… It happens a lot, does it not?”

Perhaps.

The past decades, the thousandth cycle, had been sweet enough to tempt me to that mistake.

“No.”

But a good chocolate cake always hides bitterness at its core, and at the centre of every photo titled Happiness Noh Do-hwa was smiling.

“Director Noh Do-hwa. All you care about is wounding me.”

“…”

“Your reason is noble, but your emotions are trash. Calling you scum is not enough.”

Boom. The door quivered.

“Why, why say such things now? Even I, if the one I love says that, i-it hurts—”

“You admit I am a fine person. I thank you. But you did not join me to see the world grow bright.”

“Sorry? I don’t—”

“You want to witness the moment I break.”

“…”

Screech. Something scraped the door. A claw, or teeth.

“When you read the word Yo-hwa sent, you asked yourself.”

Q. How do you leave the deepest scar on the Undertaker?

“A simple bad ending? Too weak. I have seen too many stupid deaths.”

A. Think the opposite.

“So, give the regressor who chants happy endings the greatest happy ending imaginable.”

“…”

A happy ending.

Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa no longer fight.

Ha-yul is not lonely.

Ah-ryeon, Ji-won, Dok-seo, all of them share time with me thanks to a perfect schedule.

“You showed me I can always reach the path closest to everyone’s happiness.”

“…”

“As long as one person, Director Noh Do-hwa, bears all the unhappiness.”

Noh Do-hwa had been indifferent to people. She broke that and forced herself to mediate.

She had cared nothing for clothes. She studied fashion, dressed up for me.

She never shared emotions. She cast aside her monopoly so everyone could share my time.

By carving away her own nature she produced one result, the

Alliance's happiness.

"And you…"

"I?"

"You led me to become trash who feels joy in that artificial ending."

"Oh dear, you think I have such vile aims?"

"Yes."

"Then all the more, answer my question."

She looked at me.

"Mr. Undertaker, are you happy now?"

Creak, the door bent. Tentacles of flesh oozed through.

"No."

"Oh my."

"I dislike the you before me. Director Noh Do-hwa does not say 'oh my', she does not smile like that."

"Goodness."

"The person I trusted to guard the towns while I was away does not have such a clean smile. I did not admire her because she was perfect, but because although she was trash who always grumbled, she never dodged her duty."

"My."

"I dislike you."

"Ummm."

She smiled.

"Was I dumped just now?"

“Yes.”

“Ah, how sad. I really liked you. I worked so, so hard to make you happy.”

“…”

“I ran the organisation. I managed the relationships. I handled two missions nobody else could do. And yet you prefer—”

She stepped closer.

“Someone trashier than someone this perfect?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

She covered my eyes with a hand and darkness fell.

“Close your eyes, Mr. Undertaker.”

“…”

“And turn on Mind Reading.”

Mind Reading. An ability I rarely used, especially on comrades. She had once begged me never to use it on her. Why ask now?

“Is it on?”

“…Yes.”

“Then listen to my last confession.”

Blackness behind my eyelids, her hand blocking sight.

“Mr. Undertaker.”

Amid the noise of monsters squeezing through the crack, her whisper.

[Awakener Undertaker.]

And the white letters Mind Reading drew.

“I was happy.”

[I was miserable.]

“…”

“There were hard times, but watching you and your friends grow closer was a great reward.”

[It was revolting.]

Whispered sounds, silent monologue, two lines tightening around my heart.

“Even though you rejected my love, I have no regrets.”

[In all these decades there was not a single moment for my own wish. You dragged my life into yours.]

“You must be confused. Your comrades are all gone.”

[I knew this ending from the start.]

“So, please remember.”

[Do not forget this moment.]

“I will always exist as your answer.”

[Do not forget that happiness for all is impossible.]

“If you wish, I will stay and help everyone get along.”

[Did you hope you could choose everyone and me at once?]

“I love you.”

[I hate only you.]

At that instant my lips were sealed. A kiss stuffed with lies.

[Do not breathe.]

Her voice faded, only thoughts burned white.

[No, breathe only the air I exhale.]

“…”

Strangely, I thought I heard her soft laughter.

[Remember with that clever head.]

[This is your thousandth ending.]

After that I recall little. Until my breath stopped I stayed in darkness. Perhaps I suffocated though her hands were not on my throat. Perhaps the door burst and the monsters devoured us in an instant.

Yet with extraordinary memory I could never forget the first cause that led here.

– If you date me, from that moment every word and act of mine will be a lie.

The fact that I nodded, that I accepted it with my own body, must be blamed.

Therefore, my thousandth cause of death was suicide.

Footnotes:

Chapter 393

The Bereaved I

Sinnoa

Now, the time to speak about Go Yuri is finally drawing near.

Yet before we can reach that point there are still a few unavoidable steps we have to tread.

For example,

an older sister and a younger sister,

twin shrine maidens,

the self-proclaimed Yo-hwa Yo-hwa☆Sisters.

"…"

Someone who, although it was a lie, once tried out a "happy ending" in the previous episode.

Someone who watched that manufactured happy ending with faint dissatisfaction until the very end.

The elder sister who was trapped inside stopped time.

The younger sister who was set adrift in the flow of hours.

Let us tell their story.

Imagine for a second what sort of news would leave an ordinary person most bewildered if it landed out of nowhere.

"Aliens have invaded." After the apocalypse modern humanity has suffered, aliens are hardly fresh news.

People at the market would simply nod "Well, that can happen," then turn back to arguing over fruit prices.

That very spirit of “Well, that can happen” is the slogan that defines our era.

Humankind wiped out, could happen. A staircase you never built appears in your house, could happen.

You step into an elevator and every button reads 4F—what, you rode an elevator without thinking in this day and age? Then just die.

Exactly.

The Babylonian proverb “Kids these days have no sense” has, after four thousand years, finally taken its first loss.

By now it is almost impossible for any ordinary incident to punch through a modern mind’s armour or topple that “could happen” attitude.

“Yo-hwa, there’s something I need to confess.”

“Ah, is this finally the moment you confess your love for me? I… I am ready, teacher!”

“The truth is, you have an older sister you cannot remember. A twin, in fact.

Your name is the same, Cheon Yo-hwa, the Chinese characters differ a bit.

Your sister was caught in a Time Seal, so from your end the memories became things that never existed.

Sejong City is stable now and the northern front is quiet, so I thought this would be a good time for us to go and meet her.”

“…”

One second. Two. Three. Four.

“Huh?”

The sound effect that plays whenever Cheon Yo-hwa's mental defence wall is breached is a faint "Huh."

And thus the regressor gained yet another fragment of knowledge about the world.

Experience Points up—Level up.

"Teacher, what kind of nonsense is that?"

"…"

Experience Points revoked.

Cheon Yo-hwa written 天寥化 and Cheon Yo-hwa written 千謠話—hang on.

Because the two names sound identical, it is terribly confusing to anyone listening.

Putting Chinese characters every time is tiresome, so from now on I will call the elder sister "Cheon-hwa" and the younger one simply "Yo-hwa."

Cheon-hwa and Yo-hwa.

A spur-of-the-moment idea, but it works rather well.

Anyway, about my Separated Family Reunion project, here is what the elder twin—

the strategist caught in a Time Seal, the girl who mangles polite and casual speech at will, a heavy dopamine addict—Cheon-hwa had to say.

"Er, I would drop it if I were you, Sunbae."

Rather unexpectedly, she shot the idea down without hesitation.

"Why?"

"Hmm-mm." Cheon-hwa smiled vaguely.

“From my angle the real mystery is why sunbae thinks reuniting us is a good idea.”

“Because you are family.” My brows knit.

“To the younger sister, her twin vanished without warning. Seeing each other again would help.”

“Hmm-mm, I am not so sure.”

“Well, of course I would love it if my kid sister got over her trauma and came all the way here to greet me. I do love her to bits, I am her big sister after all.”

“Oh, I knew it.”

“But Sunbae, is the Yo-hwa we have now mature enough to accept me?”

I tilted my head.

“Mature? Does a reunion between sisters require maturity?”

“I have been trapped in this classroom by the Time Seal, so I have no idea what is happening outside.”

She looked toward the window.

“All I can do is inhale the information you bring me like oxygen and deduce the situation beyond.”

“I know.”

“So I can only imagine with my head how frightened my cute little sister must be.”

She pulled her legs up onto the desk and hugged her knees.

“You know, Sunbae, the Yo-hwa I remember was always as fresh as a spring breeze.”

“She still is.”

“She never burned with jealousy, never fought to prove herself, never wore a perfect smile while something inside her died.”

“…”

“Yo-hwa with a sister and Yo-hwa without a sister are very different people.”

Family, however close or distant, shapes a person deeply, and for twins that influence is beyond dispute.

“My sister and I were born twisted, so if anybody had mental shadows, it was me.”

“…”

“Meanwhile she is the textbook picture of mental health—jealousy, grudges, gloom, she fixes those with a game of basketball and a nap.”

Sometimes I wondered how such an angel was born into a family as crooked as ours.

“That,” I said carefully, “does not match the student-council president I know.”

Her bright smile faded into bitterness.

“Sunbae, I have no regrets about the Time Seal. It is the correct answer, the only clear route.”

“Is that so.”

“Yes. Waking up to find you here like today even makes me happy. But when it comes to my sister… I am not confident.”

The wind through the window ruffled her hair, and for the first time I saw her unsure of herself.

The regressor’s advantage is that, no matter the failure, we can keep pressing the retry button.

“Yeah, I am not confident, but like you said, Sunbae, it is worth a shot.”

The amnesiac’s advantage is that the scars of failure never last more than twenty-four hours.

“Even if it fails my day always resets, so I can just keep at it until it works.”

“The outside might stabilise more later, but if I sit on my hands I doubt my sister’s mind will heal by itself.”

“Then this too is a strategy.”

Right, retry and scar immunity meshed and set the gears of time turning.

“I am sorry, Sunbae. You already saved her once, but please, help my sister one more time.”

“Do not worry. The fee was already paid in advance as your tutoring bill.”

“Ahaha, right, my tuition was steep.”

Clap—a high five.

“Yay, Yo-hwa Yo-hwa☆Sisters reboot, Separated Family Reunion Project, begin!”

“Alright, for my precious students who give me headaches just by existing, I will give it a go.”

And then it went to ruin magnificently.

The start was not bad.

Even though the cliché “You have hidden blood relations” briefly possessed Yo-hwa with the soul of SG Man, her trust in Teacher had long since passed one hundred percent.

With calm explanation her horror began to thaw.

"…Well, Teacher, you do have the Time Seal ability, and you would never feed me nonsense. Hmm."

"Then will you meet her?"

"Hmm. Yes. But to be honest, it feels completely unreal."

She tilted her head at an awkward rhythm.

"The world has gotten so weird I let most things slide with a 'could happen,' but this is unbelievable. A twin sister? Me? Then she was supposed to inherit our order?"

"We will unravel all that when you meet."

"Hmm, alright."

I led her to the rooftop of the Tower of Babel. At the centre, as always, sat the crystal stele.

"Cheon-hwa!"

I stuck only my right foot through the invisible boundary, poking my head inside. Yo-hwa's hand was still in mine, so she could not yet enter the Time Seal.

"Eh, Sunbae?"

"Why are you coming in like that?"

"I brought your sister."

"Huh?"

"I struck a deal with yesterday's you. Let's meet her."

"What? Ah, ah, wait, I am not ready!"

Crash, thump.

She nearly fell over a desk, frantically checking her clothes and hair.

“Is my hair sticking up?”

“No sister on Earth fusses over hair to meet her sister. Just meet her.”

“Aah… I always kept the brand of a dignified, unreadable, therefore admirable big sister!”

“…”

“Um, Teacher,” came a voice from behind me, beyond the translucent door only I could see.

“Huh?”

“Forgive me, but you keep shouting by yourself. Are you alright?”

“Cheon Yo-hwa, because of your namesake I am about to look insane in front of my student!”

“Ye-yes?”

“No, not you, Yo-hwa. Cheon-hwa, big sister, I am coming in!”

“Aaah, the dignity I tended all my life…”

Since the very idea of a twin who worries about such dignity is anomalous, I pulled Yo-hwa in without hesitation.

A short “Ah—” and tap—

Just like that, the heel of the younger sister’s shoe touched the elder’s classroom floor.

“…”

“…”

Their eyes met.

Two people utterly identical except that one uniform was white and the other black, both wearing the same orange ponytail and the same crimson eyes.

“…Welcome, my sister.”

A breeze blew in through the window.

This Divine Realm is entirely under Cheon-hwa’s control, so the open window, the perfect timing of the breeze, the gust that tousled her hair, and the way she swept it aside were all handmade touches.

“Congratulations,” she said, smiling like a mastermind.

“To transcend the fetters of fate, to cross the boundary of time, and to arrive at this promised spot at last. I, Cheon Yo-hwa written as the lonely empty sky, greet you, my one and only sister.”

“…”

Ah, that sort of roleplay.

Footnotes:

Chapter 394

The Bereaved II

Sinnoa

For a moment, let's add a single, cruel thought to the mix.

I want you to think of someone very precious to you.

It could be your mother. It could be your father. It could be a lover. It could even be a pet.

It doesn't matter if you don't have such a precious person.

No. In fact, for the simulation we're about to try, it might be more fitting if you don't have a precious person.

– Ah, seriously! Unni!

It is enough to simply posit the hypothetical existence of 'someone incredibly precious to me'.

– I told you not to steal my clothes! I haven't even had a chance to wear that yet!

– They say wearing new clothes right away is bad for you because of all the chemicals on them, little sis. Your amazing older sister, in her infinite concern for your health, has graciously tested it for you first, just like a royal food taster.

– Die!

Your life story is so intertwined with that precious someone that you couldn't possibly write your biography without them.

Laughing. Fighting. Glaring. Apologizing.

Cursing. Blaming yourself. Trusting. Waiting for them.

Through that someone, you learned how to be ‘human’. You learned emotions. You practiced how to interact with people.

Thanks to them, you became human.

– I’m so glad you’re my unni. To think… that I have someone in my family I can talk to like this, even about our parents. I think it’s a blessing.

– Yeah. Me too.

– If, by any chance, I get dragged away by that god… help me, unni. I’ll help you too, no matter what happens.

– Okay.

Then one morning, you wake up, and that ‘someone’ is no longer by your side.

– ...?

A strange feeling.

It feels like you’ve left something behind somewhere.

– Huh?

They are no longer there.

If it was your mother, it’s as if you never had a mother to begin with. If it was a lover, you’ve never experienced such a love. If it was a pet, that child had never once climbed onto your back.

– …

It is empty.

A void.

This world, this universe, has lost something precious called the laws of physics. And you have just lost something a little more precious than that.

Even so, the world keeps moving, and you are still left there.

– …Ugh? What is it? I feel like I forgot something.

– Pre-President!

– Hm?

– Thank goodness! President, the school has gotten really, um, strange! We can't even get past the school gate. And all the teachers have disappeared!

– Whoa, whoa, hold on! Calm down! Everyone, take a deep breath in! And out. Yes, yes, in and out. Good. Calm down and speak one at a time.

– *Sob*. Well, you see….

As the world's time flows on and your own life remains, you have no choice but to keep living.

But then, it suddenly hits you.

While walking down a long, straight hallway, for no reason at all, a reason you yourself could never figure out, you turn around.

– …

Me.

What did I leave behind there?

– President?

– Oh, uh, yeah! Sorry. I just had a strange feeling for a second. Let's go! Let's find the other kids!

– Yes! Waaah. Really, I'm so glad you're here, President!

– Ahaha…

Why is it?

– …

This.

It feels like this isn't my life.

The reunion with the twin sisters… nearly ended in disaster.

“Ahahaha! Really—?”

“Hey, I’m serious. Ahaha.”

Unlike the older sister, who was a hikikomori of legendary proportions (having been trapped by Time Seal and left all alone in the classroom for eternity, she was effectively the world’s greatest loner), the younger sister was, thankfully, a complete social butterfly. The very epitome of an ENFP.

She had mastered that special magic exclusive to social butterflies, turning the momentarily frigid air into a soft spring breeze as if by a lie.

Oh, for the record, the older sister who made a mess of her first impression was classified as an INFJ. Since her personality type will never be mentioned again before the story ends, I’ll just get it out of the way here.

Even though a catastrophe had occurred, much like an otaku trying to make a deep impression on a blind date and instead leaving a very deep impression in a different sense, the younger of the twin sisters, Yo-hwa, skillfully performed a stunt called ‘getting close to someone you just met’.

“For some reason, from the moment I saw you, Teacher, I felt this incredible sense of familiarity. And, wow. So you were our tutor even before we met at Baekhwa Girls' High!”

“Yep, yep.”

“But why does unni call you Sunbae?”

“Ah. I was planning on getting into Seoul National University too. Since we were going to be senior and junior in a few years anyway, I just decided to start calling him Sunbae. That's how we settled on the title.”

“Wow. You must have been really good at studying.”

“Well, well. Studying is a piece of cake! Ahem.”

Hmm.

I had been watching the reunion of the separated sisters with a nervous heart, but….

‘This is surprisingly okay, isn’t it?’

Just then, my eyes met Cheon-hwa’s.

From an angle her sister couldn't see, she clenched her fist and mouthed ‘Nice!’. I found myself responding in kind.

“So, so. Yo-hwa, you won’t remember this, but when I was teaching you two, we used to wander through a secret passage in your house and stuff—”

“Heeeh.”

“And then! Sunbae—”

Cheon-hwa chattered on, unusually excited like a child. Yo-hwa played along, chiming in enthusiastically.

A contented smile naturally formed on my lips.

‘Well, they were such close twin sisters, so even if she lost her memories because of the [Time Seal], their basic human compatibility wouldn't just disappear…’

A mold grew in the cracks of my thoughts.

It was a sense of unease.

‘…Hm? Wait. How would I know how close the two of them were?’

This was the first time in my entire long life as a regressor that I had seen Cheon-hwa and Yo-hwa laughing and chatting together like this.

In other words, I had no clues or evidence to know anything about the two sisters' relationship.

It was only natural.

So why did I?

"Our family is the absolute worst, isn't it?"

"Ah, for real! You really can't understand it unless you're born as the successor to a pseudo-religious cult!"

"Right, right. I mean, what kind of parents mess with their daughters' names, planning to offer them as sacrifices? Did you know? We actually have different names officially registered at the government office. It was just within the family and the cult that we were both called Cheon Yo-hwa…"

"Wow. No way."

"We would've known sooner if we'd gotten our ID cards. They probably hid those from us too. Ah."

Poke, poke.

Cheon-hwa, with a mischievous, playful smile, nudged my ribs with her elbow.

"Sunbae, you probably know our other names, don't you? You know. When you were working with Grandpa Schopenhauer, you dug through all the government records."

"Who knows. I wasn't paying special attention to you two back then."

"Aww. But you could find out if you tried. Sunbae, please look it up for me! I don't particularly dislike my name, but I'm just curious to hear what it is. You never know. It might be something like Bok-ja

or Gil-ja.”

“That does sound interesting.”

“Right? I’m Cheon Bok-ja. Ahahaha.”

It was then that I suddenly realized.

The classroom had gotten a little quiet.

Specifically, Yo-hwa. The younger sister had suddenly stopped talking.

“Ahaha…?”

“Hm?”

We both turned our heads at the same time.

And we saw.

“…”

From Yo-hwa’s face.

All expression had vanished.

She was just silently staring this way… in the direction where Cheon-hwa and I were sitting, with a blank look.

“Uh.”

Flinch.

Both Cheon-hwa and I were at a loss for words.

In the red eyes watching us, there was a vinyl-like film that seemed impossible for any wings to penetrate.

They resembled the eyes of a reptile.

“…”

“…”

Silence.

The thread of conversation was unnaturally torn, and a stillness continued.

Both Cheon-hwa and I had good instincts. While we pretended to be logical at a glance, in reality, we often relied on our gut feelings.

That was why we kept our mouths shut.

Like an insect. Because it knows that if it moves now, the lizard over there will react.

“Hey.”

After about 90 seconds of silence, Yo-hwa’s lips parted.

“Are you two close?”

“Yes! No!”

Cheon-hwa answered instantly.

“I-I’m not close with Sunbae! We’re mortal enemies! I really hate him! We’re always just looking for a chance to stab each other in the back! Right, Sunbae?!”

“Ah, ah. Besides, I’m not even 100% sure if this thing is a human or an anomaly. From my perspective, she’s not trustworthy at all. A self-proclaimed strategist? A schemer? She seems eager to brand her own character, but it just comes off as sinister.”

“See! He hurts people’s feelings just like that, without a second thought! Would close friends do this to each other? Huh? Aah- this is the worst. My youth was wasted because a person like this was my tutor. Yep, yep. It would have been better if I never knew!”

“I probably only taught her for the money. In my heart, my only true disciple was always you, Yo-hwa.”

“Die! Sunbae! Please just die!”

“You die. No, you’re already dead, so please just delete your very existence.”

“See!”

“We’re—”

“Not close at all!”

“…”

Silence. Ninety seconds again.

“Hmph.”

More silence. Thirty seconds added.

“Your hair. Dye it.”

This time, it was our turn to be silent.

Only, the meaning of our silence was quite different. It was because we couldn't easily decipher the meaning of her demand, the words that had popped out of her lips.

“Huh? What are you talking about, Yo-hwa? Dyeing?”

“…”

Yo-hwa didn’t answer. She didn’t even shift her gaze. She was looking at her ‘unni’ from the same unmoving angle as before.

“Ah.”

Cheon-hwa sighed in resignation.

“Yeah, I see. I get it.”

What could she possibly have gotten?

Cheon-hwa got up from her desk and walked to the blackboard.

Then she picked up the blackboard eraser and, out of nowhere, started rubbing it on her own hair.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

In the desolate classroom, only the sound of the blackboard eraser striking not the blackboard, but Cheon-hwa's hair, drifted down.

It was such a sudden, bizarre act.

I tried to approach her, but, *squeeze*.

Yo-hwa's fingers, which had been interlocked with mine since we entered the [Time Seal] classroom, stopped me.

"…"

It was a grip of negligible strength, but for that very reason, it was a pull I couldn't break free from.

While I was frozen, Cheon-hwa's hair had become caked in white chalk powder.

As the powder scattered in all directions, Cheon-hwa turned to look this way.

"Is this okay? Or… more?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I get it."

Rustle. Cheon-hwa undid her hair tie.

And with that, the ponytail that was as good as the sisters' trademark, vanished.

I couldn't understand.

"Sorry."

What was even harder to understand was that the older sister, Cheon-hwa, who had covered her own hair in chalk powder, dirtied

her neat black school uniform, and let her hair down, bowed her head deeply.

“I am an anomaly.”

“…”

“The truth is, I’m the god your family, the Cheon Yo-hwa family, used to worship. An Outer God. The mastermind. But to entice the Undertaker, I’m mimicking your appearance, pretending to be human. A kind of doppelgänger.”

“…”

“I’m sorry for invading your space without permission.”

Cheon-hwa kept her head, now powdered white, bowed low.

“I won’t ask you to forgive me. But there are two points I’d like you to consider from my perspective. Will you hear me out?”

“Say them.”

“First. I am an anomaly that has been afflicted by [Time Seal]. So, when a day passes, I forget everything that happened today. You can assume it’s nearly impossible for the Undertaker and me to build memories together.”

“And?”

“Second. The Undertaker will never, ever confuse a creepy anomaly like me with you. I’m sorry, but the one who is confused is you.”

“…”

“The one who’s anxious is also you. It’s brazen of me to say this when I’m the one who caused the confusion, but no matter how much an anomaly like me imitates you, you will never be replaced by ‘me’ in the Undertaker’s heart. Please believe me.”

“Change it, then.”

Flinch. Cheon-hwa's shoulders, her head still bowed, tensed slightly.

"…Sorry. I can't change my appearance."

"Why not?"

"I just…. Can't."

"You said you were a doppelgänger?"

"I'm sorry. I really can't. It's beyond my ability. It's because I'm an incompetent person, no. An incompetent anomaly."

"You said you were an Outer God?"

"I was sealed. The me right now is just a trace left by the Outer God, nothing more than a shadow. I'm sorry."

"Hmph."

Yo-hwa tilted her head.

"Then you can change your name, can't you?"

"…"

"Mastermind, that's good. Your clothes are black, too. From now on, I'd like you to use the name Mastermind, not Cheon Yo-hwa."

TL/N: The word for Mastermind can also be "Black Veil", hence the black clothes.

"Okay. I will."

Creeeak.

Outside the classroom. The trees and flowers of the four seasons that had adorned the windows all withered at once.

The bark on the birch trees split, and from the cracks, black blood gushed out.

"But like I said, I'm a mayfly. Even the thought that I changed my

name will be reset when midnight passes.”

“…”

“So you don’t need to worry about someone like me. Cheon Yo-hwa. A mayfly that doesn’t exist in the world anyway, that won’t exist in the future, and that won’t be able to leave anything behind. That’s what I am.”

“I see.”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Scrape, Yo-hwa pushed back her chair and stood up.

“Let’s go then! Teacher!”

Yo-hwa, who said that while looking at me, had a wide smile on her face, a smile without a single trace of shadow.

“Ahyoo. Really! I don’t know why I get so tangled up with doppelgänger-type anomalies.”

“…”

“You remember, Teacher, at Baekhwa Girls’ High? When we were isolated in the student council room all winter. Back then, too, a doppelgänger was the one who remained until the very end, wasn’t it.”

“…That’s right.”

Or perhaps.

——To subjugate the Outer God sleeping at Baekhwa Girls’ High, it wasn’t just Yo-hwa and me, but there was actually one more mischievous ‘someone’ by our side.

——So in the student council room, where the electric stove let off wisps of steam, there wasn’t the warmth of two people, but actually

three.

——And by that someone being deleted, they might have been forcibly replaced by the anomaly called a doppelgänger.

It's just that I had resolved myself to the latter.

And the Yo-hwa before me had simply decided on the former.

'Ah.'

Only then could I truly feel how cruel my authority, the ability called [Time Seal], was.

As a regressor, 'I' could accept it.

Because I had been given enough time, over many regressions, to choose whether the being before me was an anomaly or a human.

But it wasn't the same for other people.

To even her own family, who must have been the closest and dearest to her, the being before her could only be seen as an 'anomaly'.

There was no choice in the first place.

Because they weren't even given a chance to understand what time and what path led to this situation.

'I see. Is this the epilogue I have to face?'

It was quite a harsh story.

"It was a bit bizarre, but it was a pretty interesting experience. Ehehe. Teacher! I've completely cleared my schedule for today, so let's hurry and go get something to eat!"

Even as I was led out of the classroom by Yo-hwa's hand, all the while.

Cheon-hwa just kept her head bowed.

“…”

Yes. To reveal it now.

This was a story about a person who lost someone precious due to [Time Seal].

Footnotes:

Chapter 395

The Bereaved III

Sinnoa

Everything in the world has its pros and cons.

The pros.

The advantage of the regressor, me, the Undertaker, was being able to roll the dice again and ‘retry’ at any time.

The advantage of the amnesiac, Cheon-hwa, was her ‘trauma immunity,’ where she could simply forget, even if she failed.

However.

“Oh? Yo-hwa. What are you doing here...”

“Ah, Teacher! I’ve, uh, decided to open a Baekhwa Girls’ High branch school in Busan, starting today!”

“A branch school?”

“Yes! Ahaha, it’s nothing too grand. I just talked to the leader of the National Road Management Corps and I’m planning to put up a temporary building, just a student council room, on a corner of the Tower of Babel rooftop!”

“...”

Every advantage, when turned upside down, was bound to become a disadvantage.

“But… Yo-hwa.”

“Yes!”

“This is difficult for me to bring up, but...”

“Aww, come on, you know the relationship between us. You can say anything to me, Teacher!”

“About the temporary building that’s under construction. The spot where the container box is supposed to go is, from my perspective, exactly where the crystal gravestone of the [Time Seal] is.”

“Oh? Oooh, was it?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, but would it be okay if you built the temporary building a little to the side, not right here?”

“Hmmmm.”

“…”

“Why? Teacher?”

The cons.

Until he rolled the dice again, until he reset the regression, the regressor was bound to be followed by the traces of his failures.

The amnesiac was given the compulsion of having to accept only the results of failure, without even the awareness that she had failed.

“I can’t see it. And I don’t particularly want to see it, but if you must visit, Teacher, you can just come into the student council room, right? I’m always welcome to have you!”

“…”

“Ah. For the time being, I plan to stay here at the Busan branch rather than the Sejong main campus because of various work. Hehe. Please visit often, Teacher!”

Yo-hwa’s red eyes were smiling.

——Access has been denied.

I was Yo-hwa’s teacher. We had even spent several years alone

together inside the barrier of Infinite Void.

Naturally, I could read the hidden undertones in my lovely disciple's smiling eyes as if they were in the palm of my hand.

Just now, I had been forbidden from meeting with 'Cheon-hwa' at all.

That night.

[The prevailing reaction inside Baekhwa Girls' High is also confusion.]

I immediately tried to contact the Saintess. To grasp the situation.

"You don't mean to say this was the student council president's… Yo-hwa's, unilateral decision?"

[Yes. The vice president and the secretary, the other executives of Baekhwa Girls' High, didn't know.]

[Yesterday, Ms. Yo-hwa suddenly met with Ms. Noh Do-hwa alone and struck a deal.]

[Ms. Noh Do-hwa was also puzzled, but she gave her the container since it would be irrational to antagonize Baekhwa Girls' High over just giving up a corner of the Tower of Babel rooftop.]

It was fast. Excessively so.

The member of the Regression Alliance who had always been the fastest in judgment and action was Yo-hwa.

She was different from her older sister, who constantly calculated variables from behind the scenes to weave an epic saga of grand strategy.

The younger of the twin sisters created her plans the moment a strategy was established, or in real-time after diving into the battlefield.

To put it one way, she was the action leader.

My failure to consider that characteristic of Yo-hwa's was my fatal mistake.

In less than 24 hours, the rooftop of the Tower was under the surveillance of the Baekhwa Girls' High student council president.

When Yo-hwa was an ally, it was an incredibly reassuring advantage, like when she came as reinforcements during the Leviathan subjugation.

But in a situation like this, it felt as if my own breathing room was slowly being choked off.

"What is Yo-hwa doing now?"

[She's on the rooftop. She's been there the whole time.]

"..."

[She's continuously exchanging messages with the Baekhwa Girls' High guild members in Sejong through me.]

[This is just my personal judgment, but.]

[I think Ms. Yo-hwa really intends to stay at the Tower of Babel alone for the time being.]

[Um, Mr. Undertaker.]

[What on earth happened inside the Time Seal?]

"..."

A reversed scale.

A person's heart is covered in invisible scales, and among them exists one that grows in the opposite direction.

"…I'm sorry. If Yo-hwa happens to leave her post, please let me know right away."

[Yes. I will.]

What exactly one's own reversed scale is.

It was common for not only others but even the person themself to not know. Some people lived their entire lives without ever realizing it.

For Yo-hwa, that reversed scale was the existence of the twin sister she had already lost.

[I'm sorry, Mr. Undertaker.]

[I tried summoning her to the meeting room through Ms. Noh Do-hwa, and I've tried various other means, but Ms. Yo-hwa isn't budging at all.]

[Rather, she… doesn't seem to trust my words.]

[I think she was convinced from the very beginning that I was scheming to lure her somewhere else.]

"…"

[The only time Ms. Yo-hwa moves from the rooftop is when she goes out somewhere with you, Mr. Undertaker.]

Warning.

The sound of a low-quality siren flickered in my head.

"Hehe. It's so nice to be walking around the city with you like this, Teacher! Hwaa, I really wish I had settled down in Busan instead of Sejong..."

"But the Inunaki Tunnel is there, isn't it."

"Mm, yes. Still! Please understand the heart of a disciple who wants to be as close to her Teacher as possible!"

"Then how about moving into my guild hideout and living there?"

"Ah."

"Ah-ryeon does that all the time anyway. Except when she's

working in Pyongyang, she's cooped up in a corner of the hideout all day. There's always a guest room ready for you."

"Ugh! Wh, what a sweet offer…! My, my heart is pounding like crazy... What should I do, Teacher?"

"What do you mean, what should you do. Just come in with the feeling of having another vacation home――"

"Do you want to meet her that badly?"

"..."

"Why? Teacher. I'm right here, aren't I?"

"..."

"That's cheap."

"..."

"I keep regretting that I was too far away recently. Sim Ah-ryeon is much farther, working in Pyongyang. I also went to help as reinforcements whenever the northern front was in danger. It's a little, cheap."

Warning.

Yo-hwa wasn't the only case of someone losing a family member to [Time Seal].

A long time ago, in an episode dealing with the football player Kim Joo-chul, his son Kim Si-eun had been mentioned.

As a result of his father's existence being erased and distorted from the very beginning, Kim Si-eun ended up living a life of traveling all over the country.

This was that kind of era. Traveling was synonymous with suicide, and Kim Si-eun, not content with just the country, even crossed over to the Japanese archipelago.

As if he were desperately searching for something.

Kim Si-eun never loved his father, the football player Kim Joo-chul.

Kim Joo-chul was a casino addict. Unable to forget his past glory, he wielded violence and abuse against his family.

That kind of human.

Even though he only lost that kind of family member, his son Kim Si-eun's life was decisively changed.

It happened even when losing a family member you didn't love.

…In the case of losing a family member you loved more than anyone, to what extent would the remaining person's life be twisted?

"Teacher?"

"Teacher."

Warning.

Nevertheless, I trusted my disciple and believed that the problem could be solved through conversation.

Giving up was always the easiest solution. It was also a stopgap measure. Therefore, I attempted to talk.

"Ahaha."

"So.... what is it?"

"That I have a twin sister."

"And that unni liked you so, so much. That she was willing to offer her very soul to save the world with you."

"And on top of that, if everything happened according to unni's plan. That means she's an incredibly-incredibly, incredibly smart person, doesn't it?"

“What is that! Ahaha.”

I attempted to talk.

“I can’t do something like that. Ugh, I could throw away my life for you a hundred, a thousand times, any number of times, but—”

“To calculate hundreds of regressions as variables and weave a plan with your own life. I don’t have that kind of brain, you know?”

“She looks just like me.”

“Her voice is the same too.”

“Her scent, it’s the same too.”

“That means she’s so much smarter than me, right?”

I attempted to talk,

“So that’s why you’re drawn to ‘that thing’, Teacher.”

“What do you call this? Hmm, there was a specific term for it. Ah. That’s right! A superior version! That’s what you call this, right? Ahaha.”

“Hmm. I don’t dislike being challenged like this. In fact, I like it. Because I can prove myself by fighting. But.... she’s not here, is she?”

“She doesn’t exist in this reality.”

“She’s dead more certainly than death itself.”

“So, what do I fight with? How do I fight?”

“Don’t you think that’s cheap?”

The attempt.

“So what am I supposed to feel?”

“A sense of apology for not even realizing my family sacrificed

themselves for you and the world? Sadness for losing my unni?"

"Am I in a situation where I have to feel sorry and sad for a family I've never even had?"

"Isn't it the opposite?"

"I'd like it if you apologized. To me."

Warning.

"It doesn't end just because you got her consent, Teacher. It means I was there too. But unlike you, I'm not a regressor, and I don't have Complete Memory, so there's no way for me to get my memories back."

"She disappears on her own terms, and now she expects me to just accept it on her own terms?"

"If I acknowledge her on top of you, that thing, she'll really become my 'unni'."

"I don't want that."

"You're the worst kind of person."

"Cheon Yo-hwa is me. Teacher.... Yes, that's right, isn't it?"

Warning.

"Look. Teacher. This is Busan. The city you protected. The town."

"I'm the only one who can walk here, holding your hand like this. The real Cheon Yo-hwa, you know? Not some illusion that only exists in that creepy classroom."

"Your hand.... it's warm."

"Yes, Teacher. A little more...."

Warning.

"Teacher, look at this. I got a wound in the last battle."

“Here— On the nape of my neck. You can see it, right?”

“What? No. I didn’t ask Sim Ah-ryeon to heal it. I wanted to leave it.”

“Why, you ask.... Ahaha. Because, well, my wound doesn’t disappear even after 24 hours pass, you see?”

“It’ll heal, sure.”

“But it won’t be ‘reset’ without a trace. Never.”

“It’s okay to come closer. Actually, I wanted to show it to you. Yes, up close.”

“Teacher.”

“My Teacher——”

Reset.

The conversation failed. A great failure. A fumble.

Until that regression ended, Yo-hwa never left my side. Her position as student council president, her power as the head of one of the two major guilds on the Korean peninsula, none of it mattered anymore.

Baekhwa Girls’ High collapsed.

It was an organization that had been established on the charisma of a single student council president in the first place. The bees that lost their queen scattered, and their members were absorbed by the National Road Management Corps and Samcheon separately.

Once, the former vice president of Baekhwa Girls’ High came and cried out in protest. But there was no change in Yo-hwa’s expression.

The only thing I could do was take responsibility for Yo-hwa and accept her until the regression ended.

Reset. And.

"..."

The next regression.

I was at a classroom desk. Across from me sat Cheon-hwa. As soon as the new regression began and the situation was somewhat sorted out, I came to visit the sanctuary.

"Aah—"

Cheon-hwa, after hearing the whole story from me, the older of the twin sisters, sighed a long sigh.

"I see... So that's what happened. Yes. I'm sorry, Sunbae. I've really given you a painful role."

"It's fine. This kind of thing wasn't unique to Yo-hwa."

"Hm? Ah, I see. It was always common for mentally unstable colleagues to rely on you. Mm, still, I'm sorry."

Cheon-hwa muttered.

"My sister is right. This is the price for me using [Time Seal] as I pleased. At the time, I was so busy subjugating the Mastermind that I thought this was the best way."

"..."

"Actually, I don't mind it being this way! Wow. Just the fact that you remember me as a human, Sunbae, is a gamble that succeeded against astronomical odds, you know? To win the heart of my lovely little sister on top of this? That's like trying to pull a 5-star with a single roll in a double gacha. Ahaha."

"..."

"You don't have to tell Yo-hwa about me. Sunbae. I have some shame, you see. I don't want to be a nuisance to the point of harming my sister's mental health! Nope!"

Leave it like this.

Neglect it.

Just as I had until now.

No one would know anyway.

Yo-hwa would never know that she had an older sister. And Cheon-hwa would never be able to remember the fact that she had inflicted an indelible wound on her younger sister.

It was a story that no one in this world, aside from the two of them, knew.

Except for me.

"..."

If I were to just close my eyes to this, it could be left as something that 'never happened'. As a blank. As a void.

"Cheon-hwa."

"Hm?"

"This classroom you're sealed in. It's a sanctuary modeled after a classroom at Baekhwa Girls' High, right?"

"Uh... yes. But, why all of a sudden?"

And wouldn't that be in line with the entirety of a regressor's life?

"I have a strategy."

The fact that Yo-hwa wasn't a necromancer of zombies, but just a girl who wanted to save a few more of her friends.

The fact that Yu Ji-won wasn't a psychopath mad with power, but was searching for someone she met one summer.

The fact that the Constellations didn't exist, but were just an act put on by someone who wanted to save people.

Like with Old Man Scho, they were all facts that no one would know if I just closed my eyes.

Originally, the void was a world only to those who sought to know it, and the other was a human only to those who sought to see them.

I had believed that a regressor was a human who sings of loss.

“In this regression, I haven’t saved Yo-hwa yet. Right about now, Yo-hwa is probably trapped in Baekhwa Girls’ High, fighting a desperate battle.”

“Yes. So I’d like you to go quickly.”

“And as you know, to subjugate the trace of Infinite Void sleeping there, I have to endure until the world shrinks to the size of Baekhwa Girls’ High and enter the void within the void.”

“…”

“Into the Baekhwa Girls’ High of the void, I will summon you.”

“…!”

Cheon-hwa’s eyes widened.

I continued, declaring.

“I will reunite you two sisters there.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 396

The Bereaved IV

Sinnoa

Operation briefing. ON.

"Most awakeners perceive the Void as a type of dungeon. However, physical laws do not apply in the Void, and it cannot be defined as a physical location."

Snap. The piece of chalk broke in my hand.

But that was fine. At least the chalk had died a glorious death after scribbling its entire purpose onto the chalkboard.

"Therefore, the Void can just as easily arise within a person's mind."

"Are you saying that's my sister's current state?"

"Probably."

On the chalkboard was a chibi-style drawing of Yo-hwa.

Right in the middle of the rather well-drawn illustration, on Yo-hwa's chest, I drew a large '□', an empty square box.

"It isn't just Yo-hwa. It's everyone who lost the most precious character in their lives due to the Time Seal. All of them."

"…"

"We can surmise that a void has formed in the deepest parts of their psyches. You could call it a hole in the heart."

"A hole in the heart…"

"And until now, Yo-hwa's psychological void has been blocked in this way."

Scrape, scritch, tap.

Using the broken piece of chalk, I drew an arrow from the '□' and wrote a name next to it. Like this.

□ → Undertaker

Blink.

Cheon-hwa's eyes, who was sitting in the very front row of the classroom, widened slightly.

"Ah."

"Yo-hwa has a hole in her heart. But right after, someone appeared who saved not only her life but also the lives of the Baekhwa Girls' High students. And that person was—"

"You, Sunbae."

"Yes."

I had found it slightly strange for a while now.

'Even if I saved her life, her affection for me grew far too quickly—and far too deeply.'

The moment I started having doubts was when I encountered the anomaly known as 'Savior Narrative Syndrome'.

'Of course, I approached those kids at the exact moment they needed me, in the exact role they needed. Nevertheless... Unlike me, the regressor, wasn't I still a stranger they had only just met?'

Why did they come to rely on me so quickly?

Why did their heartbeats resonate with my existence as if they had been waiting for it all along?

I recalled this question and came up with my own answer.

"It's simple. If you assume there's a void in their hearts, a hole that runs as deep as hell itself, then it all makes rational sense."

“…”

"Yo-hwa has a psychological void that she absolutely cannot fill. So, to deny and seal that hole, she placed the person known as 'Undertaker' at the very center of her heart."

"Sunbae, are you trying to say that the feelings my sister has for you aren't love?"

"No. I'm not discussing the color of the heart, but its structure. In a way, it's a feeling much deeper than ordinary love."

“…I see. And if she fails to block the hole, the void.”

"She would become an anomaly."

A desperate struggle to remain human.

She couldn't become human on her own. As I said, a fatal gap had already been torn open in her heart.

So, she finds a guarantor.

Because she herself is not enough, she borrows the existence of another to serve as a patch-up job for the hole in her heart.

"Trust, because she entrusts herself to another. Love, because they guarantee each other's humanity. Sacrifice, because she handed over her most precious heart to another. Obsession, because she cannot let go. You can call it whatever you want."

“…”

"The important point right now is—"

My chalk danced again.

Cheon-hwa (Older Sister) → □ → Undertaker

Scrape. The trembling of the chalkboard stopped.

"The fact that I was not the one originally designated for this spot."

“…

"The reason I, we, failed in the last cycle was because we missed this. My thinking was too simple. I just thought that if she met her lost family member, an instinctive favorability would form."

“…Because in Yo-hwa's heart, you had already taken that spot, sunbae. I get it now."

Cheon-hwa's eyes lowered.

"My existence must have looked like an 'enemy' that threatened not only Yo-hwa herself, but you as well, Sunbae."

"That’s right."

"She can bear it if she's the only one threatened. But if it feels like someone is trying to take your place, Sunbae... Definitely. She's bound to react sensitively."

A more delicate approach.

That was why a more sophisticated strategy was desperately needed.

"In the end, it's a matter of timing. If 'Undertaker' has already become Yo-hwa's teacher and completely replaced the hole, it's already too late."

"Yeah. I understand. I, her 'lost older sister,' have to appear before Yo-hwa falls for you, Sunbae."

“…However you want to put it, yes. At any rate, the direction is correct."

"But that's impossible."

Cheon-hwa said.

"Look, Sunbae. I've been hit with a Time Seal, so I can't move a single step from the rooftop of the Tower of Babel. On the other hand, for Yo-hwa to get here, she first has to clear the 'Baekhwa

Girls' High Tutorial Dungeon.' But to clear that dungeon, your existence is indispensable, Sunbae. So how… Ah."

Cheon-hwa's eyes went wide.

Clatter. She pushed back her chair and stood up.

"The fairy!"

I smiled.

"Exactly."

The tutorial fairy.

Or, the 'first anomaly'.

It was the first anomaly-like anomaly that the vast majority of awakeners encountered. That was natural.

That's why it was the 'tutorial' fairy, after all.

Of course, that was just a nickname given for convenience.

Its true name, the name that revealed the anomaly's identity in its entirety, was something else.

I lamented.

"In the end, in our world, you guys are a succubus and an incubus...."

"Hoe-eh."

Fairy number 264 was happily stuffing a sausage into both its cheeks, like a happy hamster.

For the record, it was a bribe I gave them. I don't know why, but their species went crazy for sausages.

Once, I thought, 'Maybe they'll like a fancier sausage more?' and got them a Johnsonville product, but strangely, they shook their heads,

saying it didn't suit their taste.

They were a strange bunch, anyway.

And as you might have guessed from my use of the word 'bunch' here.

"Such a sweet taste...!"

"Hoe. Why did my comrades fall for the bourgeoisie's appeasement and turn into the hunting dogs of power, hoeeh. This food is so counter-revolutionary it makes me realize it inadvertently."

"Is it a taste that makes you abandon the world revolution and regress into nationalistic revisionism that only cares about Russia?"

Right now, a number of fairies were gathered before my eyes in a small huddle.

"You guys seem to be subtly lacking in enthusiasm."

"Hoeeeng. That's because…"

"We ambitiously started the tutorial dungeon, but the Fairy King who was giving us orders suddenly disappeared…"

"Praised as a revolutionary fighter and sent to the jungles of South America, only to find out it was just a purge from back home…"

"The wall of reality is the North Sea Ice Palace…"

That's right.

Originally, the tutorial fairies were under the control of the Outer God, Infinite Void, or the Mastermind.

However, Infinite Void had been intellectually castrated and reduced to something like a lump of power, and the Mastermind had been sealed by someone on the rooftop of the Tower of Babel.

In a word, the fairies of today were.

"No different from dogs abandoned by their masters."

"Hieeek! Wh-what cruel wording!"

"We opened the tutorial dungeon out of inertia, but we just don't feel motivated for some reason…"

"When I think about it, who cares about humans? Whether they get killed by other anomalies is just their own fate…"

Just like humans falling into depression, the fairies were collectively shrouded in a dark cloud.

I caught a strange sense of déjà vu.

'In a way, isn't this also the result of a void suddenly appearing in their hearts?'

…An angle of thought I would have never come up with in my past self.

My hatred for anomalies was still preserved along with my Complete Memory, forever burning my heart.

But now, I could observe with a cold detachment from the opposite side, at least when it came to the tutorial fairies.

'It might not be all that different.'

One day they woke up, and Mugan had become strange and the Mastermind had disappeared.

All thanks to the actions of me, the regressor.

The flow was always similar.

"I will become your new pillar of support. Specifically, I will distribute one sausage to each of you every day."

"Hoe-eh! Comrade General Secretary!"

"You're going to rule over us!"

"The forefront of the revolution!"

"Long live Comrade General Secretary! Long live! Long live!"

In the first place, what is an anomaly?

Why did these beings come to exist?

'Almost every awakener must first meet the tutorial fairies.'

'And the fairies' true identity is the Dream Demon. Anomalies of dreams.'

'In short, the first void that people encounter is none other than… a dream.'

A human's dream. The first void.

'In a way, a more fitting name for the tutorial fairies might be the [Fairy of Beginnings].'

Tutorial. Starting point. Dream.

All the puzzle pieces shimmered just at the edge of my grasp, as if I could understand them but couldn't, as if I could catch them but couldn't.

'Could all of this be a mere coincidence?'

One more step.

It felt like if I could just find the last puzzle piece, I would see the destination this picture was pointing to, but for now, it was still a mystery.

Pushing the puzzle to one side of my mind, I spoke with a deliberately solemn expression.

"What I require of you is very clear. From now on, I will infiltrate Baekhwa Girls' High disguised as a security guard. There will be a girl there who is the student council president, and whenever that girl falls asleep—"

"—I'm going to use the fairies to manipulate her dreams. And I will continuously show Yo-hwa the image of her 'older sister' in her dreams."

“…”

"Yo-hwa just recently lost her sister. If she sees even a vision resembling her sister in her dreams, the hole in Yo-hwa's heart is bound to react."

“…”

"So, Cheon-hwa."

I said, looking at the girl in front of me.

"I need your help to create a dream that is as close to reality as possible. Tell me what happened between you two sisters in your childhood. As detailed as possible, please."

A long silence followed.

Cheon-hwa's face looked complicated.

Gratitude for someone who would go to such lengths for her and her sister. Apology for having to rely on him so much.

And an overwhelming emotion for being accepted as a human, not an anomaly. Trust. Love. Sacrifice. Obsession.

"But there's a problem, Sunbae."

Leaving behind the emotions that wouldn't disappear no matter what you called them, Cheon-hwa, ever the strategist of the self-proclaimed Regressor Alliance, pointed out the practical problems first.

"No matter how hard the fairies try, they won't be able to perfectly replicate my childhood self. They're no different from dolls that only act as they're programmed."

"That's true."

"My sister has good instincts. Her nose for telling the real from the fake is almost genius-level. Will her heart really be moved by an 'older sister doll' that the fairies clumsily imitate?"

It was a truly accurate point.

"Who do you take me for? I'm a man who has even run a reincarnation project using writers and fairies."

I puffed out my chest.

"It's no exaggeration to say that there are few who know the strengths and weaknesses of fairies as well as I do. Naturally, I've prepared a countermeasure for that."

"Heeh. As expected of you, Sunbae! What kind of countermeasure is it?"

"A very effective one, Cheon-hwa. Do you not have the world's best actor right before your eyes?"

Blink.

"?"

"?"

Cheon-hwa's head tilted to the side. My head tilted the other way.

About ten seconds passed like that.

"Uh…"

Cheon-hwa's lips parted hesitantly.

"Sorry, Sunbae. I think I misunderstood something. If I did, please feel free to correct me."

"Mm."

"So… based on the story I tell you, and because your memory is super, super good, you'll memorize everything like it's a script."

"Mm."

"And then… 'you're' going to act as 'me'? You, Sunbae? You're going to 'transform' with the help of the Dream Demons, like me, like a Ditto, like a female student in a black sailor uniform… and act as her older sister for my little sister. That's not what you're saying, right? I misunderstood, right?"

"No. You understood it perfectly."

"…"

"What. Don't you worry. Although it may not be on the level of Oh Dok-seo's VTuber mode, I, as a regressor who has lived for tens of thousands of years, boast the strongest acting ability among present-day humanity. I will act out a 'Cheon Yo-hwa' who is more you than you are."

"…"

"So come, hurry and tell me the life story of you and your sister. How you talked to each other at home, what habits and quirks you had, input every single thing into my Complete Memory—"

"That's creepy!!"

Why?

Regardless of what the strategist complained about, the operation was pushed forward.

The Baekhwa Girls' High Tutorial Dungeon was a demon's den where casualties would increase exponentially if left alone for even a moment. Realistically, at this point in time, besides me, there was no one else suitable to enter Baekhwa Girls' High and act as 'Cheon-hwa' in the dream.

And so.

"…Security guard mister."

After building up a decent level of trust, just like in other turns, Yo-hwa cautiously approached me.

As you can tell from the fact that she still calls me 'security guard mister' and not 'Teacher', it hasn't been many days.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Um, I have something I'd like to talk about… Could you listen for a moment?"

Finally! I clenched my fist in my mind.

But I didn't show any of it on the outside.

"Of course. As the student council president, Yo-hwa, it must be hard for you to show any weakness in front of the other kids, so you can always rely on an adult."

"Ahaha. Thank you."

"So what's on your mind?"

"Lately, whenever I fall asleep, I have these really, super, seriously creepy dreams… They're just completely unpleasant dreams. Could this also be the influence of ghosts or something?"

"…"

Why?

Footnotes:

Chapter 397

The Bereaved V

Sinnoa

I was confident in my acting.

I had already lived for tens of thousands of years, so it would have been more difficult not to have accumulated experience in any art form, regardless of the field.

I could even change my voice by mobilizing just a tiny bit of aura.

If I shaped the aura and overlaid it on my facial muscles, it could even function as a temporary disguise, a type of human-skin mask.

– Hayul, peekaboo! It's daddy.

– …

– This is Jung Sang-guk. Daddy has come to his senses. I love Hayul very much.

– Die.

My genius-level acting skills received rave reviews from my colleagues around me!

Looking across the entire martial world, there was only one person who would dare to challenge me at this level, and that was Oh Dok-seo, who had turned on her VTuber mode with [Side Story Creation].

But that kid, Oh Dok-seo, can't act as someone who has been time-sealed, right? It was impossible for her to empathize with Cheon-hwa in the first place, wasn't it?

Yes, she’s garbage.

Naturally, I, the Undertaker, had no choice but to be selected as the master actor to play the part of Yo-hwa's 'long-lost twin sister'.

Now, all that was left was for Yo-hwa to reminisce in her dream about the sweet childhood days with her precious sister, and recover her lost memories from the very beginning!

It should have been a truly perfect calculation.

"I hate you, unni!"

"…"

"You ate the chocolate ice cream I put in the fridge again, didn't you! I can only eat one of those a day, but you pretended to be me and ate mine too! I hate you! I really hate you, unni!"

Right before my eyes, or more accurately, in the 'dream,' a young version of Yo-hwa was screaming her lungs out.

All I had to do now was lower my eyebrows apologetically and bow my head to my lovely younger sister.

If I just did that, a reasonably 'good memory' would be imprinted onto Yo-hwa's subconscious.

When she woke up later, although Yo-hwa wouldn't be able to remember every single detail of the dream's scenery, at the very least, a faint feeling of 'I made memories with someone like family' would remain.

But.

"Oh, really? But I like my little sister so much."

My tongue, having already achieved a perfect state of oneness with Cheon-hwa through my supreme acting ability, moved on its own.

"Because you're here, I get to eat two ice creams. I love you, Yo-hwa. But since I want to keep eating chocolate ice cream no matter how much I have, I think it would be great if I had just three more little sisters like you!"

“Hwaaaaaah!”

In the end, Yo-hwa burst into tears.

“I… I hate you, unni! Die! Waaah! Unni, just drop dead!”

– What is the matter, young lady?!

Crash. The housekeepers, having detected the crying from outside the door, came running.

And just like that, not only Yo-hwa but also Cheon-hwa immediately launched into an impromptu crying act.

“Hic, hwaaaaaah! Cheon…, Cheon-hwa unni… sob! Sh-she hit me… and scolded me!”

– What?!

“N-n-n-no! I’m Yo-hwa! I’m the one who’s Yo-hwa, but unni took my ice cream and…”

“Hwaaaaaah!”

“Sob, hic, waaaah, u, uwaaaaaah!”

The housekeepers' eyes trembled violently.

To reiterate, Cheon-hwa and Yo-hwa looked identical.

Of course, the family had its own ways of distinguishing the twins, like dressing the sisters in different clothes, but Cheon-hwa, who had been cunning from a young age, exploited those methods to act like her ‘younger sister.’

As a result,

“I… hic, I’m… the real Yo-hwa……. She’s unni……. Why, only me……”

Yo-hwa, whose ability to talk back was weaker than her sister's, was abruptly singled out as the culprit and made to stand in the hallway with both her arms raised.

Meanwhile, Cheon-hwa, who had slipped away from the housekeepers' watch like an eel, was in front of her sister, pantomiming her crying face.

"I'm the unni, but why only meee…"

"Hwaaaaaah…"

"Heoeoeoeong."

"Unni, I really, hate youuuu……!"

"Kyaahahahaha!"

Cheon-hwa burst out laughing and rolled around on the hallway floor. She rolled so vigorously that there was no need to dust the floor separately.

And as for the 'me' who was the actor playing this true personality of Cheon-hwa, the young Cheon-hwa.

The Undertaker squeezed his eyes shut in a corner of his mind.

'This is a good memory?'

They deceived me.

"Hoe. Currently, the target codenamed 'Yo-hwa's' favorability toward Cheon-hwa, when converted to a numerical value, is 5."

Inside the child Yo-hwa's dream.

A grand mansion in Sejong City. The twin sisters' hometown.

Of course, the surrounding scenery was all just a dream. It was no different from a so-called 'set' that the Tutorial Fairy and I had built in collaboration.

In the backstage of the dream, where the flow of time was jumbled and mixed, Fairy No. 264 and I gathered to whisper back and forth.

"I see. So the maximum favorability is 10."

“Hoet, no? It’s 100.”

“…”

“For reference, a favorability of 5 is a value even lower than that for a complete stranger. Hoee, the love between human siblings is so very, very scary.”

“Keuk.”

I scratched my head roughly. Ah, and of course, my current appearance was fixed as ‘Cheon-hwa.’

“This is strange. I had a feeling that the Cheon-Yo-hwa sisters definitely had a bond so close it was second to none in the world. But why is it that in their childhood, it’s like they were dying to kill each other…”

“Comrade Secretary-General. Then wouldn’t it work if you just acted out the part of an ‘ideal older sister’ for her to see?”

“No.”

Thump.

I plopped down in a posture that a young lady from a great mansion would never take, cross-legged.

A perfect example of a delinquent noble lady.

I furrowed my brow deeply and grumbled.

“Doing that would just be soldering over the hole in Yo-hwa’s heart with another lie, far from patching it up properly. I have to restore it as close to the true history as possible for Yo-hwa’s mental state to become sound.”

“Hoee. We fairies can become happy just by eating a sausage, but human psychology is so complicated…”

“I agree with you on that point.”

I looked around.

“Really, it’s hard to see even an inch ahead.”

The grand mansion seemed fixed when I just looked at it.

But the story changed when I focused all my senses.

– The young ladies, I tell you, this time again…

– The madam has passed away! It was an assassination!

– This is the police! Don’t move! We received a report that a murder took place here.

– Aren’t our young ladies so cute?

Whisper, whisper. Murmur, murmur.

Shadow-like phantoms were restlessly coming and going through the hallways and the garden.

Bang!

A gunshot rang out somewhere in broad daylight, while right next to it, cult members were chatting leisurely.

It was all mixed up. Time and space.

“Tsk.”

I clicked my tongue.

“This is why I wanted to avoid entering someone else’s dream to look into their past if I could help it… This is no different from the void.”

“Hoe! Actually, Comrade Secretary-General’s dreams are unusually clear!”

The fairy bounced up and down.

“The vast majority, all humans except for the Secretary-General,

dream about their past in this way!”

“I was aware of that.”

Whether one possessed the Complete Memory ability or not.

That alone caused the ‘dream about the past’ to be this chaotically entangled.

The facts of the events were twisted back and forth, and even the timeline was a messy, fluid wreck.

It wasn't a metaphor, it was literally the void itself.

‘Even if I want to shape the dream as I please, the situation won't allow it.’

Can you even imagine the difficulty, given that this is the state of things even with the tutorial fairies assisting?

The ‘Cheon-hwa’ I was playing, and the young ‘Yo-hwa’.

Just fixing these two characters and granting them each their own self-identity was a magical achievement in itself.

What about the other people? They all melted in the void poison.

For example, if you just look at the housekeepers who had rushed in moments ago to stop our sisterly argument.

– Y-y-y-y-y-young lady.

– They’resocutebothofthemsocuteIcouldjustgobblethemup.

– Sometimes I don't know who is who. So last night, I secretly peeled off the younger lady's fingernail. Now I will never confuse the young ladies again.

The housekeepers’ faces were melting like candle wax.

The wax was constantly alive and moving, at one moment forming into the shape of human eyeballs, only to melt again and stretch out their cheeks.

This wasn't something that started suddenly.

Earlier, when I was fighting with Yo-hwa over the chocolate ice cream, the housekeepers looked just like that.

It was just that Yo-hwa, without feeling any sense of wrongness, fought with her sister like a child.

'…In the end, my hypothesis that there's a hole in Yo-hwa's past was correct. That's why the closer you get to the past, the more this void unfolds.'

But if there was something I was curious about.

'Is it just Yo-hwa's past that is uniquely rusted by the void poison like this? Or are the other colleagues in the Regression Alliance the same…'

It was at that moment.

Thud!

A footstep so loud that it made the entire wooden hallway reverberate rang out.

At that, the housekeepers, who had been chattering like shadows until now, all straightened up at once and lined up in rows on both sides of the hallway.

The fairy trembled.

"Hoee. He's, he's here again!"

"…"

I twitched an eyebrow and unfolded my cross-legged position. Then I stood up and assumed a graceful posture.

Like the daughter of a prestigious family, without a single flaw.

Thud! Thump, Thuuud! Thud!

The footsteps grew closer.

Before long, Fairy No. 264 had vanished, leaving me, as ‘Cheon-hwa,’ alone at the end of the hallway.

I bowed my head.

Thuuud.

The source of the footsteps, which had stopped in front of me, cast a shadow.

– Oh! Cheon-hwa! My proud daughter!

I bowed my head even deeper.

“Yes. Sir Cult Leader.”

The master of this grand mansion.

A dictator of a large-scale Taoist pseudo-religious cult, the likes of which were hard to find in Korea.

Based on the circumstances, he was the main culprit who had worshiped two separate Outer Gods, Infinite Void and the Mastermind, and finally caused their descent into the mortal world.

More accurately, this was the form of the father as remembered by Yo-hwa, the owner of this dream, a manifestation of a child’s terror.

– Aigoo, Sir Cult Leader! If even you, Cheon-hwa, call me that, your father will be quite hurt.

“Yes. I understand, Father.”

– Ahem! You have come of age now, how long do you intend to appeal to mere blood ties instead of being the successor to the cult! Today, I must go to the discipline room and personally take up the rod!

“Yes. I apologize, Sir Cult Leader.”

The flow of his words was inconsistent and messy, but I was quite used to it.

‘This is how void beings are.’

In times like these, I couldn't let the other party take the lead in the conversation. No matter how bewildering it was, I had to respond with confidence.

“A little while ago, I was reading the scriptures with Yo-hwa. That child was misinterpreting them, so as her older sister, I scolded her a little. She should be reflecting on her actions well now.”

– …

Crackle, zzzzt.

The shadow cast on the hallway floor flickered and wavered, then stretched out as if it would reach the ceiling on the opposite side.

– Ooh, Yo-hwa did? Yes. That child has always been a bit slower than you.

– By whose authorityyyy! You two dare to touch the scriptures on your oooown!

– Did you review the part I taught you last time on your own? How praiseworthy. My daughter indeed. I am always so proud of you.

– It's contaminated. Contamination! It’s been contaminated! The sacrifices for the Taegeuk have been contaminated, they must be purified!

“…”

I didn't bother to reply.

A part of me was dumbfounded at what kind of memories were being planted in such a young child, but as a void expert, I calmly waited for the right timing.

– Yes, what passage were you studying?

I opened my mouth immediately. It was the question I had been waiting for.

“The name that can be named is not the eternal name[1]. It was the passage that says names do not exist for the things we ordinarily point to, and that a name is always nothing more than a temporary label.”

– …

“That is how Yo-hwa understood it. But I reminded her of how you, Cult Leader, bound our names together with the single pronunciation of Cheon-Yo-hwa, and pointed out that not only the names of things, but even her name, Yo-hwa, is also an illusion.”

Zzzzt. Zzzzzzzzt.

– Ooh.

“So Yo-hwa, belatedly feeling ashamed, said she should have looked back at herself before discussing other things, and she voluntarily asked for punishment as she reflected on her actions.”

– Excellent!

The paper screens lining the hallway trembled at the ‘father’ shadow’s resounding roar.

– Yes! Cheon-hwa. Your words are truly correct!

– In the end, the scriptures are a precious treasure only to those who accept them as their own story, and for those who dismiss them as merely the writings of others, they are nothing more than trash abandoned on the ground.

– My daughters. You two sisters were destined from birth to be able to accept our scriptures entirely as ‘your own story.’

– Ah! What a great blessing this is! Truly, the gods of heaven and earth are watching over us! The Tao models itself on what is natural.

Beyond their melting wax cheeks, the mouths of the housekeepers all moved in unison.

– The Tao models itself on what is natural.

– The one who will become our living sacrament, my daughter, the successor of the cult, and the salvation of the masses, is so wise, I am truly happy! Do not neglect your training for even a single day, my daughter!

“Yes. Sir Cult Leader.”

– Uahahahaha! Ha ha ha ha!

Thuuud. Thud, thump. Thump.

The footsteps and laughter grew distant. The housekeepers, as if it were only natural, followed behind the cult leader with uniform steps.

“…”

A past from a time before the button for world destruction had been pushed.

Beyond the walls of the vast mansion, modern people were likely living their daily lives as if nothing was wrong, but the Cheon Yo-hwa sisters were already living in a broken miniature garden back then.

‘Does this mean that someday, I, as a private tutor, will come here to teach the sisters?’

There was plenty of time.

With the help of the tutorial fairy, I could stretch the time within the dream as much as I wanted.

‘At first, I entered for the simple purpose of treating Yo-hwa’s psychology… But if I’m lucky, I might find a clue to the past.’

That wasn't all.

Step, step, step.

There was one more set of footsteps following the procession of the pseudo-religious cult leader and his followers.

A particularly small and quiet footfall. Unlike a resident of the void, it maintained a constant velocity, and within it, held vitality and a sense of presence.

I suddenly raised my head and our eyes met.

“…”

“…”

Nod. Nod.

Without either being first or last, we bowed our heads silently. The other person maintained a faint smile and walked away with casual steps.

An endlessly familiar sound of footsteps.

Watching the all-too-familiar back, I muttered inwardly.

‘Go Yuri.’

In this grand mansion where every character except for the twin sisters was infected with void poison and shimmered with noise, she was the only third party maintaining her own form.

My low monologue flowed into the hallway where I was left all alone.

“…Why on earth are you here, at this time, in this place?”

Footnotes:

1 - The opening line of the Tao Te Ching, a fundamental text in Taoism.

Chapter 398

The Bereaved VI

Sinnoa

Why was Go Yuri here? It was a question that not even I could answer, and neither could the fairies acting as the server administrators for this 'dream' world.

"Hoek, we apologize, Comrade Secretary-General."

"We were only trying to recreate the past as closely as we could, using Codename Yo-hwa's data and the settings you provided...!"

"But we can change the data and erase her existence, right? Should we activate your inherited authority, 'Existence Erasure,' Comrade Secretary-General?"

I just shook my head.

"No, there's no need for that. In fact, you must never do that. Our goal isn't to warp Yo-hwa's past, but to restore it to be as historically accurate as possible. We might have to tolerate minor distortions if they're unavoidable, but we must not intentionally corrupt the timeline. Remember that."

"Hoek, we understand."

The fairies saluted in unison.

"But, we're getting this funny feeling that not only your appearance but your speech is becoming more and more like Codename 'Cheon-hwa,' Comrade Secretary-General. Personally, we think it has a cute charm."

"..."

"The fervent support of the people. With this, our Red Empire can endure for another two hundred years."

I confiscated their sausages.

The fairies burst into tears, wailing "Hoe-eeeng," but I paid them no mind and began to carefully explore the mansion.

'The tutorial fairies are ultimately outsiders, so it's no surprise they know nothing about Go Yuri.'

'That means my only option is to ask the insiders, the members of this cult.'

More importantly, in this world, I was the cult's most treasured child, one of the successors handpicked to become a god for the next generation. My young age placed many restrictions on my actions, but something as simple as contacting the members to gather information should have been easy.

However.

– Shh, Young Miss.

– You mustn't talk about that woman.

Even the shadow-like cult members, who wandered the grand mansion like phantoms, offered contradictory statements about Go Yuri.

– Oh dear. This will surely sadden you, Young Miss...

– She is someone cherished by our Leader.

– Pardon? What are you saying, Young Miss? No such person exists here in the Holy Temple.

– Young Miss... you ask such a strange question.

– She is your new stepmother, isn't she?

"..."

The testimonies were all over the place.

One member said Go Yuri was the leader's lover. Another denied

her existence entirely. Someone else claimed she was the woman the leader remarried after his wife's death.

It wasn't a case of one of them lying through their teeth, as I certainly have the sharp judgment needed to tell an act from the truth.

Every single one of them was being sincere.

It was as if…

'...as if even the information surrounding Go Yuri had become tangled in a mess of spacetime.'

I was completely disoriented.

A typical void was already an abyss beyond human comprehension, but with Go Yuri now in the mix, it was driving me to the brink of insanity.

I decided to visit my younger sister, who was the only person in this dream-like void, or rather the second if you included me, to have retained her 'identity'.

"Yo-hwa."

"Hmph. I hate you, unni. I hate you. Go away."

"Here's some chocolate ice cream."

"I love you, unni. Please live forever."

I casually posed a question to my dear sister, the great philosopher Madam Yo-hwa, who had just placed a scoop of chocolate ice cream right on the line between life and death.

"That very pretty unni who's always with Father," I began.

"Hmm? You mean Teacher?"

"..."

A shiver went down my spine.

'Teacher'.

So this is where that title originated.

"...My apologies, Yo-hwa. Your unni has had a lot on her mind lately, and my memory is a bit hazy. Could you remind me what we've been studying with our... 'Teacher', and since when?"

"The scriptures. The Tao Te Ching," Yo-hwa answered with a bright smile.

"I like Teacher. She explains the scriptures in a way that's much easier to understand than the other adults, and she never gets mad."

"Really...?"

"Yup. But you're acting strange, unni. You like Teacher a whole lot too, don't you? So why are you asking me this all of a sudden? ...Gasp. Oh, I get it. You're trying to drive a ledge between me and Teacher, aren't you? Aren't you?"

"The expression is 'drive a wedge,' not whatever you just said."

"It's the same thing. You're silly, unni."

"It seems my little Yo-hwa holds some very different opinions from the National Language Institute."

"Huh? The Na-National... what now?"

"They're the absolute arbiters of the Korean language, the ones who decide we should use awkward official terms instead of the words everyone actually uses."

"Eh. I-I don't get it..."

Yo-hwa's lip quivered and her eyebrows drooped.

'Ah. How cute.'

Without thinking, my hand reached out and started patting Yo-hwa's adorable head.

"Ungh..."

Yo-hwa narrowed her eyes. Her gaze flickered between my face and her own hand (equipped with chocolate ice cream).

Then, with a look that said, 'Ah, whatever,' she cheerfully resumed eating her ice cream quietly permitting my head-patting attack.

'So cute.'

Howcouldmylittlesisterbesoadorableandlovableandnaiveandfoolisheventhou

'—Wait.'

I snapped back to reality with a jolt.

'This is bad. I've been so focused on acting as Cheon-hwa, empathizing with her so much, that my own way of thinking is starting to become identical to hers.'

A chill crept over me.

The void, as expected. It was a treacherous place where even a seasoned expert like myself could lose their identity in a single, careless moment.

Well, of course, I still had my final failsafe, the [Complete Memory] ability, holding strong. Even if I were to completely lose my sense of self, as long as my vast memories as the Undertaker remained, I would always be able to find my way back.

Complete Memory really is an overpowered cheat, isn't it. I'm quite jealous that my predecessor got to enjoy such a great skill all by himself.

"Unni," Yo-hwa said, "there's something strange about this ice cream."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Well, the outside is chocolate, which I like, but the inside is green. And it tastes like toothpaste. Are you sure this is real chocolate ice

cream?"

"Of course it is. All the really fancy chocolate ice creams are green on the inside these days. It's proof that they use organic, all-natural chocolate. That slightly cool, fresh taste just means it's extra healthy for you."

"Wow, really?"

"I heard that only the most refined ladies can appreciate the profound depth of such a luxurious sweetness. Haa, to be honest, it's still a little overwhelming for me. What about you, my dear Yo-hwa?"

"It's... it's super delicious!"

"Is that right? Well then, from now on, you should only eat this kind of chocolate ice cream."

"Ack."

Just as I was busy cementing this precious memory of our warm, sisterly affection...

Knock. Knock. Knock.

A sound came from the door.

I shot my sister a look, and she hurriedly swallowed the rest of the ice cream, destroying the evidence.

In this cult-like household, the family customs were so strict that we weren't even allowed to have dessert without permission.

"Who is it?" I called out, buying my sister a few more seconds.

But when I heard the voice that replied from the other side of the door, my heart gave a small jolt.

"It is I, Young Misses."

It was the voice of Go Yuri.

"Class is about to begin. Miss Cheon-hwa, Miss Yo-hwa, would it be alright if I came in?"

"..."

I didn't have to think for long.

"Oh, please, come in, Teacher."

After all, hadn't my sister just testified to this very fact? That I, 'Cheon-hwa', was very fond of my private tutor.

So, no matter how unsettling I personally found Go Yuri to be... I couldn't afford to act in a way that contradicted the established rules of this reality.

If the anomalies here detected that I was an entity even slightly out of place in this Void, they would immediately move to eliminate the foreign intruder.

'If my goal were simply to eliminate them, that wouldn't be an issue.'

But my objective in this void wasn't extermination or eradication.

It was the restoration of the past, and nothing else.

My task was akin to using a specialized recovery program to restore files that had been moved to the trash and permanently deleted from a computer long ago.

Therefore, my reaction as 'Cheon-hwa' the moment the door creaked open was already set in stone.

"Yay. It's Teacher."

"Haha."

Go Yuri offered a gentle smile in response to my broad, perhaps overly enthusiastic, welcome.

"Have you been well, Miss Cheon-hwa?"

"Yes. Wow, Teacher, how do you manage to look prettier every time I see you? And you smell so wonderful. I'm envious, Teacher."

"Thank you for the kind words. But you are the beautiful one, Miss Cheon-hwa. My appearance is just the result of some effort, whereas you, once you're a bit older, will surely cause people to marvel at your beauty wherever you go."

Go Yuri tilted her head, her gaze drifting past my shoulder.

"And how are you, Miss Yo-hwa?"

"Ah, y-yes. Hello, Teacher."

"Oh, my."

Go Yuri walked over and stopped directly in front of Yo-hwa. *Hiccup*. Yo-hwa was clearly tense.

A white handkerchief emerged smoothly from Go Yuri's pocket. An apple fragrance, seemingly woven into the fabric, instantly permeated the room.

Twirl. Press.

With a quiet grace, Go Yuri knelt down and gently wiped the corners of Yo-hwa's mouth. There had been a faint trace of chocolate on her lips.

"Ah, ahh, uhh..."

Smile.

Yo-hwa stammered, flustered, but Go Yuri simply put her handkerchief away and turned back to me, her expression giving no indication that she had seen anything unusual.

"Shall we continue our lesson on the scriptures from where we left off, my young ladies?"

"Yes, yes."

As I heard Yo-hwa's enthusiastic reply and offered a cheerful one of my own, a corner of my mind became chillingly clear.

I had sensed it faintly when we passed in the corridor earlier, but now I was absolutely sure.

"..."

Go Yuri.

She didn't recognize 'me'.

Let's rewind a bit, to a time not so long ago.

This was before I transformed into the young lady of a distinguished family, before I even entered Yo-hwa's dream.

It concerns a strange phenomenon that began occurring sometime after the 1,000th cycle.

"Hyung-nim."

"Oh? What's up, Seo Gyu? It's rare for you to seek me out."

"I felt it was best that I report this to you directly."

SG Net. The Library Society's Bulletin Board.

It was supposed to be an encyclopedic forum, a place for Awakeners to find and share strategies.

The constellation managing it, [The Librarian of the Great Library], was a completely fabricated persona, and the entire board was meant to be an artificial construct, but—

"It's this, Hyung. This post right here."

"Oh?"

"The person you warned me about so many times... the one you called the 'pink entity' or something. I think this information is about her."

For some time now, information that I myself had never seen or heard before had begun to flow backward, appearing on the [Library Society's Bulletin Board].

"What?"

"Look. Starting from this passage."

Most of it, no, 99.99% of it, was just useless drivel. It was mostly childish roleplaying about this marquess or that baron.

But among them all, one post.

There was a single post that was far too meaningful to be dismissed as a simple lie.

" 『At first glance, it may seem like an anomaly that brainwashes its target, but that is not the case. The brainwashing is merely a consequential result. In truth, 'it' works by reading the target's innermost thoughts and subconscious, then automatically articulating the very words that person most desires to hear.』 "

"..."

" 『Ability Name: Absolute Strategy. Auto-Hunt. Genuine communication with 'it' is virtually impossible. However, if you can consciously alter your own inner state, it is possible to adjust the parameters of the conversation.』 "

"..."

"It's a little different from your explanation, Hyung, but it's very similar, isn't it?"

This was a post containing information about Go Yuri.

Information that I couldn't have obtained no matter the cost, even if I had sacrificed dozens of regressions for it, was now available for free on the [Library Society's Bulletin Board] of all places.

"No, that's impossible."

Naturally, I denied it at first.

"Any posts on here that aren't written by us, but are automatically generated by some anomaly... they're all set to private, aren't they?"

"They are."

"That means only members of our Regression Alliance can read this post. So this entity secretly passed on information about Go Yuri for our benefit... It's impossible."

Seo Gyu blinked.

"Then what is this, Hyung?"

"It's just an anomaly imitating the infinite monkey theorem."

"The what?"

"The theory that if you give a monkey a typewriter and an infinite amount of time, it will eventually type out the complete works of Shakespeare."

"Ohh..."

"This is just a coincidence. A coincidence. Some random anomaly that took up residence on the board has been spouting nonsense for so long that it accidentally produced a post that resembles information about Go Yuri."

Swoosh.

I took the phone from Seo Gyu and scrolled to the bottom of the post.

"It's nothing more than an elaborate piece of fake ne—"

And then I saw them.

S U

The initials carved at the very end of the post.

"..."

A simple two-letter signature, left without any warning or preamble.

And I had just found it.

"..."

"Hyung? What's wrong?"

SU.

It was a last will and testament. A code.

A secret that, in this entire world, was known only to me.

If you don't recall, a long time ago, Oh Dok-seo and I had a conversation. She told me about the prologue of a novel he'd read before the Void's advent, [Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint].

– That's him. The prologue. The fake protagonist.

– ORV, I mean, ORV. The [Omniscient Regressor's Viewpoint] I read before the void's arrival. The prologue has the exact same story.

Hearing Oh Dok-seo's words, the past me had asked.

– Then does that novel also say why his head suddenly exploded?

– Of course. He's a real prophet.

The Prophet.

The ill-fated fake protagonist who possessed the ability to glimpse the future of this world. Because of that power, he saw far too much, and his head exploded the very instant he awakened it.

There were six such prophets in the world, and every single one met the same fate.

One of them, the prophet who awakened in Japan known only as 'Y', also died instantly.

But right before his death, Y used the last of his strength to scrawl a dying message on the ground.

S U

Those were the prophet's final words.

His first and last prophecy.

And.

'...it's a secret I have never told another soul.'

In other words.

'This document... is authentic.'

I didn't know how or why. The cause was unknowable.

But somehow, an 'Undertaker' from a different regression had used a secret code that only the Undertaker could know to deliver this information about Go Yuri to me.

A message sent, perhaps, at the cost of his own memories.

"Seo Gyu. Delete this post."

"What? Oh, right."

"And don't you ever mention this to anyone. Don't even let on that you saw it. Understand?"

"...Yes, Hyung. I will."

That's right.

Since that day, I have been armed. I possessed a small weapon, a sliver of information as sharp as a dagger, that I could use against Go Yuri's [Perception Distortion] and [Brainwashing].

Even now, as I infiltrated Yo-hwa's dream.

Even now, as she appeared in this cult's mansion as the private

'teacher' of the twin sisters.

Even in this moment, as I watched Go Yuri read from the Tao Te Ching across the desk.

'I will not be played by you any longer.'

That dagger was in my hand.

Behind Cheon-hwa's bright, eye-crinkling smile, my own dark gaze remained steady.

'I will expose what you truly are, Go Yuri.'

Footnotes:

Chapter 399

The Bereaved VII

Sinnoa

A Heart-pounding ☆ Private Tutoring session with Teacher Go Yuri!

A scenario straight out of an old dating sim had become my reality. And my heart, both its left and right ventricles, were genuinely pounding in response.

And so, after spending thirty minutes reading scriptures with Go Yuri, feeling like a spy who had infiltrated the heart of an enemy nation's intelligence agency, the result was in.

‘What is this?’

I was bewildered.

‘This is... a remarkably normal lesson, isn't it?’

Ah, the reason my inner monologue was so formal was that I was doing my absolute best to emotionally immerse myself in the character of 'Cheon-hwa', a young Miss from a prestigious family.

Putting aside my soul-baring method acting, Go Yuri's private lesson was... truly 'normal'.

My fears about what sort of bizarre heresies she would try to brainwash into the soft, developing minds of the twin sisters were proving to be entirely unfounded.

“Therefore, Miss Cheon-hwa.”

“Yes?”

“Just because your own name feels empty and void, there is no need to forcibly empty out your own identity as well.”

"…"

"Parents hold absolute power over a child. But you, Miss Cheon-hwa, are a wise person. You not only know how to think for yourself but can also take responsibility for your actions, so you are already no different from a respectable adult."

"Is that… so? Teacher?"

"Yes!"

Go Yuri beamed.

"Honestly, I've never met someone your age who is as brilliant as you are, Miss Yo-hwa. I believe you have more than enough reason to be proud of yourself. Ah. Of course."

Shhh, Go Yuri playfully crossed her index finger over her smiling lips.

"It would be troublesome if the leader were to find out just how clever you are."

"…"

"Freedom is power. It is a natural right given to all humans from the very beginning. So, until you have gained sufficient power, Miss Cheon-hwa, I would be grateful, though I'm sorry to ask, if you would keep that freedom suppressed."

Go Yuri's advice.

The private tutor's counsel was utterly appropriate.

I forced the facial muscles of Cheon-hwa to move. Without betraying any of that forced effort, I managed to shape it into a natural smile.

"Thank you, Teacher. I will keep that in mind."

'This isn't brainwashing.'

My thoughts proceeded on two separate tracks.

While my face and my tongue were wholly engaged with the 'Teacher' before me, the angle of my thoughts continued to delve deeper inward.

“However, this mansion is no different from my father's fortress. The helpers, too, only appear to be maids on the surface, but in reality, they are followers more ardent than anyone. In a place like this, how can a mere young girl like me possibly build up any strength?”

“Oh my. But I’m here, am I not! My Miss!”

‘If it's not brainwashing. This feels almost like…’

It seemed to be the exact opposite, as if she were trying to liberate the twin sisters, Cheon-hwa and Yo-hwa, from the chains of this pseudo-religious cult.

“Are you saying you will be on my side, Teacher?”

“Yes, haha. With such adorable girls like you, and as twin sisters no less. As a responsible adult, how could I possibly not help?”

“…”

I turned my head slightly.

“Nyaa…. Unni, I don’t like green chocolate….”

Beside me, my lovely sister, Yo-hwa, was drooling on my arm as she dozed off.

It couldn’t be helped. How many children at that age could genuinely focus while reading the Tao Te Ching together?

After stroking my sister's soft hair once, I turned my gaze back.

“Teacher. I have also heard many rumors about you.”

“Oh my. What kind of rumors are you referring to?”

“That you are a self-made woman who, despite being an Oechul, captivated Father’s heart in an instant and rose to the very cusp of an executive position.”

Oechul. Naechul.

These were slang terms used only within this time-honored pseudo-religious cult. Followers who were born into the cult and raised for generations were called Naechul, while those who had just recently joined were referred to as Oechul.

The cult's history dated back to the time of the Imjin War. I didn't know if it was fact or propaganda, but there was even an executive who had supposedly served the cult for twelve generations.

Perverts existed in this world. They possessed a disposition to value the times they had not lived in more than the times they had.

And into this fortress of time, built by such perverts, an Oechul had unexpectedly seeped in.

The being before me was clearly strange.

Just as it had always been.

“Is it your intention to steal the cult’s power and wealth by stealing my father's heart?”

“Oh, my my.”

“And by securing the trust of me, the successor, you plan to enjoy power for the next half-century?”

“Ahaha.”

It wouldn't be strange for her to falter at least a little when faced with such sharp animosity.

But Go Yuri’s lips, on the contrary, softened.

“Power. Authority. Ahh, what sweet words those are.”

“…?”

“Never mind half a century, it would be quite nice if it could be maintained for even twenty years, hmm, or maybe even ten years.”

“…”

A chill shot straight up my spine.

‘She knows.’

At this time. At this very moment.

At a point in time when modern civilization so casually holds firm its love and trust in the laws of physics, the being before me already knew.

‘This being knows that the world is going to end. She knows. Already.’

How?

‘Is she really the main culprit behind the arrival of the void? A prophetic ability? No. If she were a prophet, why is only Go Yuri's mind intact?’

‘Let's assume she knows the future. Then every single second of this present time would be incredibly precious. Just look at me! Just look at Old Man Scho. Haven't we lamented countless times how wonderful it would have been if we could have regressed just a little bit earlier before the arrival of the void!’

‘A time limit precious as gold.’

‘Why is she investing such time in something like giving private lessons to the twin sisters of a pseudo-religious cult? Why?’

“Oh my.”

Steadily.

Go Yuri’s eyes half-opened and stared directly at me.

“Why do you look so flustered? My Miss?”

“…”

“I believe I said something quite ordinary.”

The clockwork of my thoughts accelerated desperately.

I removed the grime from between the gears that I, as the ‘Undertaker’, had created. I eliminated the noise.

The oil of acting was hastily injected, and the cogs that made up the current marionette, the one named ‘Cheon-hwa’, began to creak and turn.

“What do you mean, an ordinary story?”

I acted, with the resolve to deceive not just humans but even gods.

“Just now, Teacher, it was as if you declared it. That our family’s glory, our cult's future, will last for 10 years at most.”

“Aha?”

“Of course, I dislike my father. But that absolutely does not mean I hate everyone who has come under the protection of our cult.”

“Hmm.”

Go Yuri’s eyes narrowed.

“—Certainly. Yes. From your position, my Miss, it could have sounded that way. I'm sorry! I spoke too carelessly.”

“…”

“When you become an adult, you sometimes pick up a habit of pretending to know things. For me to do that in front of someone as smart as you, my Miss. I am truly lacking. Will you forgive me?”

“…Yes.”

“Thank you. I always feel nothing but sorry towards you, my Miss.”

Bzzt, the smartphone buzzed for a moment.

It was Go Yuri's phone. As if she had known a message would arrive at this exact moment, she picked up the smartphone with a casual motion and looked down at it.

Glance.

"Hmm, oh dear. It seems it's already that time."

Go Yuri clapped her hands together.

Clap!

"Hwek?!"

At that, Yo-hwa, who had been in a deep slumber, shot her eyes open. Go Yuri smiled gently and took out a handkerchief.

With a different handkerchief from the one she used to wipe the chocolate from Yo-hwa's mouth before the lesson, she gently dabbed at the drool marks.

"Heup. Ah, aht, aht…."

"Well then, shall we review the last passage from the Tao Te Ching we studied today?"

Go Yuri whispered.

"The Way follows what is natural. How about it? It's a familiar phrase, isn't it? It's the one our Reverend recites the most, after all."

"Yes, yees! Teacher."

"All things in the world are imitations. Ah, saying it like that might get it confused with Plato, so…. it might be better to call them 'incomplete works'."

Nod-nod, Go Yuri bobbed her head.

Yo-hwa, with a face that knew nothing of the world, mimicked the teacher's gesture.

“Why are they incomplete works? Because the very act of humans giving names to things is imperfect.”

“…”

“Man follows the Earth. Humans are imperfectly given their names from the environment of the current era. You are a student. You are the child of certain parents…. The Earth follows Heaven. The environment of the current era reflects a fragment of the flow of all ages, of destiny. And Heaven follows the Way. Even destiny itself stems from a single path.”

“…The Way follows what is natural.”

“Yes. Only the path itself proceeds as a path, without relying on anything.”

Go Yuri let out a small laugh.

“Your father, my ladies, seems to believe that by casting away his name, he can become one with that path completely…. but I, I interpret that passage in the opposite way.”

“The opposite?”

“Even a single path ultimately culminates in a single person. If that is the case, then I ask you, for what reason can a single person not change that path?”

“…”

The Tao. The Path.

The Route.

As ‘Cheon-hwa’, I tilted my head as if I half-understood, but as the ‘Undertaker’, I was thrilled.

Go Yuri. Why, and how she had infiltrated this place, this pseudo-religious cult, I could not know.

But I was certain of one thing.

This mansion was an indispensable stepping stone in the ‘Route’ she had drawn in her mind.

“There is only one way to reach that point. It is to become a human as vast as the path of nature, as vast as the universe.”

Slide.

Go Yuri stood up.

“To put it another way, perhaps the Way follows Man. Man-as-is, and at the same time, destiny? Ahaha. Really, it's a problem how much I like this kind of old-fashioned way of speaking.”

“…”

“Well then, I will see you again next time. Miss Cheon-hwa, Miss Yo-hwa.”

Yo-hwa shot up to her feet and bowed her head deeply.

“Uung! Teacher! Goodbye!”

“…Goodbye. Teacher.”

I, too, went to the doorway to see the teacher off and bowed my head.

Step, step, step.

The sound of Go Yuri’s footsteps grew distant.

Down the long wooden hallway, befitting a grand mansion, the weight of Go Yuri’s presence grew fainter and fainter.

‘Is it finally over?’

The me inside heaved a sigh of relief.

Since I was still bowing my head to see the private tutor off, there was comparatively less need to pour my mental energy into maintaining my expression.

‘Still, the guide on SG Net was a huge help. By empathizing with Cheon-hwa's ego, with someone else’s ego, I was really able to deal with Go Yuri normally. Yes. Just proving this fact makes this cycle an unparalleled success…’

“Oh, by the way.”

Thud.

The footsteps stopped.

Her gaze latched onto the crown of my head.

I could feel it.

Even though she had already left the room, even though she had walked down the hallway, I could feel Go Yuri's eyes looking ‘this way’.

The gaze of her smiling eyes.

“Come to think of it, you haven't called me by my name even once today, Miss Cheon-hwa.”

“…”

“You used to say it so affectionately every day, so it feels a little empty now that you've suddenly stopped. Hehe. The title 'Teacher' is nice too, of course. But I really, really love the sound of your voice saying my name, Miss Cheon-hwa.”

“…”

“My name.”

Whisper.

“Could you say it for me just once?”

My heart pounded.

‘I’m under suspicion.’

Countless answers formed routes and branching points in my mind, only to be blocked. Go Yuri? Wrong answer. ■■■? Wrong answer.

Because.

“Pardon?”

I lifted the head I had kept bowed for so long. And, just like Cheon-hwa would, I smiled sweetly and tilted my head.

“I’m sorry, Teacher! I think you just said something. What was it you said?”

“…”

The correct answer was, ‘I couldn’t hear you’.

I wasn't suddenly acting out a hard-of-hearing character. As I said, Go Yuri had walked a fair distance from the room down the hallway.

And just a moment ago, Go Yuri had 'whispered' in an endlessly low voice.

There was no way I could have heard it.

A voice whispered by someone from that far away.

It would be impossible for the childhood 'Cheon-hwa', who had yet to awaken any aura or anything of the sort, to have heard it clearly.

“Ah. It’s nothing.”

Wave!

Go Yuri waved her left arm back and forth and said in a slightly louder voice.

“It’s nothing at all! My Miss! Well then, I’ll see you again next week-!”

“Yes! Teacher! Goodbye!”

Only then did Go Yuri's back completely disappear around the corner of the hallway.

I lowered the hand I had been waving back.

'…If I had panicked just now and answered rashly.'

What would have happened, I wonder.

"…"

I didn't even want to think about it.

Ignoring the maids, the shadow aberrations that began to roam the hallway again, I went back into the room and hugged Yo-hwa tightly.

"Woong? Unni?"

"…"

"What's wrong, Unni?"

Yo-hwa reached out her small hand and stroked my head. It should have been the exact same size as my own palm, and yet, why did it feel so small?

I murmured.

"I'll protect you, Yo-hwa."

"Huh?"

"From Father. From the cultists. From the inscrutable Oechul. Even if the world becomes strange. No matter what, your big sister will protect you."

"…"

Please, hurry and come, Sunbae (—me—).

To the 'me' (Cheon-hwa) right now, this world is far too vast, and far too dark.

Footnotes:

1 - Near the end of her lesson, Go Yuri makes a pun. She suggests a new interpretation of the Taoist principles, `도법인연 (道法人然)`, which phonetically sounds like "The Way follows Man." This is a play on the common word `인연 (因緣)`, which has the same pronunciation (In-yeon) and means "karma," "destiny," or "connection." She is essentially saying the path of destiny is ultimately shaped by individual people.

Chapter 400

The Bereaved VIII

Sinnoa

Let’s skip the pleasantries.

Hello, everyone. How have you all been?

I’m not quite sure who I’m speaking to right now. Which makes sense, because my own existence has become rather vague and ambiguous these days.

I was Infinite Void, then the Mastermind's miko, then Cheon Yo-hwa, then the Undertaker, and then Cheon-hwa again.

This level of identity confusion is practically a grand festival.

They say that if you take something too far, it becomes a work of art. If that’s true, then the current 'me' must have far surpassed Leonardo da Vinci.

The world is just a jumbled mess of anomalies and void anyway.

Keeping in step with the trend that will sweep the globe in just a few years, I, Cheon-hwa, have simply embodied the spirit of an early adopter.

But the world has a nature that seeks balance.

If someone is fast, then someone else must be slow.

That is the way of the world.

Therefore, even I, who has become a complete mess of identity confusion, can confidently declare this one thing.

“That son of a bitch, my sunbae, is taking his goddamn sweet time, ah, fuck.”

“Unni…?”

The rest has been omitted.

It has been five years since I entered this dream.

And still, that sunbae of mine, the Undertaker, has not shown even a single strand of his hair at the grand mansion of the pseudo-religious cult.

On the veranda of the mansion’s annex.

I stared up at the sky, which was sharply cut off by the line of the eaves, and muttered forlornly.

“You’re late, Sunbae… Will I turn into an anomaly at this rate?”

Yo-hwa, who was doing push-ups beside me, turned only her head to speak.

“You know what? Sometimes, unni, you seem like a moron.”

“Oh my. My dearest sister. If I am a moron, then due to the genetic similarities between twins, you would inevitably be registered as a moron too, so why would you spit towards the sky?”

“Ah, sorry. I misspoke. You always seem like a moron, Unni.”

“This can’t be.”

I was slightly shocked.

Where on earth did the child who, just a few years ago, would cry and whine, ‘I don’t want the chocolate ice cream unni brought me! I don’t want it! I’m not eating any more!’ disappear to?

“Well, whose fault do you think it is, huh? It’s the fault of the person who fed me mint ice cream for over half a year while calling it chocolate ice cream, isn’t it?”

“This is all father’s fault.”

I said gloomily.

“He said that as the daughter of a prestigious family and the successor to the cult, we must never forget our dignity and etiquette, and from the moment he forced us to use formal language with each other, your life was already over, little sister. How sad.”

“You use the same formal tone, unni! Yo!”

“I cannot forgive him, father. For the sake of my sister’s normalization, I must perform my filial duty as soon as possible.”

“...When I get married, I’m never having children. Leaving behind that kind of DNA for future generations would be a sin against humanity.”

Well.

Although I have been completely colored by the persona of ‘Cheon-hwa’ in this manner, from my appearance to my inner self, a corner of my mind still remembers the existence of the ‘Undertaker’.

A while ago.

I had a conversation like this with a Tutorial Fairy.

“Hoeee, Comrade Secretary General… We are continuing to extend the time in the dream as you commanded, but it’s starting to get dangerous.”

“What exactly is dangerous about it?”

“Hoek. The only way to increase the time you reside in a dream is to dream again within that dream. You are already at the fourth level, Comrade Secretary General… You are in a dream within a dream within a dream within a dream.”

“A dream within a dream. I see. So you’re saying I’m falling deeper into the world of unconsciousness where the pink entity wanders.”

“An accurate diagnosis, hoeee!”

The fan in my hand snapped shut and gently tapped the tip of my chin.

“It doesn’t matter. Proceed.”

“Hoeek?! I-Is that really okay?!”

“Yes. The world of unconsciousness has seven levels, after all.”

I smiled sweetly.

“We only need to hold out for three more years at most, and a new ‘tutor’ will arrive. Our objective is to endure until then. There’s no need to wait any longer than necessary.”

“Hoeee, if it’s only about three years, we can certainly finish within the fifth level, but…”

I had other calculations as well.

I didn't tell the fairies, but I secretly wanted to get closer to Go Yuri.

‘This is Yo-hwa’s dream. But from the moment Go Yuri appeared, it was no longer just Yo-hwa’s dream.’

The ‘data’ that constitutes this dream.

I had a suspicion, no, a certainty, that this data might have flowed in from Go Yuri’s side.

‘Data that I could never obtain on my own.’

I would use Go Yuri to ‘restore memories.’

To look into not only Yo-hwa’s memories, but Go Yuri’s as well.

It was a truly dangerous plan.

‘In the past, I would never have attempted such an operation, but… now that I've learned how to handle Go Yuri to some extent through the fortunate encounters on SG Net.’

It was a challenge well worth taking.

“Are you really okay, hoe?”

The fairy looked at me with worried, sparkling eyes.

“Comrade Secretary-General. It's not just your appearance, you've really changed a lot.”

“Hmm.”

“Originally, one’s ego is supposed to melt away limply in a dream, da-yeo. The very fact that you’ve endured this much proves your iron will, Comrade Secretary General, but I am still worried!”

Nod.

“It’s fine. I have my memories.”

“Hoeee.”

“Rather than worrying about me, all of you fairies should focus your entire effort on maintaining Yo-hwa’s identity.”

“Hieeek! W-We are already allocating sixty percent of our power to that! Are you saying we should reduce the Comrade Secretary General’s ratio even further from here?!”

“Yes.”

My eyes narrowed unconsciously.

“Discovering the pink entity by chance made the situation interesting, but we must not forget our original purpose.”

“…”

“Yo-hwa. Our objective is to plant the ‘memories with her sister’ into my younger sister’s unconscious, to repair, even if just a little, the abyss-like hole that has been bored through her.”

On the other hand, it doesn't matter if ‘I’ lose a bit of myself.

As mentioned, I have the [Complete Memory] ability, and……. Once I eventually wake up from this dream, I will return to my

original self anyway.

“B-But…”

“Do it. That is an order from the Secretary General.”

“Hiiik! Y-Yes, I understand!”

The fairies scattered in a hurry.

“…”

I quietly closed one eye and looked up at the sky.

No one in this dream world had noticed, but that sky has looked exactly the same for the past four years.

The color tone of the sky. The shape of the clouds. The intensity of the light.

The fairies had been erasing, one by one, the resources they deemed unnecessary for implementing this world.

‘That’s right. In the end, it’s just like the days I spent with Yo-hwa when we were hunting Infinite Void.’

Back then, too, the world grew progressively smaller, eventually shrinking to the size of the student council room at Baekhwa Girls' High.

‘Back then, I was trying to kill Infinite Void one way or another. Now, I’m trying so hard to restore Infinite Void. …No, not Infinite Void, but Cheon-hwa.’

The affairs of life are just so cunning.

Unlike the unchanging sky, time continued to flow unpredictably.

“Hoe. Comrade Secretary General. We can no longer match the time even with the fourth level… I am ashamed to say it, but we will have to proceed to the fifth level!”

“Go ahead.”

“However, the synchronization rate between you and the young lady here is unusual. A somewhat strange incident might occur…”

Tilt.

“A strange incident?”

“This is a first for us as well, so we cannot be certain, hoee! But we believe without a doubt that you, Comrade Secretary General, will overcome any difficulty without panicking!”

The nature of the ‘strange incident’ was soon revealed.

“…?”

Immediately after entering the dream within the dream, surrounded by fairies as usual, I opened my eyes to a world that was strangely silent.

“Fairies?”

Silence.

The dream demons, who would always cling to me to the point of annoyance, crying ‘hoeeng hoeng’ whenever they had the chance, were nowhere to be seen.

“Fairy number 264?”

No reply.

“…”

Indeed.

The one who commands the Tutorial Fairies and wields absolute authority in the dream is—— the ‘Undertaker’, after all, not the young ‘Cheon-hwa’ I am now.

“Does this mean that from now on, I am the only one who remembers the real world.”

“Unni? What are you doing over there?”

I turned to face the direction the voice came from.

Yo-hwa. My one and only sister was the sole source of vibrant presence in the void of this dream-within-a-dream, where only shadows roamed.

I can see the ‘aliveness’ in my sister’s eyes as she tilts her head and looks at her unni. Yup.

“Then I suppose it doesn’t matter.”

“…Ah. It’s monologue time again, isn’t it? Sorry. Forgive me for interrupting your precious life as a chuunibyou patient. I’ll just be over here doing my strength training.”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d stop the habit of subtly dropping the formal speech and using informal language.”

“I don’t want to. You should try it later, Unni. It’s fun.”

“Really? Then I’ll try. You’ve finished reading the scriptures, right? You can’t forget that father plans to personally quiz you on passages from the scriptures next week.”

“I love you, Unni! Please pretend to be me and take the test in my place this time, too! I’m off to exercise for a life of slow aging! Bye! Love you!”

“…”

What a naughty little sister.

Where has the sister who used to be so lovely gone? I feel like I should file a claim for damages against the universe.

Regardless of my grumbling, time flowed on.

Around this time it was becoming difficult to access the memories of the ‘Undertaker’ without conscious effort.

“Hah. Take a look at this, Yo-hwa.”

“Yes?”

“An interesting article has come out.”

Tap, tap.

My father flicked the newspaper with his finger.

My goodness, a ‘newspaper’. These days, even the elderly are enjoying a second life as smartphone addicts, father.

As expected, I must perform the traditional filial piety that has been passed down on the Korean peninsula since the Goryeo dynasty as soon as possible.

“This time, only one person got a perfect score on the CSAT. And the interview is quite amusing.”

“…?”

I leaned in, wondering how interesting an interview with a perfect scorer could possibly be.

———————————

Q. What is your religion?

A. “Taoism. My friends always look at me strangely when I say I believe in Taoism, but I really do believe in it. It’s deeply connected with self-discipline and cultivating the mind.”

———————————

“…”

“What do you think? Yo-hwa?”

My father wore a pleased expression.

“Your sister is always worrying that Taoism lacks expandability, but look. Even a student from another region, not one of our cult’s Naechul, says they believe in Taoism on their own!”

It seemed my father was subtly demanding recognition for his discerning eye.

Well. The fact that he believed I was his younger sister ‘Yo-hwa’ just because I, his older daughter, put on a little disguise, already proved that my father’s eye sockets had a pretty high compatibility rate with knotholes.

“Heeeh. That really is amazing.”

I decided to play the part of my younger sister without reservation and satisfy my father’s desire.

Recently, the faction within the cult that revered ‘Cheon-hwa’ had been growing.

It was only natural. No matter how much of an identity crisis I was going through, I had the knowledge and experience of a ‘protagonist’ to assist me.

Even my father, who wielded absolute power in the cult, had no choice but to be devoured if he granted me this much time over several years.

My father himself must be feeling a strange sense of anxiety.

That’s why he stuck closer to ‘Yo-hwa’ than to ‘Cheon-hwa’, acting as if to show off their intimacy to those around him.

“Sometimes, an outsider like that has to come in for a fresh breeze to blow through the cult. Indeed!”

“Ahaha.”

He wants to advertise that the power to select the successor lies with him, but… does this father of mine know?

That clinging to the right to name a successor is itself a bad move. The fact that it doesn’t suit the ‘Cult Leader’ who should be an agent of a god and the king of the cult at all.

Above all, there is no way my sister could become my rival.

A future where the assets of the cult, including Baekhwa Girls' High, are handed over to Yo-hwa.

That is truly impossible, unless I were to one day offer myself as a sacrifice to suppress an Outer God and be [Sealed].

Ahahahaha. A Time Sealer joke!

Time passed.

"Miss Cheon-hwa. Miss Yo-hwa."

One day. During a tutoring session.

Our tutor, Teacher Go Yuri, who had taught us various kinds of 'external knowledge' since we were young, once a week, closed the scripture and spoke.

"I'm very sorry, but it will be difficult for me to conduct classes starting next week."

"What?!"

Yo-hwa, who had been leisurely munching on a chocolate ice bar, was startled.

"What do you mean, Teacher?"

"I'm truly sorry. A family matter has come up."

Teacher wore an expression that would make anyone feel that she was being completely sincere in her apology.

"Starting next week, my successor will come and conduct the classes."

"Eh, a successor…"

"Fufu. From now on, you ladies will also have to seriously consider preparing for the CSAT. In that field, my successor will be able to teach you much better than I can."

I slightly closed one eye.

“It seems you know this person, Teacher?”

“Yes.”

Smile.

Go Yuri-Teacher smiled.

“I know them very very well.”

“…”

“They’re someone who has even received a perfect score on the CSAT. I don’t think you’ll need to have any doubts about their skill!”

What was there to hide.

The person who came to our mansion’s study room a week after Teacher Go Yuri’s sudden resignation.

“——Hello. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Miss Cheon-hwa, Miss Yo-hwa.”

He had the face of someone I knew well.

“My name is ■■■.”

The Undertaker.

“I have been faithfully handed all the materials regarding your academic progress from the previous teacher.”

The ‘me’ from before the world was destroyed.

The ‘me’ from before the advent of the void.

“Your achievements are both excellent.”

“…”

“It’s just that the university your parents want for you is Seoul University, so you need a pacer. Your school records are not a

problem. Between us, I was told that the school you both attend is in a very… ‘special situation’.”

The man gave a slight smile.

The one whose whereabouts I could never find, no matter how much I searched through the data, who only revealed a tiny glimpse of himself when I explored Yu Ji-won’s past to fill in the empty canvas.

The missing person of this world.

The secret figure that no one knew.

“Well then, shall we begin our first class?”

Finally.

He appeared before me.

Footnotes:

Chapter 401

The Bereaved IX

Sinnoa

“Unni, did’cha know…”

“Use formal speech.”

“You know.”

“Yes. What is it?”

“I think… I might be in love.”

“That’s why you should make a habit of using formal speech, you’ll get an earful from Father if he finds out… Excuse me? What did you just say?”

“I’ve fallen in love.”

One day, my cute little sister confessed her feelings to me like that. I put down the pen I was studying with and whipped my head around to look at her.

“Oh. Um. I see. Right...”

“Unni, your eyes suddenly look scary.”

“My eyes are your eyes. If I look scary to you, it must be because of your own desire to see something frightening. So, who is it?”

“Teacher.”

“Ah. Your old teacher? Hmm. I don’t think our family would approve of a same-sex relationship, but don’t you worry, little sister! After I send Father on an amazing, all-expenses-paid trip, I’ll completely overhaul these damn family traditions and——”

“No. My current tutor.”

“…”

“Hey, now. Don’t look at me like that. If you glare any harder, you might actually kill someone. Come on, unni. This is your lovely sister’s first love, her first romance. You’re going to help me, right?”

Indeed.

So, my younger sister has fallen in love with the future ‘me’, and I am supposed to personally provide every form of support to make that love come true?

“Hmm…”

This is just not right.

Long ago, a man in ancient Greece who got his kicks from starting flame wars with people, and was finally branded a community troll and sentenced to death, was fond of using this phrase.

「Know thyself.」

I, too, have recently taken this wise saying to heart.

A person who does not know their own nature, who pretends to be knowledgeable about the world but is ignorant about themselves, is a truly sad existence.

In that spirit, I will say this.

“What a thieving bitch.”

“Excuse me? Miss Cheon-hwa?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Hehe. I was just thinking deeply about someone and a monologue slipped out by accident!”

“Ah. I see, is that so? Well. I’m used to it, as I have an acquaintance who is particularly prone to talking to himself.”

“Oh my. Is that right?”

“Yes. It’s someone you know as well, Miss Cheon-hwa. The one who taught you and your sister before...”

“Ah. You mean our first Teacher. You two must be close?”

“Haha, close, you say. Well! We are certainly on familiar terms.”

“A one-of-a-kind thieving bitch.”

“Pardon?”

“Ah, I’m sorry. My Habitual Convulsive Monologue Syndrome seems to have burst through my lips again.”

“...”

“What is it? What are you looking at? Ah. I suppose this is your first time seeing the daughter of a man who runs a religious order from a multi-thousand-pyeong mansion on the most sought-after mountainside in Sejong City. I can see how you’d find it fascinating.”

“Ah, it’s nothing.”

■■■ before my eyes, no.

Let’s just call him the ‘Undertaker’ to make things simpler.

This Undertaker is, in short, the me of the past. The first-cycle regressor.

If you were to ask what makes a first-cycle regressor different from a normal person… that’s just it.

There is no difference.

A regressor who has never regressed! What is that!

It’s a step beyond a fish-shaped bun without the fish, it’s a fish-shaped bun without the bun!

It would just fall apart in your hand! The red bean paste!

You can't even eat it!

Food that cannot be eaten. We have agreed to call such things food waste.

"This piece of trash."

"…?!"

The first-turn Undertaker flinched at my low mutter. Oh? What's this? Are you succumbing to such a faint amount of killing intent?

Ah, how pathetic, the me of the past.

But of course! How could a young, pipsqueak, amateur, piece of trash who is far from his 100th cycle, let alone his 1,000th, possibly withstand my pressure!

"W-well then. Miss Cheon-hwa. Shall we end the break here and move on to the next chapter…"

"Do you have a retirement plan?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you have a way to stably manage your assets to keep up with inflation?"

"Uh, um… Pardon?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Of course, you don't even have any seed money yet. We sisters are so privileged that I failed to be considerate. Let me rephrase the question. By when, how much, and by what means do you plan to secure your seed money?"

"…"

"Surely, you don't mean to say you have no plan at all?"

"Heek!"

“I see. You plan to trust in your youthful vigor and fighting spirit and just roll with the punches. I don’t dislike such a youthful approach, but that lack of a plan is precisely why you’ve been rolling for over ten thousand years! Did you know that?!”

“I’m not sure what you mean but I apologize!”

“You’re not even sure, and yet you dared to seduce my little sister?!”

“N-no. That’s not it. I have absolutely no intention of doing such a thing. In the first place, even if Miss Yo-hwa were to harbor such feelings, I fully intend to refuse her...”

“Hah? You dare refuse my sister’s confession?!”

“…Please spare me.”

This is getting nowhere!

Even as I looked down at the Undertaker, who had gotten up from his chair only to prostrate himself flat on the floor, my anger hadn’t subsided, and I continued to fume.

How could a person be so unmanly!

…That’s me!

That thing grew up to become me!

So this is how Archer felt!

“Um, Miss.”

“Yes...?”

“Might a humble person such as myself be so bold as to ask why you are prostrated right next to me?”

“Please be quiet.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Well. It wasn't a total loss.

'The fact that the Undertaker of this period knew Go Yuri. No, it seems certain that they were more than just simple acquaintances, they were likely cooperating closely… That much is clear.'

I had already inferred as much during the summer I spent with the middle-school-aged Yu Ji-won.

'I'm sure of it.'

It was extremely valuable information.

However, the question of where this information could have possibly originated from still remained.

'This is Yo-hwa's dream. But there's no way Yo-hwa would remember this.'

'Even if the tutorial fairies did their best, they couldn't have restored the details about Go Yuri and the Undertaker.'

'If that's the case...'

Is this Go Yuri's dream?

'It's more plausible to think that from the depths of the unconscious world, Go Yuri's data has flowed backward like a sewer in the rainy season.'

It was bizarre.

I had only entered this dream of the past to fill the □ in Yo-hwa, the hole that had been bored open in my sister's heart.

'Somehow… Yo-hwa's □ is connected to Go Yuri's unconscious world? Why?'

A complete mystery.

Just how much of this dreamscape I'm looking at now is true, and from what point is it contaminated data?

“That’s a question to be answered from now on.”

“…”

“Ah, were you complying with my request to be quiet? Well done! You may now faithfully answer my questions.”

“Understood.”

As I stood up, the Undertaker followed suit, and we sat facing each other across the desk.

Clap, clap!

I clapped my hands, and the lights in the study turned off.

They’re sound-activated. Undertaker jumped in surprise, as if encountering a marvel of the new generation. Every one of his reactions screamed that he came from nothing.

“Let me say this in advance, Sunbae.”

“Sunbae?”

“Ah. The title of ‘Teacher’ is already mortgaged to one person. Yo-hwa doesn’t seem to care about such naming and calling conventions, but it’s a very important matter to me.”

“…”

“It’s a given that I’ll get into Seoul National University anyway. So I’ll call you Sunbae in advance. That’s alright, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Then, my first question. What exactly is your relationship with our sisters’ ‘Teacher’?”

Undertaker’s expression hardened.

He’s so naive. I can practically hear the gears turning in his head as he tries to figure out how to speak to avoid my suspicion and earn my trust.

“For your reference, I dislike lies very, very much. Enough to jeopardize the tutoring fee that was promised to you, Sunbae.”

“…The money doesn’t matter.”

“The ones who say money doesn’t matter are always the most shackled by it.”

I opened my fan to cover my mouth. A little attack here should be enough to make him reveal an opening.

“I heard the news. That you have a child you hold very dear.”

“Pardon?”

“Where was it? Ah, it was in Seoul. Some village… Ahaha. I’ve forgotten the name.”

Then, casually.

I took a magazine from the bookshelf and opened it.

In that magazine was a photo of a very beautiful girl, a picture of a lookbook model.

“…!”

Suddenly, Undertaker’s eyes widened.

“You, this. Ji-won… How.”

“I’m a fan, you see. Of this person.”

“…”

Now his face was finally worth looking at.

“She lives while supporting her grandmother all by herself. How admirable. But there’s a limit to how much she can earn just from modeling. She must be desperate for someone’s income.”

“…What do you want from me?”

“The truth. Information.”

Thump. I closed the magazine.

“I’ll ask again, Sunbae. The teacher who was responsible for our childhood. The one who helped us breathe in this hellish mansion. What is your relationship with our ‘Teacher’?”

A long silence followed.

“…You won’t believe me even if I tell you.”

“The truth is decided by the powerful.”

Undertaker took a small breath.

A moment later, his eyes, now filled with resolve, looked straight at me. Hmm. This has a bit of spirit, it's not so bad…

“The world is going to end.”

Blink.

“What?”

“You can think of it as a prophecy. But I consider this to be a confirmed future. It’s information given to me by none other than the ‘Teacher’ you mentioned.”

“…”

“I see it’s still hard for you to believe.”

“N-no.”

That’s——not it.

There was another reason for my shock.

‘The fact that the world will end, the me of this period, the first-cycle Undertaker, already knew about it?!’

That’s impossible!

‘Th-then why did he let Old Man Schopenhauer lose Lady Adele? The end of the world. If he knew that the White Night would come to Seoul... he could have evacuated her!’

‘If not that, then. Did he intend for it? Did he intentionally neglect her? Lady Adele’s death? Why?’

Undertaker’s voice flowed into my chaos-filled mind.

“Should I stop here?”

“…No. Please continue.”

“Understood.”

The Undertaker spoke calmly.

“There are several causes for the world’s destruction, but among them, the primary cause is you two. Miss Cheon-hwa and Miss Yo-hwa.”

“Excuse me?”

“You two young ladies are confirmed to bring about the destruction of this world... To be more precise, you will summon the main culprits who will bring about that destruction.”

“...”

The gods.

The Yang of the Taegeuk. The Infinite Void.

The Ying of the Taegeuk. The Mastermind.

“We call them the Outer Gods.”

Not just gods, but Outer Gods?

Did the me of this period… no. Did the team that Go Yuri and I formed officially adopt the term Outer God?

“The descent of the Outer Gods cannot be avoided.”

“…Excuse me, but couldn't we just be eliminated? You said we are the ones who will summon them.”

“Even if you young ladies do not summon them, the Outer Gods will descend one way or another. This is also confirmed information.”

“…”

“No, in fact, the situation would become worse. As you can see, you ladies are capable of rational conversation. But if other candidates are chosen as sacrifices for the Outer Gods—they become almost impossible to control.”

Hah, a hollow laugh escaped my lips.

‘The verification is complete?’

In other words, he has experienced regressions where people other than Cheon-hwa and Yo-hwa were chosen as the ‘Priestess of the Infinite Void’ and ‘Priestess of the Mastermind’.

He has lived through such cycles.

Which means…

‘This place right now… isn’t the [first cycle]?’

My head was spinning.

The sensation of the common sense I had believed in until now being shaken to its very core.

“Miss? Are you alright? Perhaps it would be best to end this story here.”

“No.”

I said firmly, pressing a hand to my forehead. I stared directly at the Undertaker’s face between my fingers.

“Please continue.”

“…I am sorry to say this, but your teacher’s appointment as a tutor in this mansion was also all part of a plan.”

“Aha. To gain our favor? To build up goodwill from a young age, so that you can manipulate us as you please when we later become the priestesses of the Outer Gods?”

“That is not it.”

Undertaker said.

“It was to save you.”

...?

“Originally, you two were destined to lose your sense of self the moment the Outer Gods descended. It’s only natural. You have been exposed to the brainwashing of a cult leader since the day you were born. Becoming the sacrifices for the Outer Gods is your only raison d'être, the only joy in your life.”

“What are you talking about. Yo-hwa and I have properly lived our own lives...”

“How was that possible?”

Undertaker’s eyes narrowed.

“You shouldn't have had any other choice. Your mother, who at least cared for you with love, passed away early. Your father treated you as nothing more and nothing less than living sacrifices. The cult members working in the mansion were all minions who agreed with the leader’s thoughts.”

“...”

“So what external factor could have possibly been introduced that allowed you to grow not as the successors and sacrifices of the cult, but as proper, individual personalities?”

“That’s…”

Go Yuri.

“Because of Teacher.”

“…”

“Is that not correct?”

Ah.

“Originally, the scripture reading class was such a critical time that the cult leader himself should have overseen it. It was the first task in raising his successors. Naturally.”

“But…”

“Yes. But your teacher intercepted that crucial time. Because your teacher worked incredibly hard to earn the complete and utter trust of the cult leader.”

“…”

“The person who recommended me to the cult leader as his successor was also your teacher.”

If that’s the case.

“In the interview for getting a perfect score on the CSAT… answering that I believed in Taoism was also deliberately done to make an impression on Father…”

“Correct.”

Undertaker nodded.

“Even the reporter who conducted that interview was someone your teacher arranged. It was thanks to knowing which newspaper the cult leader enjoyed reading.”

“…”

“Miss Cheon-hwa. You must become the sacrifice. Because…”

In the past. From this point on. Already.

“Only you, Miss, are the perfect candidate who can summon the Outer Gods and still maintain your own self, who can still remain human.”

——A regressor… had existed all along.

Footnotes:

Chapter 402

The Bereaved X

Sinnoa

“...Miss. I have, as you commanded, delivered the truth, the unadulterated information, without adding or subtracting anything.”

Undertaker's voice seeped through the haze of my consciousness like a whisper.

"Ah, yes. Yes. I heard you."

I quickly came to my senses. The Undertaker was looking at this face with a peculiar expression.

Since it was none other than ‘my’ own face, it wasn't difficult to guess his inner thoughts.

Tension, suspicion…

That was to be expected. He must have been wondering if the person before him would actually believe his words, his outrageous claims about the world's destruction and outer gods.

And on top of that, resolve. And a hint of… guilt?

I wasn't quite sure about that last one. No. Perhaps for Undertaker, sharing the 'truth' here today was an unexpected development.

'If that's the case, sharing this much information was his own unilateral decision, made without consulting Go Yuri… Ah, I see.'

So that was the reason for the guilt.

'His thoughts must be, My independent action could disrupt the plan my colleague has established. That's why he feels apologetic.'

Even without a [Status Window] or [Mind Reading], I could see right through him.

Because of that, I was able to calm my own flustered heart.

Yes. Right now, the Undertaker was even more nervous than I was.

I would rather bite my tongue and die than show a less-than-reliable version of myself to my own past self.

“Of course, I know this must be difficult to believe. To suddenly speak of destruction in a world like this, I must seem like a lunatic. But we….”

"No. I believe you."

"Pardon?"

Undertaker's eyes widened.

While I felt a sadistic glee at his dumbfounded expression, I suppressed the heart of 'Cheon-hwa' and spoke calmly.

"I've spent my whole life among cultists who believe lies to be the truth and dismiss the truth as lies, you know. I'm confident that I've at least developed a discerning eye for figuring out what is a lie and what isn't."

“…”

"Objectively, it might be a lie. But at the very least, I can feel that you, Sunbaenim, truly believe your own words."

"Th-then—"

"Yes."

I smiled.

"I'll believe you. That you and my teacher are in a cooperative relationship. And that the purpose of that cooperation is to save the world from its end."

“What a relief!”

Undertaker's face brightened.

At the same time, the atmosphere in the study room, which had been stretched taut with tension like one of Ha-yul's puppet strings, eased considerably.

“I knew it. The moment I saw you, Miss, I could tell you were an exceptionally sharp person.”

Was he congratulating himself on a successful gamble? The Undertaker hummed, openly showing his good mood.

"My friend told me I shouldn't let my guard down until the very end. Still, I trusted my own eyes."

"Yes? Your friend…"

"Ah. I'm talking about your teacher, Miss."

I blinked.

"My teacher… was suspicious of me?"

"Yes. What was it she said? That you seemed different from your usual self."

“…”

"She repeatedly warned me to be cautious, saying that although she couldn't pinpoint it, something felt off. Anyway, that friend of mine worries too much for her own good."

It was at that moment.

The world's colors vanished.

Undertaker, who had been chattering right in front of me, stopped. It wasn't that he stopped on his own accord. Literally, everything came to a halt.

The sky blue cycled to gray. The walls cycled into black and white

dots. The low whispers of the cultists that could be heard from beyond the door ceased, and all the colors in the study room faded to monochrome.

And in the midst of it all.

"Ahaha."

Step.

"Really, I had a feeling this would happen."

From beyond the room's door.

The sound of footsteps and a voice drew closer.

"Something felt strange, you know. Hmmm. I haven't particularly changed this time around. So why has Cheon-hwa Miss become so clever?"

Step, step, step.

My whole body was frozen, and I could only let the 'sound' approach, growing clearer and clearer.

"Did her DNA change? Unlikely. I haven't touched a single thing about the surrounding environment that led to the birth of Miss Cheon-hwa and Miss Yo-hwa. If I meddle carelessly, you twins could have miscarried far too easily, you see."

The other person seemed to know this as well.

And for good reason.

"It's a simple conclusion. A change occurred. But the 'external' environment is unchanged. Then it's clear the change originated from the 'internal' environment."

She was whispering just like that.

As if she were certain I could hear her, no matter how quietly she murmured.

Whisper, whisper. Step. Whisper.

The 'sound' drawing ever closer to the door whispered in a seemingly cheerful tone.

"So I tried stepping down from my position as teacher a little earlier than planned. Ehehe. I had a small hope that perhaps my opponent would let their guard down, thinking I had disappeared, and reveal their true colors."

"…"

"Thank you for meeting my expectations, Miss. Ah! Is that not right? You wouldn't be Miss Cheon-hwa, after all."

Creeak.

The door opened.

"Is it Mr. Nameless anomaly?"

Through the crack in the door, I saw a pair of eyes smiling.

"Ugh."

In this world that had faded to monochrome, only the eyes were visible through the crack in the door. Only the smiling eyes. Only the face. Only the hair.

They retained their 'color' as if it were the most natural thing in the world, glistening with a sleek sheen.

Like a poisonous herb.

"W-wait a moment! Please wait!"

"Yes. I'll wait for you."

Creeak, the door opened completely.

The figure revealed there was the very image of Teacher 'Go Yuri', not a bit different from when she had left, saying she would quit being my tutor.

Neat clothes. Elegant hair.

And even a smile that seemed to define everything in the world.

"I'm not an anomaly! I have no intention of being hostile towards any of you! I just… It's a very long story, but I came here because I want to know the truth."

"Yes."

Step, she was approaching.

Even though I had asked her to wait. Even though she said she would wait.

As if such 'words' held no value whatsoever.

"Anomalies, you see, usually say things like that."

"I'm not! I'm the future of this person, the one who is frozen here!"

"Oh my. Now that's a little interesting."

Step.

"But it's not enough. Anomalies often mimic speech to draw my interest. Could you cry out a little more interestingly for me, Miss?"

"Th-this place is a dream. It's not reality! I accessed this place through Yo-hwa's dream."

"Not enough."

Step.

"A little more."

"In the future, you aren't human. You're an anomaly! But I was certain you held a clue to the world's destruction. So, to reclaim Yo-hwa's lost memories. That's why I came. With the help of the Tutorial Fairies… and the power of the nightmare!"

"Not enough. A little more."

Step.

"Ms. Go Yuri!"

“…”

Right in front of my nose.

Go Yuri stopped.

Her lips parted, and from within the abyss of a bottomless well where only darkness could be seen, a bright red tongue flickered.

"How interesting."

A scent, like crushed and peeled apple skins, a breath, brushed past my face.

"Wherever did you hear that name?"

"Y-you introduced yourself. Ms. Go Yuri. We can cooperate. I don't know what kind of plan you have at this point in time, but if you would at least share your information with me, I could carry on your work—"

"No."

Squeeze.

Go Yuri held my head steady with both hands. My cheeks were pressed lightly.

Her eyes were looking deep, so very deep into me.

"The one to disclose information isn't me. It has to be you. Mr. Mysterious anomaly."

"I'm…"

My lips trembled.

"I'm not an anomaly—"

"I told you, didn't I?"

Go Yuri smiled sweetly.

"Anomalies usually say things like that."

Pop!

The sensation of something bursting.

That was the end of that cycle.

…I was careless.

Yes. I'll admit it honestly. In my impatience and excitement to get information somehow, I inadvertently underestimated how dangerous Go Yuri was.

But please, try to understand.

If you had been stuck for over 1,000 cycles and you finally saw a clue to a world secret you could never figure out, wouldn't you pounce on it like a dog?

I still have a long way to go, it seems.

But I digress.

…There was still no evidence to confirm whether Go Yuri was another 'regressor' or a different kind of ability user.

Still, one thing was certain, Go Yuri was at least on 'equal footing with a regressor.' Whether she had become a prophet or something else.

She knew the future, and she was pioneering a route to break through that despair-filled future.

In that case… What element would Go Yuri be most wary of?

As a regressor myself, I can say with certainty.

It's a 'variable'.

The appearance of a variable in a world that constantly repeats is, in itself, a serious matter.

An anomaly. It's a very clear sign that an anomaly, with a high probability of being Outer God-class, has interfered.

And these Outer Gods usually possess powers like 'mental brainwashing' or 'reality distortion' as if it's a given.

There's a high chance that my mind could become contaminated just by conversing with her.

From Go Yuri's perspective, I was a virus that rightfully needed to be eliminated.

'More thoroughly this time.'

In the next cycle, I followed the exact same route and once again infiltrated Yo-hwa's dream.

However.

'This time, for real, I will completely assimilate with Cheon-hwa's psyche. I will absolutely not reveal my ego as the [Undertaker].'

So that Go Yuri would never find out.

One mistake was always enough.

——Again, time flowed.

This time, I avoided drawing Go Yuri's 'interest' by rashly distinguishing myself.

I was Cheon-hwa. The successor raised as a sacrifice for a pseudo-religious cult. I assimilated 99% into that role, and nothing more.

"Miss Cheon-hwa. Miss Yo-hwa. I'm sorry, but it seems it will be difficult to hold classes starting next week."

My childhood was spent with Go Yuri. The subsequent tutoring

sessions with the Undertaker also passed without incident.

I watched from the side as Yo-hwa developed her first crush on the Undertaker, and observed as Cheon-hwa built her trust with the Undertaker over time.

I followed the correct course of history to the letter.

And perhaps it paid off.

"Cheon-hwa."

"Hm? Sunbae?"

"I've already spoken to your father, but it'll be difficult to have class next week. If anything comes up, feel free to contact me anytime."

In an instant, D-Day drew near.

Just one more week until June 17th.

Yes, the day the Void arrived in Seoul, and the point in time where the Undertaker always began his regression.

The day it all began.

The absolute point of no return for his regressions, a past to which he could never go back to, no matter how much he struggled.

"Heung."

My heart pounded.

It was a golden opportunity to witness the truth of that day with my own two eyes.

But right now I am 'Cheon-hwa'. I suppressed that abnormal palpitation and smiled cheerfully, pretending to know nothing.

"Well, I'm sure you have your reasons, Sunbae. I don't mind. But I wonder if Yo-hwa will be a little disappointed."

"Ahaha. I'll leave Yo-hwa in your hands."

My relationship with the Undertaker, which had been stiff at first, had softened to the point where we could freely exchange jokes.

'But, Undertaker's face is far too peaceful.'

In one week. Even though the world would begin to end in earnest on June 17th.

Even though Yo-hwa was about to be trapped in Baekhwa Girls' High and wander through hell until she reached the 109th cycle.

I felt no particular signs of abnormality from the Undertaker's hand as he patted my shoulder.

Time passed, and it was June 17th.

"…"

I was in my room, staring intently at the clock. It read 13:30.

'The void arrives in Seoul at 14:00. That's when Miss Adele dies. Old Man Scho loses his wife forever.'

Tick-tock.

The clock hands moved just a little slower than the wick of anxiety burning in my heart.

'Any second now. 5 seconds, 4 seconds, 3 seconds, 2 seconds.'

And then—— *Tick*.

'The void has arrived!'

I looked out the window.

The sky was perfectly serene, but I knew. I knew that at this very moment, the world had taken a decisive step toward its destruction.

'South of the Han River in Seoul has just been devastated this very second. Miss Adele has died, and the nucleus of the Ten Legs has been born. Undertaker must have finally begun his own first cycle!'

'Now. Show me.'

'What on earth... happened... in this missing past?'

It happened at that moment.

"Huh?"

Something.

“……? Hm, …huh?”

Something.

It vanished from my head.

No. To say it vanished from my head isn't accurate. From my memories, from my consciousness.

——'Something' disappeared from within my soul.

“…?”

A strange feeling.

A normal person might have brushed it off as a weird sense of déjà vu… But I still had my self-awareness as Undertaker, even if it was only 1%.

The faint memory of having been preparing for an incredibly momentous and dangerous moment just a moment ago… also remained.

And so, just barely. Truly, by a hair's breadth.

I was able to realize that the 'something' I had just lost was far too precious to be casually ignored.

□.

It was as if a hole had been punched through my heart.

'What did I lose? Just now?'

I listed the precious beings in my life in order.

'Yo-hwa, my lovely sister. Sunbae. The one who taught me that humans existed in the outside world. Mother. She passed away early, but I haven't forgotten her. And…'

And?

'And… was there anything else precious in my life? The cultists? No. That wouldn't be a huge problem if I lost them.'

Huh?

'Right. I haven't lost anything.'

No.

'From a young age, I was exposed to my father's brainwashing, but because I was exceptionally smart, I was able to avoid falling for such tricks. It was by my own strength alone.'

"…"

'Furthermore, I even saved my younger sister from the clutches of brainwashing. Just the two of us, my sister and I, deceiving our father, we managed to survive while maintaining our identities.'

"…"

'And then I met Sunbae for the first time. Sunbae. He was the very first person to teach us sisters about the world. Not a pseudo-religious cult like this, nor a school tainted by the cult, but the real outside. The outside world…'

That's not right.

"…?"

That was wrong.

'You' couldn't have noticed. Of course. Because you weren't given the ways and means to protect your own memories from the void

poison.

But 'I' was different. Not the 'I' of the past, but the 'I' who had reached this point through countless coincidences and inevitabilities, could see through the fragments of this distortion.

“…Go Yuri.”

That was it.

"Go Yuri, Teacher."

You forgot that existence.

Just now. At 2 PM on June 17th.

Casually. As if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Ah."

Drip.

The dream crumbled away. Melted wax dripped from the sky, and with every drip, color was erased, cycling the space monochrome.

It couldn't be helped. The moment Cheon-hwa became aware of that 'lost existence', the dream had already become too different from the past.

I could no longer be Cheon-hwa.

I was Undertaker.

Awakening.

“…”

I looked around.

The cafeteria of Baekhwa Girls' High. The students trapped in the tutorial dungeon were sleeping in a group, having laid out blankets and such here and there.

I had spread my bedding at the cafeteria entrance to protect the children. And, next to me, Fairy No. 264 lay dead, torn to shreds.

Amidst the quiet, sinking breaths all around, I touched my forehead and murmured inwardly.

'The hole bored into Yo-hwa's heart… The void, it wasn't just her twin sister.'

□.

It wasn't just her sister, Cheon-hwa, who was there.

'Go Yuri.'

The teacher who had taught the twin sisters since they were children.

'The existence of Go Yuri had vanished.'

She had disappeared.

Footnotes:

Chapter 403

The Bereaved XI

Sinnoa

What does it mean to trust someone?

I will confess honestly to you all. I, the Undertaker, have lived for far too long.

I had always thought so, but seeing the [1st cycle's Undertaker] made the feeling all the more distinct. That the me of today had become far too old for a human.

The word old man was not enough. I was beyond old. I had transcended aging. Truly, a new horizon of oldness was being updated daily because of me.

Seventies? Eighties? Oh, I'm sorry, but compared to me, they were no different than young children.

Just think about it. Even that old geezer Schopenhauer probably couldn't return from his 'vacation' even if he wanted to, because he wouldn't have the stamina.

According to the Confucian sayings that old man loved so much, how dare a young whelp, huh, raise his head so stiffly to me, someone so much older.

I trusted Cheon-hwa.

I also trusted Yo-hwa.

To trust another person. At some point, that had become extremely natural for me, overlapping in meaning with 'to trust a child.'

I hope they grow up well.

Even if they don't grow up well, that's okay. As long as they are

safe. I hope they get along with their precious family.

For me, the words ‘to trust someone’ were identical to a declaration that I would take responsibility for that child.

And so, upon my return from the Arabian Nights of the dream within a dream, I immediately went to the gravestone on the rooftop of the Tower of Babel and cheerfully rambled on about the whole story.

“Cheon-hwa! There were a number of mishaps, but in any case, it was a success. In your sister's subconscious, there will now be a vague feeling and longing for her lost older sister!”

“…”

“Hoo. No psychiatrist in this world could alleviate psychopathological symptoms as well as I can. Really, what would you two sisters have done without me!”

“…”

“Yo-hwa is still busy catching up with her students, so I’ll bring her in about a week. This time, you two sisters will be able to have a reunion that is a reunion in the truest sense!”

“Yeah. Thanks, sunbae. I’m really, really grateful, but...”

Cheon-hwa's red eyes narrowed.

“In the end, you pretended to be me in a dream, with my appearance, with my way of thinking, like the daughter of a prestigious family. Even using formal speech in front of other people. You spent several years like that, right?”

“Mm. That's right.”

“It feels awful.”

“…”

“It feels awful! Sunbae!”

Cheon-hwa looked at me with an expression of genuine contempt and, wrapping her arms around her own shoulders, twisted only her upper body away.

'I see.'

Children sometimes go through puberty, after all.

This too was an aftershock of ‘trusting someone.’

I nodded my head, then drew up my aura to shape a form on the surface of my skin. Orange hair and red eyes, a subtle smiling expression.

An instant human-skin mask exclusively for Cheon-hwa, complete!

“Oh my. How do you do?”

Then I took out a fan I had prepared in advance and spread it open with a snap.

Elegance and grace. Those two words exist to describe the ‘me’ of this very moment.

“Kyaaaaaaak!”

“Haaah. I wish my father would just die. Ah, I must quickly give my father a taste of the Korean peninsula's traditional filial piety so that my dear sister can breathe a little easier.”

“Kyaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Sunbae. Please make me a happy person.”

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaak!”

“Yes. Now, I think I've become happy enough.”

“Die! Die, sunbae! Please just die! Really, really! It really feels awful! Awfulawfulawful! Please just die—”

Playing with kids is fun!

A short while after the stormy, convulsive puberty (valid for 1 day) had passed.

At last, the historic reunion of the separated twin sisters took place.

"…You're my sister."

Reunion.

Literally, they met again.

In the previous regression, I had simply made the sisters face each other, and because of Yo-hwa's breakdown, it was I who once again orchestrated the meeting that had ended in the ruin of a regression.

More meticulously. Using the regressor's privilege to my heart's content, employing a method that could not be more thorough.

Was it that the fruits of that effort had seen the light?

"…I don't remember at all. But, mm, certainly. The strange impression that someone was by my side in my childhood… that much remains."

Unlike before, Yo-hwa's expression was cautious.

Last time, the feeling was strong that she was forcing herself to get close because she had received a request from me.

In the end, even while talking with the other person, she was merely responding with 'her feelings for me' and not 'her feelings for her sister.'

On the other hand… It's different now. This time, she was truly and seriously contemplating the existence of a 'twin sister.'

□.

Like someone sitting normally at their desk one day who suddenly spots a bruise on their forearm, not knowing where they got it.

Yo-hwa was finally able to stare clearly at the □ that had been

pierced through her heart.

“I guess.”

“…”

“I did think it was strange.”

Yo-hwa muttered.

Cheon-hwa and I, who would normally have led the conversation, were now silently waiting for Yo-hwa's reaction.

Because we knew that forcing a ‘conversation of mere words’ would only be met with disastrous failure.

‘We've done all the work we can from our end.’

All information was disclosed to Yo-hwa. Including the fact that Cheon-hwa could be her twin sister, or she could be a mere trace of an Outer God.

Thump. My heart beat faintly.

'Now, the affirmation or denial of this relationship is entirely up to Yo-hwa.'

Our role was to accept the outcome.

And to be her sincere conversation partner until that outcome was reached, that was all we had left to do.

“Strange? What was?”

“Infinite Void. The god I served. Our cult, for all its worth, is a Taoist-based pseudo-religion. Just as the Christian sects obsess over the number ‘3’ of the Trinity, we are pathologically attached to the ‘2’ of the Taegeuk.”

Taegeuk.

White and black.

“Ah.”

Something came to mind.

Seeing my face, Yo-hwa gave a bitter smile.

“So if a non-existent ‘sister’ had broken the Baekhwa Girls' High school rules to wear a ‘black sailor uniform’… that was, in all likelihood, a result of my father’s intentions.”

“Crazy.”

I couldn't help but let out a low curse.

Cheon Yo-hwa’s father. The cult leader had even forced his pseudo-religious incantations onto the color of the school uniforms his children wore.

Looking at it this way, my own thoughts became clear.

“Infinite Void treats all things in creation as equal scraps of data. A world where all is equal. It can be seen as all of creation itself, and as space. On the other hand, the Mastermind simply takes that data as a base to constantly arrange and rearrange it, running simulations.”

“Yes. It is the time in which everything is manifested.”

“…For the Mastermind to have meaning, as much data as possible must be collected. Conversely, for Infinite Void's data to be useful, as many simulations as possible must be run.”

“Yes. Only then can it be free of any flaws.”

“From the Outer Gods’ perspective, they are imitating a ‘world’ that will perfectly replace our reality.”

Yo-hwa nodded her head.

“I think they are mutually complementary beings. To each other.”

Next to me, Cheon-hwa kept her lips sealed. But in her red eyes, a

flicker of realization like a candle flame passed by.

The three of us, who could be called ‘anomaly experts,’ had reached the same interpretation.

“In that case, the names I gave to the Outer Gods will also have to be changed.”

“Yes. Teacher. Perhaps what I suppressed was not Infinite Void, but…”

The Yang of Taegeuk.

“And that one over there.”

“…”

“What the person who might be my sister embraced and sealed might not be the Mastermind, but…”

The Yin of Taegeuk.

“An Outer God that was one and two from the very beginning. Twins.”

“…”

“Of course, I don't know which one my father designated as Yang and which as Yin. It can't be distinguished by color alone, ah. You know this too, don't you, Teacher? When you look at the Taegeuk, there's a dot of the opposite color on each side.”

“I know.”

☯.

In the middle of the white, a black dot. In the middle of the black, a white dot.

It was a very important symbol when drawing the Taegeuk. As it emphasized that black and white were not just a separate ‘two,’ but a ‘one’ in which each led the other.

Yo-hwa smiled softly.

“So actually, that side might have been Yang, and my side might have been Yin. Well! It looks like father's plan failed anyway. Not that I care!”

“…Is that so.”

This was the final conclusion of the answer chapter.

The true name of ‘Infinite Void,’ which I first subjugated in the 117th cycle, was the ‘poles of the Taegeuk.’

It was only now, upon reaching this point—in the 1,003rd cycle, no less—that it was all revealed.

'Is calling something by its proper name such a difficult thing.'

I felt a sense of deep emotion.

As I was savoring that feeling, Yo-hwa wiped the smile from her face and stared at Cheon-hwa.

“It's still difficult to call you… Unni. I'm sorry.”

“…”

“But if you are my sister. If your personality is as teacher told me, you would be more hurt by me calling you unni on the outside when I don't sincerely think of you as one on the inside. So, please endure the slightly less painful wound.”

“…”

“If you are my sister. You were subjected to the [Time Seal] even though you knew I would be hurt. So bear it.”

“…”

Cheon-hwa nodded her head.

Then, Yo-hwa smiled.

“Instead, for now, you can call me Yo-hwa.”

“…Really?”

For the first time since the sisters' reunion, Cheon-hwa carefully opened her lips.

“Me, who might be an anomaly…”

“That's why there's a condition.”

“A condition.”

“Yes. A condition, or rather, a contest. Let's make a bet. If you want to, that is.”

A contest. A bet.

Those were words Cheon-hwa loved more than anyone.

It was also a game that would be played more often than any other, having been born as siblings so close in age.

“What kind of bet?”

“I heard from teacher. You, even here where you were subjected to the [Time Seal], deliberately made the day you were sealed your happiest memory in order to maintain your sense of self.”

“Yes.”

“By kissing teacher.”

“…Yes.”

Yo-hwa closed her eyes and took a breath.

And then she looked straight at the person who looked exactly like her.

“From now on, just once. I will call you ‘unni.’”

“…!”

“I will believe your story. I will believe teacher's belief. I will think hard in my heart—really, really hard—that you are my lost sister, and while pondering your pain deeply… I will sincerely call you ‘unni.’”

“Uh, um. That's good, but… Yes! It's really good, but…”

Cheon-hwa furrowed her brow.

“Why…?”

“…”

Yo-hwa's eyes grew calm.

“To test if you become happy.”

“Huh?”

“If you are really my sister. If a ‘real anomaly’ isn't lurking in some corner of your heart and merely mimicking my sister, if you are truly my sister. Then you… have to become happy.”

“…”

“You have no choice but to become happy.”

Yo-hwa's eyes were serene.

And for that reason, they were terrifying.

“The teacher you love has worked so hard for you like this. For the younger sister you love, he has tried this hard. Literally laying his life on the line.”

“…”

“No matter how many times this world repeats its destruction, you will never, ever be able to reach a scene like this again. Someone to lead you this far—to understand you. To yield to you. You cannot wish for such a person, for such a family, anymore.”

“…”

“So the moment I call you ‘unni,’ you must become the happiest. More so than the moment you kissed teacher on a whim. This moment. More. More. More. It must be happier.”

Yo-hwa's red eyes narrowed.

“Am I… wrong?”

“…No. You're right.”

“Yeah.”

Yo-hwa stated firmly.

“So it's a contest. If the moment you are called ‘unni’ by me makes you happier, so that the ‘day’ you repeat here in this tomb area becomes today instead of that day——”

“…My victory.”

“Right. I will accept the fact that you are my real sister. But if, even after I call you sister, the moment you remember most happily is still that moment from the 688th cycle. The day you shared a kiss with teacher.”

“…”

“If you forget what happened between us today. And if, after midnight passes, you repeat the same day as before.”

“My… defeat.”

“I will not accept that you are my sister. Forever.”

“…”

“Ah. Teacher? This is really a ‘forever’ kind of thing, okay? Even in the next cycle. Even in the cycle after that, please do not ever try to reunite me with my sister again.”

Yo-hwa smiled brightly.

“If she's just a person who values one kiss with teacher more than

this scene anyway. It doesn't really matter if she's my sister or not.”

“…”

“So, what will it be? It's up to you.”

Yo-hwa rested her chin on her hand.

“It's fine if you don't accept this bet. Then I won't go as far as calling you sister, but… well. I can accept you as a plausible colleague of Teacher. I'll call you Cheon-hwa. And I'll accept you calling me Yo-hwa.”

“…”

“If you accept the bet, this is the only time. There are no more chances. Will you become my sister? Or will your existence rot forever inside a tombstone that no one but teacher cares about?”

“…”

“You decide.”

Silence fell.

Yo-hwa's proposal was, even from my perspective, a remarkably rare idea.

'…Unlike other sealed ones, Cheon-hwa preserves the very moment she was [Time Sealed] as her ‘happiest memory."

'In fact, it's as if she faces the moment of being [Time Sealed] every time she opens her eyes.'

That was Cheon-hwa's clever move.

A brilliant plan to simultaneously repeat the happiest day and also retain the ‘awareness’ that she herself had been time-sealed.

'By using such a trick, Cheon-hwa was cleverly continuing to update her day despite being time-sealed.'

'Memories with me. A slightly happier time, she was steadily

accumulating them day by day.'

'Now Yo-hwa is… using the exact same idea as her twin sister, to ask a question in return.'

How precious am I to you?

Is being called ‘unni’ by your little sister truly as precious as the kiss with the Undertaker you claim to love?

If so.

Show me proof, not just words.

“…”

Only after a long silence had filled the classroom did Cheon-hwa, the strategist who had lived her entire life as a mad gambler, lift her head.

In her eyes…

There was resolve.

A day passed.

“What do you think? Teacher?”

For a whole day, the two of us set up a tent on the rooftop of the Tower of Babel and lived there.

Just a few days ago, we had spent time alone, isolated in the barrier of Infinite Void at Baekhwa Girls' High. The current situation seemed very familiar to Yo-hwa.

“Do you really think that person will accept the moment I called her ‘sister’ as her happiest day?”

“Who knows.”

I looked up at the night sky.

“There is nothing as close to the void as a person's heart. It cannot be grasped. They don't know it themselves. There are even parts they don't want to know, and parts they are willingly deceived by.”

“Ahaha… I think so too.”

“Sincerity is always a difficult word.”

A few hours ago.

Cheon-hwa eventually accepted the bet.

Yo-hwa, too, called her opponent ‘unni’ and gave her a tight hug.

Apologizing over and over for being sorry for forgetting, for leaving her sister to be sacrificed alone.

Tears streamed down Cheon-hwa's face.

“It's common to judge tears as a person's sincerity. But in the end, sincerity is proven not by that moment but by the time that follows.”

“…Teacher. You are spending countless hours to prove your own sincerity.”

“That's thanks to you all believing in me.”

I smiled.

“And I believe in you all as well.”

“…”

“It doesn't matter if the sisterly bond is broken forever. Life is not over. Thanks to you two sisters, I was able to learn that even the life of someone who has been time-sealed is not completely over.”

Whether one can learn from children or not.

Perhaps that was the standard of an adult.

Trrrrrrrrrrrrring.

We both turned around. On the simple table in front of the tent, a smartphone was ringing.

It had become midnight.

“…Teacher.”

“Yes.”

12 o'clock. For the humans of reality, it was the baseline where just now became ‘yesterday’ and now becomes ‘today.’

But for the beings in the time-sealed tomb area, it was merely the point at which the same day repeated.

“Shall we go in?”

“…Yeah.”

Yo-hwa took my hand first. A slight tremble. A clear tension was transmitted through her body heat.

Today, she would either gain a family member or lose one.

And that, at Yo-hwa's request, was engraved for ‘eternity.’

In the future, no matter if thousands or tens of thousands of regressions were to be repeated, the day I would introduce her ‘sister’ to Yo-hwa would never come again.

Step, I took a step forward.

Thud, footsteps followed at an angle.

“Huuuuu…”

A small breath.

It was the same as in the 117th cycle. Yo-hwa, the lively, orange-haired student council president, always trusted and followed me from behind.

At that time, Yo-hwa was able to find her lost self.

This time was different. She didn't just follow me, the teacher.

She thought for herself, created a standard that everyone could accept, and she herself bet herself under the name of a ‘contest.’

'You've grown, Yo-hwa.'

The world was destroyed without reservation and life was repeated without promise.

And yet, if a chance were given. Perhaps.

“I will open the door.”

“…Yes, Teacher. Please open it.”

Creeeak.

A door that only I could see opened at a speed only I could hear. The transparent tombstone, which seemed like it would accept no one, merely reflecting them like a mirror, revealed its interior.

What kind of scene was waiting?

Normally, upon seeing me enter first, Cheon-hwa would have laughed cheerfully, saying something like

‘Ah sunbae! Welcome! I knew you'd come!’

From her perspective, she had just kissed me a moment ago.

“_____”

She would have been smiling a confident smile, as if to show off, as if to say everything went according to her plan, as expected of her, a smile that made me want to give her a light rap on the head.

But.

“——Hik.”

Even before the door opened, Cheon-hwa was crying.

In a corner of the classroom. Crouched down using a desk and chair as a screen, she was shedding silent tears.

As if belatedly realizing we had entered, Cheon-hwa turned her head. Cheon-hwa's lips moved.

“Hk, uh…… ah, ……hk. Uuh……”

“…”

But no meaningful words came out.

She opened her lips to say something, but all that came out was a whimpering groan.

Even when she tried to suppress the groan, what remained in her mouth was the same groan, so cry was piled upon cry, and her voice kept sinking lower.

“I, I……. I. I, someday……. Someday, with sunbae……. and Yo-hwa. The three of us. Hk, the three of us…….”

“…”

“But, that. But, that's……. not possible. It's, it's hard. It's impossible……. So, even if it's just sunbae. I, I. With that, I thought it was enough……”

“…”

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Yo-hwa. I'm sorry……”

Yo-hwa walked forward.

Inside the time-sealed tomb area, originally, no one other than me was supposed to wander around freely. Because from the moment their contact with me was broken, they would be exposed to the void.

But for some reason, Yo-hwa naturally let go of my hand. I too, for some reason, felt that ‘it would be okay’ and let her go.

Step, step.

Yo-hwa walked over and bent her knees. And sitting at the same height, she stretched out both her arms and hugged her opponent tightly.

“I'm sorry, Unni.”

Yo-hwa said.

“I’m sorry for forgetting.”

“…”

“Welcome back.”

The sound of Cheon-hwa's weeping filled the classroom.

The sealed one. The one who lost her own existence.

There is only one name for the spell and curse that makes the stopped time of the lost flow.

Happiness.

Footnotes:

Chapter 404

The Bereaved XII

Sinnoa

There is an epilogue.

"Yay-hey!"

"The two sisters are troublemakers, but they're the strongest!"

"The tradition of the ten million cultists of the Korean peninsula! The essence of heresy! The last remaining prodigies of Taoism!"

"Yo-hwa-Yo-hwa☆Sisters! Descend!"

"Yeeaaahhhhh-hey!"

Clap! The sound of a high-five rang out.

"…"

There were two audience members who had been watching the spectacle from start to finish. Noh Do-hwa. And Yu Ji-won.

Both of them belonged to the National Road Management Corps, and this was certainly no coincidence.

The place where the Yo-hwa-Yo-hwa☆Sisters had just appeared was none other than the innermost sanctum of the National Road Management Corps headquarters, the 'Tower of Babel', specifically the office of the corps Director.

"Wonderful…"

Noh Do-hwa muttered with a face that looked anything but wonderful.

"Alright. Fine, so the Cheon family had a pair of twin sisters. I heard

the stories, so I understand that much. But… I was told one of the twins was time-sealed or something. Then shouldn't she not exist in reality? So why is it that right before my very eyes, both sisters are physically present and putting on this goddamn sideshow…?"

"*Gasp*. An interesting point!"

"As expected of the National Road Management Corps Director. Were the fine wrinkles etched on your brow not only proof of a foul temper but also of a highly evolved intellect?"

"It can't be helped, Unni. Please show them your true form!"

I released my aura.

Shwaaaa.

My orange hair was bleached to black, and my sailor uniform reverted to a barista's outfit. The aura that had been writhing around me had been released.

It was just like a magical girl transformation sequence played in reverse.

The result was simple.

Cheon-hwa became the Undertaker.

"?"

Noh Do-hwa's head tilted.

"Trans! Form!"

I flared my aura again with a snap. Sensorially, it felt like finishing a strength workout and striking a pose.

Then, my appearance, not just my face but my height and fashion as well, distorted entirely, and wouldn't you know it, I reverted to being Cheon-hwa once more.

"…"

"Yay-hey!"

Clap, I high-fived Yo-hwa. A dacapo.

"The two sisters are troublemakers, but they're the strongest!"

"The tradition of the ten million cultists of the Korean peninsula! The essence of heresy! The last remaining prodigies of Taoism!"

"Yo-hwa-Yo-hwa☆Sisters! Descend!"

"Yeeaaahhhhh-hey!"

"……"

Silence flowed through the conference room.

"Mr. Matiz, here."

"Ah, thank you, Ji-won."

"You're most welcome."

Yu Ji-won poured black tea from the thermos she always carried and handed it to me. I had just been testing the limits of my vocal cords with Yo-hwa, so I was craving a hot liquid.

Slurp.

As I was peacefully drinking my tea, words finally burst from Noh Do-hwa's lips.

"Has this son of a bitch completely lost his mind—"

Once again, there is an epilogue.

Of course, I would have loved to end the epilogue just by playing the part of Cheon-hwa and teasing Noh Do-hwa, but this episode had a problematic part that absolutely needed to be revised and reviewed.

"I see. In short, you're proposing a hypothesis that there might be a

regressor who exists separately from you, Mr. Matiz."

"Yes."

I said, having thrown off Cheon-hwa's aura farming a moment ago. I restrained myself, feeling that teasing her any further would just needlessly increase Noh Do-hwa's kill count.

As someone who dearly loved Noh Do-hwa's distorted facial muscles, it was a rather difficult thing to endure, but I managed. This was why mental cultivation was so important for a regressor.

"However, it's unclear whether Go Yuri is truly a regressor or not. But it is certain that she is at least in a 'position comparable to a regressor'."

"Hmm."

The testimony I paid particular attention to.

No, it was more of a transcript, and this was the part.

Go Yuri: Really. I thought it would be like this.

Go Yuri: Nothing in particular should have changed this time. Why has Miss Cheon-hwa become so clever?

Go Yuri: Did her DNA change? No way. I didn't touch a single thing concerning the surrounding environment so that Miss Cheon-hwa and Miss Yo-hwa could be born.

Go Yuri: If I had made one wrong move, you twins, you would have miscarried so easily.

Miscarriage.

This part was so excessively significant that I printed it out like a transcript and handed it out to my colleagues.

"Though I can't be 100% certain, Go Yuri spoke as if she also knew of a world-line where Cheon-hwa and Yo-hwa were never even born."

"…"

I glanced to my side.

Nod.

Yo-hwa, who had been working with me to test Noh Do-hwa's murderous intent until just a moment ago, now wore a serious expression.

"Originally, my mother was a bit… frail. After she gave birth to me, no, to us, the image I have of her is of someone who was always lying in bed."

"Hmm. So you're saying it wouldn't be strange even if she had miscarried you."

"Yes."

Yo-hwa affirmed Yu Ji-won's question without hesitation.

"So if Teacher's reasoning is correct, and ah, I think it's correct too. Anyway, then my 'first teacher', that Go Yuri person, probably induced it so that twins would be born on purpose."

"What would be the reason for that?"

"Ahaha. That, I'm not so sure about either…"

Yo-hwa scratched the back of her head with an awkward face.

Why, for what reason, did it have to be twins?

It was a question that could not be easily answered without being able to look inside Go Yuri's heart.

"Hmm."

Noh Do-hwa had deliberately sat a short distance away from us,

propping her chin up at a crooked angle.

"What if you think about it in the exact opposite way…?"

I tilted my head.

"The opposite way?"

"You don't know the reason it had to be twins. In that case, wouldn't it work to try and guess the problem that would arise if they weren't twins…?"

Indeed.

I began to brainstorm back and forth with Noh Do-hwa.

"First of all, if only one was born instead of the Cheon-hwa-Yo-hwa twins, then calling them by separate names like this would become meaningless. In the first place, she would just be one person, 'Cheon Yo-hwa', so there would be no risk of confusion."

"Well, from my perspective, there is still only one Cheon Yo-hwa… In any case, that would leave only a single Cheon Yo-hwa. Is there some kind of problem with that…?"

"The thing is."

My mouth opened.

"Yo-hwa was designated as the sacrifice for Infinite Void, and Cheon-hwa was chosen as the sacrifice for the Mastermind. Therefore, the conclusion is that the Outer Gods that were supposed to be divided between the two of them respectively would become concentrated on one per—"

At that moment.

"Ah?"

My mouth and tongue stopped.

“…?”

"Teacher?"

"Mr. Matiz?"

The gazes of the three focused on me.

But I had no time to worry about each of their expressions. A sort of realization, a thrill like a lightning bolt, was piercing through my spine.

I said.

"Taegeuk."

"Taegeuk?"

"Let's try to think about it in reverse. What if it wasn't two Outer Gods from the beginning. What if originally, there was only *one* Outer God?"

Blink. Blink, blink.

The others still didn't seem to understand my words, their eyebrows twisted uncertainly.

But as I continued to speak, I myself was being swept away by a violent wave of electricity.

"It's Taegeuk. Taegeuk. It's not an Outer God of Yin or an Outer God of Yang. Let's assume that the two were originally one, and that in this world, there was originally only a single Outer God named 'Taegeuk'."

"…"

"That Taegeuk god treats all of creation as equal data. And it runs infinite simulations of the ways all of creation can be combined. Constantly, endlessly, so that a world-line advantageous to itself will always emerge… It keeps running simulations, so that the 'world most advantageous to itself' will come about."

"Ah?"

“…!”

Only then did the expressions of my colleagues begin to change.

Infinite Void. The Mastermind. Aberrations that were Outer God-class even when separated… What if they had been fused into one?

"In other words, from a human perspective, that Taegeuk god itself possesses the power of regression. It would be impossible to win, no matter how much one struggled. It's only natural."

"Because that side… would just run simulations until it wins."

Yo-hwa said, hesitating.

"Even if humanity were to achieve victory, it wouldn't be a true victory. The Outer God would just have to move on to the next cycle. Just like… Teacher."

That's right.

My voice also became low.

"It's useless even if a regressor exists. It's bound to be a draw forever. No, even a draw cannot last forever."

"Why is that? Teacher?"

"Humans do not have infinite mental fortitude."

It was simple logic.

Humanity has a regressor. Even if they are destroyed by the anomalies, they can challenge the next cycle until they win.

The anomalies have the Taegeuk god. Even if humanity is victorious, it can run the next simulation. Until humanity is destroyed.

However, unlike humanity, the anomalies have no intellect. No mind. No ego. No mental fortitude.

Neither stress nor trauma.

"...That is the worst-case scenario."

Yu Ji-won said with a blank face.

"The fact that humanity has been able to reach this point is entirely thanks to the existence of a regressor named Mr. Matiz. To think that the same power was given to the enemy as well. I don't even want to imagine it."

"Just by us being born as a single child, instead of twins, the Taegeuk god would emerge…?"

Yo-hwa muttered, dumbfounded.

Literally cornered on all sides.

A labyrinth and a maze that could never be broken through.

A trash game where no matter which option you choose, it will eventually lead to a bad ending.

If I, the Undertaker, were to face such an impregnable fortress, what would I do?

'I'd give up.'

Like Old Man Scho.

'But what if I don't give up?'

The problem is that the Taegeuk god exists.

'Simply getting rid of Cheon Yo-hwa cannot be the answer. Then another sacrifice will just be chosen as the miko.'

'Rather, it becomes even more impossible to control the variables, as it becomes unknown which human other than Cheon Yo-hwa will be designated as the priestess.'

Leave Cheon Yo-hwa alone.

'If the problem is that the Outer God is too strong…'

Split the Outer God.

“…”

Twist it by force.

Insult nature.

Artificially split what was naturally one into two.

The Way follows nature.[1]

– I interpret that phrase in the opposite way.

A memory.

– Even a single path ultimately culminates in a single person. If that is the case, then I ask you.

If there is no route…

– What reason is there that a single person cannot change that path?

Create a route.

Taegeuk.

The concept of Taegeuk had one loophole. Even though it was ultimately one, it could for the time being be divided into two extremes, yin and yang.

That's why it could be split.

Devise a way to split the originally single 'Cheon Yo-hwa'. The priestess of the Taegeuk god. Into a being that is one yet two.

'Twin sisters.'

It's simple. You just have to roll the coin until Cheon Yo-hwa's mother gives birth to twins. It's a low probability, but it's a possibility that obviously exists.

'Simply being twins is not enough. The two have to be made as if they are truly one… As if they are beings that reflect different aspects, yin and yang. And so.

Even their names were unified.

Cheon Yo-hwa. The same pronunciation.

In writing, Cheon-yo-hwa (天寥化). Cheon-yo-hwa (千謠話).

When calling them, the same pronunciation is segmented into one, one side is Cheon-hwa. The other side is Yo-hwa.

'No way.'

A person. A mere human.

Succeeded in splitting the invincible anomaly, the 'Akashic Records that runs infinite simulations', the impregnable Outer God, into two?

– There is only one way to reach that point.

– It would be to become a human as vast as the path of nature, as vast as the universe.

"…"

– To put it another way, The Way follows *inyeon*.

– Inyeon both as 人然 ("human nature") and as 因緣 ("causes and conditions").

The fact that one anomaly was split into two did not simply mean its combat power was reduced to 50% like in an RPG.

For example, think about separating 'Regression' and 'Complete Memory' from me, the Undertaker.

It wouldn't be a 50% reduction in power. 80%. No, maybe even 99%.

It would bring about a result where almost all of my advantages are

lost.

The 'Taegeuk god' that had driven all of creation into fear no longer existed.

Only the mere, incomplete yin and yang. The traces of that separation called Infinite Void and the Mastermind.

Only some echo of fear faintly chirped in the universe.

The once-perfect Outer God had declined. It had fallen.

Only anomalies that were somehow incomplete, lacking something crucial, came to roam the earth.

'What if.'

A sinister thought suddenly occurred to me.

'What if the difficulty of this world that I have been challenging for over 1,000 cycles… the difficulty that I have thought of as Hard or Lunatic all this time, was actually adjusted to Normal by someone?'

Adjusting the difficulty of the world.

This feat, close to impossible, a being called Go Yuri might have accomplished it.

A fight that was originally a confirmed defeat.

Turned into a 'manageable difficulty' if one bashed their head against it enough times.

It was nothing short of a miracle.

'Wait. Then why on earth, if she was such an incredible being, is she now wandering around as if transformed into an anomaly?'

'In the first place, why was she deleted from Cheon Yo-hwa's memory on June 17th… No. There's not enough material to make a judgment on this.'

I shook my head.

Even though I might have succeeded in deducing the existence of the Taegeuk god, there were still too many mysteries regarding Go Yuri's actions.

I had to get more clues.

"For now. I have figured out how to approach the secret of Go Yuri this time."

Fortunately, I knew where the clues were hidden.

"If I hadn't entered Yo-hwa's dream and delved into her past, I wouldn't have known that a hole of the heart, a void, a '□' was pierced there."

"And you're saying you found that out after more than 1,000 cycles? Isn't this dereliction of duty for a regressor…?"

"Ahem. I have frequently wandered through my own dreams. I was just being careful to protect my privacy and to avoid contact with the Go Yuri residing in the world of the unconscious as much as possible."

Come to think of it, all the dreams about my past were also riddled with holes. Like the memories of my mother.

Everywhere I looked, only the [404 - Not Found] sign had appeared.

To think that it wasn't just me who was peculiar, but that Yo-hwa was similar too. I never would have imagined it in my dreams.

"But it's different now. I have definitely verified a method to deal with Go Yuri, a strategy to face her without getting brainwashed."

"Hmm…"

"So, this is something I'm saying to all of you."

I opened my mouth.

"I think that perhaps not only in Yo-hwa's past but in all of our

pasts, including my own… there might be a similar empty hole (□) pierced."

"Yes…?"

"It's just a hypothesis for now. A hypothesis. So, just as Yo-hwa did, would it be alright if I took a brief look into your pasts?"

"No. I fucking hate that idea…"

Noh Do-hwa made a face of utter disgust.

But there was only one personality-disordered person like Noh Do-hwa in the world. Yu Ji-won coolly accepted.

"In the first place, the only scenery from my past worth cherishing is the summer I spent with you, Mr. Matiz. I don't care about the rest."

"Thank you, Ji-won."

"You're most welcome."

That very day, with the help of the Tutorial Fairies and Cheon-hwa, I infiltrated Yu Ji-won's dream.

Into the dream beyond the 4th stage. Into the past. And thus, to the precarious danger zone from which fragments of the unconscious world where Go Yuri resides flow out.

The result.

[404 - Not Found]

It was discovered.

The same void of memory as Yo-hwa's. A '□'.

“…”

A 'trace of the existence called Go Yuri having been deleted' also existed in Yu Ji-won's past.

'How?'

Right after that….

In Saintess's past.

[404 - Not Found]

In Lee Ha-yul's past.

[404 - Not Found]

In Sim Ah-ryeon's past.

[404 - Not Found]

Even Seo Gyu, Kim Ji-soo, and Dang Seo-rin.

A '□' was discovered in every single one of the people around me. Their pasts, a part of their past memories, had been 'cut out'.

Whenever I wandered the edges of that void pierced in their hearts, something that looked exactly like Go Yuri appeared.

"Why…?"

It didn't stop there.

I persuaded others as well. I infiltrated Lee Ju-ho's dream. I accessed the Sword Marquess's past.

Lee Baek, Lee Jae-hee, Uehara Shino, the Great Priestess, Manyo Neko, Phantom Blade, Obsidian Qin, Jo Yeong-su, Shin Su-bin, Cecelia, Kwon Ryong, Nenets, Manav, Akash.

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Everyone. Every last one.

In the past of every person I looked into, perhaps in all of humanity, there were empty holes pierced like a void.

It was all 'the result of forgetting the existence called Go Yuri'.

“…”

No one in this world.

Not even I, who possessed Complete Memory…

Could remember the someone who had vanished from their respective pasts.

Footnotes:

1 - A phrase originating from Chinese Philosophy, first seen in the book *The classic of The Way and Virtue.* It is one of the Daoist interpretations of how the universe operates, saying that all things in the world must follow their natural course.

Chapter 405

The Interpreter I

Sinnoa

Ta-da.

Who could have possibly guessed it?

The final stop for the infinite regressor wasn't in the 'future' but in the past, back in the very first timeline, of all places.

A classic cliché, twisted. Even the regressor was surprised by this one.

"...Mister. I'm sorry. But you're genuinely giving me the creeps, so could you please stop mimicking Cheon Yo-hwa without any warning? Seriously. I'm begging you."

Unfortunately, having received Oh Dok-seo's 100% sincere ultimate technique, the dogeza, I had to declare the end of the season for my Cheon Yo-hwa impersonation.

"My apologies. Some side effects still linger."

"Aha. Right. So when mister has lingering side effects, he uses that divine control over his aura to copy his student's appearance and cosplay as her, is that it?"

"Thank you for understanding."

"Yep. This is exactly why the Regression Alliance needs a manager like Noh Do-hwa. Someone has to tell the crazy person he's crazy for the world to function properly..."

Oh Dok-seo treated me like a complete lunatic, but honestly, I felt it was unfair.

The habitual transformation into the young lady, this convulsive

impersonation of Lady Cheon Yo-hwa, wasn't just some perverse or self-deprecating joke of mine. It truly was a side effect.

"Dok-seo, imitating someone else entirely within the void is an incredibly dangerous thing to do. It only ended with this kind of joke because it was me you were dealing with. If it had been anyone else, they would have spent the rest of their lives with a second or third personality living in a corner of their mind."

"Hmm. Is it that serious?"

"It is. In fact, I'm more surprised that you're perfectly fine. You sometimes turn on your VTuber mode with [Side Story Creation] and completely immerse yourself in other people. How do you manage to maintain your own ego so effortlessly after doing that?"

"Well, you know?"

Oh Dok-seo tilted her head.

"For me, it just works."

"You talented rascal."

Well, it was probably thanks to Oh Dok-seo's unique skill, the absolute defensive barrier known as the [AT Field].

Oh Dok-seo's sense of reality was, in some way, detached from that of others.

It wasn't that she didn't live her life seriously, but she had a strong tendency to perceive her own life and the lives of those around her as a [story within a work of fiction].

She insisted that she herself possessed the attribute of a 'transmigrator' who had simply been dropped into the middle of a story.

An experienced actor knows how to fully immerse themselves in a role while still maintaining their own self.

Oh Dok-seo's [AT Field], her [Absolute Defensive Barrier], and her

[Fourth Wall] might have been interconnected in that sense.

It was just as I was lost in thought.

– Yaaaaah!

A loud shout.

I had been sitting across from Oh Dok-seo, drinking coffee in the cafe at the Inunaki Tunnel, when a 'noise complaint' suddenly echoed from the floor above.

– Shit! Die! Just die! Get out! Get oooout!

"Ugh."

Oh Dok-seo's expression soured as she was drinking her espresso.

It wasn't just the noise from upstairs that made her face crumple. This girl, despite hating bitterness, insisted on drinking espresso.

If her chuunibyou was at that level, she had practically reached enlightenment.

"That house is at it again."

"Mm."

"No matter where you sit, there's like a 30% chance you'll hear that noise from upstairs. It's even more annoying because you can't make out what they're shouting."

Oh Dok-seo was right.

It was the so-called noise complaint anomaly.

The very fact that a noise complaint was being heard here in the Inunaki hideout cafe was bizarre. Where could an 'upstairs' that generated domestic noise possibly exist in a submerged underwater tunnel?

But that kind of shouting was often heard in any building that simply had a ceiling.

In truth, many of the anomalies that ordinary people encountered in their daily lives were of this trivial sort.

Too insignificant to subjugate, yet too annoying to ignore.

They were the kind you just came to accept as an uncomfortable neighbor in life.

"Can't you get rid of that thing for me? Mister? Every time I'm about to take out my laptop to start writing, that noise starts up and completely kills my motivation."

"Once you get rid of the noise complaint anomaly, I suppose the phobia of the blank white page in your notepad file, the writer's block anomaly, and the burnout anomaly will be waiting for you in succession."

"The only reason I can't write is because of all the anomalies."

"This mister has an inkling that anomalies were born in the first place because people blamed others instead of themselves, hated them, and shirked responsibility."

"What? Are you saying I'm one of those irresponsible and insensitive types? My goodness. I'm hurt. Because of this wound and trauma I've received from mister, I'll now forever be a pathetic writer who can't post two chapters in a row...."

– Dieeeee! Die! Just die, already! Die!

"...No. I'm not joking, Mister. Seriously, do something about it."

Oh Dok-seo looked up at the ceiling with a fed-up expression.

"People on SG Net are always complaining that the noise is driving them crazy. That thing genuinely lowers the quality of life."

"Hmm."

"It's always making a racket with that incomprehensible noise!"

"..."

"It would be better if I could at least understand what it's saying! Then I could at least curse back at it properly!"

While Oh Dok-seo was fuming, I just quietly sipped my coffee.

Because…

'I can actually hear it. What it's saying...'

An astute reader would have already noticed.

The subtle difference that existed between Oh Dok-seo's complaints about the noise and my own narration of it.

– Why are you my mom! Why are you my moooom!

That's right.

To me, Undertaker, the shouts of the noise complaint anomaly from beyond the ceiling were perfectly understandable.

And it wasn't just the noise complaint anomaly.

The voices of all anomalies, I could hear them.

[I'm the Only One Who Can Understand the Anomalies' Voices].

That was the web novel-esque title I had given to my current situation.

If you were to ask exactly when this strange phenomenon began, I could answer with great precision.

It was from the 1,000th cycle.

"Huh?"

The moment that made me certain of this anomaly was none other than my encounter with Dang Seo-rin.

It was our first meeting, an event that had already been repeated hundreds of times.

– Where is this place?

– Dad. Dad. I'm here, Dad.

The moment I arrived to meet Dang Seo-rin as usual, I began to perceive sounds that had never been audible in previous cycles.

The diagonal crosswalk at Centum City in Busan.

An alternate space, a 'crossroads' that had become bizarrely wide.

– Can you hear my voice?

– There's someone here. Someone's here.

Drip. Splat, splat.

Thousands of traffic lights stood like pillars in a temple at the crossroads, and crimson blood overflowed from every red light.

– Excuse me?

– Excuse me, hello?

The blood from the traffic lights became 'red handprints' that crawled across the crosswalk with splatting sounds.

There weren't just one or two. Tens of thousands of handprints were chaotically moving back and forth across the crossing.

Visually, it was no different from the previous cycles.

It was a scene I had watched to the point of exhaustion up to the 1,000th cycle.

'Why can I hear voices?'

Auditorily, however, it was completely different.

– My house disappeared. Officer. Please find my house, please.

– My mother isn't answering her phone. I had it turned off for a moment. There's a missed call. I shouldn't have turned my phone off

then. My mother isn't answering.

– I was kicked out of my house. Does this make any sense? It's my house. There were strangers living there.

Swarm, swarm, swarm.

Every time a bloody handprint was stamped down, a sound, as if it were prerecorded, played from that spot.

It was like hundreds of people in a crowd all muttering whatever they wanted to say at the same time.

"..."

Faced with that overwhelming scene, I was momentarily at a loss for words.

'Why? I've never heard the voices of the handprints at this crossroads before. So why now, in the 1,000th cycle, without any warning....'

No.

At the time, I was too flustered to think about it, but this wasn't the only sudden change that had arrived around the 1,000th cycle.

"Actually. I… I can hear a song."

Dang Seo-rin too, had changed.

"I can hear a song from you, too."

To be precise, it had started from the 999th cycle.

Dang Seo-rin's testimony that everything in the world sounded like 'music,' 'noise,' or 'songs' remained valid even after the 999th cycle passed and the 1,000th began.

What kind of magic could have unfolded?

Dang Seo-rin, for whom all things in the world, including even the sunset in the sky, had truly begun to sound like 'sound.'

And me, who had begun to perceive the 'voices' of anomalies that had been completely inaudible before.

A clear similarity was observed between these two strange phenomena.

However, no matter how much I thought about it, there was no way to know why this 'ability' was suddenly granted to Dang Seo-rin and me without any warning whatsoever.

"Dok-seo."

"Yeah?"

"It seems like a very strange incident that I don't know about must have occurred around the end of the 999th cycle. Is there any way you could use your [Side Story Creation] to find out what happened?"

Come to think of it, the 999th cycle was strange.

'I was just having a drink with Dang Seo-rin, and then the world suddenly ended out of nowhere.'

There were no clues or evidence, but I could at least deduce that some kind of incident had occurred then.

"Uh, yeah. I'd like to help you out if I could, Mister."

"But?"

"The 999th cycle is too recent, you know. My novel hasn't progressed that far yet. To empathize with someone using [Side Story Creation], it needs to be at least somewhat close to what I've written...."

"..."

"Ah. Why? Don't look at me like that."

"..."

"I want to write too! I want to write the novel too! I want to be revered by the readers as a super-diligent-author-nim who posts every single day except for Chuseok and Christmas! You think I want to be like this?! Huh? Mister, you don't know anything. You don't know the pain of creation. You don't know the pain of the soul! Shit, all those diligent writers are just talented hacks! It's in their DNA! If my mom and dad had just passed down some more diligent genes, I wouldn't be in this mess——"

I'll omit what followed, not for Oh Dok-seo's honor, but for the honor of her parents.

It dawned on me anew.

If I were to ever get married but choose not to have children, the reason would be singular. It would solely be due to the fear that there was even a 0.01% chance of a child like Oh Dok-seo being born…

'Two Oh Dok-seo lifeforms on this earth?'

A shiver ran down the back of my neck.

No matter how many world-ending routes I, a professional destructionist, had walked, I couldn't bear to face such a future.

"A-Anyway, please try to write as quickly as possible. Now there's no risk of the world being corrupted by Infinite Metagame even if you write fast."

"The more you rush me, the more my motivation drops."

"Please write as slowly as possible."

"Are you saying you don't trust me right now?! Mister?!"

"...Just please stay healthy."

"I was actually thinking about getting personal training from Mr. Seo Gyu. I heard he is a PT master? Could you put in a word for me, Mister?"

"Sure. Just don't go beating up your readers after you get strong."

"Hm? Ahahaha. Are you silly, Mister? Where in the world is there an author who beats up their readers?"

"..."

"Anyway, just you wait! Once I get PT and become healthy, I'm definitely going to earn the title of a diligent author who posts five times a week, every week, except for the holidays!"

‘You think that's gonna happen?’

The truth of the mystery fell into a state of utter confusion due to a certain author's catastrophic writing pace.

Still, it was a relief. It wasn't an 'unsolvable' problem, but merely a 'delayed' one.

After all, if I just held on for a thousand or ten thousand more years, wouldn't a future Oh Dok-seo eventually reach the truth of the 999th regression on her own?

For a regressor, time was the one thing I had in abundance.

"But is there really a need to be so anxious? Mister? In any case, you gained another ability, so isn't that lucky?"

"..."

"An awakener has awakened again. For now, isn't it fine to think of it like that?"

Though my personality wasn't carefree enough to jump rope with my nerves like Oh Dok-seo, for now, I had no other choice but to adapt to the new situation.

The advantage of being able to [directly and fully understand the voices of the anomalies] had certainly brought me an enormous benefit.

For example.

– Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

– How I wonder, what you are.

– Up above the world so high....

– Like a diamond, in the sky.

– Twinkle, twinkle... little star.

– How I wonder what you are.

The Meteor Shower. Meteor.

The shooting star anomaly that always arrived in the skies above the Gimhae Plains seven years after a regression began.

From the anomaly that had once driven the entire Korean peninsula into terror and even destroyed the world, a 'voice' of incredibly clear quality could be heard.

"Heo."

Originally, that is, before the 1,000th cycle, the only sound I could hear from the Meteor Shower was, at best, something like noise.

To express it in text.

– Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

– Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

– How I wonder what you are.

Something like that.

The melody was so familiar that I could guess it was a 'lullaby,' but even so, I had never been able to hear the Meteor Shower's song clearly.

It was different now.

I could hear it.

– Wheeeeeeeeeeeee.

– How I, wonder what you are.

– Like a diamond... in the sky....

And because of that, I could also understand.

I noticed a minute detail in the trembling of the song that I would never have caught before.

'The voice is trembling.'

The voice of the Meteor Shower belonged to a woman.

Between the brilliant starlight spread across the night sky, the whining sound of a siren was tearing through. It was an air-raid warning.

1. On a certain night when an air-raid siren is wailing.

2. A certain woman sings a lullaby.

3. With a trembling voice.

4. The humans who die by the Meteor Shower die instantly, feeling no pain.

"..."

Having gathered this many clues, I hadn't squandered my life as a regressor so foolishly as to be unable to make the leap toward the truth.

I wonder if you remember.

Back when I first subjugated the Meteor Shower.

I had mentioned in that story that there had been an 'unexplained bombing' in the Gimhae Plains at the time of the void's advent.

No evidence related to that bombing incident remained anywhere, so it was impossible to even know how exactly the bombing was

carried out.

The reason for death had evaporated.

Because death went missing, life too went missing.

'Perhaps.'

I put Do-hwa down. I released my aura as well.

In a situation where I had to conserve my aura as much as possible to suppress Yu Ji-won's Outer God, also known as Leviathan, the Meteor Shower had been an exception until now.

I knew of no other way to deal with it other than to slice it apart in a single strike with a powerful aura.

However.

"...Mom."

Only after more than 1,000 cycle.

I felt like I finally knew how.

"I'm… I'm okay."

I muttered, looking straight up at the host of the Meteor Shower staining the night sky.

"I'm not scared."

– Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

"I'm with you, Mom."

– How I wonder...

"When I'm with you, Mom, I'm not really scared."

The siren wailed.

"Actually, I'm more scared when you cover my eyes."

The siren wailed.

"So it's okay if you don't cover them."

The siren wailed.

"I want to keep looking at your face, Mom, until the very end."

The Meteor Shower trickled down.

The streaks of starlight that had been ceaselessly striking down, etching diagonal lines across the night sky, began to fall all around like hail.

Thud, thud, patter.

Small fragments made of starlight.

As the fragments of light rained down, something wrapped around my shoulder. I couldn't see its shape, but it had a contour similar to a human arm.

– I love you. My baby.

The starlight all melted away, and the night sky blurred.

– Mommy, really, truly loves you.

I held onto the invisible forearm.

"Yes. I love you too."

Click.

The siren stopped.

The pebbles that had fallen to the ground no longer emanated starlight. The night sky grew quiet, as if it had always been that way.

"..."

I bent down and picked up a pebble that had lost both its light and

sound.

And I realized.

I must not use my invincible aura. And yet, I must put the anomalies to rest.

My route, which was extremely self-contradictory and at a glance seemed impossible.

I realized how I could walk it.

Footnotes:

Chapter 406

The Interpreter II

Sinnoa

In retrospect, I suppose I was a rather bland and unremarkable person for an awakener.

Let's imagine, for instance, that there was a Protagonist Certification Association for genre novels, and an interviewer there asked me a question like this.

‘Oh! A regressor! How wonderful. But just being a regressor isn’t enough to be competitive among protagonists these days, you know?’

‘The key is a unique skill!’

‘Setting aside regression, which every Tom, Dick, and Harry seems to have these days, what powerful ability is uniquely yours?’

Hmm.

Despite being a professional regressor who had been through over 1,000 cycles, if they were to ask me that, I really wouldn't have had anything suitable to write on a resume.

Time Seal?

‘That's certainly unique! But unless you get the other person's consent, it's useless.’

‘It's far from powerful. Man, this kind of thing isn't popular these days.’

A tremendous amount of aura?

‘Oh, I'll give you that. That is powerful. But reading your resume, it says you’ve entered an 'aura diet' phase…’

‘In the first place, aura isn't even a unique skill, is it?’

Interview result: Rejected.

That's right.

Except for the fact that my mentality was more flexible than anyone else's, and aside from my extraordinary love for the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, there was nothing particularly special about me.

But in a way, wasn't this also a tradition?

The cliché of the 'ordinary protagonist', which had long since devolved into an old joke. Perhaps the perseverance that had steadfastly preserved this beautiful culture like a fossil until now was the very identity of me, Undertaker.

At least, that's how it had been until now.

“I can hear the voices of the anomalies. It isn't just simple noise or static. I can decipher their screams just as if I were listening to a person's voice. Everyone, if you are with me, you will experience the days of conquering anomalies by devising highly sophisticated strategies.”

“Undertaker! Undertaker! Undertaker!”

“Wooooooah!”

“Hey, hey! We believed in you!”

Receiving the fervent cheers from the awakeners, I raised both my arms high. The shouting, of course, grew even more intense.

The Undertaker.

A successful debut as a protagonist, after a grand total of 1,000 regressions.

Sometimes, life was truly coincidental.

“Suppose I had the ability to understand the voices of anomalies from the very beginning. Say, from around the 5th cycle.”

“Hmm.”

“Then I probably wouldn't have been able to face the anomalies with the same mindset I have now.”

I was walking with Oh Dok-seo, Sim Ah-ryeon, Lee Ha-yul, and the kids from the Regression Alliance.

Crunch.

The asphalt gravel from the crumbled highway scraped unevenly under the soles of our shoes.

The cycle was the 1,022nd.

The location was the Japanese archipelago.

“Why? Wouldn't that have been better?”

Oh Dok-seo, shouldering a backpack, tilted her head.

“Being able to understand the voices of all anomalies is a huge advantage only you have, Mister. If you had acquired it in the early regressions, I think you could have greatly reduced all sorts of trial and error.”

“I wonder. Ah, this is the spot.”

The broken highway led to a tunnel, which was half-buried in earth and sand. I pointed to a patch of bare ground near the tunnel entrance.

“Everyone, grab a shovel and dig around here.”

“Hweeeh. W-why do we have to do this manual labor…”

Sim Ah-ryeon looked like she was about to cry.

But with Lee Ha-yul, who was much smaller than her, taking the initiative and starting to dig, she couldn't afford to slack off. Sim

Ah-ryeon also joined in the digging, whining as she followed us.

Soon.

[Ah.]

Lee Ha-yul's shovel stopped.

[Oppa. It's here.]

We immediately stopped working and gathered around Lee Ha-yul. After digging out a little more dirt, the thing we were looking for finally revealed itself.

It was the forearm of a child.

[It's an arm, not a foot.]

Lee Ha-yul muttered as if disappointed. To be precise, she wasn't speaking with her own mouth but moving the mouth of her maid puppet.

[It would have been easier if it was a foot.]

“You can't be full on the first spoonful. It's lucky we found it this quickly. Store it for now.”

[Okay.]

Lee Ha-yul lightly brushed the dirt off the child's forearm, then placed the remains into the refrigerated compartment of her yogurt cart.

We didn't have to worry about it rotting.

As you could tell just by seeing how its original form was preserved without a single insect bite mark despite being buried in the dirt, that was no ordinary piece of a corpse.

“Next is a tunnel 40km from here.”

“Hweeeeng. Guild Leader, I-I want to ride in the cart too…”

“Do you really want to take the ride from a kid with no legs?”

“B-but! She has the Director's special prosthetic legs equipped, so she has legs now! Guild Leader, you only dote on Ms. Ha-yul…”

“Sigh.”

The three of us, excluding Sim Ah-ryeon, shook our heads and headed for the next destination.

“Eh. W-wait for me! I'm coming too……!”

For a full fortnight, we scoured the Japanese archipelago.

Here, a left leg. There, a few fingers.

Like that, the corpse was assembled piece by piece in the cart's refrigerated compartment.

“Ha-yul.”

[Roger.]

After neatly arranging the scattered body parts, Lee Ha-yul drew out her puppet strings.

The puppet strings burrowed into the corpse like living parasites. *Squeeze*. Before long, the severed sections of the body were stitched together with the puppet strings.

[Complete.]

The corpse shot up to its feet.

If you looked closely, the severed sections were attached so cleanly you wouldn't even notice. Just like the marionette maid that Lee Ha-yul always had with her.

There was one difference from the maid puppet.

“Ugh.”

Oh Dok-seo was repulsed.

“They really messed up the face badly. What kind of bastard did this?”

Thanks to Ha-yul's puppet strings, the limbs were intact, but the face was so severely damaged that it was impossible to recognize.

If this had been before the fall of civilization, the kids gathered here would have gagged several times.

But now, since they observed corpses whenever they were bored, everyone just furrowed their brows a little, with no intense reactions.

“Ah-ryeon, it's your turn.”

“Mmm… Okay.”

Sim Ah-ryeon furrowed her eyebrows and opened her sketchbook. She seemed to have a lot to say, but her tone suggested she wouldn't complain since it was ‘the Guild Leader's request’.

“…”

However, once she actually began the task of drawing, the residue of emotion vanished from Sim Ah-ryeon's face completely.

“Please turn it around.” “Sitting pose.” “Please spread its arms wide,” and so on.

Sim Ah-ryeon constantly made requests in a low voice. Lee Ha-yul received those requests and manipulated the doll accordingly.

“Mm… Well, yes. I'm done drawing.”

Her tone was tinged with the sentiment that it wasn't particularly satisfying, but the quality was somehow acceptable.

What was drawn in Sim Ah-ryeon's sketch was none other than the full body of a child.

The ruined face was also properly ‘restored,’ and it was smiling brightly on the drawing paper.

“Yes. Good job. You must have had a hard time following us around, so rest for a while now.”

“Ah. Ehehe…”

When I patted her head, Sim Ah-ryeon smiled with a silly grin.

My heart ached at her smile, which seemed to say that this simple gesture relieved all her hardship.

It wasn't that I wasn't happy. It was just that I knew the ‘□’ cut out with scissors in Sim Ah-ryeon's heart was just as empty.

‘This is a problem I'll have to solve someday. Someday.’

For now, I had to focus on the anomaly in front of me.

I attached the portrait of the child drawn by Sim Ah-ryeon to the face of the corpse doll assembled by Lee Ha-yul.

Then I picked up a mask I had prepared in advance and covered the corpse doll's face.

The terribly mangled face and Sim Ah-ryeon's portrait were both swallowed and buried by the mask.

“Oh.”

Then, something amazing happened.

“Ah, Mister. It disappeared!”

Just as Oh Dok-seo said, the corpse doll wearing the portrait and mask had vanished in an instant.

It hadn't run off somewhere with footwork that far surpassed my own. It had literally just vanished in the blink of an eye.

Lee Ha-yul tilted her head.

[Was it eliminated?]

“No.”

I shook my head.

“Probably not. I'll be right back.”

[Be right back? Where are you going?]

Inunaki Tunnel.

The plaque at the tunnel entrance, faintly engraved with ‘犬鳴隧道’ (Inunaki Tunnel).

Beneath it, a child wearing a plain white mask stood hesitatingly.

– Ah.

Has it spotted me?

The masked girl flinched and trembled, but spoke cautiously towards me.

– Uhm. M-mister.

“What is it?”

– I have to, um, get through that tunnel. It's too dark, so I'm scared to go alone. Could you possibly go with me?

“…”

I smiled.

“Of course. That's fine.”

– Ah.

“I was just about to cross the tunnel myself. Even if you're scared, I'll be by your side, so shall we go together?”

– Th-thank you!

“But this tunnel. There are a lot of rumors that ghosts appear here.”

– G-ghost!

The child was startled. Even though its expression was completely hidden by the plain white mask, I could clearly feel that it was terrified.

“That's right. Even if you hear a voice calling you, never look back. And you mustn't lose sight of me until we get out of the tunnel. Got it?”

– Yes, yes. I'll do that.

I held out my hand. The child then raised its arm and firmly grasped my hand.

We entered the tunnel.

Thump, the sound echoed longer than usual.

It was probably because a slightly smaller footstep, pitter-patter, echoed after my own.

– Euh…

“Are you scared?”

– I'm not scared…

This wasn't the first time I had entered the Inunaki Tunnel. It was probably the place I had spent the most time in during my life of regression, so it was only natural.

So, I was able to walk through safely.

The sections where a wrong step would plunge you into invisible water up to your head, choking you. The sections where your limbs would be torn apart. The sections where your fingers would be splintered.

“Oh. By the way, I never asked why you're trying to cross the tunnel.”

– M-Melt is gone.

“Melt?”

– Ah. It's the dog we're raising at home. It's really big. But a little while ago, it suddenly started barking a lot and disappeared inside the tunnel.

“…”

– If Melt is gone, my dad and I will be very sad. Melt will be sad too. That's why even though I'm scared, I have to cross the tunnel and bring Melt back!

“You must be scared too, but you mustered up the courage because you were worried your pet dog would be more scared. That's very brave of you.”

– Hehe. Ah. I-I'm not scared!

Thump. Pitter-patter.

As always, the Inunaki Tunnel was terribly long.

It wasn't strange. A tunnel seen through a child's eyes was bound to be much longer than one experienced by an adult.

Why is it so rare to find an adult who will take the hand of a child when they muster a handful of courage and reach out?

– Melt shouldn't have gone far…

The masked girl muttered this the entire time we walked through the tunnel. It was partly to fight her fear, and partly because she was genuinely worried.

– There were flyers posted in the village, you know, asking to find lost pet dogs or cats.

“Is that so?”

– Whenever I saw those, I wondered what they were for. If Melt disappeared, I'd have to put up flyers too…

How long had we walked?

Woof!

The sound of a dog barking came from the other end of the tunnel. The child, who had been walking with its head down while holding my hand, was startled.

– It's Melt!

The child let go of my hand and, as if forgetting this was a scary tunnel, rushed towards the other end.

A faint light streamed in from the far end of the tunnel. The light settled in the puddles of water on the tunnel floor, then, Splash! it flew up with droplets of water at the girl's footstep.

– Melt! Melt! Melt!

The child kept calling its pet's name.

It seemed to harbor a slender hope that the dog would recognize it from that simple call, an expectation that a mere name would connect the two beings.

Woof woof.

Fortunately, it seemed to have recognized the voice.

To me, the sight of a puppy crying for its young master was completely invisible, but it seemed different for the masked girl.

The child plopped down at the end of the tunnel and hugged the empty air. As if the puppy that had been waiting for its master at the exit was right there.

– Thank goodness, Melt. I'm so glad. I'm glad you didn't go too far.

Woof.

– From now on, don't suddenly run off like that, okay? I was really scared. Let's go home quickly, Melt. Let's hurry home…

Woof.

And then, all sound ceased.

I exited the tunnel. The exit. The bushes were overgrown, and the concrete was broken. There was no sign of a puppy waiting for its master.

The child was gone too.

Instead, a mask lay on the ground. Beneath the mask, the picture Sim Ah-ryeon had drawn was pressed flat.

As I lifted the mask, I paused for a moment.

In the drawing, the girl was smiling. And next to the girl, something that Sim Ah-ryeon had not drawn was now there.

A large, brown-colored dog was drawn with a crooked crayon.

"…"

I carefully stored the drawing so it wouldn't get folded.

This time, there was no separate epilogue.

No. Not just this time, but the next time, and the time after that, there was no need to record a separate epilogue.

And that was only natural.

Because from now on, every story would become the epilogue of a certain regressor.

Footnotes:

Chapter 407

The Exhibitor I

Sinnoa

As I mentioned in the last story, I continued to travel around the world, ‘conquering’ anomalies as I went.

This time, let’s talk about something that happened in Busan along the way.

My colleagues in the Regression Alliance often expressed their gratitude to me.

The reason was simple. They said that my intervention, as a regressor, had changed their lives.

“Yeees. I'm so grateful that I feel like flaying you, stuffing you, and then enshrining you like a household god for the rest of my life.”

I’ll correct myself.

With the exception of personality-defects like Noh Do-hwa, ‘most’ of my colleagues in the Regression Alliance were grateful to me.

For instance, Lee Ha-yul.

[Yeah. It’s horrifying to think of a world without you, Oppa.]

Having returned to the Busan hideout after a long time, Lee Ha-yul philosophized while curled up in my arms like a squirrel.

[I probably would have killed the esteemed Mayor Jung Sang-guk and then neatly ended my own life.]

[The extermination of all traitors to the nation. It’s sad, but this was the mission given to me, Lee Ha-yul, the last proud descendant of the Deoksu Lee clan….]

And she really would have done it.

But, to put it another way, it meant that I had presented the choice of life to a Lee Ha-yul who was originally supposed to meet her end.

Though no one forced me to, I felt a certain sense of duty about this.

Of course. If you're going to force someone who wants to die to stay alive, shouldn't you take responsibility for their life?

I didn't mean I had to take responsibility for everything.

It meant I had to do just enough so that Ha-yul wouldn't give up on life, just enough to keep her finger from leaving the 'Continue' button in a game.

[…]

I had no intention of just dropping her into a hunting ground and abandoning her to grow on her own.

Nor did I have any intention of letting her dependency on me go unchecked.

[You mean I have to get stronger.]

That's right.

I taught her how to become stronger. I provided her with time to practice.

If there was a hole in her heart that was too difficult to bear, I would even enter her subconscious to reveal that '□'.

"It's hard to believe how things ended up this way, but every person in this world has a scar from having lost a being named Go Yuri. Ha-yul, you're no exception."

[…]

"The secret to the magic that makes people feel an instinctive

fondness for Go Yuri, as if they've been brainwashed, lies here."

I used to think it was a simple brainwashing ability.

But not anymore.

"When people see Go Yuri, they feel the same emotion as if they've been reunited with a precious person they lost a long, long time ago. Subconsciously."

[Because she really is someone we lost?]

"Yes."

That was Go Yuri's secret. Her trick. Her method.

Anyone who saw Go Yuri felt a sense of 'longing'. They sensed a nostalgia for a time before the world had turned into a complete mess, before their own lives had been ruined.

It was a temptation that was difficult to refuse.

"But in my case, it went beyond just having a part of my past distorted. My past was thoroughly erased. It's literally a blank space, a void. That might be why I was able to remain relatively free from Go Yuri's brainwashing."

[…]

Nestled in my arms, Ha-yul tilted her head back and looked up at my face.

[That's actually a bad sign.]

"What do you mean?"

[Dad. If Go Yuri was a part of my life, even if I don't remember it, and my memories were distorted as that part was cut away.]

[The fact that your memories disappeared entirely.]

[Doesn't that mean Go Yuri was such a precious existence to you that simply cutting out a part of it wasn't enough, so everything had

to be deleted?]

“…”

She was a sharp kid, as expected.

I gently combed through Ha-yul’s chestnut-brown hair. It was slightly curly, and Ha-yul liked it when I combed it this way.

“The fact that I have a wound I don’t even know about doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing.”

[Why?]

“You and I, Ha-yul. The members of the Regression Alliance. And even other people, it means we all suffer from the same void in our memories, doesn’t it?”

[…]

Lee Ha-yul rubbed her head against my chest. I, in turn, accepted Ha-yul’s childish affection.

‘However.’

All of humanity shared a common ‘□’. They had lost the being known as Go Yuri.

For that very reason, for some people, when they descend into a dream within a dream, a dream of dreams, a great void known as the subconscious world must unfold.

‘An Outer God is a being that corrupts all humans and twists the world. If that’s the case, has Go Yuri already devoured the people of Earth?’

It was at that moment.

“Ah, ahhhh.”

At the entrance of the cafe hideout, Sim Ah-ryeon, who hadn’t even washed her hair, stood with a trembling finger.

“G-Guild Leader is… again! Again, you just got home after so long and you’re only giving affection to Ms. Ha-yul…!”

Lee Ha-yul let out a scoff.

[The early bird gets dad’s lap.]

“I… I was awake too. If only I hadn’t been protecting the peace on SG Net until dawn, I could have done it!”

[That’s impossible.]

Lee Ha-yul said coolly.

[Ah-ryeon unni is a famous community addict.]

“My hair! C-comb my hair too, please!”

[You smell. Don’t come any closer.]

“What? W-what are you talking about? I only smell nice…. The faithful followers of the Eastern Holy State all like me. If my smell is b-bothering you, then it's entirely Ms. Ha-yul’s sense of smell that’s at fault.”

[Why in the world is this person a perfect woman when she’s cosplaying as a Saintess, but a complete mess the moment she comes home? I really don’t get it.]

Regardless of Lee Ha-yul’s laments, Sim Ah-ryeon squeezed herself in between us like a hedgehog and claimed her spot.

Ugh, Ha-yul let out a groan not with her voice, but with her entire body.

And yet, the fact that she only bickered with words and didn’t actually chase her away proved our Ha-yul’s beautiful nature. QED.

So what if she killed and tortured her family and carries them around as marionettes? Such things can happen.

It’s all the fault of Go Yuri, who implemented the Humanity

Affection Deficit Plan by drilling a □ in Ha-yul's heart. Mhmm.

"..."

Sim Ah-ryeon was staring at me intently.

Expecting this, I took out another comb I had brought separately and tidied her hair, and only then did her expression slacken into a wide grin.

"Ah-ryeon."

"Yes?"

"Are the preparations for the exhibition going well?"

"Yes!"

Ah-ryeon giggled.

"It's all thanks to you, G-Guild Leader."

The one and only person who was always elected with an overwhelming first place in the 'Shall we vote for the person in our Regression Alliance who might actually be an anomaly?' poll, a title acknowledged by herself and others.

Sim Ah-ryeon.

This ungrateful OldManGoryeo Villain whined that I only ever doted on Ha-yul, but that was, of course, fake news.

I could confidently say that if you searched the entire three thousand worlds, past life, present life, and next life, you wouldn't find anyone who put as much effort into caring for Sim Ah-ryeon as I did.

"A-a painting…?"

"Yes. I want you to paint funeral portraits for the anomalies."

The portrait painting project.

This too was part of the plan to rehabilitate the human enigma known as Sim Ah-ryeon.

As I mentioned when I dealt with the Inunaki Tunnel in a previous story, around this time I was taking Sim Ah-ryeon around and always instructing her to paint ‘portraits of anomalies’.

There was a deep thought behind it.

‘Ah-ryeon is, in the end, just a pitiful victim who developed a sickness of the heart due to that wicked Go Yuri’s mischief!’

The reason why Sim Ah-ryeon couldn’t find fulfillment in the real world and always escaped to the SG Net community to leech self-esteem from others.

The reason why, when I begged her to live in reality and even got her a job as a Saintess in the North, she would cry out, ‘This isn’t the real me,’ and act as a completely different persona, turning reality itself into a stage play.

The reason why, every time she saw me, she would exert a silent pressure of ‘ehehe’ and ‘If you saved me, I won’t allow you to run away,’ showing the very essence of a menhera.

It must all, all be the fault of the ‘□’ that Go Yuri left behind.

“Um…”

Hearing this assertion of mine, Oh Dok-seo tilted her head.

“Mister. Didn’t you say before that the reason anomalies are born is because people disregard their own responsibility and blame everything on others and the world? It feels like you’re doing the exact same thing right now, just swapping ‘blaming others’ with ‘blaming Go Yuri’….”

“The most recently uploaded chapter was 172 days ago.”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaak!”

Do not worry. The monster that threw my pure and innocent

readers into the swamp of a hiatus has been vanquished by me, the Undertaker.

Anyway, the problem was the heart. A sickness of the heart.

But it wasn't as if I could bring Go Yuri over and plead, ‘Now, become one.’

What could I do to heal Sim Ah-ryeon, this troublemaker of the Regression Alliance, this one-of-a-kind villain who manufactured trouble like a perpetual motion machine, even just a little?

The answer.

‘It’s art.’

That was the tentative conclusion I reached.

‘Ah-ryeon dismisses all her activities in the real world as mere ‘pranks,’ but at least when she’s drawing, she’s more serious than anyone.’

That was the blessing Sim Ah-ryeon had received.

The fact that she could be sincere in at least one field. The fact that there was a point of friction where she could make her own self confront the world and clash with it.

And she even possessed a heavenly talent?

If this wasn't a blessing, what was?

‘Even though I can draw quite well myself, Ah-ryeon’s anomaly paintings… they have a power that’s difficult for me to express, moving and living with detail.’

Considering that I, a regressor, had invested easily hundreds of thousands of hours into painting, Sim Ah-ryeon’s sense was truly remarkable.

‘And yet…’

The product of that very talent.

Sim Ah-ryeon had never once revealed it to people under her real name, her true name.

Even when she occasionally posted doodles on SG Net, it was always under the nickname

[OldManGoryeo] , the villain.

Or they were attached as uncredited illustrations to the guide posts uploaded by [The Librarian of the Great Library].

‘No. It’s not just her art.’

In the first place, how many people on Earth right now even know of the existence of Sim Ah-ryeon?

There were plenty of Awakeners who knew of the villain OldManGoryeo. There were even more people who worshipped the Saintess of the North.

Whether through infamy or fame, both ‘nicknames’ were receiving the most attention of the era.

But Sim Ah-ryeon?

“M-Ms. D-Dok-seo. Look at this. I’m sorry, readers. I’ve been cutting down on sleep to write and rewrite the manuscript, but I just can’t seem to get a satisfactory quality. I sometimes resent my own artisan spirit…”

“Hwaaaaaak! Mister! Ah-ryeon unni is tormenting me again! She’s reciting an old announcement I wrote and following me around!”

“…”

How many people, I wonder, truly know about Sim Ah-ryeon.

‘It’s probably just the members of the Regression Alliance.’

Whether it was the true Saintess residing in her home in Yongsan,

or the fake Saintess coming and going from the palace in Pyongyang, both showed a strange similarity in that they were secluded from the world.

'That's why I'm going to make her debut! As the great artist Sim Ah-ryeon! The master of the art world who, following in the footsteps of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, has given birth to the Anomaly Expressionist style of painting!'

"?"

As if sensing my fervent gaze, Sim Ah-ryeon tilted her head. Then, *thump thump*, she returned with the comb and plopped down in front of me.

'Hehe.'

I smiled like a wicked young lady and combed her hair. Ah-ryeon-ah, soon the whole world will be cheering your name.

'Then you'll find joy in reality and stop putting on your mask-and-troll acts!'

"?"

At last, the long-awaited day of the exhibition.

We set up a temporary gallery in the Tower of Babel Plaza so that the citizens of Busan could come and go and view it comfortably.

Noh Do-hwa seriously questioned whether it was right to invest manpower in such a project, but faced with the great cause of normalizing Sim Ah-ryeon, even the great Director of the National Road Management Corps had to concede.

"What's this? An exhibition?"

"Wow, it's been a really long time since I've heard that word."

"Is it an event hosted by the National Road Management Corps?"

People who in the old days would never have given a second glance

to something like an art museum, claiming it lacked dopamine, now looked around the gallery in twos and threes.

“Oh…”

“This has a certain vibe.”

“I know, right? It looks really esoteric, but it’s strange how you feel like you can understand what’s what.”

The choice of theme was also excellent.

In the exhibition hall, the visages of the anomalies for whom Sim Ah-ryeon and I had held funerals were painted in a vigorous style.

Anomalies, after all, were beings familiar to Awakeners and known to the general public through rumors. A field that held interest for everyone, regardless of class.

And yet, a genre that had never once been ‘properly’ established in art history was being created at the tip of Sim Ah-ryeon’s brush.

“Ah. Gremlin! I know this one! It’s a Gremlin!”

“Just looking at it makes me want to kill it…”

“Ahaha.”

“But what’s this masked kid here? Is this an anomaly too?”

“I don’t know. The esteemed Awakeners would probably know.”

Murmur murmur.

The number of visitors, which had been decent even during the early morning commute, had multiplied fivefold by lunchtime as word got out, and by the evening rush hour, the gallery was bustling enough to be completely full.

“Heh.”

“...I didn’t expect it to be this popular.”

On the second day, even Dang Seo-rin and Cheon Yo-hwa, who had each brought their executives, couldn't hide their surprise.

Looks of newfound respect focused on Sim Ah-ryeon, who sat at the counter with her head bowed low.

"The Teacher always protected and doted on her, so I just thought she was someone who was all about healing…"

It was only natural to be impressed.

This exhibition was, after all, the 『Special Anomaly Exhibition』.

The more types of anomalies a viewer was familiar with, the deeper and more they could see.

In other words, it was designed so that the more outstanding an Awakener was, the more immersed they would become in the exhibition.

'The response wasn't this good when people saw it as an illustration on SG Net.'

There was quite a big difference between a picture cut off by a smartphone screen and encountering the real thing.

Sim Ah-ryeon had even expressed 'Infinite Void' and 'Mastermind' as abstract paintings infused with expressionist techniques.

In front of that enormous canvas, even Cheon Yo-hwa couldn't help but linger for a long time.

"Hmm…"

Day four of the exhibition. Noh Do-hwa must have heard the rumors, as she somehow found the time to stop by.

After touring the gallery with my commentary, having taken on the job of a professional curator, Noh Do-hwa muttered.

"I see. I was wondering what kind of carefree art exhibition this was, but at this rate, it will be helpful for people to accurately

perceive anomalies. This was meaningful…”

For even Noh Do-hwa, who had lived her life with a wall between herself and art, to evaluate it this way.

The exhibition project was, in short, a grand success.

– Anonymous: I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone who can draw that well in my life

Anonymous: fr fr I thought modern art < this was just for clapping when a famous person takes a dump but my opinion changed a bit this time...

[Samcheon]WitchJudge: I was surprised too

Anonymous: Wow a comment from someone so esteemed in such a humble place;;

SG Net was also buzzing with talk of the exhibition.

“Hmm.”

I looked down at my smartphone with a pleased smile.

That’s right. Whether in reality or in the virtual world, it was fine even if she didn’t draw attention as the villain OldManGoryeo.

Sim Ah-ryeon was overflowing with enough charm to capture people’s interest.

Now, won’t Ah-ryeon be able to escape, even just a little, from suffering due to the deficiency in her heart?

As I was feeling so thrilled.

“…”

Blankly.

Sim Ah-ryeon was staring intently at me.

Footnotes:

Chapter 408

The Exhibitor II

Sinnoa

The first-ever ‘Special Anomaly Exhibition’ came to a successful close.

It was a triumph that engraved the three-syllable name ‘Sim Ah-ryeon’ into the minds of everyone on the Korean Peninsula, Awakened and ordinary people alike.

“Artist Ms. Sim Ah-ryeon! Can I please have your autograph!”

“Me too! I was so deeply moved by your work, I can’t even pick a favorite!”

“Eh, ehehe. Yes...”

“Can we take a picture, Artist-nim?!”

“What? No. I’d absolutely hate that...”

“Eh.”

“Eh.”

Of course, the visitors all felt an instinctual sense, whether they knew it or not, that this artist might not be entirely sound of mind, but isn't that just how geniuses are?

A person's personality could be packaged in any number of ways. With titles like 'artist', 'genius painter', and 'mad anomaly artist' attached to her name, Sim Ah-ryeon's unique eccentricity was actually a charming point.

After all, the only people who would like someone for being perfect were Plato or Confucius. Unless finding joy in being adored by old men was your life's goal, a few moderate flaws in a person were like

necessary breathing holes.

“Much like my own passionate love for the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is for me, the Undertaker.”

[Hey, Dad. If you have time to spout nonsense, hurry up and move the equipment.]

“Yes, milady.”

[Alright.]

Chastened by Ha-yul's retort, I sullenly directed the demolition of the gallery's temporary structure.

Now that the exhibition was over, clearing out the Tower of Babel Plaza was the natural course of action.

The plaza was also a place where some homeless people lived and food stalls thrived, so it wasn't good to monopolize it for too long.

“Ah.”

Just then, Sim Ah-ryeon came scurrying over from a corner of the exhibition hall.

“G-Guild Leader. Please don't clear it out yet!”

“Hm? Why? The exhibition ended today.”

“Well...”

Sim Ah-ryeon twiddled her index fingers.

“I-it's a secret!”

“A secret?”

“Yes, yes. There's something I want to show you, Guild Leader... Could you maybe leave it up without tearing it down for about a week?”

“Oh.”

I was a little taken aback.

“I think Director Noh Do-hwa is going to be breathing down our necks, asking what we're doing and telling us to clear out.”

“T-the gallery doesn't have to be as big as it is now! Just a space big enough for you and me to walk around is enough.”

“Hmm.”

If it was just that much.

“Wait. Let's see. You're saying it's okay to shrink it to about one-fifth of the current size, instead of using the whole plaza?”

“Yes!”

“Alright. Your Guild Leader will see what he can do.”

“Ehehe. Th-thank you. You're the best, Guild Leader...”

At Sim Ah-ryeon's strange request, the demolition work was halted immediately. The marionette labor corps led by Lee Ha-yul also trotted back.

“D-don't. You absolutely cannot enter the gallery until I say you can!”

“No one?”

“No one! It's a t-total secret. A super, super secret... If you try to peek behind my back, I won't forgive you, even if you are the Guild Leader...”

A threat from anyone else might have been different, but a threat from Sim Ah-ryeon was terrifying, so I quickly made myself scarce.

If anyone wishes to know the reason for my fear, please refer to the list of posts made on SG Net by [OldManGoryeo] and [Saintess of the North] in the slightly earlier episodes.

“Saintess, do you know anything?”

[No.]

I exchanged telepathic messages with the real Saintess, not the fake one, but I didn't get much.

[Ms. Ah-ryeon made me promise not to peek either.]

“She’s already been holed up in the gallery for four days without a word... I'm getting worried.”

After the demolition was postponed, Sim Ah-ryeon had surrounded the entire exhibition hall with a white tent. Then she went inside and started working on something with tapping and clicking sounds.

She had cut off all contact and communication with others.

Twice a day, when I placed a meal at the gallery entrance, a hand would shoot out from the tent as quick as a flash and snatch the meal tray.

The sliver of Sim Ah-ryeon's bare arm that I saw was completely covered in paint.

“From the looks of it, she’s clearly working on something else inside the exhibition hall.”

It was strange.

“But all the anomalies Ah-ryeon could possibly paint have already been completed as artworks. The exhibition ended well, too. What more could she be drawing.”

[Perhaps she is painting a piece she wants to show only to you, Mr. Undertaker?]

The Saintess said in a gentle tone.

[Ms. Ah-ryeon surely knows how much you do for her.]

[So I suspect she might be preparing a kind of thank-you gift.]

“My goodness.”

What a thoughtful gesture.

‘Ah, our Ah-ryeon is becoming more and more human! This Guild Leader is so happy I could cry!’

Tears were, in fact, streaming down my face.

[...You truly are devoted to Ms. Ah-ryeon, Mr. Undertaker.]

“Well, as an intellectual, I can't help but be moved, since I'm witnessing the evolution of an ape into a human in real time.”

[Pardon?]

“Yes?”

The promised week passed.

That morning, I was drinking a cafe au lait while brushing Ha-yul’s hair.

I was feeling a little lonely without the green-haired coffee thief who always appeared like a ninja to steal her share of caffeine, when.

Ping!

A notification popped up on my smartphone.

– Saintess of the North: Mr. Barista.

Sim Ah-ryeon had sent a message.

It was a private, secret message sent to the ‘Admin-Only Chatroom,’ which only members of the Regression Alliance could access, an internet chatroom we had set up using Seo Gyu's SG Net ability.

I skillfully turned on the one-on-one secret chat function and replied.

– ZERO_SUGAR: What?

– Saintess of the North: Respectfully, the preparations are complete. I request that Mr. Barista come alone to the designated place tonight at 11 PM.

– ZERO_SUGAR: OK

So the preparations were finally done.

'This is making me strangely excited.'

The thought that I might receive a proper gift from the green-haired coffee thief for the first time in my life mixed excitement and pride, creating a cocktail called fondness.

Ping!

– Saintess of the North: Furthermore, a strict dress code will be in effect at the location. Please refrain from using the seven-colored perfume you usually wear.

– Saintess of the North: I will see you tonight then.

I paused for a moment at the follow-up message.

First, I wondered what on earth was the correlation between a dress code and perfume.

But more than that, it was because an intangible sense of foreboding was creeping out from between the casually arranged words.

"…"

When night fell, I went to the exhibition hall.

The 11 PM of today felt quite different from the 11 PM of the past.

In the past, the dazzling modern civilization forced insomnia upon people, but now, the entirety of Busan was shrouded in quiet silence, except for the area around the casino.

"Ah."

That was why Sim Ah-ryeon's gallery, the only place in the area where lights swayed brightly, looked just like a bug zapper lamp or a fishing light on the night sea.

“W-welcome... Guild Leader!”

Sim Ah-ryeon was…

She was waiting for me at the entrance of the exhibition hall.

For someone who had mentioned a dress code in the chatroom, the great artist’s own attire was a mess.

Her whole body was splattered with paint, a complete disaster.

She had barely covered it with a doctor's gown, but even the white gown was stained with paint here and there.

However.

“Ah-ryeon, that thing in your pocket is...”

“Ah?!”

Sim Ah-ryeon hastily shoved the bridal veil peeking out of her doctor's gown pocket back inside.

“Th-this is a secret! A secret!”

“You’ve been saying it's a secret for a whole week, and there's another secret now?”

“Yes! Ugh, I-I was really pressed for time. It reminded me of my graduation exhibition deadline for the first time in a while. I don't have those dreams much these days, but before, whenever my condition got a little bad, I'd always have nightmares about my gr-graduation exhibition...”

Sim Ah-ryeon suddenly came closer and sniffed me. There was no context for it, but she often did things like this.

In the first place, overt ‘speech’ and ‘language’ didn't hold much

meaning for Sim Ah-ryeon.

“Ah. Y-you didn't wear it... The scent.”

“I didn't realize you disliked that perfume. You never showed it before.”

“Hm? Oh, I don't dislike it. It's just that if you smelled like that today, Guild Leader, it might have been a bit of a problem...”

“Why?”

“What? Ummm. That scent is p-proof that Guild Leader is always thinking of Ms. Yu Ji-won in a corner of your mind, isn't it. Ehehe.”

Sim Ah-ryeon laughed as if she were embarrassed.

“So it would have been a d-distraction to viewing the exhibition. An interference with immersion. It's distracting. So I got rid of it.”

“...”

Question:

Does Sim Ah-ryeon dislike Yu Ji-won?

Answer:

No. That is impossible.

Counter-question:

Is there anyone in particular whom Sim Ah-ryeon dislikes?

Response:

No. That is impossible.

Interrogation:

Why is it impossible?

Reply:

Because while one can dislike cockroaches as a whole, to single out and hate or detest just one particular cockroach would be a very strange thing to do.

“P-please come in, Guild Leader. I worked really hard on this all night for a week! Ho-honestly, I think these are the masterworks of my life.”

Sim Ah-ryeon suddenly grabbed my hand and led me inside.

Into the gallery. Into a labyrinth of vision, blocked on all sides by temporary walls and white canvas.

“Ta-da, ta, ta-daaaa...”

The exhibition that had received nothing but praise from all walks of life, from the National Road Director to influential guild leaders, Awakened, and even ordinary people.

All the paintings in that place had been painted over in black.

Chaotically. Messily. Like graffiti.

The paintings that had so brilliantly depicted the anomalies were all ruined.

The works that some would have paid a fortune to add to their collections were gone, and in their place, hideously distorted ‘overpaintings’ were coiled.

“...”

My mouth went dry.

“What... is this, Ah-ryeon?”

“Yes?”

It was a natural question.

It was no exaggeration to say that the portraits enshrined in this gallery were originally the last treasures produced by the art world

of humanity. And to think she had spent a week painstakingly ruining them like this.

But upon hearing my natural question, Sim Ah-ryeon made an unnatural expression, muttering, ‘Ummm’.

It was similar to before.

When I had asked ‘Why?’ about not wearing the perfume. In fact, her reaction back then was exactly the same as it was now.

It's strange.

Why does Guild Leader keep asking me things he already knows?

“Even if you ask... what it is. Well. I-it's how the anomalies look from Guild Leader's perspective... isn't it.”

My heart pounded.

I barely managed to calm the trembling of my tongue.

“You're saying this is how I... see the anomalies?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Well... Because you have Complete Memory, Guild Leader?”

Sim Ah-ryeon tilted her head.

“M-memory is a form of association. It's not that different from sensation. An apple you see right now... and an apple you saw three years ago. From a person's perspective, it's all visual information.”

“...”

“But for normal people, the present perception is much stronger. O-of course. The thing in front of your eyes is clear, but the apple in your memory is blurry and indistinct... B-but! You're different, Guild Leader!”

Sim Ah-ryeon continued.

Like a university student explaining her work in front of a panel of judges. Like a curator leading visitors to the true meaning of a painting.

With conviction.

“They're both... the same... aren't they?”

“Ehehe.”

She laughed.

“Um, for exaample... Here! Here, the Ten Legs!”

The painting of the Ten Legs had also changed drastically from what I saw a week ago at the ‘Day Exhibition.’

In the portrait of the Ten Legs hanging in the ‘Night Exhibition,’ the corpse of Dang Seo-rin was depicted for some reason, her chest pierced and her limbs severed.

“B-because of the Ten Legs, something very precious to you died, didn't it, Guild Leader. Because you have Complete Memory. For normal people, the object in front of them is just the object in front of them... and memory is memory. Well, of course they can overlap, but the clarity and blurriness are so distinct that they can be separated...”

She brought me in front of the massive painting.

Sim Ah-ryeon brought her hands together, palms touching.

“But not you, Guild Leader. Y-you can't do that. Because you literally have Complete Memory... The present Ten Legs and the past Ten Legs are perceived as completely equal, ‘overlapping.’”

“...”

“I-I think it's amazing. Picasso's Cubism was an attempt to paint human perception by overlapping not just the present, but also the

realms of recollection and prediction, but h-honestly, that was something imagined with the ‘head.’ It's not like the p-past, present, and future appeared to the artist with equal color and tone... It's a bit… lame. For a theme that pursued fundamental intuition, the m-method to reach it was ultimately intellect, not sensation. But... not you, Guild Leader! You're total human Cubism!”

“...”

“Wh-when you see one Ten Legs. Assuming this is the 1,000th cycle. You're looking at a whopping 1,000 Ten Legs at the same time! Weell. In most regressions, the behavior of the Ten Legs would have been similar, so even if it's 1,000, they'd probably blend into some clumps... Ehehe. I'm so jealous, Guild Leader.”

Sim Ah-ryeon squirmed.

“Guild Leader, you're a… a living, moving exhibition hall. You're different from the kids who just talk about how their intuition is special or whatever. You, Guild Leader, are, fwah. The real deal...”

“...”

“Umm. But it's strange. Why do you keep telling me to paint from ‘other people's perspectives’ and not ‘your own perspective’? Y-your perspective is so much. Soo much, a million, ten million times more interesting...”

My throat was parched.

My mouth had long since become a desert.

The thick saliva that pooled under my tongue felt not like the moisture I craved, but like a swamp pulling my tongue down.

“How...”

“Well, because I was thinking of you, Guild Leader?”

It was an immediate answer.

There wasn't even a need to finish the sentence, ‘How did you

know?’

Because in Sim Ah-ryeon's mind, my lines were already being completed automatically.

“Every single day.”

Skip. A conversational shortcut.

It was something that often happened when I was talking with Sim Ah-ryeon alone.

As I said, overt ‘speech’ and ‘language’ didn't hold much meaning for her.

“I… I'm actually always amazed by you, Guild Leader. You must see everything. You must be seeing it. How can you a-act so perfectly...”

“See everything?”

“Us, in our dead forms.”

“...”

“You can see them, can't you? Even now.”

Thump. Sim Ah-ryeon came closer.

“L-like being decapitated. Or having our limbs torn off by an anomaly. Bloodstains. All those things, all those memories, you must see them clearly, right before your eyes.”

“...”

“A-amazing, Guild Leader! Actually, your acting skills might be your most amazing talent, even more than your intuition...”

Fumble, fumble.

Sim Ah-ryeon took something out of her doctor's gown pocket. The bridal veil she had crumpled up earlier.

It was the veil from a Saintess's habit.

“U-umm. Sooo. Ah. There.”

Sim Ah-ryeon unfolded the veil this way and that before placing it on her head.

Click, clack.

She walked down the gallery corridor, and in the very center, beneath the largest painting, Sim Ah-ryeon knelt down.

Artwork Title:

‘World Tree Udumbara.’

On the painting where vibrant petals should have been dancing wildly.

Brushstrokes were painted over, and the ‘corpses’ of Sim Ah-ryeon were drawn, her limbs all twisted like dead trees.

Like an afterstory of Sim Ah-ryeon, fallen to corruption while fending off the Monster Wave.

“…”

I could recognize it.

No. In this world, only I could immerse myself in the true meaning of the masterpieces in this ‘Night Exhibition.’

“Every time you brush m-my hair, Guild Leader.”

Sim Ah-ryeon, kneeling with her back to me, murmured softly.

“I can feel it. So many... emotions. Sadness. Resentment. Sorry. Gratitude. Really, really dense emotions...”

“…”

“So I thought. Ah, come to think of it. I must have been active as the Saintess of the North in the Final Defensive War. Since the

Eastern Holy State would have participated. Then I would have worn a Saintess's habit... The sight of me becoming corrupted. I couldn't let the believers see that, right? Ah, so I'd wear something like a veil that covers even my head. So.”

The shoulders of the kneeling Sim Ah-ryeon, her back turned to me, trembled slightly.

“Ehehe. I thought, this is probably what I looked like at the very end! What do you think? Am I right?”

“...”

“G-Guild Leader, now…”

Sim Ah-ryeon smiled.

“Brush… my hair, please.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 409

The Exhibitor III

Sinnoa

Reminiscence.

I am always thinking about how I can be truthful to all of you.

I must confess now, there was a rather desperate reason why I hired the ‘ghostwriter’ known as Oh Dok-seo.

Was it merely to subjugate Infinite Metagame? That was part of it, but that wasn't the only reason.

I was fundamentally unsuited to writing the story of my own life.

I couldn't be any other way.

Far down the street, the back of someone you know is walking. So you quicken your pace and call their name.

“Ah.”

That person turns around.

“Undertaker. What a coincidence. Are you going somewhere?”

A daily occurrence. A normal reaction. A natural response.

However, for me, who possesses the [Complete Memory] ability, such a thing never happens.

That person.

"Ah" "Vice Guild Leader?" "Undertaker" "I knew you'd come" "Why are you so late?" "I've been curious since we first met… what is that staff?" "What a coincidence" "Hm? Oh, it was you? Sorry. I was lost in thought for a moment" "What, that outfit again? I told you not to

wear it because it's so dreary" "You really are always wearing a barista uniform" "Are you going somewhere?"

They look back at me. They keep walking, as if they didn't hear. They smile brightly. They blush and grin. They snort as if it's absurd. They playfully jab my side with their elbow. They clasp their hands behind their back.

Now, after more than 1,000 regressions.

There are over 1,000 versions of you.

"…"

Complete Memory.

The coexistence of the past and the present.

Within the scene that unfolds before my eyes like a kaleidoscope, I am like an archaeologist, brushing away the sands of the past to separate them from the present.

I snatch up 'this cycle'.

How can I possibly convey this feeling to you all?

I select the most appropriate vision that fits the context of the present moment.

In a way, you could say that I immersed myself and 'acted' as the me of this regression.

It is so natural to me that there are many aspects that are, conversely, difficult to explain.

"…"

Sometime ago.

"Mister. I'm sorry, but this is… unusable."

Oh Dok-seo said, picking up my manuscript.

Yes. Originally, I had no intention of leaving the novel's writing entirely to her. I had planned to help with a significant portion.

What Oh Dok-seo was holding was my first draft.

“What do you mean, unusable? Why?”

“Well… for a single line of dialogue, there are a thousand lines overlapping. Also, at this point in the novel, we should be telling the story of the 20th cycle, but there’s dialogue that appears much later, around the 400th cycle. If it’s like this, the readers can’t follow.”

“But Dokseo.”

I said.

“This is the truth, for me.”

“…”

Oh Dok-seo’s expression distorted.

“If my truthful world seems bizarre in your eyes. Then perhaps I really have already degenerated into an anomaly.”

“…”

A long silence followed.

Oh Dok-seo took off her hat.

“…No.”

She opened her laptop, unclasped her hands, and looked straight at me.

“That’s not it. Mister, you just became an awakener with an ability called Complete Memory. You just rolled through hundreds of regressions because you didn't give up, and the result of that is becoming an anomaly? I can never accept something like that.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’ll edit it for you.”

Oh Dok-seo put on her glasses.

It was a tool she only wore when writing her novel alone, saying for some reason that she didn't like showing her face with glasses to others.

“There’s no reason anywhere for you to lie to the readers, Mister. Just tell me things as they are. Instead, I’ll edit it in my own way—as much as possible, as sequentially as possible.”

“…”

“You said I’m not just the priestess of Infinite Metagame, but your priestess too, right? This is perfect. That’s originally the role of a priestess, isn't it? An intermediary. To interpret and translate the language of a god.”

I am always thinking about how I can be truthful to all of you.

“Let’s share the truth.”

“…”

“Your truth is your own, Mister. I’ll also be faithful to my truth. The friction that arises between the two, the narrative errors, I’ll take full responsibility for all of it.”

That was my editor.

That was the solution Oh Dok-seo presented.

“But… okay. I finally understand.”

“Understand what?”

“I was curious how you could tread the same path hundreds of times without getting tired. Where that mentality came from.”

A bitter smile crossed Oh Dok-seo’s lips.

“From your perspective, Mister, the same route isn’t all that bad.

Why? Because it’s easier when people’s reactions are the same. It eliminates the ‘need to distinguish only this regression from the hundreds of other people’.”

“…”

“Of course, since you're human too, there must be times you get tired. At those times, you create a ‘regression that will never overlap with other regressions’. Well. Either way, there’s a common point in making the other person’s reaction into ‘one’.”

I nodded my head.

“But there is one problem.”

“Hm? What problem?”

“Didn’t we decide that I would be in charge of the descriptions of you?”

“Ah. Um. In that case, just try to follow the way I wrote the novel.”

Oh Dok-seo shrugged her shoulders.

“It doesn’t really matter if you lie a little to the readers about me, right? I’m just an editor, anyway. Originally, I’m a presence that shouldn’t even be revealed at the forefront of the novel.”

“Hmm.”

“In the Regression Alliance, I’m a bit of a clown anyway. I don’t really have any desire to show my true self to the readers.”

“Will you be okay with that?”

“Yes. That’s what I want.”

And so it was.

“I will never let you be treated like an anomaly, Mister.”

Oh Dok-seo’s eyes shone with a red light.

“I’ve decided. In the novel I’m going to write, all the story titles will end with ‘Ja’.”

“Ja?”

“Yes. The character for person, 者. In the end, this will be a story of a person, a story of a person meeting another person.”

“…”

I held back a smile at that grandiose declaration.

“For something like that, it seems you haven't followed it very well.”

“Huh?”

“Like ‘The Monad’ (單子). Or ‘The Potato’ (감자). In the first case, it’s the character for son (子), and in the second case, it’s just pure Hangeul.”

Oh Dok-seo’s head tilted.

And her lips parted.

“What are you talking about?” “Ah, jeez. That was like a short story collection! Make an exception!” “I never wrote a chapter like that?” “Potato (Gamja) was a title that omitted the ‘si’ from Gamsija (Watcher). And it was a pun that meant potato at the same time. In reality it’s Potato, so I wasn’t wrong anyway” “The character for son is similar to the character for person, so shouldn’t it be fine?” “Sorry, mister” “I didn't understand what you just said” “What did you mean?”

“…”

I smiled.

“It’s nothing.”

“Honestly, Mister. As if it’s not enough that you have the protagonist attribute, you’re always muttering nonsense or talking

to yourself.”

“…”

Reminiscence.

To me, a reminiscence was the same as the present.

Life was always an epilogue.

——Every time I faced the Ten Legs.

There, I saw not only the teeming tentacles but also the figures of my comrades.

There was Dang Seo-rin, her head severed. There was Old Man Scho, his chest pierced. There was Yu Ji-won, who had pushed me aside and died in my place. In all sorts of ways, my comrades who had died in each cycle were collapsed at the tips of the tentacles, under the grasp of the Ten Legs.

“Undertaker…” “Doc!” “Your Excellency,” “Run” “At least you” “I’ll cover the back!” “Please, my last words” “We’ve been annihilated” “Vice Guild Leader!” “Sorry” “For getting you caught up in this” “Another failure” “The defense line,” “…” “I’m sorry” “Will you tell the next me?”

This world hated humanity.

The anomalies were insulting humans.

They were even desecrating the deaths of humans.

I could not forget.

I could not run away.

I simply could not forgive.

I had been seen through by Sim Ah-ryeon.

A secret that only Oh Dok-seo had known. A truth that I had even told Oh Dok-seo myself first, Sim Ah-ryeon had figured it out

entirely on her own.

It was a surprising thing.

But for some reason. In a corner of my heart, there was also a feeling that it was ‘natural’.

Sim Ah-ryeon ate human emotions. As a joke, I had described her a few times as ‘the bird that drinks poison’, but in truth, she was closer to ‘the bird that drinks emotions’.

Before Sim Ah-ryeon, every human could not help but reveal their true, bare face.

For example.

– Can I take a picture? Miss artist?

That visitor’s request, which sounded perfectly ordinary on the surface, might have sounded completely different to Sim Ah-ryeon’s ears.

Because the color changed depending on what kind of emotion was held.

Was it pure fan adoration? Did they want to brag to someone? Was it to spread her personal information on SG Net by pretending it was a mistake. Was it lust?

Whatever it was, Sim Ah-ryeon ‘felt’ it.

Since Sim Ah-ryeon’s intelligence was by no means low, she could also guess the events that would follow based on the emotions she felt.

So she answered.

– Pardon? No. I absolutely hate the idea…

– Eh.

– Eh.

The reaction was misaligned.

A frictional sound. Noise was generated.

An irreparable gap had opened up between the world Sim Ah-ryeon perceived and the world people walked in.

It was the same when having a conversation.

– Hahh, i-it was really tight. It reminded me of the deadline for the graduation exhibition for the first time in a while. I don’t have those dreams much these days, but before, whenever my condition got a little bad, I always had, had nightmares about the graduation exhibition…

Even when the other person was quietly listening to her story, Sim Ah-ryeon could actually see the other person’s emotions ‘reacting in real time’.

So from Sim Ah-ryeon’s perspective, a ‘person who quietly listens without a word’ in the truest sense did not exist.

Instead, it was like this.

– Hahh, (Why is she moaning) i-it was really tight. (What was tight) It reminded me of the deadline for the graduation exhibition for the first time in a while. (Graduation exhibition?) I don’t have those dreams much these days, but before, whenever my condition got a little bad, I always had (Condition?) ha-had nightmares about the graduation exhibition…

Therefore, she couldn't help but stutter.

Because the other people were constantly questioning her back with their emotions. Reacting. Too quickly.

Matching that tempo, Sim Ah-ryeon was swayed this way and that by the ever-changing context, repeating her words as if rambling.

Now, a certain contradiction would be understood.

Q. Why does Sim Ah-ryeon not stutter at all when she is playing the

part of the Saintess of the North?

A. Because she does not need to answer the other person sincerely. Without needing to have a ‘conversation’, she just needs to perform the role given to her.

It was similar in essence.

The me with Complete Memory, and Sim Ah-ryeon who lived by drinking emotions, we were both detached from the world.

…People might blame Sim Ah-ryeon, asking why she doesn't wash her hair, why she walks around so messily.

But Sim Ah-ryeon herself would probably want to ask the complete opposite.

‘You all are leaking emotions everywhere, you know?’

Washing one’s hair and dressing neatly.

That was, in essence, the act of covering up one’s appearance because you ‘want to look good’ to others, because you ‘don’t want to be criticized’.

But before Sim Ah-ryeon, there was no use in covering anything up. Everyone was, in a sense, walking around stark naked.

Our values were different.

Our perspectives were different.

So, it was perhaps natural that my most secret truth was seen through by Sim Ah-ryeon of all people.

Because we were two of a kind.

“Ehehe…”

Rustle.

While I was combing her hair, Sim Ah-ryeon, with her back turned to me, laughed softly.

“I-it’s nice…”

I didn't ask, what is?

Sim Ah-ryeon was responding ‘it’s nice’ to my own feeling of seeing her as a kindred spirit.

Unlike people who live bound by words and sentences, between the two of us, language was always nothing more than a secondary tool.

“When did you notice?”

“Ah. Uum. Th-that, Guild Leader… You don’t feel lust under any circumstances.”

“?”

This time, an unexpected answer came back.

“Lust?”

“Yeees… I-it’s strange, isn’t it. So I thought about it. I mean, every time you see people, you see piles and piles of corpses layered on top of them… There’s no way something like lust would arise.”

“…”

“Because you are a normal person, Guild Leader.”

A bitter smile formed on my face.

It was truly difficult to hide anything in front of this child.

With this, not only my attribute of ‘monologuing’, which I had disguised under the pretext of the conventions of genre fiction, but even the cliché of the ‘asexual protagonist’ had been seen through.

“People… are really strange, aren’t they.”

“Please try to understand them.”

“Yes. But, it’s a problem you can solve by just imagining it simply,

isn't it? You remember everything perfectly. Then how would the world look. You drink emotions. Then what would happen… I-it's so easy."

Sim Ah-ryeon leaned the back of her head against my chest.

"O-only you did it, Guild Leader. That."

"…For me too, only you have been like this. They are truly wonderful paintings. Thank you."

"Ehehe."

"Still, Ah-ryeon-ah. There are many times when people don't know unless you tell them."

"Even though you knew, Guild Leader?"

"That is…"

"I don't really need other people."

Sim Ah-ryeon looked up at me.

"I am… happy. Guild Leader."

"…"

"The exhibition. It was nice to hold it after a long time. But those people just revere me after seeing my paintings, right? Uum. I mean, Guild Leader… it wouldn't matter if I could never paint for the rest of my life, right?"

"That's right."

"Yes."

The combing stopped.

It wasn't me who stopped. Sim Ah-ryeon had leaned completely against me, so I could no longer comb her hair.

"You don't have to try to fill the hole in my heart, i-it's okay, Guild

Leader.”

From under my chin.

Sim Ah-ryeon was looking up at me.

“It’s not because I have a deficiency in my heart… or because I have a memory of losing someone. Th-that’s not why I like you, Guild Leader.”

“…”

“I like you because you are you, Guild Leader. Whether I can’t draw, or I cause trouble… it doesn't matter. Just like how I am still me to you, Guild Leader.”

Sim Ah-ryeon raised both her arms and wrapped them around my neck. And she buried her head in my chest.

“Aside from the two of us, h-honestly, no one will understand this exhibition but…”

In the quiet night of the exhibition hall.

Beneath all the frames stained with anomalies. In the middle of a gallery where the thousands upon thousands of deaths I had witnessed were all listed.

Sim Ah-ryeon smiled.

“I think it’s truly… beautiful.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 410

The Exhibitor IV

Sinnoa

Wouldn't it be fair to call this a confession already?

“…”

I took a short breath as I combed Sim Ah-ryeon's hair from behind.

This was the reason why.

How in the world could I ever leave a child like this and go somewhere else?

In a world contaminated by Infinite Metagame and turned to dots, in other words, during the destruction of the 135th cycle, Sim Ah-ryeon hadn't abandoned me, even though I was nothing more than a mere ‘NPC’.

“Ah-ryeon, the Guild Leader is—”

And so, I opened my lips, intending to give an equally sincere answer to this child's most genuine confession. I opened them, but…

Sim Ah-ryeon, who was sitting with her back to me, had her head tilted like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

“Ah-ryeon?”

I held her shoulders to check on her.

“Zzz...”

This kid, she was dozing off.

She was even drooling waterfalls to boot.

“Ha.”

A disbelieving laugh escaped me.

No way. It’s not like she’s some hard-of-hearing protagonist. How can she just say her piece during a heartfelt exchange like this and then immediately fall asleep?

Even the gentle Guild Leader was getting angry now.

“You little rascal. You really just live however you want, don't you. You little troublemaker.”

“Ube-eb, bee… uhehe...”

I poked her cheeks over and over, but Sim Ah-ryeon's sleep phase wouldn't budge from the ‘deep sleep’ stage.

The reason was easy enough to guess. For a whole week, she hadn't rested, painting endlessly without a care for her clothes getting dirty. How could her mental state possibly hold up?

She could maintain her physical vitality by casting self-heals. Thanks to that, she had completed a quest that would make anyone in the art world faint just hearing about it, ‘Preparing for Two Consecutive Exhibitions’.

But the vitality of her mind was another matter entirely.

Sim Ah-ryeon had been running on the high of her healing abilities, painting nonstop for a week without sleep. It wasn't normal.

She probably held on through sheer grit and willpower until I came to see her exhibition, and the moment she thought, ‘Ah, the Guild Leader has seen everything now,’ the rubber band in her head must have snapped.

“Uhehe, Giiild Leeder...”

“Yes, yes. The Guild Leader is right here.”

Pat, pat.

I set the comb down and stroked Sim Ah-ryeon's hair with my hand. I had cleared my schedule anyway, so I planned to stay by her side until the OldManGoryeo herself woke up.

——*Thump.*

Just then, I heard footsteps coming from the gallery entrance. It was a little strange.

I had hung a ‘No Entry’ sign at the entrance. The time had already passed midnight. There shouldn't be any citizen audacious enough to attempt a theft right under the nose of the Tower of Babel.

‘Did a drunk from near the casino wander in by mistake?’

Step. Step. Step.

The footsteps grew closer. Soon, they would round the corner and I would be able to see who it was, so I prepared to give them a warning in advance.

“I don't know who you are, but this is a restricted area for the general public. I'd appreciate it if you would head back out...”

“Oh my.”

Thump.

One of the person's feet peeked out from around the corner. Then their lower body, hidden by a long skirt. Their neat upper body.

And their pink hair, which cascaded down like a weeping willow.

“I'm sorry. I heard this exhibition was a nighttime exclusive, so I was under the impression the closing time was at dawn. Did I get the information wrong?”

“...”

My whole body froze.

Go Yuri.

The scent of apples, so rich it felt like it would sweetly pickle my very brainstem, was approaching from the gallery corner like a shadow.

Step. Step.

Go Yuri moved to stand before the massive canvas of 『Title: Ten Legs』.

“This one has had its frame torn off. Because there was no intention of preserving or managing the work later, because the plan was to use it for a single exhibition and then discard it. To not frame it and expose its bare face entirely... How wonderful.”

“...”

“An exhibition that contemplates how much a single frame can interfere with immersion. Of course, the perfume of Miss Ji-won might be seen as a distraction. The artist thought only of the Guild Leader for a whole week while painting, so they must have thought, ‘I wish the Guild Leader would also set aside their thoughts of someone else for a moment and look only at my work.’”

“...”

“It's an entirely reasonable transaction.”

I carefully shifted Sim Ah-ryeon, holding her tightly in my arms.

Of course, I never took my eyes off Go Yuri. I watched with maximum vigilance, so as not to miss a single movement, no matter how subtle the sign.

On the other hand…

“Aha, this one is Miss Seo-rin. And this one… could it be the death of Miss Yo-hwa? My. She was always a good painter, but for her skill to improve this much. Mmm. It's magnificent... As expected of love and death. No matter how the history of human art changes, these two themes remain endlessly potent.”

She strolled nonchalantly through the midnight gallery, stopping at

each piece in turn as if they were bus stops.

90 minutes passed.

In the end, I had no choice but to open my lips.

“Why did you come here?”

“Because I heard a wonderful exhibition was being held.”

“Is that really the only reason?”

“For now, yes. To not only love someone's life, but to love even their death. To see their very existence as beautiful. Sincerely, sincerely, sincerely... Opportunities to witness the works of a master painter like that don't come around often, you know.”

“...”

“I enjoyed them very much.”

Bow.

Go Yuri bowed deeply before me, or rather, towards the both of us with Sim Ah-ryeon.

“If this world were a single work of art, and only beauty existed within it, then one could say that all the time a certain regressor has repeated over and over existed solely for this one moment.”

“...”

“They were masterpieces that would not be an exaggeration to praise as such.”

It was high praise.

But there was no way those words of acclaim would reach Sim Ah-ryeon's ears.

It wasn't because Ah-ryeon was asleep.

It's just that Go Yuri's voice never reached anyone in the first place.

Not curses, not praises, not even a simple everyday greeting.

She was an existence that simply returned an optimized response according to what the person facing her ‘wished’ for.

That was Go Yuri.

“But you and I both know, Doc. That the world cannot be described as simply beautiful.”

However.

I alone was the exception.

“Yes.”

For some reason, since the 1,000th cycle, I had become able to hear the anomaly's voice. I had also figured out the strategy that Go Yuri's words change to match her conversation partner.

That's why a trick like this was possible.

“…”

I looked around.

The gallery at night. Here, a monument of corpses built from my deaths from the 1st cycle to around the 1,000th was on display.

Without rushing, slowly, I connected ‘myself’ to the deaths expressed in all the paintings. I immersed myself.

Starting from the 1,083rd cycle and going in reverse order—— to the 5th. To the 4th. And finally, to the 1st cycle I had seen in Cheon-hwa's dream.

[Complete Memory].

This ability, which for me was both a lifelong curse and a blessing, became the teeth of over 1,000 keys.

Click.

The enigma named Go Yuri. I slowly aligned the tumblers on that single lock.

“Go Yuri.”

“Yes.”

“Why did you erase your own existence and fall into being an anomaly?”

“…”

The next moment.

Screeeech. As if a key and lock were grinding against each other, ‘voices’ ricocheted from the canvases scattered in every direction of the exhibition hall.

“What are you talking about?” “I have never fallen into being an anomaly” “Mr. Undertaker” “My” “Yes? Miss Cheon-hwa?” “Of course, it's for the sake of humanity” “That's sad…” “Your Excellency Undertaker” “Ahaha, I've finally been caught!” “There is none” “Don't you actually already know?” “I am human, just as you see” “That's interesting” “I have never mentioned the next teacher to the young lady” “With me” “Guild Leader” “Voice” “Being able to forget can sometimes be a blessing” “This was the only way” “The fact that distinguishing between anomalies and humans is extremely ambiguous” “That is your ego” “Let's become one” “Doc” “Can you hear me?”

The voices echoed endlessly.

They rained down like bullets on a battlefield.

But I didn't lose my concentration.

On a normal day, I might have, but here, with just a glance, the records of my deaths spanning 1,000 cycles were on display.

A child was asleep in my arms.

This was the temple that Sim Ah-ryeon had built for me.

Here, it was possible for me to maintain myself, continuously, without a single skip.

Therefore, I wove all the hopes and wishes of every cycle into a single thread, a single timeline, a single key, and reached it.

“What are you talking about?” “I have never fallen into being an anomaly” “Mr. Undertaker” “My” “Yes? Miss Cheon-hwa?” “Of course, it's for the sake of humanity” “That's sad…” “Undertaker-nim” “Ahaha, I've finally been caught!” “There is none” “Don't you actually already know?” “I am human, just as you see” “That's interesting” I have never mentioned the next teacher to the young lady” “With me” “Guild Leader” “Voice” “Being able to forget can sometimes be a blessing” “This was the only way” “The fact that distinguishing between anomalies and humans is extremely ambiguous” “That is your ego” “Let's become one” “Doc” “Can you hear me?”

I edited them.

“My” “voice” “Can you hear me?”

I answered.

“Yes.”

I broke the curse.

“I can hear you. Clearly.”

Go Yuri's lips closed.

“……” “……”

The countless paintings, the countless Go Yuris, all fell silent at once.

Screak. The grinding noise subsided. The key had been inserted all

the way to the end of the lock. And all that remained was a single result.

"..."

Unlock.

The tinnitus faded.

The shadows that had been wailing in the abyss of pandemonium, crying for me to look at them first, to understand them, also disappeared.

I looked at the one person.

I was wishing for an answer.

And Go Yuri could not refuse my wish.

She was that kind of being from the very beginning.

She was.

"…It's taken a long time."

She smiled.

"Humans aren't beautiful. Not even you, Undertaker. You throw everything away and go on a vacation just to wipe away the stains on your heart."

I drew in a breath.

"When I go on a vacation cycle, Ha-yul kills herself. Yo-hwa becomes a mad necromancer. Seo-rin becomes a lonely dictator. My other companions also end up in unhappy lives. I leave, knowing all of this."

"But, that is a temporary measure for you to remain human, Doc."

"…The moment I think that the lives of those children are all my responsibility, I would try to take responsibility for all of humanity, and I am not a god. I would surely break and shatter someday."

“And yet, some would call your method cowardly.”

“What's important is victory. Having come this far, I have no choice but to win. For that, I changed the way I live, and I even threw away the way I think.”

“Indeed, those are correct words.”

A fine line appeared on Go Yuri's lips.

“To know how to abandon oneself. That is the minimum requirement to walk the lonely path of this world stained with emptiness.”

“…”

“It's not enough to simply be prepared to abandon yourself. If it were a problem that could be solved with such resolve, no one would have suffered.”

“After devising the best possible way to abandon yourself, can you truly go through with it?”

Step.

Go Yuri walked past me with her hands behind her back.

Slowly.

“You asked why I abandoned myself. The answer to that question is very simple.”

“…”

“It is, of course, because my goal is to save people, not to give birth to a one-of-a-kind Outer God named ‘Go Yuri.’”

Surely the Doc, if no one else, would understand my heart, is what she seemed to say.

The sweet whisper dug into my ear.

“Ah. It would have been nice if I were a slightly more perfect being.

God Go Yuri! Hiyah! I will take responsibility for all of you—like this. Ahaha.”

“...”

“But I am not a god.”

Thump.

Go Yuri's footsteps stopped behind me.

“I don't ask for much. It's just that I was born as this kind of person in this kind of world, and things just happened to turn out this way. Just like you, Doc.”

“You are.”

Go Yuri had said.

That if this world were only beautiful, then thousands of cycles would have been worth it for the sole reason of holding Sim Ah-ryeon's exhibition.

The world was not beautiful. This world hated humans. There were only humans who were born of that hatred.

That is why, if I could reach the single question and answer I was about to speak, then those thousands of cycles would have been worth it.

“Who are you?”

Go Yuri leaned in and whispered.

“I am a reincarnator.”

It was a revelation like a lightning strike.

“A human who is always born again.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 411

The Reincarnator I

Sinnoa

——I don’t remember my first life.

That’s because I don’t have a good memory like you do, Doc. Ah, of course, I did have a chance to improve it, but I naturally refused.

A Complete Memory Ability, you ask. Ahaha. What kind of curse is that, who in the world would want to receive such a thing?

…It’s faint, at best.

There are two scenes that I can barely recall.

There was a playground in my neighborhood. A playground covered in sand. Yes, it was an old one.

I would meet with children whose faces and names I didn’t know there during the day, and we would part ways in the evening.

Then the void arrived. And around the time civilization was ending, a thought suddenly occurred to me.

『The children I used to play with at the village playground in my youth. They must all be dead by now.』

But, that wasn’t actually true.

I had joined the resistance in Busan. Of course, I was a non-combatant, not a combatant.

Ah. For your reference, a massive organization like the ‘National Road Management Corps’ obviously didn’t exist back then.

There was no such thing as an ‘awakener’ either. Strategy guides hadn’t been discovered like they have been now… and people with

strange abilities hadn't been found yet.

But then, a man who was leading a part of the resistance at the time was about to pass by me when he suddenly stopped.

The man's rank was much higher than mine. I was a non-combatant, while he was a combatant, and on top of that, he was in charge of the most dangerous reconnaissance team.

The man spoke.

『By any chance, aren't you from □□□ village?』

I don't remember his exact words.

As I've told you, my memory is terrible compared to yours, Doc.

But I probably said something like this.

『Yes, that's right. How did you know…?』

『Oh. I knew it. Don't you remember me? It's me. Whenever it snowed, we used to run all over the apartment complexes having snowball fights.』

『Ah…』

Honestly, it was absurd.

Who would remember a childhood like that?

I can guarantee you that a person makes far more friends before the age of 12 than they do after the age of 12.

It's just that we parted after playing just once at the playground. We parted after kicking a soccer ball on the field. We parted after throwing the winter snow.

You just can't recall their faces or names.

『What's your name?』

『Su-yeon.』

I just ended up smiling vaguely.

『It's Su-yeon, Reconnaissance Team Leader.』

『What's with the Team Leader. Just speak comfortably.』

『Ahaha…』

It was an era where you couldn't be comfortable.

The day the hordes of aberrations, though back then we just called them monsters, finally arrived. Anyway, on the day the stain of the Void reached Busan and everyone fought a desperate battle.

That man fought without giving up until the very end, gathering everyone, combatants and non-combatants alike.

I lost an arm too.

Or was it a leg? Perhaps both.

Just as my eyes were getting so heavy they were about to close, in the distance, in the middle of a swarm of countless monsters.

The man who had acted like he knew me, saying we were from the same village, was fighting while bleeding from his entire body.

As I closed my eyes, I wondered.

『We're going to be defeated anyway.』

『The world is going to end anyway.』

『Why is that person fighting so hard?』

That was my first life.

A scene I no longer remember.

And…

"——And that man, was you, Doc."

I was at a loss for words for a moment.

“What?”

Go Yuri smiled faintly.

“So, in a way, we were actually ‘childhood friends’. Ahaha. Isn’t that funny?”

“…”

“My second life was a little later. When I was born, oh my. The Void had already arrived and my parents had already fled to Busan, you see.”

Despite my question, Go Yuri quietly continued her story. Slowly, as if not blaming a child who couldn't keep up with her footsteps.

“My parents ran a bakery.”

Busan. A bakery.

“But the world was so broken. You can’t afford to leisurely run something like a bakery. Just like me in my past life, my father went to war as a combatant and my mother as an assistant... and both of them passed away.”

Go Yuri’s expressions were varied.

She would sigh, then she would smile, and then she would rest her cheek on her hand.

The night gallery.

A one-person play flowing softly in an exhibition hall where hundreds of regressions were displayed.

“At a young age, just as all the children in Busan did, I went to war as a child soldier.”

“…Jeong Seo-ah.”

I said, as if spitting it out.

“The bakery owners have a different child in each cycle. One of them...”

“Yes, that was me.”

A bright smile.

“It didn't have any special meaning. Even if it was the body I was reborn into, as I said, the timing was far too late.”

“...”

A world she was born into too late.

An era where there was no longer even a chance for salvation.

“I showed combat power that was no different from my first life, and so I was eliminated. Hah. It’s embarrassing... Someone like me is disqualified from being a Reincarnator.”

Was it her first battle?

Go Yuri, no. ‘Jeong Seo-ah’ was killed in action.

Just before her eyes closed. She saw it then, too.

Far away, at the final defense line, she saw the figure of one person fighting in the middle of a battlefield where bullets rained down.

The man who was a ‘childhood friend’ in her previous life and a distant ‘superior officer’ in this life was being pierced through the chest by a tentacle, breathing his last.

She suddenly thought.

Why was she living a life like this?

What is life?

From her third life onwards, her memories truly started to become vague.

“I didn't want to forget the 1st and 2nd lives, so I diligently took

notes and such. But from the 3rd, how should I put it? Ummm. It became hard to feel any meaning,"

Go Yuri said.

"I was continuously born as the child of different parents, as a different person."

Reincarnation.

She was born in Japan. She was born in Germany.

Reincarnation didn't care about nationality. However, the era was relatively fixed.

Based on the point when the Void arrived, the earliest she could reincarnate was 20 years prior.

Go Yuri couldn't understand why she was repeating this reincarnation so many times.

To consider herself a Buddha or the Dalai Lama, she had never received any sort of enlightenment or anything of the sort.

She just kept on living.

"In any case, we have to stop the end of the world, don't we?"

She vaguely set a purpose for her life.

"I… that is, 'Jeong Seo-ah' died. But when I went back to Busan after reincarnating again, my parents were perfectly fine."

Of course, Jeong Seo-ah's parents didn't recognize her.

In the place she should have occupied, another child, a new 'Jeong Seo-ah', existed.

Nevertheless, to her, those two were still her parents.

"With each reincarnation I repeated, the number of people who were my parents, my family, and my friends gradually increased."

Their nationalities were different. Their statuses were different too.

The degree and color of the love she received were also different.

“Still, they were all very precious people.”

“…”

“Did you know? I was even born as Ms. Noh Do-hwa’s younger sister once.”

“What?!”

Go Yuri covered her mouth with her hand.

Ooh-hoo-hoo.

A delighted laugh escaped.

“That surprised you the most.”

“N-no. But still. I’ve never heard that National Road Management Corps Director Noh Do-hwa had a younger sister…”

“Of course not, Doc.”

Go Yuri’s head tilted slightly.

“When you are born again, when you reincarnate. The ‘me’ of the past life disappears.”

“…”

“Miss Noh Do-hwa. She was really kind. She was very cold to other people, but, at least to me, her younger sister. She became a prosthetist for me, who had suffered from a disability in my legs since birth.”

“What…?”

“When I became the child of Ms. Adele and Mr. Emit.”

Shock followed shock.

Like a wave.

“I felt a little sorry.”

“Old Man Scho’s, child? The two of them didn’t have any children...”

“Even so, I was an adopted child. Both of them poured out more love than I deserved on young me. However, during that time, I was desperate to stop the end of the world one way or another.”

“...”

“I was confident, too.”

She had already experienced hundreds of reincarnations.

Go Yuri was fluent in numerous languages. She had reached a level of knowledge and a realm of experience that an ordinary human would find difficult to achieve.

“Gathering funds was easy. So was gaining power. I poured all the resources I could possibly use to prepare for the destruction.”

“...”

“My parents…, Mr. Emit and Ms. Adele worried about me. Still, I persuaded them and headed to the Korean Peninsula by myself... and died trying to block the advent of the Outer God ‘Taegeuk’.”

Go Yuri looked up with a blank gaze.

At the painting titled, 『Title: Ten Legs』.

“When I looked for them in my next lives, Mr. Emit and Ms. Adele. They never adopted a child again.”

“...”

“And for some reason, whenever the time for Taegeuk’s advent came around, the number of times the two of them came to Korea on business trips increased.”

A small murmur.

“As if their lost daughter was there.”

“…”

“Isn’t it strange? Neither of them should have any memories of a past life.”

Go Yuri said.

“The Schopenhauer couple started coming to Korea. Noh Do-hwa-ssi’s younger sister was gone, and the reason she wanted to become a prosthetist was gone too. But from the next life on, she always became a prosthetist.”

“…”

“If a child was born under different conditions at a different time, with a different gender, the name would likely change. But the bakery owners always named their child Jeong Seo-ah.”

Go Yuri turned to look at me.

“Why, do you think? Doc.”

“A hole… in the heart.”

I barely managed to say.

“The Void.”

“Yes.”

Go Yuri nodded.

“I was someone’s most precious child. Someone’s most precious younger sister.”

“…”

“When I was alive, when I was people’s irreplaceable confidante and family. Those people were happy because of me. Even Miss Sim

Ah-ryeon, who is lying on your lap there.”

A smile formed on Go Yuri’s lips.

“You see, I’ve been born as a child with cerebral palsy quite a few times. At that time, Miss Ah-ryeon was my unni.”

“…”

“Her younger sister couldn’t speak well. Couldn’t express herself. Couldn’t move her body. So Ms. Ah-ryeon, she would always draw various pictures in a sketchbook, and she would show them to me and play with me.”

She was happy.

The fact that in a past life she had been a mastermind wielding great power behind the scenes of the government wasn't very important. There would be a next life anyway.

“Ta-da, ta, ta-daaaa…”

In front of her eyes, her unni.

No, if you considered the actual length of time she had lived, she was just a kid who was overwhelmingly younger than ‘her’.

In any case, the person who was her unni in this life spread open a sketchbook and, ehehe, she laughed.

“H-how is it?”

It was good.

Though she couldn’t speak.

As she conveyed a sound closer to a cry than a voice, uh-oo-uh, Shim Ah-ryeon smiled as if troubled.

A slightly tearful face.

“I-is it good? I, if you could just… even without words. It would be really nice if I could understand you…”

You had a talent.

Hundreds, no. Thousands. She, who had now lived a number of lives where counting them had become meaningless, could say for certain.

This unni's talent was enormous.

It wasn't an empty compliment. She had no memory of seeing someone who could draw as well as she did. At least among the currently living painters and aspiring painters, she was the best.

However, even a person like this dies.

It wasn't the fate and lesson of humanity that everyone dies someday.

Monsters that no one at the current point in time could even imagine would appear, wield an unreasonably absurd violence that made it impossible to resist, and kill everyone.

"Haaah. I, it would be nice if I could be sick for you instead... S-sorry. That unni is the only one who's okay…"

This… shining talent before her eyes.

This painter who could become greater than anyone.

…This unni who, for the sake of one younger sister who was lying on a sickbed for her entire life and dying lonely without a single friend, would run to the hospital as soon as school was over to show her pictures.

She will die.

And, herself too.

"…!"

From a distance, a voice was heard.

Her unni was crying.

Severe cerebral palsy. On top of that, stained with complications. The fact that she had endured for years up to this point was because of the 'Reincarnator's' superhuman mental strength.

"…T-Teacher! My sister… i-is. My sister. Please, please……!!"

A life that did not last long.

As she felt the sensation of it being cut off, as she eavesdropped on her unni's faintly audible cries, she thought of something.

Ah.

I wanted to save children like you.

Sorry.

I'm sorry, unni.

For not being able to save you.

I'm sorry for being born like this.

"Doc."

"…"

"Have you ever thought about it? Why would someone who lived an ordinary life suddenly want to draw?"

Still.

Go Yuri was looking up at the painting.

"Despite having other amazing talents. The ability to organize citizens in an apocalyptic world and operate a wide-ranging government, why would she choose the route of a prosthetist of all things?"

"…"

"Why do people often feel like they've lost something even when living an ordinary life. Why isn't there a precious someone by their

side? Why do they feel like they've lost their life, when they possess the treasure that is life?"

"..."

"Why did she awaken an ability to feel other people's emotions without words?"

Go Yuri turned around.

Our gazes met.

"Doc. According to a certain myth, the guidance of destiny plays a part when a person chooses a profession. It's a theory that says regardless of what you did in this life. What you will be 'possessed' by is already decided."

"…Karma."

"Correct."

Go Yuri smiled.

"Karma. Cause and effect. Usually, it's the concept that this life is decided by what you did wrong, or what you did right, in your past life... But I… I think the complete opposite."

In your past life.

What did you lose?

What kind of hole was bored into your heart?

□.

"I am the one and only reincarnator."

She was someone's loss.

"I am the life before the life that decides what people like, and what they dislike. I am the starting point of all routes."

She was someone's precious person.

“I am…”

She was.

“The cause that awakened the awakeners.”

She was the first awakener.

Footnotes:

Chapter 412

The Reincarnator II

Sinnoa

‘What is life?’

I had lived thousands, tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of lives.

Or maybe even millions.

I repeated more lives than anyone else. I was born as a child with full-body paralysis, and I was born as the descendant of royalty.

And yet, life always remained a riddle to me, a reincarnator.

‘Why am I… constantly suffering in a world where destruction is already a certainty?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Maybe this place isn’t reality, but my own personal hell from the very beginning.’

My own existence. The self that was a precious family member to someone would inflict a scar upon that family of a past life each time I was reincarnated.

A void would open up.

A □ was pierced through them.

‘...Perhaps… is my existence something that only hurts other people.’

And so.

I even tried running away until the very end on purpose.

At this point, I had already reached a stage that an ordinary human could not dare to fathom.

With all my knowledge, experience, power, and wealth, it wasn't difficult to take care of ‘my family’ even after the apocalypse.

Whether the world was ending or not.

I built a shelter or a bunker in the safest area in the world, and disregarding the survival of humanity, we lived together as a family for decades.

“Thank you. My child. Thanks to you….”

“Dad will always love you.”

Certainly.

When I chose to live like this, my family wasn't hurt all that much.

No □ was formed either.

This was because, in most cases, I outlived my family, so rather than inflicting a loss upon them, I was the one who inherited that loss.

It wasn't a happy ending.

It was a normal ending.

Just achieving a normal ending in this world, so terribly stained with the void’s poison, was a tremendous accomplishment in itself.

For a while, the reincarnator pursued only normal endings.

It couldn't be helped. Living for an impossible goal was just too difficult and exhausting.

‘Ah.’

There was a side effect.

‘They don't... awaken.’

It was a natural principle.

The reincarnator bit their lip firmly.

‘The people who lost me in a past life live with a void in their hearts in the next. But, thanks to that, they awaken.’

‘On the other hand, those who didn't experience any particular sense of loss... are just ordinary people in their next life. And continue to be ordinary people.’

In other words.

‘When the void arrives and monsters swarm, they are just ordinary people, people who will die much, much more easily than awakeners.’

‘Just... ordinary humans. The kind who will die without being able to utter a single word or scream.’

That was the price of a normal ending.

It was the result of a wish to simply spend time with my precious people, casting aside both the world’s destruction and humanity’s salvation.

People were brutally murdered by monsters. Unable to even resist. My families from past lives, from tens of thousands of lives, who had bid me farewell with gentle smiles.

“...”

In the ruins of a certain collapsed city.

I had arrived as quickly as possible, but the person who was my father in a past life was already dead, crushed by a building.

The reincarnator gently held the corpse’s hand and quietly closed their eyes.

‘This is cruel. Truly.’

This world hated humans.

And among them, it particularly hated me.

‘...I have to raise awakeners.’

The reincarnator opened their eyes.

‘As much love as possible. I have to become an irreplaceable, precious existence to them.’

‘That way, when they lose me. And the more horribly I die...’

‘The probability that the person will awaken a powerful ability in their next life increases.’

The hesitation was brief.

Even in the time I spent hesitating, people were dying.

‘The power to fight back against the monsters.’

‘A hope for survival in a world like this.’

It was simple. The more powerful awakeners that appeared, the greater the chance humanity had of winning.

Even now, humanity held an unbelievably advantageous position compared to the ‘first life.’

Although it was merely like the score of a soccer match, that was once a crushing defeat of [100:0], had only just changed to [100:1].

‘Everything is statistics.’

‘I must become a precious person to people. So precious that they can never lose me, an existence more fatal than their own death.’

‘And then...’

‘I must die as miserably as possible.’

I put it into practice immediately.

It felt like imagining a small button inside my head, then lightly pressing it.

Time passed.

“Aaaaaaaah! Ah! Aaaack!”

Someone was wailing before my eyes.

It was my ‘older brother’ in this life.

“So-someone... Somebody please! Please help me! My sister, ugh, my little sister! Please help me!”

His name was Lee Baek.

He had strayed a bit when he was young, but he became more and more diligent as he grew up.

In place of our parents who passed away early, he took on all sorts of part-time jobs to support me, his younger sister.

That sister. The one and only family member he had left was now dying, crushed by the debris of a collapsed building in Seoul.

“Oppa....”

“D-don't talk! You, don't talk! Hey! Over here! Is anyone there?! Please come here! Help me! There’s someone here!”

What is a person?

With my entire lower body crushed by a block of concrete and my shoulder pierced by a rebar, was I, now more red than flesh-toned, still a person.

“I'm sorry... oppa....”

“No! So-ah! No! Aaaaaaaargh! No, no! Don't close your eyes! You can't close your eyes! H-hey... Over here! Ah, here! Help me! Someone, someone!”

I'm sorry.

I died. I was born into a new life. And so, after settling down to some extent in my next life, I went to visit the outskirts of Seoul.

I checked Lee Baek's ability.

'An ability to make his voice louder?'

The so-called Lion's Roar.

'Ahh, I see. Did he think he couldn't save his sister because his voice didn't reach anyone? That can't be the reason.'

Lee Baek's life was ruined.

A life that had already gone astray. After his parents died, he began to get involved in crime, spreading the germs that had infested his own life to others.

He didn't ask for anyone's understanding.

Because when his own life was being ruined, no one had asked for his.

'It's not a very useful ability... Hmm. No. It could be relatively useful for commanding a large number of allies on a battlefield.'

'Next.'

It was like a lottery game. Like gacha.

'Next.'

The reincarnator, like a scientist with the entire Earth as their laboratory, carefully bestowed □ upon people.

Naturally, high-rank awakeners and low-rank awakeners were sorted out. The latter were not worth a second thought.

'Next.'

High-rank awakeners.

These ones required special management.

‘Next.’

Come to think of it, there were countless ways to become a precious person to someone. It didn't necessarily have to be as family.

A friend. An understanding soul. A companion.

‘Next.’

Jeong Ye-ji, who would later be called by the title [Saintess], was special in that sense.

After becoming her family member and dying, I checked on her later, and what do you know? Jeong Ye-ji had mastered [Telepathy].

The reincarnator clenched a fist in their mind at that moment. My goodness! Telepathy.

It was a jackpot. Dopamine rushed through me like someone who had just poured hundreds of thousands or millions of won into gacha and got an S-rank for the first time.

My dear unni was so foolish.

It wouldn't have been Ye-ji unni's fault that her smartphone had disappeared somewhere right when her family member was dying, so she couldn't send an SOS signal to anyone.

‘Next.’

In the next life, the reincarnator moved near Jeong Ye-ji and purposely became her childhood friend.

Gaining her affection was easy. People with a □ pierced in their hearts felt a very easy pull toward the reincarnator whenever they saw me.

It was natural. It was a reunion with a family they had lost to death.

‘Next.’

Jeong Ye-ji's childhood friend died. The friend from the same school with whom Jeong Ye-ji read books and shared her heart died. The friend Jeong Ye-ji met up with occasionally to chat and laugh with died. Jeong Ye-ji's, Jeong Ye-ji's, Jeong Ye-ji's....

The results were astonishing.

‘Excellent.’

Telepathy. Clairvoyance. Time Stop.

‘A desire to be able to report to someone without any tools when a family member is dying.’

‘A wish to watch over everyone, because a friend was kidnapped and tortured to death without my knowledge.’

‘A hope that it would be better if all of this just stopped.’

SSS-class, confirmed.

‘The more a person aches.’

‘The more they cherish someone.’

‘The more talented a person is at the pain of loss.’

A powerful awakener was forged.

‘Interesting.’

However, there was a limit to awakening as well.

For example, in Jeong Ye-ji's case. She no longer knew any other way to fight against the wound in her heart beyond ‘stopping time.’

This was a result verified over dozens more attempts.

‘If so, couldn't I create a reincarnator like myself someday?’

A faint flutter in my heart.

The emotion named hope, which I had let go of long ago when I

discarded my human heart, lit up like a candle.

‘If one can stop time, they might be able to repeat time. Yes, I'm sure of it.’

‘I want to turn back the past. I want to start over. Isn't this kind of wish a pretty universal desire for humanity?’

‘There must be someone out there who will reach that point. Yes, it would be strange if there weren’t.’

Next.

‘Where might you be—?’

Next.

‘Is there anyone who will swim with me through this shattered world of destruction? Anyone?’

Next.

‘No, no! It's troublesome if you try to overcome the scar so easily. Why are you trying to somehow stand up on the scar that is me? You have no talent.’

Next.

‘No... Hmm. But it’s also troublesome if you crumble under the loss and your heart dies completely. That's a problem.’

Next.

‘Please feel the pain.’

Next.

‘But please do not break.’

Next.

‘Painfully. So painful that you want to die, you want to curse the world right now for losing someone precious.’

‘But I still want you to live more earnestly than anyone else. I still hope you will decide to save the world.’

Next.

‘It’s troublesome if you are satisfied with saving just one precious person. Is there no one who will think of the world? Of humanity?’

Next.

‘Is there really no one? Someone like that.’

Next.

‘Why?’

Next.

‘When even I can do it...’

Next.

‘Ahaha.’

Next.

“...”

Your wish.

I made your wish… come true.

You all said it.

Please let me be rich in my next life, or… Let my voice reach everyone around me in the next life, or… I wish time would just stop in the next life, or…

I made your wishes—come true! I did!

Yes. Scars remained. A stain in your heart that could never be washed away no matter how you lived this life. The poison of the void remained, I admit it.

But, how can a wish be granted without anything in return?

It's only natural that there's a price. Besides, you don't even remember the price you paid. You remain ignorant of what happened in your past life, of how much pain you were in.

I, in fact, granted your wishes.

I didn't leave a scar.

I said I didn't!

“…”

It was a natural principle.

“Mmm.... Every time I leave a small void in someone, one forms in my heart too. A tomb of the exact same size.”

I lost my parents.

I lost my family. They were precious people. They were childhood friends. They were friends. They were all truly precious people.

□. □. □. □. □. □.

□. □. □. □. □. □.

□. □. □. □. □. □.

□. □. □. □. □. □.

Now, if I look inside my heart.

“There are only holes everywhere.”

The result of hundreds of millions of tombs, dug by hundreds of millions of people, all piled up inside my heart.

“This can hardly be called human anymore.”

What is life?

“…”

What is a human?

“Am I… a human?”

Probably not.

“Then it would be necessary to separate the two. Acknowledge the void in my heart, and isolate it completely.”

“Oh my. It's a kind of Wirianchihyeong1, isn't it?”

“Even if I isolate it, how do I do it? This is my heart. If it were an arm, I could at least cut it off, but I can't cut out my heart.”

“Because the moment I cut out my heart—”

“I would truly become a monster.”

“Ahaha. You’re already a monster!”

“Knowing full well that people will suffer.”

“Approaching them for that very suffering.”

“Dying.”

“And killing them.”

“Now, just walking down the street, everyone is family from a past life, you know? The whole world is my graveyard.”

“Congratulations.”

“This is the scenery you wished for, isn't it?”

“You reap what you sow.”

“Hey.”

“Just a moment. This kind of conversation has been repeated for too long, too familiarly. It's a meaningless flow.”

“It's the trace of a being who has come to regard digging into their own wounds as the only proof of their humanity. How pitiful.”

“Feeling pity is part of the template.”

“What wonderful self-awareness. And so—”

“I have a brilliant idea.”

“Ah.” “Ah.” “Ah.” “Ah.”

“Not all minds are the same. Without even going as far as Freud, isn't the concept of the ‘unconscious’ very familiar to people?”

“Consciousness.” “Unconsciousness.”

“The me of the conscious.” “The me of the unconscious.”

“There is a possibility.”

“Um, excuse me.”

“Carl Jung advocated for the concept of the collective unconscious.”

“The idea that humans do not exist as individuals but always as a group, and that ‘memory,’ which is formed using the human brain, can in fact be accumulated collectively.”

“Like DNA.”

“Existing within the individual, but the individual is merely one of many nodes—”

“Interesting.”

“Excuse me?”

“The voids piled up in my heart have certainly reached a level that can be classified as humanity's collective unconscious. After all, my wounds are the wounds of humanity, aren't they?”

“How interesting.”

“In that case, if I reincarnate more, much more from here on, leaving scars in the hearts of all humanity and accumulating them as voids in my own heart?”

“Wow. It’s a cemetery for all of humanity!”

“Let’s make it.”

“Shall we make it?”

“Let's just make it.”

“Let's isolate it.”

“Hey. I-it hurts.”

“…” “…” “…” “…”

“I don't want to do this anymore.”

“How is this... saving the world? It's strange. Originally, even if they died at the hands of monsters. Everyone... Mom, too. Dad, too. Father, too. Mother, too. All of them. They died as humans.”

“What is an awakener? What is a superhuman? An ascendant, or whatever they're called...”

“They're monsters.”

“While claiming to fight against monsters, I'm creating them. I am. The monsters.”

“By bewitching people. By speaking out as if I'm a precious person, just as I please.”

“Like a changgwi2 joining a procession of corpses.”

“I want to die.”

“…” “……” “…” “……”

“Everyone has come to hate the world.”

“Everyone, they hate *it*, because—”

“It was taken from them. Their precious existence. Me. There's no way they would love a world that took *me* away.”

“It's not that the world hates humans.”

“It's that humans hate the world.”

“Because of me.”

“……” “…” “……” “…”

“Someone like me should not have been born. As soon as I was born, I should have died.”

“A miscarriage. Of course they would be sad if they miscarried, but that sadness would have been better than the wound I would inflict.”

“I'm tired.”

“I don't want to. I-I don't want to do it anymore.”

“I don't want to be born.”

“Please save me. I'm sorry, oppa. I'm sorry. Mom. Dad. I'm sorry... Sorry. Forgive me.”

“Please. Someone.”

“Please kill me.”

“……” “……” “……” “……”

“There seems to be no particular problem.”

“Yes. It's a flow that has always existed.”

“Humans have a nature akin to that of a carnivore. It is the instinct to feel as though they are absorbing life when they dig into flesh dripping with juices.”

“However, in the modern era where hunting has decreased, and violence and murder are forbidden, people's opportunities to dig into the flesh of other beings have been extremely reduced. So as an alternative.”

“They eat their own flesh.”

“The contradiction of regarding self-slaughter as one's own life.”

“Interesting.”

“The civilization of cannibalism.”

“Whether you are human or not is not important at all.”

“The billions who have died so far.”

“No. I have to multiply it by the number of times I've reincarnated. Billions multiplied by billions, that's the weight of the lives that have been lost until now.”

“Can those people be saved?”

“Can they be rescued?”

“That is the only thing that matters.”

“Because—”

“What humans desire is not a human, but a god.”

“A god does not cry.”

“A god does not regret.”

“A god is not human.”

“Therefore.”

“The next life.”

“Yes.”

“The next life.”

“Next.” “Next.” “Next.” “Next.”

The reincarnator was born.

The reincarnator was always born.

“Ah.”

And every time I was born, I witnessed the sight of someone looking down at me.

The first memory.

The person looking at me this time was a man.

“Aboob abooobooboo bueeeh.”

“…”

The boy scrunched up his face foolishly. It seemed he was trying to make me, a newborn baby, laugh.

The gesture was familiar.

His face was also familiar.

‘Reconnaissance Team Leader.’

Because no matter how many reincarnations I repeated, he was the one who always fought at the final defensive line until the very last moment, despite having no abilities whatsoever.

Beaming.

“Huh? Oh, oh, they smiled! They smiled!”

The boy chattered excitedly. It had been a long time since the reincarnator had equipped a smile that could evoke affection from anyone. It was only natural for the other party to be excited.

‘It’s this person this time.’

I think he was my childhood friend in my first life.

‘What kind of wound will you receive?’

And…

What kind of wound will I receive?

Again, I live.

A life destined for death.

Footnotes:

1 - This refers to a specific type of exile punishment from Korea's Joseon Dynasty. A political offender was confined to a designated location, and their house was surrounded by thorny bushes to prevent escape or contact with the outside world.

2 - In Korean folklore, a **Changgwi** is the ghost of a person who was killed by a tiger. This ghost becomes enslaved to the tiger and is forced to lure other humans to their death to serve its master.

Chapter 413

The Reincarnator III

Sinnoa

Snap.

The Reincarnator's Arabian Nights came to an end right there.

The midnight exhibition hall, which had a thousand deaths on display, was once again wrapped in silence, much like a portable radio that had suddenly powered down after its batteries ran out.

“Go Yuri? Why did you suddenly stop talking?”

“…”

Go Yuri lifted her head.

A gentle smile was drawn upon her lips.

“No reason. It’s just that Ms. Ah-ryeon, nestled in your arms, Doc, seems to be starting to have a nightmare.”

“Ah.”

“This place is a temple built for you, Doc. Thanks to it, you succeeded in receiving my voice. But now that you’ve heard ‘this much’ of my story, the reception should be clear even when you are outside.”

“Reception.”

“Yes. You could call it the way to tune into the radio channel that is me.”

The hem of her purple skirt flowed down.

Go Yuri stood up, letting the night air spill off her like a diver who

had just broken the surface, shedding water droplets.

“This is the end of the prologue.”

She was looking down at me.

“Doc, please take Ms. Ah-ryeon to her lodgings. After she opened such a wonderful art exhibition for us, it would be sad to let her sleep on this hard floor, wouldn't it.”

“And you are...”

“I will be waiting.”

Shhh.

Go Yuri’s finger crossed her lips. She winked playfully with one eye.

“Please don’t ask where. We will be reunited when we are meant to meet, in the place we are meant to be.”

“…After hearing a story like that, you expect me to just wait quietly?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. Hmm, I don’t particularly intend to torment you, Doc. It’s just that in order to continue what comes next, you will need a resolve of your own.”

Resolve.

I had always considered my own resolve to be stronger than anyone’s. But the person before me was a reincarnator who had lived through billions of lives.

I couldn’t help but pause at the sheer weight that word must carry.

“The next time we meet, we will no longer be able to stop. We won’t be able to go back, nor can we take a single step backward.”

“...”

“Therefore, Doc. Please, take a long ‘vacation’. Enjoy it until you have no regrets left.”

“What is going to happen to me?”

“My salvation.”

Go Yuri’s smiling eyes widened.

“The promise will be fulfilled.”

“Promise…?”

“Please enjoy your last vacation. Ah, and please don’t worry about me. I’m used to waiting. Very much so.”

“How can I possibly do that after hearing all this—”

“Ahaha. Please, trust me. Hmm, although if we only consider the absolute numbers, you’ve only just passed 1,000 regressions, Doc, so you can’t be compared to me. Still, I believe you are the only one on this earth who can understand my familiarity with waiting.”

“…”

“Well then, goodbye. Until we meet again.”

Tap.

Go Yuri took a couple of steps back, then elegantly gathered the hem of her skirt and bowed like the daughter of a nobleman.

And without adding another single word, she left the exhibition hall alone.

Tap, tap, tap… Tap.

I immediately followed Go Yuri, holding Sim Ah-ryeon in my arms. Truly, immediately.

Therefore, when I turned the corner of the gallery, I should have seen the back of Go Yuri, who could not have gotten far.

But she was not there.

Not in the exhibition hall’s corridor. Not at the exit. No matter how

much I scanned the city under the dark night sky, Go Yuri was nowhere to be seen.

There was only the chirping of insects like crickets.

“...”

“Uuumm. Guild Leaderrrr...”

The sleepy mumble of a frail, young child snuggled into my arms, digging into my chest as if there was a burrow, a □, carved out just for her.

By my side, there were many children whose four seasons were always winter.

I stroked the child’s head.

Go Yuri had disappeared.

Even when I inquired with the Saintess, she could not trace any sign of the disappearance.

[I'm sorry. As per your instructions, Mr. Undertaker, I had been deliberately averting my gaze from her, to ensure I wouldn't pry, not even by chance.]

[It seems she has vanished from the soup kitchen that was operating in Daejeon as well. There are no witnesses. I have no excuse.]

“No, it’s alright. I was the one who ordered you to never monitor Go Yuri until now. I’m the one who should be sorry for the sudden confusion.”

Where could she have disappeared to?

If I searched the entire world, could I find her somewhere?

‘No. That would be impossible.’

Go Yuri was a reincarnator. I was a regressor.

For the two of us, ‘disappearance’ was not merely a spatial concept.

A temporal disappearance was also entirely possible.

‘The next cycle.’

I will be waiting, she had said.

Until when?

‘Until I myself am satisfied. Until I have enjoyed this world without a single regret and can let it all go.’

It would be fine if it took a hundred years. It likely wouldn't matter if it took a thousand.

‘Because Go Yuri had already waited until I could receive her voice.’

Could my entire life have been a period of waiting for someone else?

“…”

“Huh? What is it, Mister. Why are you staring at me with that face?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Aha. You’ve fallen for my deadly charms, haven’t you? My, my. I suppose it can’t be helped to fantasize about a great author. But don’t get too close, okay? You might just melt like the wings of Icarus.”

It was a strange feeling.

Until now, I had always waited for others, but I had never been the one waited for.

Because I was a regressor.

I knew who they were and what their futures held, with a semi-omniscient point of view.

That's why I knew all too well.

"Dok-seo."

"Ung?"

"How is it? Is the writing going well?"

Dodododo, Oh Dok-seo covered her ears with both hands and ran off somewhere. The moment I had pronounced the 'wri' in writing, she was already in a cheetah's stance.

I let out a bitter smile.

'I can wait. As long as it takes.'

Still.

'I would be happy if you could catch up as soon as possible.'

Of course, I was strong.

I could wait forever. I had built up the fortitude to endure that waiting.

But even the best-made structures eventually rust.

Even if one were to befriend that rust and call it a form of elegance, one could not deny the fact that the steel bars within were silently corroding away.

'Go Yuri was waiting for me.'

Her words were certainly right.

The only person on this earth who could understand the heart-wrenching nature of a reincarnator's wait was, regrettably, a single regressor.

"Now, now. Dok-seo."

"Aaargh! I can't hear you! I can't hear anything! Guarantee the author's human rights! Guarantee them! Guarantee them! An author

is not public property but a privately existing human being! A human! A human!”

Normally, I would have retorted with something like, ‘Well, aren’t readers private human beings too?’.

But this time, I simply stroked the back of Oh Dok-seo’s head.

“…?”

Oh Dok-seo, who had been protesting with a ‘grrr’ in a hedgehog’s stance, cautiously lifted her head.

“Uh, Mister?”

“Mm.”

“What’s wrong?”

Looking up at my face, Oh Dok-seo’s expression grew even more anxious. Her red eyes trembled, unable to find a place to rest.

“Are you… going somewhere?”

As expected. She was a sharp kid.

I crouched down to meet her gaze at eye level. And then I smiled.

“Mister doesn’t really know either.”

“…”

“Even though I’ve lived for so very long. There are still so many things in the world that even Mister doesn’t know. But you know that Mister cares for you a lot, our Dok-seo, right?”

“Don’t go.”

“I’m leaving Ha-yul in your care.”

“…”

“Ah-ryeon too. And Yo-hwa. The other children as well. If Mister

isn’t around, you have to be the center for everyone, Dok-seo. Can you do that?”

“Why, why are you saying things like that? You’re not really disappearing, are you? Right?”

She was just a child.

Children this young had died over 1,000 times. Perhaps billions of times. Perhaps billions of times that.

I had to save the children.

It wasn't some grand feat. There are more people than one might think who would disregard their own lives to save a child in danger right before their eyes.

‘Let these children have a continuation of their epilogue.’

My work was not fundamentally different.

‘I don’t care if it’s a world full of sorrow. That is something to think about when the time comes. But to die for such absurd reasons. Something like the void, or aberrations.’

‘They cannot be allowed to die for such things.’

The world was sickeningly full of such occurrences.

‘If that’s the case, then it’s the world that’s wrong.’

People called such a world nature, reason, the Dao, the path.

In other words, a Route.

Now, I could fully understand the words Go Yuri had left me with.

– What reason is there that a single human cannot change that path?

I agreed.

Therefore, in the next cycle. The 1,085th cycle.

Go Yuri was not at Busan Station.

As soon as I broke through the tutorial dungeon, I cast aside my contact with the Saintess and headed for Onyang, Asan, in South Chungcheong Province.

Go Yuri was standing in an old inn in Onyang, in room 202 on the second floor, a place where the murky, cream-colored paint was peeling off in patches like dead skin.

"..."

Seeing me enter through the open door, Go Yuri's eyes widened as if in surprise.

An inn room. In that place where a nameless mother and son had withered and died like old trees, Go Yuri had been looking up at a red flower just moments before.

"Oh my."

Her voice was one of genuine surprise.

"How did you do it in just one cycle?"

"It was a simple problem to solve if one thought about you and me. You, the reincarnator, chose me, and my title just so happened to be the Undertaker."

"..."

"In the end, you were thinking of a way to die yourself. But for beings like us, death is not a simple end. To truly reach the end, to see the end of the Route, the ability itself needs to be eradicated."

"Brilliant."

Go Yuri smiled.

"Yes. That's right. Therefore, Udumbara. I need a 'reset button' that can erase all of an awakener's abilities."

“So you deliberately aimed for the time when Ah-ryeon held her art exhibition. That girl, Ah-ryeon, possesses the same ability as Udumbara. Your very visit to the exhibition was a hint in itself.”

“Ah, that’s wonderful.”

Her smile deepened.

“I thought it would take you three regressions at the very least. Honestly, I thought you would miss it for about ten regressions. To think you reached the correct answer in a single regression. You truly are something else, Doc.”

Go Yuri crouched down on the floor.

She then reached out and caressed the wrist of the child who had starved to death. A string of prayer beads, a little too large for a newborn’s wrist, was wrapped around it.

Clatter. Clatter.

“We were originally twins.”

“…”

“One of them was me.”

On the bodies of the mother and child, crimson flowers bloomed here and there, like red spider lilies.

Like the banks of the river in the underworld.

“My mother, of course, tried to feed both of us children equally. But I, even as a newborn, was sentient. So I steadfastly refused.”

“…”

“Then she had to feed the other child, right? She had no choice. She kept fussing, hoping I would eat at least a little, but the child acted as if the two of them could only live if she sacrificed herself, and in the end… she was the first to die.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. As you can see, it was a fate they would have met all the same, even if I wasn't there.”

Hup, Go Yuri pushed herself up from her knees.

“Isn’t it strange? I wish she had eaten something. If she didn’t like porridge, if she didn’t like milk, if she didn’t like tap water, then I wish she could have eaten my thoughts as her mother instead. My love and my worry.”

“…”

“And from that, a tree that could eat even life and abilities was born. As for why it had to be a tree, well, hmm. I suppose I was envious of a life that could survive on just sunlight and water.”

Having said that, Go Yuri wore a smile that was both bitter and satisfied, like a theater owner who had just revealed the entire backstage of a play.

She was like an examiner giving a perfect score to a candidate who had reached their destination without a single error, like a professor who had just read a flawless graduation thesis.

However…

“For a long time.”

“…?”

“There was a point I always found strange.”

My part of the answer was not yet finished.

“I don’t know if you remember, but when I first met Oh Dok-seo, you were also in our party.”

“Oh my, yes, I remember. It wasn’t that long ago, was it? Although I can’t recall it as perfectly as you can, Doc.”

“At that time, I barely managed to persuade Oh Dok-seo and had you expelled from the party.”

Go Yuri let out a small laugh.

“Expelled from the party, you say. That’s a good cliché. Now it’s your turn to regret chasing me out and become obsessed, Doc.”

“It was on a sloping road.”

“Pardon?”

“After being expelled from the party, you walked down a sloping road. It was a single path. So if I had waited a little longer, I should have seen you walking up the next hill, but you never appeared.”

“…”

“After going down the hill, you vanished. There was nowhere else to go. Like a mirage.”

It was the same this last time.

Sim Ah-ryeon’s exhibition hall was located in the very center of downtown Busan, in the Tower of Babel Plaza. There was no way I wouldn't know the geography of that place.

And yet, just by turning a single corner in the gallery, Go Yuri had evaporated without a trace.

How?

Was it because Go Yuri was a being who walked through dreams? Because she was an aberration? Because she could brainwash humans into not perceiving her?

But Go Yuri was not a brainwasher. According to the revealed truth, she was merely the one who had lost all of humanity.

Go Yuri was human.

In that case, the conclusion became simple.

“You were the one… you were the teleporter all along. Go Yuri.”

“…”

“That’s why you disappeared on the sloping road, and why you vanished from the exhibition hall. The reason you sometimes don't get caught by the Saintess's Clairvoyance is simple too. You just teleported beyond the range of her vision.”

The inn grew quiet.

“I rushed here as soon as I cleared the Busan Station tutorial dungeon. And yet, you were already here before me.”

“…”

“There is only one answer. The ability user that Old Man Scho had been so desperately searching for. The person who can teleport is you.”

Silence.

“Perfect.”

Go Yuri’s lips slowly parted.

“Yes, Doc. I am the very awakener of teleportation that you have all been looking for.”

Footnotes:

Chapter 414

The Reincarnator IV

Sinnoa

The Teleportation ability user.

Go Yuri.

"…"

As I processed the business card that had been summarized into two lines in my head, a myriad of emotions washed over me.

Of course, it was clear that she had countless other abilities hidden beyond [Teleportation].

If an Awakening was the howling sound of wind rising from the □, the bottomless abyss, bored into a person's memory—

Then the billions of holes drilled into Go Yuri's heart would be a cluster of Awakenings in and of themselves.

But among them, [Teleportation] was an ability that I, that Old Man Scho, that we had longed for so desperately.

We searched and searched and ultimately couldn't find it, so wasn't the Inunaki Tunnel what we secured, thinking we should at least prepare a passage for swift movement?

The very reason I had made the Inunaki Tunnel my base as a regressor.

It was partly for convenience, but it was also a show of my own resolve to never forget Old Man Schopenhauer's 'wish'.

"…This might sound like a complaint. But may I say something?"

"Oh, please do, Doc."

Go Yuri smiled brightly.

“In the first place, just having a proper ‘conversation’ like this is a joy for me. Ohoho. I don’t know if you can read my expression but… Believe it or not, I am very happy right now, you see?”

“…Why didn’t you save Old Man Schopenhauer?”

Those words slipped out of my mouth.

“You could have saved him. Yes. Old Man Scho probably wouldn’t have been able to tell who you were, or even if you were human. But you could have silently moved Madam Adele and placed her beside the old man. Wasn't something like that simple for you?”

“…”

The smile on Go Yuri’s face slowly settled, calm like matcha powder.

“Why didn’t I save him when I could have? That is what you’re asking, I see.”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.”

After pondering for a moment as if she were in a bit of a bind, Go Yuri did something completely unexpected.

She suddenly began to take off her top.

“…?!”

I reacted faster than thunder, immediately turning my head away.

For the record, I felt no lust whatsoever.

As I have confessed to you all, I, the Undertaker, always sensually perceived the ‘state of the other person in the regression where they met their death’.

In other words, Go Yuri’s head, which I had cleanly sliced off in the

89th cycle, was also being broadcast 24/7 on the Undertaker's special broadcast channel.

To add to that, it wasn't just the visuals that were reproduced. The audio was also implemented in ultra-high quality. This meant that Go Yuri's head, severed by my blade, was cheerfully smiling and saying 'Let's become one'.

It would have been more surprising if I had felt any lust.

"Hey, what are you suddenly—"

"It's okay."

What? What is okay?

I'm not? Not okay at all?

"You can look now, Doc."

"…"

The moment I opened my tightly shut eyes.

I was once again met with a completely unexpected sight and was at a loss for words for some time.

Normally, Go Yuri never exposed any bare skin.

Even when she was handing out food at the soup kitchen wearing a green apron that said 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms', her entire body was meticulously covered in cloth.

Therefore, it would be fair to say that this was the first time in my eons-long life as a regressor that I had witnessed Go Yuri's bare skin, but there was no bare skin to be seen.

Her back, with a pronounced spine.

Black markings, packed so densely that no skin was visible.

[Lee So-young/6/17/13:59]

A name.

[Kim Ha-neul/11/2/22:45]

[Mateusz Kowalski/5/20/23:56]

[Park Jin-woo/3/12/08:21]

Names.

Like epitaphs.

[Jeong Da-yeon/1/6/10:18]

[Han Yu-jin/12/14/15:27]

[李秀文/8/22/11:11]

[Shin Ye-rim/8/8/19:12]

[Kang Tae-hyun/5/20/23:56]

[आयशा ख़ान/7/19/14:44]

[Choi Min-seok/9/25/17:03]

[Люсия Ромеро/11/3/18:18]

[田中 優希/12/27/06:40]

[Yoo Seo-yeon/7/3/06:35]

[2/28/12:00/ماركو بيانكي]

[Moon Chae-won/10/10/09:09]

[Nguyễn Thị Sophia/8/16/20:25]

[Jo Eun-bi/12/21/16:45]

[Омар Эль-Саид/6/5/00:02]

[Jang Eun-seo/7/27/20:40]

[9/1/14:11/נואה סמית]

[Noh Hyun-woo/5/13/05:25]

[Анастасия Волкова/10/31/03:03]

[Yoon Ha-rin/10/31/03:03]

Names and dates.

Words written in the smallest possible size that a person could discern with the naked eye.

On her back. On her arms. On her waist. Over her entire body.

“My memory isn’t as good as yours, Doc.”

Go Yuri said, her back still turned to me.

“I just wrote down as much as I could remember.”

“…The anniversary of their deaths.”

“Yes. It’s the time when my precious people die. Though it doesn’t mean much if the butterfly effect is too strong.”

Rustle, rustle.

Go Yuri pulled her clothes back on. I silently watched as the cemetery composed solely of letters was covered up.

“It’s a kind of ritual. They are all precious to me, but for the ones who are especially, especially precious, I try to recall that life again each time I write their name.”

“…”

“Then, sometimes when I’m looking in the mirror. Oh. Why did I write this person’s name?”

Go Yuri tilted her head.

“—and. There are times I can’t quite remember. It happens more

often than you’d think.”

“…”

“When that happens, I stop writing that person’s name and the anniversary of their death from the next life onward. It’s like tossing a memo file into the trash can, poof.”

My lips would not part easily.

Regarding the method to escape from that cemetery of oblivion, even if no one else in the world knew, I, of all people, could speak of it with certainty.

I was also more aware of that method's side effects than anyone.

“Complete Memory.”

“Yes.”

“…But the Complete Memory ability requires one to bury their own senses in a tomb as the price for mourning others.”

“Yes.”

“The two of us reflect the end of the Route that each of us can reach.”

Go Yuri turned around and looked at me.

A smile still lingered on her face.

“Every ability is a blessing and a curse at the same time. But the human heart is a bit sly. It always envies what it doesn't have.”

“…”

“I also thought about it a lot. Hmm, for example. Miss Lee Ha-yul is a very precious person to you, isn’t she, Doc? But after hundreds of regressions, what if you could no longer remember Ha-yul-ssi.”

“…”

“I think you would be sad.”

That’s right.

“So, Doc. Please, I hope you won’t consider the ability you have a curse.”

In that moment, I realized.

“You chose not to obtain the Complete Memory ability on purpose, just so you could say those words to me now.”

“…”

A slightly surprised expression.

And then, a smile once more.

Her gentle gaze lingered on my face. It was the look of someone who understood that the other person had grasped her intention, and who, in turn, fully understood that they had understood.

After taking back the breath I had exhaled into the air, Go Yuri murmured quietly.

“Mr. Schopenhauer only awakens his regression ability upon losing his wife.”

“…”

“I tried various methods. At one point, I even tried to pioneer a Route by selecting Mr. Schopenhauer as the ‘protagonist’ instead of you, Doc. But he is, crucially, mentally weak.”

A regressor’s greatest weakness.

“He only awakens as a regressor upon losing his wife. But once he loses his wife, he can no longer become happy enough to continue living as a regressor.”

“…A dilemma with two choices.”

“Yeees. It would be so convenient if I could just find him a suitable

new love. Really, Father is so devoted and romantic, it's quite troublesome.”

Go Yuri covered her mouth and laughed.

“On the other hand, you were the best, Doc.”

“…”

“Your ability—to be honest, it was nothing special. It was F-rank. Ah. Originally, you were a completely ordinary person with no abilities, Doc.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. But your mentality—hmmm, your mentality. It was so incredible, it made me wonder how a person’s will could be so strong. Of course. Your will was so sturdy that even as awakeners started to appear, you were always the one commanding the reconnaissance team of the Final Defense Line.”

“Hm.”

I couldn't relate to that.

Because it was a ‘past I could not remember’.

But Go Yuri, as she talked about me, seemed, how should I put it, a little more excited.

“I became your precious family member and died once, and surprisingly! This person. In the next life, he was still a non-ability user. My goodness. Does that even make sense?”

She seemed happy somehow.

I had no choice but to let her continue.

“I was a truly perfect younger sister, you know.”

“You were?”

“Yes. And you were the perfect older brother. The people in the

reconnaissance team were so envious when they saw us siblings. Hmm, even now, when you're with Miss Lee Ha-yul or Miss Sim Ah-ryeon, or Miss Oh Dok-seo, you exude a very warm atmosphere that makes others quite envious. But I don't know. If they had seen the two of us siblings, they might have thought those other relationships were just lesser versions. That thought just crossed my mind."

"Hey, no matter how you put it. Isn't that a bit of an exaggeration?"

"If you realized just how much of a doting fool you can be, you would probably be extremely embarrassed yourself."

"…"

I had my own suspicions about my doting tendencies, so I quietly shut my mouth.

"We were such close siblings. And you were in so much pain when you saw me get abducted by the void and die as if being tortured, my limbs torn off by a monster."

"…"

"But when I went to find you in the next life, what do you know? This person. He hasn't Awakened at all…!"

"Hmm."

"D-don't tell me, all that doting on his sister was a lie? An act? Oh my god. How dare he deceive the eyes of a reincarnator like me. This is unforgivable. This time, I will become someone far, far more precious than a sibling from a past life and make you Awaken…"

Finding something amusing, Go Yuri chuckled to herself.

"I think I got competitive. Probably."

"…Sorry for being so indifferent."

"What? No, no. I thought so too at first, but the truth was different."

Go Yuri looked at me.

“Doc. Do you have any idea when or how you first Awakened?”

“No. Not at all.”

“It was when you heard my story.”

Story?

“You see. After trying to trigger your Awakening about 6 times and getting nowhere, I confessed everything in a fit of desperation. I came out as a reincarnator.”

“Ah.”

“So my plan was probably to just complain, saying things like, I've never met anyone like you, why on earth won't you Awaken, was your affection for me a lie, but…. As you listened quietly to my story. Well, you, Doc——”

I'm sorry.

I’m sorry for not remembering.

Sorry for not remembering you.

“You started to cry.”

“…”

“Ahaha. I was so flustered, you know? You just held onto me and kept apologizing, saying you were sorry, truly sorry. I was wondering why this brother of mine, this person, who had remained so resolute even when the defense line fell and the citizens all died, was suddenly acting this way…”

At that moment.

“It’s embarrassing, but tears fell from my eyes too.”

"…"

"Ah. The truth is, I wanted to hear an apology. I realized it then."

Go Yuri reached out her hand.

Her palm caressed the regressor's head.

"The human heart is such a sly thing, isn't it? It's only natural that you all don't remember me. To want an apology for the oblivion of a past life, not even the present one, it's all a mess."

"…"

"It wasn't [Complete Memory] from the start. It was just, your memory got a little better. It was already good to begin with. To be honest, it's hard to call it a meaningful Awakened ability. Hmm, FFF-rank."

However.

"I think I just wanted to be a little spoiled by you, Doc."

There must have been many reasons.

In the name of finding an SSS-class ability user, she had treated her precious family members like gacha pulls. Furthermore, she distributed happiness and pain as if to lab rats to maximize the rank of their Awakening.

Atrocities that would have made the her from her first life faint in shock. Vile acts that would have her berating, 'How can you still be human after doing that?'.

Before she came to completely hate herself, while the her from her first life still remained, even if just as a vestigial organ, right now.

"I thought, maybe it would be okay if it was you, Doc—"

She took a gamble.

"No more reincarnating. Well, in reality, I kept on reincarnating

and reincarnating, but the game of using my reincarnation to awaken people is over.”

This is my last life.

“I decided to make this person, this man, my final destination.”

Fix the Route.

Suppress the butterfly effect.

Select the people to save and the people to abandon. Among them are numerous S-class ability users. Abandon them.

Set ‘the Undertaker’ at the very center of the Route.

Simultaneously calculate the movements of billions of people to create the ‘optimal Route’. I must create it. I can create it.

Change Uehara Shino’s location. Adjust her to appear at the Busan Station Tutorial Dungeon instead of the original Seongsan Ilchulbong tutorial dungeon.

Change Saintess Jeong Ye-ji’s location. In order to alter her walking path so she isn't swept away when the void appears in Seoul, a certain amount of groundwork is required, and carrying out this groundwork will cause the paths of three S-class awakeners to collide. Ignore it. Force it through.

“It was hard, but…”

The reincarnator realized. She had thought that time was the only resource she was given in infinite supply, but in reality, the resource she lacked the most was time itself.

“I was happy.”

Despite using her teleportation ability to somehow create an optimized path, the best possible Route, schedules that had to be ‘abandoned’ inevitably arose.

The farther one was from the Korean Peninsula, the more strongly

this phenomenon occurred. It couldn't be helped. The Undertaker, located at the center of this Route, lacked the teleportation ability.

Abandon. Abandon. Abandon. Abandon.

As it neared completion, from a distance, it was a world where ‘most of the ability users were strangely concentrated on the Korean Peninsula’.

But the reality was the complete opposite.

It was a world where ‘most of the ability users outside the Korean Peninsula had been abandoned’.

For example, the location of Leviathan’s appearance changed with each different Route. She fixed its location to a middle school girl living in a certain village in Seoul, on the Korean Peninsula.

The best of worlds.

The worst of calculations.

A possible world where the best and the worst coexist, all for a single person.

“I’m sorry, but this was the best I could do.”

Go Yuri held out her hand.

“Doc. You may not remember, but the two of us, a very long time ago, a really long time ago, we made a promise.”

“…What kind of promise?”

“I asked you, Doc.”

Can you save me?

“And you answered, Doc.”

I will. No matter what.

“Now, I will ask you one last time.”

To renew an old promise.

“Will you save this world, and me?”

The regressor did not hesitate to take the reincarnator’s hand. Then, he covered their joined hands with his other one.

Humans had two hands.

They could overlap two resolves upon a single promise.

“I will.”

“…”

“No matter what.”

A smile slipped from the reincarnator’s lips.

“Let’s become one, Guild Leader.”

When he opened his eyes the next moment.

The regressor could finally remember everything that had happened in the 1st cycle.

Footnotes:

Chapter 415

The Regressor I

Sinnoa

When do you all experience déjà vu?

Is it when the sunlight pours down on the street, causing the asphalt's outline to crumble into a hazy mirage?

Is it when a red peony falls, its petals scattering in every direction?

Is it when you climb the stairs of some old public office or school, only to find the hallway completely empty?

I will confess first. I, the Undertaker, experience déjà vu 24 hours a day, for all 1,440 minutes and 86,400 seconds.

『Oppa, please wake up. It's morning.』

『...Hey. I'm genuinely curious. Why do you insist on that same greeting every single morning? I'm already awake, you know.』

『I'm sorry, brother, but I have my own aesthetic principles. They say learning begins by imitating the masterpieces.』

『?』

Therefore, even when a scene that should have been a 'nonexistent memory' suddenly flowed by like a dream, and even when an intense sense of déjà vu washed over me, I was not particularly flustered.

I was used to the feeling.

Of course, perhaps it was not simply a matter of familiarity.

Squeeze.

The warmth of Go Yuri, who was holding my hand tightly beside me, soothed my heart.

“This place is...”

“As you can see. It's the time when we were siblings.”

“Is this inside your dream? Did you invite me into your dream?”

“No, Guild Leader. For beings like us, there is no such thing as a 'dream'. There is only a void I artificially created in imitation of a dream, a place called the 'world of unconsciousness'.”

“You too…?”

“Yes. We are already anomalies. We only imitate humans, love humans, and act for the sake of humans.”

“...”

The scenery before my eyes transformed rapidly.

The landscapes scattered into pieces, each flowing at its own arbitrary speed. Each one held a lifetime of Go Yuri, contained within frames made not of space, but of time.

That's right. The two of us were walking alone through an exhibition hall titled 'Her'.

“The 'red flesh' that you occasionally witnessed, Guild Leader, is the conclusion where my identity as an anomaly completely devoured my identity as a human.”

“The conclusion.”

“Yes. It's because I lost my family every time I was reincarnated. Because I wanted to become someone precious to them again. It is a mass of flesh, consumed by desire, that merely struggles to become 'one' with whatever it comes across.”

Go Yuri murmured.

“My ugly and filthy end. An anomaly known by the name of Reincarnator. A forgotten god of false happiness.”

“...”

“Everyone swallowed by the red flesh remembers me and becomes my family. Within the flesh, they each dream their own separate dreams of being with me for all eternity.”

Then, something came to mind.

“That's just like my ability, [Time Seal].”

“That's correct.”

Hehe, Go Yuri let out a small laugh.

“You, Guild Leader, can only grant people a single day of happiness. But I can make them dream of their happiest lifetime, an entire life spent with the one being who filled the emptiness in their heart more than anyone else and made their life happier.”

“A superior version, is it?”

“Perhaps.”

The scenery within the frames changed again.

In those scenes, the 'Go Yuris' were continuously dying. After becoming someone's precious person, they would deliberately orchestrate the most harsh and miserable deaths for themselves.

“Guild Leader. You may have noticed by now, but my 'human self' barely exists anymore.”

“...”

“Even now, Guild Leader, you are taking the countless, echoing screams from thousands upon thousands of paths, and from within that noise, you are barely managing to connect words and sentences to create 'my voice'.”

It was true.

“Every human is like that to me.”

“Yes. I'm happy. That you continue to treat me as a human even after knowing what I am now.”

Go Yuri smiled brightly.

“It was because I knew you were that kind of person that I decided to entrust myself to you.”

“Entrust yourself?”

“Hup.”

There was no answer.

Instead, there was a hand pushing me.

Into the frame of a dream within a dream. Into that well of the abyss, where Go Yuri's lifetimes were swirling in pieces.

“…?!”

It was a blow I took while completely off guard.

I desperately reached out my hand. Though I had already been pushed and had fallen into the massive frame, I somehow succeeded in grabbing its edge.

Just like a castaway hanging precariously from the edge of a cliff.

“You…?!”

“Ahaha. You were fooled, Guild Leader. This is the price for neglecting the precious people around you and letting your heart be captivated by an anomaly like me.”

Unlike me, who had tumbled completely inside the frame, Go Yuri was looking down at me from above.

Smiling cheerfully. In a squatting posture.

“You could have chosen to subjugate me after hearing my story, Guild Leader. You could have treated me as a monster, then simply urged me to commit suicide by getting infected with Udumbara.”

“…”

“You're a greedy one, Guild Leader. But I don't dislike that kind of greed.”

It makes me feel a sense of kinship.

Go Yuri added.

She reached out her hand and began to peel my fingers off the edge of the frame.

One by one. One by one.

“You can still back out now, you know? If you fall into my dream like this, truly, truly terrible things will unfold.”

“…‘No matter what happens,’ is what my past self swore. For what it's worth, I pride myself on being a man who keeps his promises.”

A smile lingered on Go Yuri's lips.

She lowered her head.

“You are even more foolish than I am.”

My ring finger, the last one clinging to the frame, was gently bitten between Go Yuri’s front and bottom teeth—and she pulled it away.

“Have a good trip.”

With those last words, I fell into the abyss.

My surroundings grew dark. Rapidly. The only light was from far above, seeping out from beyond the frame where Go Yuri's shadow flickered.

A small whisper echoed in the darkness.

“My precious.”

And then, hell began.

Go Yuri's life unfolded.

“Ah.”

The first life.

Confirming that the life of the reincarnator she had told me about in reality as a 'story' was being reproduced exactly as it was, I sensed that I was seriously screwed.

Even that castaway on Mars, who famously declared something along the lines of 'I'm screwed, and then I'm even more screwed,' would surely offer me some unwitting sympathy if he saw the situation I was in now.[1]

“You want me to live it, from the very beginning? The life she walked as a reincarnator…?”

My head felt dizzy.

The situation was so absurd that a laugh escaped my lips.

Humans often let out a laugh as a defense mechanism when faced with a disaster they can't possibly resist. Laughter was a form of human magic, as ancient as language itself.

“...A life worth hundreds of millions, billions of years. This is a problem on a whole other level than when I lived Cheon Yo-hwa's life. This is…”

“Hey, Ms. Su-yeon! What are you doing over there! The monsters will be swarming in tomorrow. Get a move on and carry those sandbags!”

“...”

A foreman at the Final Defensive Line ordered me, and I had no choice but to obey.

In an instant, that foreman achieved the feat of imprinting his authority upon a reincarnator and regressor.

'To think that the phrase, ‘let's become one’ meant something like this.'

The years flowed by.

Sometimes quickly. Sometimes slowly.

The end came easily and swiftly. In 'this world,' which could truly be called the first round, or rather, the round before the first round, the Final Defensive Line was breached with laughable ease.

'A world where not a single Awakener exists, aside from the reincarnator.'

What kind of hard mode was this?

The 'monsters' that pierced through the Final Defensive Line were not merely the infinite horde of the Monster Wave.

Ah———ah—ah-ah-ah———

Above the battlefield.

A single 'witch' was singing there. At a glance, she looked human, but the reality was completely different

——Ah-ah—ah—ah——ah——

What looked vaguely like a witch's hat was made of living, squirming hair.

All over her body, 'eyes' and 'fingers' bloomed and snapped off repeatedly, as she spewed forth songs stained with curses and resentment that a person's ears could not dare to contain.

I couldn't help but mutter unconsciously.

“Dang Seo-rin...”

“It's Hecate! The witch! Hecate has appeared!”

But the soldiers who participated in the battle, the civilians classified as support personnel, and the boy soldiers were different.

They did not know the name 'Dang Seo-rin'.

'Hecate?'

Just as I did not know the name of that anomaly.

“Retreat! Retreat! Don't listen to the song! You must not listen to the song!”

“Ah, ahhh...”

One of the soldiers exposed to 'Dang Seo-rin's' song suddenly opened his mouth with a blank expression. From that opening, the same rhythm as 'Dang Seo-rin's' scream began to play out a cappella.

Bang!

A discipline officer pulled out a pistol without hesitation and shot the soldier. The soldier fell immediately.

– Ah, ah, ah.

However, only the soldier's body had fallen.

The soldier's head remained, suspended by itself in 'mid-air', singing the a cappella chorus.

“Hyaaaaargh!”

A comrade next to him, horrified, swung his sword, struck the head, and sliced it off, and only then did the song stop.

“Don't listen! Do not listen! Keep muttering anything in your mouths! You bastards! Mix in some noise! Don't focus on the song!”

“Ah ah ah ah ah.”

“Ah ah-ah ah-ah ah.”

Bang! Bang!

The discipline officer's pistol spat out sharp reports all across the battlefield.

I, who was there as a combat support personnel, could only stand there, aghast.

The final form of 'Dang Seo-rin', called by the name Hecate, was shocking enough, but an even more detailed point struck me with horror.

'They're using guns!'

Chekhov's Gun. It was one of the anomalies that had inflicted the most damage upon humanity.

If a gun so much as appeared once, that gun would someday be used, creating a 'decisive scene'.

For most humans, the most decisive scene was a moment when their own life was on the line. In other words, if one were to use a firearm, the user's life would inevitably be put in grave danger.

'No... But, it's true. In a world this broken, they're not in a position to be picky about using firearms or anything else.'

In the first place, the soldiers seemed to know nothing about Chekhov's Gun.

'The experience points.'

They were desperately lacking.

'Strategies against the anomalies. Knowledge. No, even the Awakeners who could use that knowledge to change the tide of war... are gone.'

There was nothing.

– Ahahahahahahahaha.

At that moment, the soldiers who had just lost their heads and fallen began to rise up from all over the front line.

– Ahahahaha.

– Ahahahahahaha.

– A ha ha ha ha.

Just like zombies.

– A thing, formless yet complete.

– Born before heaven and earth.

– The way that follows nature.[2]

The resurrected zombies danced and pranced, forming their own circle dance. If their neck was broken, they chanted the Tao Te Ching with a broken neck, and if they had no head, they struck their own corpses with a sword, keeping rhythm with the surrounding zombies. You might know them as the Jiangshi.

– The way that follows nature.

– Man follows earth, earth follows heaven.

– A ha ha ha ha ha.

In an instant, dozens of circle dances formed on the battlefield. Strangely, the endlessly surging horde of monsters never touched those circle dances.

Mixed in with the other soldiers, I retreated, glancing back.

"...Yo-hwa."

In the middle of the ever-growing circle dance.

Someone dressed like a shrine maiden was there, letting out an endless stream of laughter—*A ha ha ha ha*—and conducting the procession of corpses.

Next to me, a soldier muttered bluntly.

“Fucking necromancer...”

“...”

“Platoon Leader. We have no more room to retreat from here. The other units are probably in a similar situation.”

“For now, just evacuate the civilians.”

“To where, sir?”

“Back. Unconditionally back.”

“Understood.”

A soldier grabbed my shoulder and pulled me.

“Go. Quickly.”

“...”

I tried to hold my ground, but I was pushed away too easily by the soldier's grip.

It couldn't be helped. The current 'me' was too weak.

The moment I stepped back like that, *Splash.*

“…?”

I heard the sound of water.

I looked down, and a puddle had formed even though it had not rained.

No. That was not a puddle.

“Ah.”

From the entire ground, the 'water level' was steadily rising.

Leviathan.

Yu Ji-won.

“...”

But the soldiers, who were busy fighting a bloody battle to hold the front, and the civilians, who were moving to the rear even as they foresaw their own deaths, paid no mind to the puddle soaking their feet.

They did not know.

The fact that this water, too, was an anomaly.

“...No way.”

“What? Ms. Su-yeon?”

The foreman moving with me asked with a tired face, but I couldn't bring myself to answer him.

It wasn't as if the foreman was expecting a proper conversation either. For that to happen, even the civilians were rarely in good shape.

Humanity was exhausted.

In the face of an annihilation that offered not a sliver of hope.

Ah—ah-ah—ah———

In the sky of the battlefield, a song that tore people's sanity to shreds rang out endlessly.

A ha ha ha ha ha.

On the ground, corpses formed circles as if holes had been punched here and there, endlessly dancing a circle dance that insulted life.

Splash. Splash, splash.

And even on the ankles of the humans who retreated to escape

them, an anomaly that mimicked 'water', an anomaly that mocked the most fundamental 'life' of this planet, seeped in.

No Awakeners existed.

Only the Fallen Ones, no.

Only the Outer Gods who borrowed the bodies of the Fallen existed.

“...”

That was the first cycle.

Not the epilogue, but the prologue.

Humanity's starting point.

Footnotes:

1 - Direct reference to the protagonist of Andy Weir's novel *The Martian* and his famous opening lines.

2 - The phrases chanted by the zombie-like soldiers are lines from the *Tao Te Ching*, a classic Chinese text. They are philosophical verses describing the nature of the Tao/Dao (the Way). In order, they are:

Chapter 416

The Regressor II

Sinnoa

The world had ended.

It was the 2,230th destruction.

‘So this is the life Go Yuri has walked.’

Each time the world fell, I was born as a different person, with a different status, to a different family.

However, the landscape of ruin was always similar.

In a world where the Outer Gods sang their songs and harvested screams, where rainwater and dampness rose from the underground to soak everything, I stared blankly at the gray sky and let out a single breath.

“Ah, this isn’t easy… really.”

– Ah ha ha ha ha ha.

Snip. My head was severed by an anomaly.

This was a world where a regressor did not yet exist, a world that still had to endure a number of apocalypses equal to the sands of the Ganges before one could even try to exist.

It was the end of the ‘first cycle,’ a conclusion I had already repeated for the 2,230th time.

A regressor and a reincarnator.

What is the biggest difference between the two?

As the Undertaker, the first witness in human history to have experienced both, I could answer with confidence.

‘The boundary of the self is blurry for a reincarnator.’

How should I put it?

For a reincarnator, the boundary stone between ‘me’ and ‘others’ trembled like transparent jelly.

“Um, excuse me. Leader…?”

“Yes, Ms. Sim Ah-ryeon.”

“Why are you being so kind to me? O-of course, I’m grateful for the food you brought me. Really, truly grateful… But why for me?”

Take, for instance, Sim Ah-ryeon before me now.

During the nights of the One Thousand and One Nights, which already felt like a distant past, I had also experienced a ‘reincarnation’ where I was born as Sim Ah-ryeon's younger sister, just as Go Yuri had told me in a corner of the exhibition hall.

Perhaps that was why.

I just couldn’t feel like Sim Ah-ryeon was a stranger.

“Hm. It’s because you don’t feel like a stranger to me.”

“E-excuse me?”

“Ms. Ah-ryeon. When I look at you, I feel at ease for some reason.”

A smile.

I smiled to convey my feelings just as they were.

“Uh, uhehe… W-wow. That’s… kind of embarrassing.”

Sim Ah-ryeon, though flustered, nibbled on the digestive cookies I had secretly brought from the stockpile, like a hamster.

And it wasn't just Sim Ah-ryeon.

“All clear.”

The soldier who saluted me as I walked down the corridor of the underground bunker built on the Final Defense Line.

“Leader!”

The woman who cautiously approached to hand me a piece of fruit while I was patrolling the civilian sector.

“We have finished preparing the ship to set sail for Jeju Island. We can begin the operation anytime upon your command, Your Excellency.”

The executives of the Final Defense Line with whom I held strategy meetings.

‘They are all my family.’

Others did not feel like others.

And they, in turn, did not feel that I was a stranger to them.

‘Ah.’

That was it.

‘A regressor is ultimately an individual who endlessly relives their own single life.’

‘On the other hand… a reincarnator is a being who becomes a different person each time, destined to live and interact with other people.’

Here is a hypothesis.

There is a person A and a person B. The two were originally different people.

But let’s assume that one day, person A gains a strange ability. They are conceived at the exact same moment as B, are born to the same

parents in the same environment, walk the same path in life, and live the exact same route.

In that case, is A a different being from B? Or are they the same person?

‘You can’t distinguish them.’

A reincarnator, especially an infinite one like Go Yuri, was such a being.

The inseparable one.

Her personality changed with every reincarnation. The way she treated people changed as well. It was only natural. How could one maintain the exact same personality when everything, down to their DNA, was different?

I had no choice but to accept it.

This process of becoming less of an ‘I’ and more of a ‘we’ the more I lived, the more I died.

To accept my existence as the ‘Red Flesh’.

“…Ahaha. I see now.”

In the deepest part of the bunker.

‘I’, who had already become the one and only dictator of the Human Allied Forces and the head of the Final Defense Line, muttered alone in my private room.

“It wasn’t that she desired to become one. It was because they were one from the beginning, and she was simply returning to that original state.”

Rumble!

At that moment, the underground bunker shook.

The meteor shower that the Outer God ‘Hecate’ had spread across

the night sky had simultaneously bombarded the Earth's surface.

Feeling the vibrations that were literally turning the planet to ash, incomparable to any nuclear explosion, all over my body.

My current life came to an end.

The hours of destruction passed.

'Now, I think I can finally, completely understand Go Yuri's thoughts.'

I had already gone through hundreds of thousands of reincarnations.

In that time, Go Yuri must have already had a faint, yet somewhat certain conviction.

'I will one day, inevitably, transform into an anomaly.'

It was a constant.

What final conclusion this world would reach was still a mystery. Whether it would be a bad ending for humanity, a normal ending, or a happy ending they had never even dreamed of.

However, regardless of where humanity's route was destined to lead, the ending for Go Yuri, the reincarnator who was 'one person and everyone's person,' was already decided.

'The worst Outer God.'

When the 'Red Flesh' eventually arrives, people will not feel disgust. Nor will they harbor any hostility.

On the contrary, they would surely welcome it.

'A longing for a lost existence. A nostalgia for the happiest life. An end for all of humanity that is far, far happier than this hellish world…'

That kind of conclusion.

‘The One.’

Despite knowing full well that such an ending awaited, the reincarnator could not stop reincarnating.

‘Because the moment I stop, humanity loses its one and only chance to stand against the anomalies.’

Therefore.

‘I must separate my human self from my anomaly self in advance, only then can I cleverly avoid the catastrophe foretold in the ending.’

A clear realization dawned.

‘But how do I separate the [human Go Yuri]?’

It was simple.

‘…If there was someone who could [remember] all the memories of my life as a human, every single sorrow and every footstep.’

Complete Memory.

‘If I could find such a person. Create one. Become one with them, and make them experience a life as me—’

The Undertaker.

“…”

Myself, and at the same time, another.

“That’s right.”

A smile spread across my lips.

“It’s what I’m doing right now.”

The process of the operation.

Phase 1: Reincarnation.

Repeat reincarnations until this world becomes strong enough, until humanity can stand against the anomalies, and create awakeners.

Phase 2: Corruption.

At this point, Go Yuri is already suffering from the side effects of reincarnation to an irreversible degree.

She falls into the form of the Red Flesh and becomes ‘a single Outer God’ that collects all of her families, corrupting into The One.

Phase 3: Murder.

In that state, spray Go Yuri with the [Udumbara] virus. Eliminate the ability of reincarnation.

Furthermore, use [Time Seal] to completely erase the existence known as Go Yuri from this world.

Phase 4: Replacement.

However, the memories and experiences of Go Yuri’s life as a human are transferred directly to the ‘regressor’ Undertaker.

The Undertaker possesses Complete Memory. Even if he experiences hundreds of millions, or billions of reincarnations, he can still maintain his humanity, and remember.

Thus, the regressor Undertaker, having experienced the entirety of the Reincarnator Go Yuri’s life...

‘Can remain a Go Yuri who is more human than Go Yuri herself, an even more human Go Yuri.’

Shudder.

My shoulders trembled.

A light thrill.

‘From a being fated to become an Outer God to save humanity… I

will remove the parts that have been corrupted into an anomaly, and leave only the humanity.'

Like a rocket jettisoning its booster.

After eliminating the void that drags humanity into hell, restore a world where humans can live as humans.

There will be no more anomalies there.

Including the final fate of the Red Flesh, the reincarnator herself.

"Aha."

What a magnificent plan.

What an… elaborate suicide.

'Go Yuri, and at the same time, the Undertaker.'

'The Undertaker, and at the same time, Go Yuri.'

Indeed.

'The declaration to become one was not an empty boast.'

Now, only one question remained.

'And so, I, who will inherit all of the memories and personality of the reincarnator Go Yuri, and also continue to possess the existence of the regressor Undertaker…'

In a world where humanity has finally achieved victory, how should I live?

"…"

I didn't know.

There was no way to know.

Because even the reincarnator and the regressor, who had lived countless lives, had never lived a life 'after the happy ending.'

An unknown territory.

“…For now, I must focus on living out Go Yuri’s lives.”

After all, that in itself was no easy task.

As I spoke my monologue, the surface world was once again turned to ash by Hecate, the price for failing to control the variables this time.

The 93,248,578th death.

The 93,248,579th life.

‘What if I try to reverse my thinking?’

Hecate was brutally powerful.

To not only command all the celestial bodies of the solar system as if they were her own limbs but also to be able to summon a meteor shower at any time and call down a meteor strike. The power balance was insane.

‘But the me of now can construct a strategy with much more flexible thinking.’

Because I had lived as Go Yuri.

Because she was the very person who had worried more than anyone about her own future of falling into an anomaly and how to pass on her human self, I was able to reach a certain idea.

‘I’ll deceive Hecate.’

If I deceive her, then how?

‘By making her mistake herself for a human!’

A shocking reversal of perspective.

It was an idea that, had the other reincarnated selves heard it, they would have clapped their hands wildly, saying, she’s crazy, isn't she insane.

‘Hecate is, in the end, a shooting star.’

‘That’s why Hecate has the property of responding to people's wishes. Let’s use this property.’

‘By selecting one [sacrifice] who wishes to live as a human and die as a human more than anyone else.’

A sacrifice.

Later, the term would be changed to ‘miko’ because it sounded bad, but to be perfectly honest, the term ‘sacrifice’ was more fitting.

‘Make that sacrifice wish. If I can make them pray to the stars in the sky, to let them live as a human and die as a human…’

‘Wouldn’t that work?’

My heart pounded.

‘That terrifying Outer God. Hecate. I’ll make her mistake and misunderstand herself as a mere human, and what’s more, make her believe it herself!’

It was a kind of experiment.

Go Yuri, I, feared the conclusion of becoming an anomaly more than anyone. So it was only natural to attempt the humanization of an anomaly.

“Who would be most suitable as the sacrifice?”

Go Yuri thought.

‘…’

I, the Undertaker, living the life of Go Yuri, could already guess the conclusion of this project.

“The desire to live as a human is an exceptionally tricky one. Ordinary people don’t really feel such a desire. Hmm. On the contrary, when does one become captivated by such a peculiar

desire…”

It would be when their humanity has been desecrated.

“They would have to be brutally killed by an anomaly.”

And they couldn't die instantly.

“As slowly as possible. Yes. They must die slowly, so they can fully realize what an insulting death they will meet.”

Dying alone would not be enough.

“Ah. And their family must also die in the same way. Because sometimes, people become more enraged by what happens to their family than by what happens to them.”

The candidate for the sacrifice must be a more brilliant human than anyone.

“It must be someone who lives with a more harmonious family than anyone. From now on, whenever I reincarnate, I must always remember this point. If I see an angle, I’ll attempt it.”

…

“Hmm, this person is a little.”

…

“This person too. A failure. As I thought, perhaps the human heart is bound to flow more towards simply wanting to get stronger and take revenge, rather than the desire to survive as a human.”

…

“Ah.”

…

“Found her.”

Dang Seo-rin.

“Her taste is… Harry Potter? That’s perfect. As it happens, Hecate’s manifested form resembles a witch. Hmm. I think the compatibility will be good!”

I see.

“Now let’s set up the plan. I’ll aim for a reincarnation where I am born as the youngest in that person’s family, and pioneer a route.”

So that’s how it was.

“I’m confident in my ability to die tragically. The only question is whether Hecate will fall for my trap—”

Time passed.

“Success!”

Go Yuri cheered.

“Success…. It’s a success! My god. No way. I… I did it! Ahhh, ah! I! I! Hecate! That, that cursed Outer God of the night sky! The destruction that masqueraded as merely granting humanity’s wishes! I! Ahhhhh!”

Go Yuri lamented.

“I… did it. Everyone. Mom. Dad. Everyone! I…. N-no, it's not. Now. I must research the methodology more thoroughly, so that this miraculous route can be reproduced again.”

Dang Seo-rin was already a dead existence.

The Lesser Anomaly known as ‘Nut’ that I knew was merely a remnant of the shattered pieces of the Outer God Hecate.

The living hell where the night sky would unfold and a meteor shower would fall whenever a human, consciously or unconsciously, made a wish, was no more.

Now, only a void meteorite would occasionally fall to the surface on a cycle of 7 years, or 1 year at the shortest.

Compared to the hell that Hecate had created, a meteorite ‘or something’ that fell here and there like a regular event was nothing.

“Ah. Hmm…. I see. The fact that the family runs a flower shop was an absolutely essential condition. It makes sense. A state where the family’s dream has come true would be far more ideal and fitting for a harmonious scene. This is a problem I can always solve by secretly manipulating the variables.”

Time passed.

“The wish only becomes stronger when Ms. Dang Seo-rin has at least two younger siblings. A sense of responsibility as an older sister? I’m not sure… but this is also fixed.”

Time passed.

“—It’s done.”

Time passed.

“June 15th. The family of Ms. Dang Seo-rin, who runs a flower shop in Busan, will be massacred. The family composition will be as it is. Ms. Dang Seo-rin will die last. Wonderful.”

The reincarnator had pioneered the route.

“From now on, no matter who I am born as, or what life I live, I must absolutely make this ‘June 15th’ incident happen.”

Dang Seo-rin’s death was confirmed.

“…”

The reincarnator, Go Yuri, felt a slight sense of unease for some reason.

It wasn't a feeling of guilt towards Dang Seo-rin. Feelings like apology were like the wallpaper that constantly lined her heart.

“Aha.”

Rather than that.

“So now, no matter what person I reincarnate as, I must… absolutely protect the timeline related to Ms. Dang Seo-rin?”

The route was fixed.

The reincarnator’s schedule, which had been virtually free to do anything, had become bound by a slight lack of freedom, as if wrapped in a weak chain.

Just as a certain regressor’s calendar had been packed solid for a full seven years.

That was the source of the discomfort.

“…Hmm. Well, if it can prevent Hecate’s living hell, it’s a price I must naturally pay.”

The reincarnator treated the light chains on her wrists and ankles as a trivial obstacle, no.

Rather, she treated them as a medal for the great achievement of tearing apart the Outer God Hecate.

And…

“…”

Splash.

Go Yuri looked down at her feet.

Leather boots. Because Go Yuri knew full well that what looked like a puddle was in fact the blood of an Outer God, and because she hated to be touched by even a single drop of muddy water, she always wore leather boots.

“Leviathan…”

Looking at her reflection in the puddle, Go Yuri’s, my lips, muttered.

“Couldn’t I offer a sacrifice for this one too, in the same way?”

Clink. Clank.

It seemed as though the sound of chains could be heard from somewhere.

Footnotes:

Chapter 417

The Regressor III

Sinnoa

Clank.

I infiltrated the cult and adjusted the timeline so that the ‘Cheon Yo-hwa’ twins would be born.

After the twins were born, I periodically approached them and influenced their way of thinking.

So they would function as sacrifices offered to an Outer God, yet still yearn to be free humans.

This route required 13,160 lives.

Clank.

The separation of the Outer God Taeguk was complete.

The Outer God could no longer manifest its original form or exert its power. This phenomenon, in which an Outer God was alienated from its own self, was concisely named an Outer God.

This route required 214,734 lives.

Clank, creak.

I grasped the nature of the Outer God, Monster Wave. It was a legion that endlessly swallowed death to expand itself.

From this anomaly, I separated the ‘ability to endlessly recover,’ the so-called ‘Heal’ ability. Severed it. Made it independent. I separately conceived an anomaly called ‘Udumbara.’

This route required 3,478,238 lives.

"…"

I looked down at my own hands.

"There isn't enough time."

One might ask how a being who is both a reincarnator and a teleporter could be short on time, but it was the truth.

'A newly reincarnated life, at its longest, is only about 40 years. Usually, it's between 20 and 30 years.'

'In a mere 30 years, I have to implement every single strategy I've uncovered so far into reality.'

There was a limit to being overworked.

'On Monday, I have to infiltrate the cult and gain the trust of the leader as a follower. On Tuesday, I need to go to Turkey and lay the groundwork so that Monster Wave and Udumbara can be separated…'

'On Wednesday, it's tutoring for the Cheon Yo-hwa sisters again. I have to cancel Seo Gyu's trip to Japan so he doesn't get caught in an accident. And if I leave things alone, Noh Do-hwa will die in a traffic accident next Thursday.'

And, and, and.

"I can't save everyone."

The butterfly effect of the optimal route.

When I, when Go Yuri, chose a specific route, it affected the world in one way or another.

As a consequence, children who would have been born in other routes were not born in the current one.

Like Jeong Seo-ah.

"…I have to discard what must be discarded."

I had to save what must be saved.

And so, it was decided that tens of billions of beings who once were, and could have been, born on this earth would be erased from history.

"…"

Then one day, when I encountered the Monster Wave, I was faced with a bizarre scene.

– Ugh, uh, uh, uh, uh.

– Su-yeon unni! It's me, unni!

– So there you were?

The Monster Wave, a mixture of the dead.

And there, I saw the faces of people who had certainly never been born in the current timeline, my younger siblings and relatives.

"Ah."

I let out a bitter smile.

The candidates who had been dropped from the reincarnator's ark of time. The traces of past lives.

"So those people also appear as anomalies."

No wonder.

I had thought that the number of anomalies was greater than the number of humans.

Now I saw that even the lives from past incarnations that failed to be born in the 'current world' were turning into anomalies.

"The more I repeat this life, the number of souls falling into that procession of the dead will grow exponentially."

But if I quit reincarnating, the probability of humanity's victory

itself would become slim.

Could there be a shittier game than this?

“Ah, this shitty game! I’m not playing!”

Whoosh.

A girl threw her gaming console. She was the girl who had become my older sister in this reincarnation.

Her name was Oh Dok-seo.

“Unni.”

I said gently.

“That console is expensive, you really regretted it last time when you threw it and it broke.”

“I don’t care! It’s not fun!”

Little Oh Dok-seo threw a tantrum.

I laughed emptily in my heart.

‘My god. To think the day would come when I’d be born as Oh Dok-seo’s younger sibling.’

Regardless of my thoughts, the work Go Yuri had once undertaken proceeded as planned.

“Hey! Read this!”

Oh Dok-seo had a talent. A talent for writing.

“Ah, damn it. Why isn't anyone reading this…!”

Oh Dok-seo had no talent. She had no talent for selling her writing.

“It’s because your writing always makes the characters miserable, they only interact through twisted emotions, things don’t get better even when they do interact, and in the end, they all fall to ruin

together?”

“Th-that’s what makes it good! That’s it!”

“I guess it’s not to people’s taste.”

“Hmph.”

If Go Yuri had not been born as her younger sister.

That is, if the reincarnator did not exist in the world.

Oh Dok-seo would have given up her dream of being a writer around the age of 20. Despite preferring works that were darkly twisted, the person Oh Dok-seo herself was not that gloomy.

Decent social skills. Quick-witted. Above all, the tenacity to see her tasks through to the end.

She would have found a job that suited her and continued her life as a reader, simply enjoying works that fit her niche hobby.

“But I like it. Your writing, unni.”

“Huh?”

“Your writing. When I read it, it’s so transparent, it feels like I’m looking at beautifully carved ice.”

“…”

But Oh Dok-seo’s life was twisted.

It was decisively altered from the moment she met Go Yuri, the reincarnator, me.

“R-really? Then… Should I submit it to a contest?”

“Yes! Unni. I’ll help you as your most dependable reader and editor!”

“Uh, oh. Um, uh…. Okay!”

Oh Dok-seo had a younger sibling.

“Wow! This character, the Count, is amazing! Hmm. For sure. There’s a cliché in novels that a beautiful girl deserves to be saved, but this novel asks if that cliché can be ethically permissible when pushed to its absolute limit! That’s the theme.”

“Ah, uh-huh. Yeah… That’s right.”

Her sibling was so beautiful and kind, and so smart, that she understood the lines Oh Dok-seo wrote exactly as Oh Dok-seo intended—or perhaps even more deeply and broadly than Oh Dok-seo’s own desires.

“Unni, I also love the parts in your novel where you describe the scenery! Hmm, it’s like the objects are alive and squirming like tentacles.”

“T-tentacles?”

“Yes. In the novel, the characters are like dead objects, and the objects are like living characters. Describing them that way adds a special flavor to the reading experience!”

“Oh…. Y-you really get it.”

Her sibling was so considerate that she elevated the ‘techniques’ Oh Dok-seo had attempted, consciously or unconsciously, in her writing style into a firm ‘method.’

It was simple advice from a being who was both a reincarnator and a regressor.

And it was more than enough advice to sharpen the tip of a young child’s pen.

Oh Dok-seo was rejected from the first contest. But there were five hundred readers in the world who were disappointed by her rejection, genuinely disappointed.

It was a feat accomplished at the tender age of 14.

“Unni. Don’t you think this sentence would have more flavor if you fix it like this?”

“Ooh! You’re right! Kyaaa, as expected of my little sister. There’s really no editor like you.”

“It’s because your writing is beautiful, unni. I can’t help but get interested and keep looking into it.”

“Hee-heehee! You’re so sweet with your words, too! Hwaa, how did such a pretty sister get born into my family…? My friends’ siblings seem totally different. I’m the chosen one…”

“Ahaha.”

Oh Dok-seo’s talent began to bloom.

Oh Dok-seo became happy.

The flower that had never been able to bloom in other timelines, in hundreds of millions of past lives, blossomed magnificently under the care of the reincarnator-regressor.

Oh Dok-seo became happy.

Her work was published. The desolation melted into Oh Dok-seo’s lines was a potent poison, but humanity’s stomach had always been good at gulping down even opium and mercury, calling them medicine.

She became famous in an instant.

An older high school sister as the author and her younger sister as the editor, I mean, what kind of crazy combination was that?

It was a combination that reporters, if they were in their right minds, couldn’t possibly ignore.

The conscientious reporters who did raise an issue, asking if they weren’t exposing the children to the media too much, were gifted with single-digit page views for the day.

“Ms. Author!”

“Praise me more.”

“Legendary Writer-nim!”

“More.”

“The grace and blessing of humanity in this era, to whom Shakespeare is but a mere mortal, the Great Author Oh Dok-seo-nim!”

“Uhehe.”

Author Oh Dok-seo produced a great number of readers.

Among them, there were three stalker fans who could be definitively labeled as villains.

The three were originally separate individuals who would have never crossed paths.

But for some reason, perhaps because someone had adjusted the ‘route,’ the three met. And upon meeting, they realized they could share their own evil.

“Huh?”

Evil was fast.

Perhaps if evil hadn't been so fast, the world would never have become like this.

“My… sister?”

She lacked a sense of caution.

It was because of the whispers of someone who had always grown up right beside her.

“Th-that’s… a lie, right?”

The criminal group of three stormed the author’s home.

But ‘by chance,’ the author was not at home. ‘By chance,’ the beautiful younger sister, who had been widely reported in all media as having lived as an irreplaceable reader and editor since childhood, was at home.

A bit of coercion. Resistance. An argument. Insults.

The criminals lost their reason at the provocations that seemed to pierce right through all three of their psyches and subconscious minds.

And so, Oh Dok-seo lost her sister.

“…”

Oh Dok-seo lost her only editor. She lost a teacher who was younger than her. She lost a friend. She lost a family member who would always play new games with her when they were released.

Oh Dok-seo lost the very first reader of her writing.

By the hands of the readers of the outside world who had made her happy, by anonymous readers.

“…”

Oh Dok-seo should have stopped writing.

However, Oh Dok-seo’s resentment was far too complex. To hate the novel itself, the most precious being to her was also connected to the novel.

She resented the readers. But to resent the readers, the most precious being to her was also a reader.

She didn’t want to write.

But she knew that only while she was writing did her sister’s trace remain in her sentences.

Oh Dok-seo’s soul was torn.

A gap formed in her torn soul.

It was a gap like a ravine.

This world is made of wind, and each and every human is a ravine hanging on the edge of a cliff, so whenever the wind blows, a unique scream rings out from the crumpled place on the cliff.

That scream was called an Awakening.

“Hey, you.”

“…?”

To Oh Dok-seo, writing was a wound. And Oh Dok-seo came to regard beings she could only meet through that wound as true humans.

The reason was simple.

“You’re my sister, right?”

“…”

Because the most precious person to her was always found not in her current life, but in the lines of an epilogue that had already passed.

“How…?”

“I can read it. It’s a completely absurd story. But for some reason, when I read it, I can feel that this really happened.”

Even though they had never met in this life, the other person was staring at me with conviction.

“What are you?”

“…”

Go Yuri had been flustered.

I, too, was flustered.

‘Didn’t Dok-seo originally read my life story as a novel? But… at first, she read Go Yuri’s story, not mine?’

I was about to ask myself why when I suddenly realized.

‘Ah.’

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame.

The Outer God that must have squeezed into the gap created in Oh Dok-seo’s soul.

‘From the very beginning, that The Admin of the Infinite Metagame thing… confessed that it couldn’t distinguish between Go Yuri and me.’

A cold chill ran up the back of my neck.

‘Just like, the me of now.’

‘Is Go Yuri, and at the same time—’

‘The Undertaker who has inherited Go Yuri’s dream, her humanity.’

If so, then naturally.

‘Dok-seo can read not only the life story of the Undertaker but also the life story of Go Yuri, earlier than anyone, like a prophet.’

Not right now.

Oh Dok-seo’s prophetic ability was slow.

The Oh Dok-seo staring at me now had only read the connection from a past life, the timeline where we were born as family just once, as a ‘novel.’

‘But…. if enough time passes?’

She would be able to read all of these events as a story.

No.

She would one day be able to seal all of these events in the form of a story.

Footnotes:

Chapter 418

The Regressor IV

Sinnoa

Tick.

The time had come.

The time was finally ripe to pose a certain question to all of you, a question that I had kept endlessly hidden throughout this entire story.

Who is the 'I' in this story?

You all have likely considered 'I' to be the 'Undertaker' this whole time. That was only natural, since the Undertaker was the protagonist.

However, at the same time, you are all aware that the one who refined the Undertaker's tale into written sentences was, in the end, 'Oh Dok-seo'.

– Writer: Undertaker.

– Editor: Oh Dok-seo.

If the agreement Oh Dok-seo and I had made beforehand had actually been carried out, our respective roles would have been revealed right from the novel's description.

In this story, 'I' was the Undertaker.

And, at the same time, 'I' was also Oh Dok-seo all along.

Every story is an imitation of a dream. It was the act of dreaming a dream someone else had, but in the form of a book.

Just as I was currently dreaming Go Yuri's dream, Oh Dok-seo was

peeking into the dream of the regressor known as me.

"Dok-seo."

"What's this, why the sudden change in your tone."

"There is something I must tell you right now."

I firmly grasped both of Oh Dok-seo's hands.

She flinched, startled. As the one experiencing Go Yuri's reincarnation, I was the young daughter of a European noble family in this life.

But I cast aside the speech patterns of this life. I cast aside its facial expressions too. For the first time, I completely ignored the rule of strictly adhering to the reincarnation of 'Go Yuri'.

"Uh, huh?"

"You probably won't understand right away. But, someday, you will inevitably read my diary in the form of a novel."

"I've already read that..."

"No."

I shook my head.

"Living as your younger sibling was, from my perspective, no different from an extremely brief flicker. I will spend hundreds of lives with you, and I will spend billions of lives without you."

"..."

"I am living this present moment to console a certain lonely person."

I told her the story.

It was a very long story, but I knew Oh Dok-seo well, and I also knew how to prepare the tale in a form she could easily digest.

It took several weeks for Oh Dok-seo to devour the entire story,

suffer from indigestion, and finally, with difficulty, open her lips.

"From me, what... are you hoping for?"

"I am in the process of carving out and severing the only humanity from the vast anomaly named Go Yuri."

Separation. Isolation.

Fundamentally, it was the same as the strategy Go Yuri had employed against the Outer Gods.

"I'm sorry, but it seems I must entrust the same task to you."

"..."

"There is no need for an anomaly called the Undertaker to exist in this world."

I said.

"He has grown too immense. He was already a being where hundreds of regressions' phantoms coexisted with every step he took. Now, billions of reincarnations are mixed in as well. For humanity to treat him as just another human, he has come too far."

"Then?"

"Please leave only the traces of the Undertaker's life as a human in this world."

That is my end.

"Go Yuri handed herself over to me. I, too, will hand myself over to you."

"..."

"Please remember the Undertaker as a mere human. Remember him as a strange man who was just a bit mentally tough, had an extraordinary memory, and liked old classics like the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*."

That's right.

The writing process of recounting the stories one by one and embedding the character for person (者) in each subtitle was, in itself, the process of sealing the regressor known as the Undertaker.

It was a measure for someone who could fall into being an anomaly at any moment to desperately be remembered as a human.

"How you will describe me as a person. I will leave the judgment of me entirely to you."

"To me...?"

"Yes."

Go Yuri had said.

That for beings like us, the important thing is how much of yourself you are prepared to discard.

The anomalies discarded nothing.

They forced themselves upon this world. They crushed even the universe's physical laws with their own rules. The anomalies were beings who always cried out 'me', 'me', 'me'.

Therefore, the way to not become an anomaly was simple.

It was to not monopolize the way you understand yourself, but to hand it over to others as well.

Mugan stopped being an anomaly the moment I began to call her Cheon Yo-hwa. Go Yuri went beyond a name and handed her very life over to me.

"It might sound strange right now. But that's because you are, in fact, my shamaness."

I smiled and patted Oh Dok-seo's shoulder.

"Gods exist to be swayed by their shamanesses."

"..."

With this, the outline of the plan for how to seal myself after isolating Go Yuri was revealed.

Of course, there was a prerequisite.

'Admin of the Infinite Metagame.'

That unprecedented last-hitter, always eyeing an opportunity to bewitch Oh Dok-seo and snatch the fully prepared meal.

'I have to make sure to subdue him and get a declaration of surrender. That's the only way he won't be able to interfere with Oh Dok-seo's sealing process.'

Fortunately, the role of subduing Admin of the Infinite Metagame had been taken care of by the 'future Undertaker' and the 'past me'.

The repeating time of the world.

Everything was inevitable.

'Go Yuri must have planned it this way, for this route to come to be, even before my first regression began.'

A three-legged race.

'And from now on... I'll have to adjust things so that the prologue of the novel Oh Dok-seo will read begins not with Go Yuri, but with the Undertaker's story.'

It was an easy task.

'All I need is for the Admin of the Infinite Metagame to judge that the Undertaker is a much more dangerous element worth paying attention to than Go Yuri.'

In other words.

'After adjusting all the schedules and entering the main route in earnest, Go Yuri will refrain from intervening in the world's

destruction as much as possible.'

It was a kind of camouflage tactic.

I'm not actually dangerous.

No, I am dangerous, but as long as you don't provoke me directly, I don't plan on acting out from now on.

But if you do touch me, smack! I'll have to punish you?

Then Admin of the Infinite Metagame's attention would naturally be drawn to the regressor rather than the reincarnator.

Because it's wiser to focus on eliminating the regressor, who is an immediate thorn in the side, than the reincarnator who has no intention of making a move right away.

"Ha."

A laugh escaped me without me realizing it.

'Isn't that the exact position I remember Go Yuri being in?'

Thinking about her grand strategy also provided the answer to why Go Yuri had reacted so sensitively to the arrival of Leviathan.

'I, the Undertaker, must one day cast aside my aura and find my own method of conquest.'

'But the 664th cycle is too early. The Undertaker is somewhat lacking in experience to decide to abandon his aura.'

'Until he has gained enough experience, it's inevitable that he will have to rely on his aura to survive.'

Go Yuri's so-called [Regressor Maker].

The nurturing of the regressor needed to proceed step by step.

It would have been problematic if he realized the truth of Leviathan too early, and troublesome if he realized it too late.

'For one person?'

I faced the next lives.

'Could she have been this devoted?'

I lived everyone's lives and watched over everyone's lives.

I experienced silence through a groaning throat in the lowest basement, and I spoke with a commanding voice from the highest skyscraper.

I lived as a beggar, sitting on the edge of a roadside ditch, relying on a single bowl to beg. To a legless beggar, the depth of that ditch was a valley.

On a street where dust had swallowed the air, I held out my hand toward tourists.

All lives were wretched in the face of destruction.

'The reincarnator was not a being who was merely sad.'

I walked on, firmly grasping the hands that rose like prayers in each and every one of those lives.

'Humans are strong.'

I saw a flower that bloomed in the ditch. I saw the red of its petals, unerased even though it was covered in dust.

'Behold. Even when the Outer Gods who insult the world cackle and make a mess of everything, a single reincarnator and a regressor from among humanity have walked this far.'

Let's go.

'Dok-seo I know you will be sad.'

Let's keep walking.

'I am sad too, for it feels like I am leaving and burdening you with this entire story and all its regrets.'

The Cheon Yo-hwa sisters were born.

I was the sisters' mother's childhood friend. That mother died early, and before she died, she left me with the words to please take good care of her children.

These children would later be possessed by Outer Gods and end up slaughtering countless people.

But these children, smiling before my eyes right now, would come to love a certain man, and eventually come to accept even the world in which that man existed.

'But you are a strong child.'

Dang Seo-rin was born.

The human who originally possessed Dang Seo-rin's body had died. However, an Outer God who inherited Dang Seo-rin's memories accepted being human, without even knowing that it was an Outer God itself.

She would one day sing a lullaby that puts other anomalies to sleep, despite being an anomaly herself. Walking alongside a single man.

'Don't collapse from sadness.'

Yu Ji-won did not commit suicide.

Originally, Yu Ji-won had ended her own life after murdering her parents and her grandmother, who had dementia, on a terribly rainy day one summer.

She had courage. In addition to the courage to treat every being in this world as an insect, she had the courage to dismiss even herself as one.

I was once born as Yu Ji-won's younger sibling, but surprisingly, the young Yu Ji-won at that time secretly strangled her newborn sibling to death, avoiding their parents' eyes.

It was because there was no need to add one more person to this

hell.

'It's alright if you forget everything. That would be one kind of ending too. But if you cannot forget, if you absolutely cannot accept it. Become strong.'

To prevent Yu Ji-won's suicide, another's breath was needed under the night sky of the monsoon rains.

'You must become so abundant that you can still be you even after giving yourself away.'

I could see the path.

On this route, there was Dang Seo-rin, and there were the lives that died to allow Dang Seo-rin to be born, and there was Jung Ye-ji, and the souls sacrificed to bring about Jung Ye-ji, and there was Noh Do-hwa, Cheon Yo-hwa, Yu Ji-won, Lee Ha-yul, Sim Ah-ryeon, Yu Ji-won, so many people.

"..."

Go Yuri looked back at me as she walked.

A smile. Her face was smiling.

I was the same.

'What I want to leave you is not sadness, but the strength to keep walking even while reading all these wounds.'

Go Yuri believed in me.

I believed in Oh Dok-seo.

And…

"Abeub, abububu, bueeeh."

Now, it was my turn to believe in myself.

"Oh? Oh, oh, she smiled! She smiled!"

Tick.

Looking up at the 'I' who was looking down at the 'I' born as their younger sibling.

I opened my tender lips.

Yes, Mr. Undertaker.

Welcome. It's good to see you again. I'm sure the current Mr. Undertaker understands that it's also always possible to say, nice to meet you for the first time.

I will be erased from this world.

It's the fulfillment of the wish you once so desperately wanted, so please be happy.

Ah. No. I'm joking! It’s just a joke.

I've lived a strange life. I ended up living it.

Before you entered my dream. Hmm, yes. It wasn't that you entered, but that I tripped you into it. But please forgive me, as that was my own way of hiding my embarrassment.

Anyway.

Before entering that place, you asked. Why I didn't save Mr. Schopenhauer.

I'm sorry.

Actually, it was on purpose! Of course, everything is the result of my deliberate choices.

Mr. Undertaker, you were a perfect candidate in many ways. To the point that I was inwardly convinced that I had finally found a shaman just for me.

...However, humans can't always be strong.

Even Kafka, whom you like, said it. The reason Alexander the Great could advance was thanks to the existence of the walls of India that he could point to with the tip of his sword.

If you can't see it, you don't aim for it. You give up.

Humans have a sad nature, so it seems they often don't even try to take on a challenge if the goal isn't vividly visible right in front of them.

That's why I created a milestone for you named 'Schopenhauer'.

From now on, or rather from hundreds of millions of years ago, from the very moment you met me, Mr. Undertaker, your destiny as a regressor was sealed, and you will walk a single, long route.

It will be hard. You will be sad.

But, if the goal is visible before your eyes. You possess enough strength not to give up.

Yes.

The corpse of Schopenhauer, who just committed suicide because you couldn't save him, is precisely the milestone I have gifted you.

A mark you can never turn away from, showing you why you started walking this path and what must be waiting at the end of this route.

Emit Schopenhauer.

Please save my father one day.

I expect you will pour out complaints that this is harsh and cruel. I will accept them.

In return, I will be subjugated by you.

Stained by the red flower of the Udumbara.

And if necessary, through the Time Seal that I created for you for

this very moment.

I will be erased. Leaving behind billions of family members here, along with a soul deleted from billions of routes.

In this world, only you will remember me.

And to walk this entire path, to pierce through the un-washable wound in your heart, the void, there is just one. A condition is needed.

Please love me desperately.

And, please forget me.

Please love other people who are not me.

The fact that you loved me, and the fact that I loved you.

The memory of you hurting me, and the memory of me hurting you, forget it all.

Forgetting even the fact that you have forgotten.

Please continue to live.

...At the end of this ending, there are bound to be aftereffects.

This world, having avoided destruction, will find it a little more... difficult to remember other precious beings.

Memories will become a little more unstable.

It will become a little more difficult to properly look at someone.

Of course. Because the existence known as 'me' has punched a hole in people's hearts.

But, if that is the price.

If this is the only price that must be paid to stop this absurd destruction, I will gladly bear it.

I have been very rude.

Please understand that this was the best that a child who suddenly died one day, only to open her eyes and find herself living another life, could do.

I love you.

Mother. Father. Everyone.

Did I do well?

Did I choose… the right person.

I loved.

I gave up many things. I lived a life where I had no choice but to give up. But still, there was one thing I did not discard until the very end.

That it was good to have been born, even into a world like this, I can now be grateful for it from the bottom of my heart, sincerely.

Farewell.

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Tick.

June 24th, 12:00. The regressor encounters 'Hecate' Dang Seo-rin at an intersection in Busan.

An exodus of refugees from all over the country to Busan.

Worldwide daily death toll: 51,956,792.

June 22nd, 14:20. The regressor reunites with Yu Ji-won at a roadside rest stop in Seocho-gu, Seoul.

The main forces of the Korean Peninsula's military are annihilated by the Ten-Legs.

Worldwide daily death toll: 124,956,792.

June 21st, 13:00. The regressor encounters prosthetic doctor Noh Do-hwa, who was evacuating patients against attackers at the National Rehabilitation Hospital.

Worldwide daily death toll: 319,956,792.

June 18th, 20:00. The regressor enters the Baekhwa Women's High School Tutorial Dungeon. Encounters Cheon Yo-hwa on the distorted timeline of Infinite Void.

Worldwide daily death toll: 771,221,328.

June 17th, 16:00. The regressor makes contact with the one known as the 'Saintess'. The Regression Alliance is formed.

June 17th, 14:10. Emit Schopenhauer dies in a cafe in Busan.

June 17th, 14:00. A large-scale Void White Night occurs south of the Han River in Seoul, on the Korean Peninsula.

June 17th, 14:00. Small-scale Voids, so-called 'Tutorial Dungeons', occur simultaneously all over the world.

Worldwide daily death toll: 1,649,857,026.

June 17th, 13:59.

The regressor regresses.

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April 29th, 16:00.

Oh Dok-seo awakens.

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Tick.

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April 29th, 16:00. Oh Dok-seo awakens.

May 7th, 17:11. Oh Dok-seo dies.

April 29th, 16:00. Oh Dok-seo awakens.

May 7th, 19:20. Oh Dok-seo dies.

April 29th, 16:00. Oh Dok-seo awakens.

May 8th, 04:44. Oh Dok-seo dies.

April 29th, 16:00. Oh Dok-seo awakens.

May 8th, 04:44. Oh Dok-seo dies.

April 29th, 16:00. Oh Dok-seo awakens.

May 8th, 04:44. Oh Dok-seo dies.

April 29th, 16:00. Oh Dok-seo awakens.

May 8th, 13:10. Oh Dok-seo dies.

April 29th, 16:00. Oh Dok-seo awakens.

May 9th, 08:36. Oh Dok-seo dies.

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April 29th, 16:00.

Oh Dok-seo awakens.

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June 17th, 13:59.

The regressor regresses.

Footnotes:

Chapter 419

The Possessor I

Sinnoa

Oh Dok-seo.

The miko of Admin of the Infinite Metagame.

And also, the miko of the regressor.

A reader who had observed the entire life of the regressor.

And also, the author who had put the regressor's humanity on display.

"Haaaah... I'm so bored..."

"Isn't there a single fun novel out there?"

"Really, all authors should just be locked up in a back room and forced to do nothing but write."

"If they just published three chapters a day, their income would triple, wouldn't it? Hmm. Why has no author figured out this simple calculation? Are they all liberal arts majors..."

First Ability.

'The Slowest Prophet'.

Oh Dok-seo could foresee the calamities of a world that would begin its full-scale destruction in seven days.

This prophecy was embodied in the form of a novel.

"Hm? Did I favorite something like this?"

Once Oh Dok-seo started reading a novel she liked, she had a tendency to read straight through it, even if it meant pulling an all-

nighter.

However, she had a strong habit of putting aside works that hadn't accumulated a decent number of chapters, letting them bulk up until they were ready.

"Oh. This one has quite a few chapters."

Furthermore, from Oh Dok-seo's perspective, the prophecy was nothing more than a mere novel, so it was impossible for her to accept the prophecy as a ‘prophecy’.

"This will be my daily bread for today."

Hence, [The Slowest Prophet].

A blind woman who acquired the prophecy faster than anyone else but could not recognize its precious value.

A Cassandra who prophesied everything but could save nothing, an Epimetheus who could only leave Pandora's box unattended.

"Huh?"

"...What's this? It's the first time a character's name in a novel has overlapped with my real name. Even the surname is the same? Ugh. The hanja... is identical, too."

"..."

"Huh?"

Condition cleared.

Oh Dok-seo finished reading the entire prophecy. And at the same time, she became certain that the character named ‘Oh Dok-seo’ in the story was identical to herself.

May 1st.

At this point in time, Oh Dok-seo was among the very fastest of all humanity, not just the prophets, to realize her own awakening.

"What is this... Is this… for real?"

"Sixteen billion? Ha, sixteen billion people die in a single day? Uh... W-wait a minute! June 17th, that's right around the corner!"

"No way."

"..."

"Everyone dies...?"

First Ability.

Unlocked.

‘The Fastest Prophet’.

"Wh-what do I do?! Crap. What, what am I supposed to do! I'm just an ordinary person!"

"Gasp. That line just now sounded a bit like a protagonist's."

"But, damn it! What am I really supposed to do?!"

"And why did this Undertaker guy entrust such an important mission entirely to me?! ...Ah. It was because he needed a prophet who awakened earlier than his own regression point to save Old Man Scho..."

"N-no. But still. How...?"

Second Ability.

‘Absolute Defense’.

Oh Dok-seo had a tendency to treat all events occurring in this world as stories within a ‘work of fiction’.

Even if a nuclear bomb were to go off inside a work of fiction, there was no way a real person would be exposed to radiation.

Therefore, Oh Dok-seo could declare any physical impact inflicted within the work of fiction as ‘null’ within her vicinity.

"...It works?"

"Wow, I'm a superhuman too! Status Window!"

"Hmm. No status window. Right, I remember it said the status window was a trick by some Outer God called Admin of the Infinite Metagame..."

But that was all.

[Absolute Defense] did not have a long duration.

At this point, it lasted for about a minute at best. No matter how much she trained, it would be difficult to dramatically increase the defense barrier's duration.

It was an ability that was ambiguous to a fault.

"Wait. I'm her miko, so shouldn't I be able to see the status window freely? Ah. She's sealed in the laptop, right."

"...I need to get the laptop. At this point, Admin of the Infinite Metagame is the safest Outer God. The only one who can't bring harm to humanity."

"Where on earth could it be—"

[Hello there?]

"It was my laptop!"

"No, no. Come to think of it, this laptop first appeared in the tutorial dungeon. That means there's a high possibility it belonged to someone summoned at Busan Station..."

"I'm part of the Busan Station family too!"

[I see. So my miko whelp was already enjoying a social life of her own by chattering away to herself even back then.]

[I suddenly feel the urge to strangle my past self for choosing a moron like this as my miko, thinking, ‘A habit of talking to herself,

what a perfect trait for a protagonist!'.]

"Oh, she really has that sarcastic, white-haired, red-eyed noble lady attribute, just like I saw in the novel..."

"Ah. More importantly, I need the rest of this story! You have to tell me what happens later!"

[Yes.]

"Oh."

"..."

"Hmm. I see."

"We're screwed."

"Right. First, I think I need a power-up. Ah, my status window! Give me my status window!"

[I do not mind giving it to you, but are you sure you will be fine?]

"With what?"

[The more you rely on my power, the more you become a 'character in a work of fiction'. Because I am the Outer God who governs works of fiction.]

[Your special status stems from the outrage of dismissing this world as a mere novel.]

[From the moment you begin to treat yourself as a character in a novel, your Ability will weaken accordingly.]

"Oh..."

"No. Wait a minute. Miss God. Couldn't that, somehow, be resolved?"

[Somehow?]

"I just need to get stronger and beat everyone up, then I can just

make this novel into ‘something that never happened at all’, right."

[...]

"I… I think I know why that Undertaker guy passed the final baton to me."

"I don't need to use all sorts of strange and mysterious methods to eliminate my own anomaly, like the regressor or the reincarnator in this place."

"I. Only I, at this point in time, no matter how powerful I become… the very moment I wield that great power to go on a rampage ‘so that the events of the work of fiction do not occur’, I will lose that power."

"It's only natural."

"Because the time that unfolds in that place where nothing happened will no longer be a novel, but only ‘reality’."

"Am I wrong?"

[No.]

[You are correct. You have seen through it quite well for a beginner with no experience whatsoever.]

"The other mikos... the sacrifices, the stronger they become, the more they are contaminated by the Outer Gods. They themselves degenerate into an anomaly by the name of the Fallen or Corrupted."

"This contradiction. The trap of becoming stronger to defeat anomalies, only to become closer to an anomaly the stronger one gets, is what ultimately drove the world to ruin."

"Both the reincarnator and the regressor."

"That's why they had no choice but to reach the conclusion of sealing themselves away."

"But not me."

"I still have the time to set everything right. It's only about a month, but…"

"Until the day June 7th arrives, I can get stronger however I want. Without thinking about the consequences. Without worrying about corruption."

[June 17th.]

"..."

[It is June 17th, not June 7th. You are truly terrible at remembering numbers. Are you even confused about such an important date?]

"Sh-shut up! Anyway!"

"...Until June 17th, I can just get stronger without worrying about any side effects or aftereffects."

"And..."

[I will seal everything so that none of it ever happens.]

"Seal..."

"Yes."

"This novel. The hundreds of regressions and hundreds of millions of reincarnations that were said to have happened in this novel."

"I will seal that time."

Second Ability.

Unlocked.

‘Absolute Seal’.

"Demoting the story in the novel to just a story in a novel. Connecting with reality."

"If that's my ability, I'll give it a try."

[...]

Third Ability.

Writing a Side Story.

Oh Dok-seo is, for all intents and purposes, a writer who holds absolute ability in composing the life story of another.

Before her eyes, all human beings are demoted to ‘characters’.

Therefore, Oh Dok-seo can empathize with any character from any regression cycle and act as if she has become that person.

For it is only natural that an author can immerse themselves in their characters.

[Why?]

"Hm?"

[You must know, having prophesied this far. In truth, there are no longer any obstacles that will stand in your way.]

"..."

[The reincarnator.]

[The Prometheus who shared the ‘fire’ known as awakening with the fangless and clawless humans so they could stand against the Outer Gods, has crawled into the regressor's subconscious and memories on his own.]

[The regressor.]

[He, who inherited the reincarnator's will, willingly chose to become a mere character in a novel and entrusted his entire humanity to you.]

[Outer Gods like Infinite Void and whatnot are not even worth a first glance. You will one day be able to demote even them to mere

elements within a novel.]

[Just as I did in my prime.]

"..."

[Is reality not worthless?]

[At least, you do not feel any particular value in reality. You are the type to think of works of fiction as a more truthful world.]

[That is why you are my miko.]

[Go on and demote the reincarnator and the regressor to characters in a novel.]

[Furthermore, adjust the difficulty so that the void poison can wreak a moderate amount of havoc and anomalies can roam about.]

[You can become the one and only god of a new world.]

"But then I'd be ignoring the Undertaker's feelings."

[...]

"You're an anomaly, so you probably wouldn't understand."

"To hand over the achievements one has made, the story one has built, a domain that one can decide and monopolize for oneself, to another person."

"That is the most noble thing for a human."

[I cannot understand.]

"Of course you can't understand. Because you have never been someone's child, nor will you ever be a parent."

[...]

"Children can understand their parents' stories from their own perspective."

"Yes, parents willingly permit the outrage of letting those far, far younger children judge their own lives."

"A king to his people."

"A friend to a friend."

"A buddha to a buddha."

"A person does not judge their own story entirely by themselves. No, they can make the decision not to judge it."

[That is why you people are weak.]

"That's right. But then why are you almighty Outer God who has become so strong, currently living as a small-time VTuber with a single viewer on my laptop?"

[...]

"People don't hand over judgment because they can't become strong."

"They just hand it over because there is an existence they hold a little more precious than themselves."

"And as it happens, I'm the type of person who considers myself to be a moderate piece of trash."

"So to the guy who handed over the right to decide his entire life to trash like me, I'm thinking of betting my entire life on him as well."

[Where are you going?]

"Yu Ji-won."

Third Ability.

Unlocked.

‘Writing the Main Story’.

"The most powerful person at this point in time. Leviathan invaded

this world several years ago."

[That is correct. It is just that Yu Ji-won, who was chosen as the sacrifice, is sealing the anomaly with her longing for the so-called ‘Mr. Matiz’, the one and only humanity that exists in her heart.]

"I need to meet that person first and ask for her cooperation."

[Because she is the strongest?]

"Yes. And above all else... Just as you said, Yu Ji-won only has eyes for ‘Mr. Matiz’. If I just mention the keyword ‘Mr. Matiz’, a serious conversation and cooperation will immediately become possible."

[So you are saying that even you, in your current state with no experience points whatsoever, can get her to join your party just by clicking the ‘Recruit’ button.]

"Status window. And turn on the map, too."

[Very well.]

"First, I'll recruit Yu Ji-won as a companion. Next is Lee Ha-yul. She's probably confined in Busan right now, being called the child of a concubine. I can just go and drag her out."

[And after that?]

"The Saintess. Before the Great Void known as the White Night occurs in Seoul on June 17th... what is this? Its name keeps appearing in the story, but there are no specific details?"

[...]

"Anyway. The Saintess is already in an awakened state before the White Night occurs. She's a little slower than me, but it's still a sufficiently early point in time. It was emphasized that the Saintess has a consistently logical personality, so if I speak calmly, I can persuade her by any means."

[Next?]

"I have to crush Cheon Yo-hwa's cult."

[Even if it has been split in two, it is still at a level capable of summoning an Outer God to the mortal plane. Are you saying that you, who has just awakened, will crush the worst pseudo-religious cult on the Korean Peninsula with a hastily assembled party of heroes?]

"Yes."

[Is that possible? You will die.]

"If I die, then you tell the me of the next life how I died, in text."

[Ha? The next life... You are not a regressor. You merely have the attributes of a book possessor. If you die, it is the end.]

"I suppose so."

"—But what will happen when the Undertaker, who regressed on June 17th, looks around the Busan Station tutorial dungeon and sees that I'm not there?"

[...]

"The moment the Undertaker determines that I have died, he will move on to the next cycle. It's only natural. The feelings the old man has for me are real, after all."

"The story hasn't even begun yet, and a child named Oh Dok-seo has died. From the old man's perspective, it's a situation that he cannot allow, cannot accept, and cannot forgive."

"That's why I can be sure. If I die, the regressor will definitely move on to the next life."

[Even if you, in the next life, having received the strategy guide from me, fail again and die.]

"He'll just regress again."

[Until you, having inherited the experience points from your past

life, become strong enough—]

"To reach June 17th. The Busan Station tutorial dungeon. The starting point, the prologue."

[In effect, you become no different from a regressor.]

"That's right. Because there's a grateful existence who regresses solely for me."

[Ha.]

[The reincarnator to the regressor. The regressor to the possessor. And the possessor, in turn, entrusts her fate to the regressor.]

"Do you get it now? You anomaly, this is humanity."

[If humanity were filled with only people like you, the Outer Gods would never have descended in the first place.]

[Very well.]

[The end of this story, I have become curious to see it myself.]

[I shall witness your deaths to my heart's content. My worst miko.]

"Yeah. I'll probably get strong after rolling around for about 10 turns? I can't be compared to that old man who's practically a non-ability user."

"I'll be fighting with a status window, an inventory, and even a map turned on. Wow, what an easy win!"

"A mode that was Very Hard difficulty for the reincarnator became Normal for the regressor! Which means for this body, a possessor, it's finally on Easy!"

"It's so... Easy."

[Hmph.]

[Well now.]

[I wonder if it will truly be that easy?]

"Hm?"

And so.

Epimetheus blossomed into Prometheus.

Footnotes:

Chapter 420

The Possessor II

Sinnoa

Every plan had been perfect.

Or at least, it had certainly looked perfect right up until I, the Undertaker, got my ass kicked.

'Go Yuri. The one who fell into becoming the worst anomaly while trying to save humanity.'

'She now exists in my complete memory as a [human] who has lived through billions of lives.'

Naturally, my memories were on an entirely different dimension from other people's memories.

"Oh my."

"Oh dear, oh dear."

This difference in dimension was made abundantly clear just by looking at the Go Yuris right before my eyes, all chattering away, bustling about, murmuring here and there, chatting incessantly, testing the very limits of onomatopoeia in real time.

"We've truly become one now."

Over there, a Go Yuri.

"But wouldn't it be rather burdensome for Mr. Undertaker if billions of us were all stationed in the Busan Station Tutorial Dungeon?"

Here too, a Go Yuri.

"It's a grand human gathering."

"Yes. It would be more appropriate if only about one person appeared at a time, while the rest remained in the unconscious world of dreams within dreams."

"Then we need to decide who will stay in Mr. Undertaker's reality."

"A lottery? Or perhaps a tournament?"

"Fairness or dopamine, that is the question."

"Truly a difficult problem..."

It was nothing short of a Go Yuri chaos party.

"Could you all be quiet? You're making my head spin."

"Yes." "Yes." "Yes." "Yes."

The Go Yuris obediently replied.

While the Go Yuris suddenly began holding a dice-rolling tournament competition at the edge of my vision, with billions of participants in the main event, I calmly looked around.

At the waiting room of the Busan Station Tutorial Dungeon.

'As expected. I don't see Dok-seo...'

This was the 1,085th cycle.

In the previous cycle, I had experienced every single moment of Go Yuri's entire life, one by one. I had literally walked the exact same life as her.

Now there was no meaningful distinction between Go Yuri's personality and mine. I was Go Yuri, and Go Yuri was me.

In this state, Go Yuri, who had existed with a clear physical form in reality, willingly became infected by 'Udumbara.'

Udumbara was the World Tree that erased the screams of all awakeners.

The ability called reincarnation that Go Yuri possessed was also removed at that moment, and at last the reincarnator finished her long journey and came to sit at the terminal station called 'me.'

Go Yuri. The reincarnator whose name in her first life had been Su-yeon succeeded in discarding herself, who had been contaminated by Void Poison.

'Now I just need to be sealed.'

My sealing method was much simpler.

'After Dok-seo finishes writing my entire life story, if I also get infected by Udumbara like Go Yuri did, everything will be over.'

It wasn't just me.

'Ji-won too, Yo-hwa too, Seo-rin too. No. I'll make Udumbara bloom fully across this entire world and all the awakeners...'

'Even the miku's who have become one with the Outer Gods, I'll infect them all with Udumbara.'

Then the Outer Gods, the anomalies that originated from the Outer Gods, and the awakeners who harbored the Void Poison called awakening.

'I can reset them all at once.'

The problem was Sim Ah-ryeon.

The ability Ah-ryeon possessed was fundamentally similar to Udumbara.

If Udumbara became massive enough to truly become a 'World Tree,' there was a risk that Ah-ryeon would also degrade to the level of an Outer God along with it.

'So I'll infect them with Udumbara little by little, divided across cycles. This way I can minimize the risk.'

A grand downfall.

While this epic of collapse continued, I, the Undertaker, had to remain until the very last moment to control any possible variables.

And beside me, Oh Dok-seo would diligently write the sealing tool called a novel to seal me away.

"...Why isn't she in the Tutorial Dungeon?"

As I was saying.

Oh Dok-seo, the person who had now become most important to my plan, was nowhere to be seen.

'There must have been some error.'

I desperately spun my positive thinking circuits.

'If I go to the next cycle, Dok-seo will appear with a ta-da! Yes! Of course she will.'

Next. The 1,086th cycle.

Dok-seo still wasn't there.

"..."

The 1,087th cycle too. The 1,088th cycle too. And the next one too.

Even the mental state of this regressor, whose only virtue was being positive about everything, naturally had no choice but to enter the five stages of grief.

"No. There's no way Dok-seo died. Why would she die in the first place? She just needs to not go anywhere dangerous and keep using her AT-Field at the right times and endure!"

Denial.

"Dok-seo! Wasn't it enough to just save Lady Adele and make contact with Old Man Scho? What kind of trouble are you causing before the regression starting point?!"

Anger.

"...No, is this the Admin of the Infinite Metagame's doing? Surely not. That's why I thoroughly crushed that bastard and even got a declaration of defeat and surrender. Still. What if Dok-seo fell for the Admin of the Infinite Metagame's whispers and decided to become the god of a new world?!"

Fear.

"Right. Our Dok-seo was a Noh Do-hwa supporter. I neglected the romance part where this old man gets all lovey-dovey with the National Road Management Corps leader too much. Dok-seo. Can you hear me? Are you reading my monologue? Ah, you must be hearing it! Ten cycles. Sure. I'll devote a full ten cycles to the Noh Do-hwa romance route. Huh! This is generous, completely generous! So our Dok-seo, don't do anything else and just save Lady Adele and come here. Okay? Sorry for always pressuring you to write. Our dear author. How about from now on you write just one chapter every ten years?"

Bargaining.

"....."

Acceptance.

"Right."

I had actually known.

"You couldn't accept it, could you."

That perhaps Dok-seo might react this way.

Having helped and watched over that child for countless tens of thousands of years, this was one of the scenarios I could sufficiently anticipate.

However, I hadn't considered this possibility very high.

The reason was simple.

"From your perspective, I'm still a future person you haven't

actually met. A character in a novel. Nothing more than an unknown stranger."

Dok-seo was different from me.

The book possessor had a characteristic that was distinctly different from both regressors and reincarnators.

"You and I had no point of contact in reality."

Regressors continued to live by repeating their own lives.

Therefore, even if others couldn't remember them, regressors remembered the bonds and oaths they had made with others.

Reincarnators continued to live by repeating other people's lives.

Therefore, reincarnators had no boundary between self and others. You were someone I once was, and I was someone who would one day become you.

Possessors were different.

For a possessor, there was only one life. The self was the self, and others were others.

"At this point in time, you and I in reality haven't built up any connection. In terms of favorability, it's zero. Even if I generously inflate it, it would be hard to exceed fifty."

She read an interesting novel.

She picked up a mysterious prophecy book.

Even so, to risk her own death for some strange 'old man' who only appeared in lines of text, to move toward a 'happy ending' whose existence was uncertain.

"Would that really be possible?"

The probability was abnormally low.

If there was a gap in my judgment.

"...It's that you're a child far more abnormal than any probability. Dok-seo."

Once upon a time, Dok-seo and I had built a bond where we would think nothing of giving up our lives for each other.

Dok-seo didn't remember that. She had merely witnessed through sentences mixed with her own handwriting that such a thing had happened.

'With just that.'

With only that much, Dok-seo had decided to bet her life on me.

"....."

"An interesting miscalculation."

The one and only Go Yuri who had lifted the championship trophy in the tournament that recorded the most participants in human history smiled warmly beside me.

"Mr. Undertaker. You don't trust ordinary people's memory. Not because you look down on them, but because they truly cannot remember you."

"....."

"You don't expect the impossible from others. You don't arbitrarily expect things and don't arbitrarily get hurt."

Go Yuri said as if humming.

"That attitude is the very foundation of the posture that allowed you to get along with people. Therefore, you naturally didn't expect an impossible achievement from Ms. Dok-seo."

Go Yuri and I were similar.

We both knew well the sensation of hurt felt when others didn't recognize 'past life' or 'previous cycle' versions of ourselves.

"But it seems Ms. Oh Dok-seo was an error, an anomalous human that our attitude failed to account for."

"...Children really don't grow up or act the way I think they will."

"Indeed they don't."

Go Yuri chuckled softly.

"I was hard mode. I lived for eons so long that counting them was meaningless. Mr. Undertaker is normal mode. You lived for tens of thousands of years."

"Right."

"I wonder how many years Ms. Oh Dok-seo will live? Until she reaches that certain summer station on June 17th that will never end."

The cycles flowed on.

Each time they flowed, Dok-seo's name was recorded at the very top of the list of deaths I couldn't do anything about.

'Dok-seo.'

Once, I had hoped that child wouldn't have to bear all the wounds.

'You don't need to save me. This old man is truly satisfied just appearing in the paragraphs of text you'll read, just in the prologue of your story.'

Could my voice be heard?

Even if it could be heard, would it be understood?

"....."

I felt an intense ambivalence.

I hoped that the words I left here and now would be understood by that child someday, if not now.

I believed they would be understood.

But understanding my words meant that child would experience the same wounds I had.

I hoped those wounds wouldn't be too great.

'Do I want them to be understood, or do I want them to not be understood? Well. This is troublesome.'

In the end, my hope had only one destination.

'I hope you become strong.'

To walk strongly.

And strength was ultimately something that could only be obtained by oneself.

The 'prophecy book' and 'strategy guide' that Dok-seo would read contained my life story, my experiences, the record of the failures and mistakes and successes I had gone through.

That was all.

The only thing I could possibly give to this child called Dok-seo was my life.

'I can't become strong in your place.'

I tried though.

Even though Dok-seo kept repeating death until she reached that June summer, I couldn't just stand by and assume she would somehow become strong on her own.

'Could I develop a new time machine ability?'

I tried.

'The black sword that the National Road Management Corps leader made for me has properties that transcend space and time. With that, if I somehow cut out time... could I perform that ultimate

technique?'

I tried.

"....."

For hundreds and thousands of years, Go Yuri simply watched in silence with a smile as I struggled to gain new wounds to help that child.

And then I realized.

"Shit. This isn't going to work."

I set down my cane-sword.

The 1183rd regression.

It was exactly one hundred cycles after I had lived through Go Yuri's life. The regressor still hadn't developed any ability to turn back time further.

Those who were destined to succeed will succeed; those who weren't, won't. No matter how desperately I struggled, I lacked the 'talent.'

"I told you, didn't I, Mr. Undertaker."

Go Yuri whispered gently.

"You seriously lack the talent to be wounded. Because no matter how wounded you become, you absolutely never give up."

"...I thought that was my strength."

"All strengths contain weaknesses."

A giggle.

"Originally you had only lost your fellow regressor Emit Schopenhauer. But now you're losing the possessor Oh Dok-seo 'pre-regression' every time too."

"....."

"But from Ms. Dok-seo's perspective it's the opposite. In a 'world without the Undertaker,' Ms. Dok-seo is aiming for a clear. Hmm. Now that I think about it again, maybe it's not exactly easy difficulty after all?"

It might be similar to the difficulty I experienced, Go Yuri breathed.

"Aha. I might be witnessing a brand new possibility."

"What?"

"Like this, Mr. Undertaker keeps searching for someone to seal him away. Since Ms. Dok-seo failed, then the next one. The next one. The next one. But each time, other people somehow struggle to save Mr. Undertaker. As a result, everyone dies before reaching June 17th."

"....."

"So even though Mr. Undertaker regresses, the people around him gradually decrease. First Ms. Dok-seo. Then someone else. Then someone else again. And so eventually... you regress, but no one remains! My word. An ending where only one regressor remains in this world. And that's the result of all of humanity desperately struggling to save one single regressor!"

"....."

"But Ms. Noh Do-hwa will remain."

Go Yuri smiled brightly.

"Because that person will absolutely die trying to save you. She'll just keep living to kill you, left alone in the world."

"Indeed."

I gave a bitter smile.

"That would be the perfect bad ending."

"The destruction of everyone for one person. It's romantic. Mm, I don't think it's bad. If that's humanity's ending, I can accept it."

Go Yuri looked far into the distance at the sunset.

"Now you understand my gamble. Mr. Undertaker. Right now in the situation you're experiencing, I bet on your success in exactly the same way."

"Is that so."

"Yes. Thanks to Mr. Undertaker being competent, thanks to you not giving up, I didn't fail and was able to talk with you like this."

Go Yuri's eyes turned to look at me.

"What about Ms. Dok-seo?"

"....."

"Will Ms. Dok-seo be as competent as you? Will she not give up like you?"

The world perished. Again.

"By any chance, do you have any regrets about entrusting the end of this grand life to Ms. Dok-seo?"

"Mm."

Go Yuri's words were right.

At last, belatedly, I fully understood what state of mind Go Yuri had been in when she entrusted her ending to me.

"I don't regret it."

"Why?"

"No one has read my life story as thoroughly as that child. Everything I could give, everything I couldn't give, it all depends on that child. Even if Dok-seo fails, that would be... well. From my position it would be something to feel sorry about, but I wouldn't

resent it or regret it."

"Absolutely?"

"Absolutely."

She lived diligently.

She tried hard.

She didn't give up.

"I'll just wait."

Waiting.

To wait for someone.

That was something quite unfamiliar to a regressor like me who had lived longer than anyone.

A regressor was someone others waited for, not someone who waited for others. It was because I knew exactly what events would unfold going forward.

Where I go, who will be there.

If I go there, someone will survive.

If I don't go, someone will die.

A regressor has a kind of omniscience.

I was an existence that always urged myself forward to get as quickly as possible to the people who would be waiting for my arrival.

Unless you were a regressor-failure like Old Man Scho who just went 'ah, I don't know, anyway if you guys don't do it I'm quitting, good luck' to the world.

'But... I see.'

I understood now at last.

"Waiting isn't so bad either."

"Ahaha. Right?"

"Yeah."

What state of mind had the regressor Emit Schopenhauer been in when he took his life over a thousand times?

Was it stubbornness? Obstinacy? Guilt over finding peace before leaving his comrade behind? Love for his wife? Desperation?

There would be many reasons, but among them I finally guessed there was 'faith in me,' 'support,' 'waiting.'

"If I had given up, Old Man Scho would have understood. Well, we wouldn't have even had a chance to talk though."

"Yes."

"But if he could have somehow received news of my giving up through some miraculous method, Old Man Scho would have felt... sorry toward me, I think."

"Yes."

"We're all pretty much the same."

"Because that's what people are like."

I waited.

At the end of a perishing world, a world without you, I waited for you.

I waited.

I waited.

"....."

"Oh my."

One day.

"Ms. Yu Ji-won died."

"So she did."

"It's strange. There should be a resolve in Ms. Yu Ji-won's heart, a vow more solid than anything, that she absolutely won't die before reuniting with Mr. Matiz no matter what happens."

"....."

Something had changed.

"Yes, Ms. Yo-hwa's death has been confirmed. Hmm. No Void occurred at Baekhwa Girls' High either."

"What's going on?"

"It means the Void that was originally scheduled to occur at Baekhwa Girls' High was triggered early, somewhere else. But it didn't go as planned and the whole party died."

"....."

"But Mr. Undertaker. Haven't you noticed another strange thing?"

"What?"

"Ms. Jeong Ye-ji's telepathy."

"....."

"The messages from the Constellations. We're not hearing them, are we?"

The world continued to repeatedly perish.

People died countless times, and you were included in those predetermined deaths.

The state of the world that 'you' had changed was completely different from the history of regression I had experienced, and even I, who possessed so much experience and 'knowledge of a regressor,' was helpless.

As a result, the situation had worsened even more.

However.

"She's coming."

That too was part of the waiting process.

"One step at a time."

I couldn't hear or see it.

"To this place."

Just as I had done for Go Yuri.

Oh Dok-seo.

When I turned around, that child was approaching my waiting.

Footnotes:

Chapter 421

The Possessor III

Sinnoa

Waiting was the sound of footsteps not yet heard.

"The trail ends here."

"Yo-hwa's cult headquarters, I see."

"Judging from the footprints... hmm. Three people. Ms. Yu Ji-won, Ms. Jeong Ye-ji, and Ms. Oh Dok-seo."

"The crutches would be Ha-yul."

"If it were me, I'd have made Ms. Ye-ji the command center and kept her in the rear. Mm, did they judge the combat power was insufficient for that?"

"...At this point in time, the Saintess's [Time Stop] is weak as can be. But they'd need to mobilize even that level of power to annihilate a cult along with an Outer God."

"Ahaha. What absurd recklessness. Ah, is this why veterans enjoyed watching newbies? How interesting."

Waiting was a message being typed.

"It's Ms. Dok-seo's corpse, Mr. Undertaker."

"....."

"Don't make that sad face. This is the first time across hundreds of cycles that she's reached 'a death that at least left a corpse behind.' To fight an Outer God and leave an intact corpse, isn't that quite an achievement?"

"An intact corpse? Only half of it is left."

"Yes. Whether a corpse is intact is determined only by whether the deceased's will was left behind or not, and ta-da."

"What's that?"

"How unexpected. It's a suicide note hidden in Ms. Dok-seo's corpse♪"

"....."

"[To Mister.]"

[Sorry.]

[If you're reading this letter, it means I'm already dead.]

[Ah, I've always wanted to write a suicide note like this—]"

"That's all there is. The rest of the letter was cut off and disappeared somewhere!"

"....."

Waiting was…

[Ah, I've always wanted to write a suicide note like this. Writing it myself is way more fucking fun than I thought. You should try it too, Mister.]

Just like the sound of a bell that didn't ring.

[Actually, if I die anyway, you'll just defer the ending to the next cycle, so I'm not really thinking much about it.]

[I wondered for a moment whether I should feel sorry about my death.]

[But I've decided not to be sorry.]

[You don't really try to think about the world that remains after you die either, right? You don't pointlessly stress over areas you can't control.]

[I thought that was your attitude.]

[So, if it's good, I'll also—]

A night that was not night.

Though not visible before my eyes yet rising before them, the sound of a fountain pen scratching beneath some lamp.

[So.]

It continued.

[If it's good, I'll try to learn it too.]

The void that exists in this world. The emptiness.

The path cut off before me. The route.

[To me, you're a human being, never a god. Sorry, but I don't have the slightest desire to worship you.]

[A life mortgaged to worship someone is too devastating, isn't it?]

[You have your own life.]

[If the answer you've reached at the end of that life is this moment, if it's to seal Go Yuri and isolate even yourself in lines of text.]

[I'll acknowledge it.]

[But there's no reason anywhere that it should be the end of my life too.]

Breath into a breathless letter.

[I told Ji-won unni and Ye-ji unni too. About your scenario.]

[No comment on how they reacted. That's something you can find out by digging through the unnies' corpses and farming their wills.]

[But just between us, those unnies' personalities are really fucking awful. Why the hell did you form a hero party with people like

this??]

[This is why your life went to shit. You idiot.]

Laughter onto a blank page without laughter.

[I persuaded Cheon Yo-hwa.]

The letter gradually grew longer.

[I persuaded Sim Ah-ryeon.]

The locations where Dok-seo's corpse was found, the places where her companions' corpses appeared, began to change little by little each time.

[Go Yuri thought the only solution was to make Hecate into a 'human' called Dang Seo-rin.]

[I respect that judgment.]

[But it's not my judgment.]

[I haven't lived that far yet.]

There were cases where corpses continued to be found at specific points for hundreds of cycles.

[I can't live the same life as Go Yuri. I'm not a reincarnator. I'm not a regressor either.]

[As a regressor, you might have understood the reincarnator Go Yuri's method, fully accepted it, and then agreed.]

[Even while abandoning your own love.]

[But I can't.]

[I can't live that far. Even if I want to, I can't.]

[I'm going to test my own life.]

[Your life without Dang Seo-rin is incomplete. If you consider that

incompleteness itself to be beautiful, I'll tell you that my aesthetic is different.]

Gunshots without gunshots continued.

[I'll save Dang Seo-rin. I'll save the Princess of the Night.]

Hecate was an anomaly that even a reincarnator and regressor couldn't dare guarantee victory against in a direct confrontation.

The domain she inhabited was the entire night sky, and all the planets and starlight that moved across the night sky were no different from the witch's limbs.

Hundreds and thousands of corpses lay scattered.

And then.

[I saved Dang Seo-rin.]

Direction was born in the sound of footsteps.

[As a result, Seo-rin ended up becoming an ordinary person without any abilities. I don't know if you'll like a Seo-rin who isn't Hecate.]

[That would be your life.]

[I saved the person I wanted to save, and I don't think your consent is necessary.]

Thud. Thud.

The footprints always disappeared at some midpoint. However, the direction the footprints continued was all too clear.

Toward Busan Station.

Toward the Tutorial Dungeon.

To the terminal of reincarnation where the reincarnator finally arrived, to the starting point of regression where the regressor first began.

"Hee. How curious. How did she subdue Hecate? I'm very interested."

"...She's a child who started with both the reincarnator's strategy guide and the regressor's strategy guide. Her conditions were much better than ours."

"Even so, it's amazing. It's a great achievement."

"Yeah. Well done."

Time flowed.

An era flowed.

Eavesdropping on the waves of those footsteps, I suddenly looked up at the sky.

'Did I perhaps become arrogant?'

The sky was like my only refuge as the Undertaker.

At least when looking up at the sky, I could turn my gaze away, even a little, from the countless corpses preserved in my [Complete Memory].

Like meteor showers, the corpses of raid members falling, only the starlight made of human lingering thoughts, desperate hopes, and will adorned my sky.

"I think I lived a righteous life."

"Yes. I think so too."

"But the world I think of myself, the self I think of myself... perhaps I unknowingly forced it on the children."

"Because you believed."

"That eventually if they were wounded like me, they would reach the same conclusion as me."

"Yes. Mr. Undertaker. Isn't that belief itself beautiful?"

Waiting was continuation.

"The world and self that I think of. The world and self that others think of. Two routes overlapping to form one path. I think that's the only beautiful thing in this world stained with Void."

"....."

"We two are beautiful."

Waiting was showing yourself.

"Only we two in this universe are beautiful."

Waiting was accepting even your misunderstanding as understanding.

"You and I understand each other perfectly. We pursue exactly the same purpose. We overlapped our footsteps. Is there any more supremely pure beauty, any miracle, that exists in the world?"

"....."

I thought there wasn't.

"Perhaps we were wrong."

"Why do you say that?"

"We just happened to become a reincarnator and just happened to become a regressor. Between just us two who happened to exist like that... the most beautiful thing in the world couldn't possibly be established."

"....."

"If it's the most noble beauty, surely even if you're not a reincarnator or regressor, anyone should be able to grasp it."

The letter continued.

The footsteps continued.

"I ultimately understood my story in my own way, and I still believe without doubt that it's right, but..."

"But?"

"Dok-seo has the right to judge my story. She's watched my story more closely than anyone."

If you compare life to a work of art.

Oneself would be both the author and reader of one's life.

However, in a true sense, the 'first reader' could only be one's own child.

"My unavoidable decision might have seemed like an absolutely unacceptable sacrifice to Dok-seo."

"....."

"The conclusion I reached, that she had already fallen into an anomaly with no way to help it and could only seal herself away, might be a wrong answer that Oh Dok-seo must correct."

"That child lacks experience points."

"It doesn't matter. We're all the same."

"....."

"I intend to offer myself so that Dok-seo can judge my life."

I looked back at Go Yuri.

Under the night sky, I cast my gaze at the finisher who had 'understood' all humanity by living through billions of lives in their entirety.

"Haven't you ever thought this sometimes?"

"What thought would that be?"

"Even if we reach an ending, would that really be the end of this

world? Perhaps the Void will appear again anytime, a hundred years later, a thousand years later, and 'destruction' will repeat as if it's nothing. Won't it push the world into Void once again?"

"....."

"By that time, Go Yuri, you won't be in the world, nor will I. Without the miracle that is you. Without the miracle that is me, people will have to fight against destruction again."

"It's a terrible scenario."

"But even there, the strategy guide left by a reincarnator and regressor will remain as traces, and the children of Oh Dok-seo's children will exist."

"....."

"I believe I'm right. Still. But Oh Dok-seo can think I'm not right. Thinking about it now... to give Dok-seo that spare room in life."

The void.

"Passing her blank pages where she can write the story about me herself might have been the best choice in my life."

"....."

"O God."

For the first time, I spoke the name of God. Not mentioning Jesus and Buddha and Mo Gwang-seo as a joke, but in a true sense, while looking at the reincarnator who had become my god.

"Please let fortune accompany that child's future."

"....."

"May that child someday accept that I simply did my best in my life."

"....."

"Not a life that's always in pain and twisted by the fact that someone isn't in this world."

I prayed.

"May it be a life that smiles happily with every step walking their own path."

"Ah."

"May that child also someday be able to hand over their own correct answer to another child as a wrong answer."

"....."

"I earnestly pray."

Go Yuri was silent.

That expression twisted for the first time.

In a direction it had never twisted while living billions of lives. Into a face never remembered in my memory.

"I..."

[I figured out how to bloom Udumbara.]

"I'm too late to become human."

[The conditions were incredibly strict. But it's not so impossible that I can't implement it at all. Ah-ryeon unni got a bit weird, but well. That person is always weird.]

[So.]

"I came this far. I threw away all my abilities just to remain human to you. But, is my sacrifice wrong?"

[I'll subdue the Monster Wave.]

"It's not that it's wrong."

"...Will Ms. Oh Dok-seo. That self-proclaimed possessor who's only just started toddling, be able to find a better solution than me?"

"I told you. Your life isn't an answer key. Countless wrong answers are recorded in the search for the correct answer. Looking at the same correct and wrong answers, Oh Dok-seo can reach a different conclusion."

"Mr. Undertaker. You reached the same conclusion as me."

"As I already said, Go Yuri. Not all humans can be like me."

"So I—"

"So I will choose Oh Dok-seo."

[Mister. But why is there so fucking little strategy information specifically for the Monster Wave??]

[The Ten Legs are a type of Hollow, and the Monster Wave is a gathering of Hollows. I understood the fact itself that if you hold memorial services and funerals for each one, it can be cleared.]

[But fuck, isn't this method too difficult?? It's a strategy that only works for someone like you who can 'bring to mind' dead people as if they were living humans right before your eyes.]

[In my opinion, this is too specialized a method.]

"If they enshrine someone like me as a god, the only things left in these children's lives will be regret and sorrow, days of blaming themselves."

"....."

"The same goes for you."

[Thinking about it, the Hollows caught in the Monster Wave are all missing persons, right? Hollows who lost even the bereaved who should hold their funerals.]

[But can't the 'state' also hold funerals jointly for those kinds of

deaths? Originally?]

"I don't want Dok-seo to live a life of always regretting because of me. Feeling sorry about me, gathering only with people who feel sorry to me and praising each other as true humans."

"....."

"I'm asking what you hope your children will become. Go Yuri. My god."

[I plan to make Ji-won unni the Undertaker.]

"...Of course."

[Ji-won unni is a priestess of Leviathan, and Leviathan is originally the concept of a 'state' corrupted into an anomaly, right?]

"Of course, I want them to be happy."

[Then Ji-won unni is an agent of the state. In the world of anomalies, she'll be treated even more as such.]

[Naturally, a funeral where Ji-won unni serves as the Undertaker will have the character of 'a funeral jointly held by the state,' I think.]

"I lived diligently for that."

[Isn't it interesting? That Yu Ji-won, a person who cannot be anyone's bereaved and cannot mourn any single person's death, is paradoxically the only human who can hold funerals for all people.]

[It'll be difficult, but I'm going to try.]

"It was a life lived only for that."

"Then you too should open your understanding of yourself to others."

"....."

"That's the only way for us to become happy humans."

I've thought for a long time.

[Hmm. I wonder how delicious your coffee is for the novel to keep going on and on about coffee.]

What is the world? What is life?

[I want to look forward to it, but what if I expect too much and then it's actually not that great when I drink it? I feel like I'll be disappointed, so I'm deliberately trying to lower my expectations.]

[But it's a special cup from a barista who's lived thousands of cycles, so shouldn't I look forward to it a lot? If something exists somewhere in this world with a taste that transcends my consideration, my kind heart, wouldn't that be you, Mister...?]

[Expectations are absent. Expectations exist. Ambivalence is absent and exists. Existence is absent. Absence exists.]

[That rhyme was sick.]

At some point, I thought that I, who had lived more lives and received deeper wounds than anyone, was qualified to define the world and life.

However, I realized after entrusting the ghostwriting of my autobiography to the child called Oh Dok-seo that I too was one world and one life to someone.

The world and life continued like that.

'Chase after me, Dok-seo.'

No.

'Move forward, Dok-seo.'

Your path.

Though you were born slower than me, your steps are faster than anyone's.

Walk stepping on the failures I experienced, the strategy guide I created, my life story.

My life was originally for others, but now it's also for you.

Therefore I wait.

"....."

I simply waited.

"....."

The waiting room of the Busan Station Tutorial Dungeon.

The people who had been summoned to the tutorial along with me were not visible. Fairy No. 264 didn't appear either.

'It's not the Void.'

I realized it as soon as I regressed.

This place was no longer the Void defined under the name of Tutorial Dungeon. It was just an ordinary concrete building from which people had disappeared.

'Someone isolated all the people who should have been summoned to the Tutorial Dungeon somewhere else, and put even the Tutorial Fairy to sleep by some method.'

The Busan Station waiting room was vast and quiet.

Lighting played a major role in that quietness. All the windows, entrances, and gaps through which light could pierce through were covered with thick curtains.

It was dark.

In such a colorless cemetery.

Creeeak.

Slowly, a door opened.

As the curtain was drawn back, faint light began to seep out. The light became a carpet.

"Who did you think would save you, Mister?"

Thud.

With the sound of footsteps.

"The Saintess?"

A voice flowed down whitely.

"Dang Seo-rin? Cheon-hwa? Yo-hwa? Sim Ah-ryeon? Lee Ha-yul? Noh Do-hwa? Yu Ji-won?"

Thud.

"Go Yuri?"

Thud.

"No."

I turned toward the footsteps and voice.

There, Oh Dok-seo's breathing existed.

Dok-seo's hair was long, unlike the her I had known until now.

The color was different too. She had let down long black hair.

"Surprisingly, you never expected it at all."

Chew chew, pop.

Dok-seo burst a cheap bubble gum. She had always failed when trying to make a bubble, but somehow this time a proper bubble had formed.

After smoothly wiping away the gum that had exploded properly for the first time.

"Me."

Dok-seo took out scissors from inside her clothes. The haircutting scissors sparkled silver as they drank in the light seeping from that door crack.

Snip.

Hair scattered in pieces.

As it fluttered, the hair gradually became dyed red from the tip of the scissors.

Soon Dok-seo had long hair. She had returned to being the red-haired girl I knew.

Grinning.

Dok-seo took out a cap and covered her head. Then she spun it around to face backward.

"—I am your salvation, Mister."

She was my epilogue.

The writer who would record the correct answer called me as a wrong answer.

Thus, the being who would connect all wrong answers into one correct answer.

The child I had always waited for.

The person I loved.

Footnotes:

Chapter 422

The One Who Was a Partner

Sinnoa

There was a man named Emit Schopenhauer.

"..."

Schopenhauer opened his eyes.

He didn't bother with something trite like "an unfamiliar ceiling" or anything of that sort.

To be perfectly honest, this German old man was about as far removed from that venerable tradition passed down from the days of Evangelion as one could possibly get.

"I've regressed. Again."

His murmur, so familiar that he could practically recite the concrete patterns on the ceiling by heart now, drifted up like stale smoke into that well-known space above.

The time displayed on the wall clock read 13:58:33.

The old Baekje Hospital building.

While his wife was supposed to be attending some academic conference in Seoul for several days, Schopenhauer found himself too restless to just sit cooped up in a hotel room.

Strangely enough, he was seized by a peculiar feeling that he had lost something in this Korean neighborhood, and that he absolutely had to find that missing item somewhere.

Schopenhauer was a man who lived on impulse.

Even though advancing age had reduced his testosterone secretion,

endless strength training and Schopenhauer's characteristic energy had somehow led him to the far edge of the Korean peninsula.

Busan.

"Ah hell, I should've just stayed in Seoul."

Schopenhauer grumbled as he pulled out his smartphone. Without even looking at the number pad, he skillfully placed a call with his left hand.

There was no need to look.

"Emit? What's going on?"

He had never bothered to memorize the digits, but the motion had become familiar after thousands of repetitions.

"I love you, Adele."

"Huh?"

Smartphone performance these days was truly incredible. He could hear his wife's expression souring in real time through the phone line.

Schopenhauer found himself laughing.

The eternal repeating ten-minute life of a regressor. Time that had transformed from a straight line into a wagon wheel, or rather an extremely tiny hamster wheel.

In this hell, this was the only moment when he could let laughter seep into his breath.

"What? Can't I say I love you?"

"No, you're not Emit, are you? A man who's never said such words in his entire life suddenly acting like this? Did you get yourself a French mistress or something?"

"The coffee here is disgustingly terrible. Drinking it made me

suddenly want to brew you some good coffee."

"I do like your coffee, but I prefer tea, you know that."

"Tea is healthier than coffee, I'll give you that. Still, can't quit caffeine though. Hell no. It makes all the difference when working out."

Completely pointless conversation.

No grand narrative about how the world would end, how monsters would run rampant, how both she and he would soon meet their deaths.

Nothing of the sort.

"Look, I get that you love exercise, but take it easy. You just had inflammation in your wrist the other day."

"Injuries are badges of honor."

"Oh my. If you earn any more badges, you'll end up a complete idiot, old man."

That was what he liked.

That was enough.

Glancing reflexively, Schopenhauer looked back at the cafe's wall clock. He wasn't sure if it was some recent youth aesthetic or what, but it was an electronic clock with raw bright red fluorescent lamps embedded in it.

'About ten seconds left.'

The red numbers counting down the remaining time until the only being on this earth that he loved would meet her death.

"This won't do."

"What won't?"

13:59:52.

"Next time, I'm definitely dragging you to the fitness studio. You're always holed up in the study reading books, that's why you have a turtle neck."

"Dream on."

13:59:59.

"I hate exercise."

14:00:00.

"I love you, Adele."

"..."

End.

Schopenhauer closed his eyes. Firmly, he pressed the call end button. His left hand holding the smartphone trembled slightly.

That trembling was probably the last heat remaining in the heart of a husband burying his wife.

'What topic should I talk about next time?'

He had already discussed too many things. But there existed someone for whom the topic of conversation didn't matter.

Something that nullified all other existence.

Love. Love, love.

'Oh God.'

A person's lifetime wounds, experiences, judgments, all ravenously absorbed like nutrients, blooming humbly toward the sun that had cast light into his valley, a single flower.

A crimson red spider lily.

'Why have you inflicted such a trial upon a mere human?'

Beneath the bare valley of a desert where nothing remained except a single cluster amaryllis.

The old man was drying up.

'Will the day come when I tire of this love?'

He had never once thought his love was insufficient.

After all, he had died. He was dying. He would die.

For the sole sake of that sixty-second moment conversing with her, Emit Schopenhauer could throw away everything.

'Can I continue like this forever...?'

But the old man had seen far too much to carelessly speak of eternity.

For him, the phone call with his wife was nothing less than a resurrection ritual.

Because he, as a regressor, died, his wife could come back to life. They could talk again.

In this world overflowing with countless awakening abilities, absurdly enough, resurrection and time machines were the only things that didn't exist.

The only passage was death.

For a regressor, death was the only ability that could pierce through a world marked as unbeatable.

'Has that bastard Undertaker still not given up?'

He couldn't know.

Still holding the smartphone from which the call had already ended in his left hand, Schopenhauer searched for a memo pad.

While thinking of his comrade.

'Is it the thousandth cycle? The two thousandth? Maybe it's passed three thousand. Common sense would suggest he gave up too.'

Emit Schopenhauer was afraid.

'Nine times out of ten, he must've been infected by Udumbara and released the authority of regression from his own hands.'

'Then is this world just endlessly repeating June 17th after losing all its regressors...?'

He was afraid to confirm it.

'Even in a world where that bastard existed, we ultimately couldn't find a way to save the world.'

He was afraid to face it.

'How could I possibly do anything alone in this goddamn world full of monsters?'

So he turned his back on the world.

To revive his wife, to escape the tragedy of confirming his comrade's fate, Emit Schopenhauer had imprisoned himself in an eternally repeating ten-minute world of his own making.

'If this is humanity's conclusion, then God, why did you create this world in the first place?'

Schopenhauer began making cafe au lait.

Still believing in the slim possibility that his comrade might not have given up yet, wanting to believe there was still hope for salvation in the world.

He offered the scent of coffee to death.

'Why?'

That was when it happened.

Vrrrrr.

He froze.

Schopenhauer whipped his head to look at his left hand. Then with an expression of disbelief, with gray eyes, he looked at his smartphone screen.

It was vibrating.

The smartphone. With vibration.

[Adele]

Displaying a profile picture of her smiling brightly.

"..."

Vrrrr, vrrrrr.

The smartphone's vibration didn't stop.

Having grown so accustomed for so long to only making calls, the old man who had never received one felt his hair stand on end for a moment.

'A call is coming?'

And from his wife who should already be dead, consumed by the void.

Then was this a call from the afterlife?

"..."

Should he answer? Or not?

Schopenhauer was well aware that anomalies occasionally played such tricks.

Though this was the first time such an incident had occurred during thousands of regressions, wasn't it the nature of those monsters to mock humanity with unpredictable pranks?

It might be a ploy to toy with the heart of someone who had just

been separated from their beloved.

No, it was surely a ploy.

"..."

Even so.

"...Hello?"

He had no choice but to answer.

The voice that flowed from Schopenhauer's lips was so thin it surprised even himself.

Neither the wit he had feigned for pleasant conversation nor his ingrained courage could be felt at all.

The old man's voice sounded exactly like a child who had tried to whistle and failed.

"What do you mean, dear?"

Even that voice momentarily stopped.

"Why would you suddenly call and then hang up on your own? Huh?"

It was strange.

He couldn't breathe properly.

"If you're going to blurt out things you've never said in your entire life and then suddenly hang up like that, shouldn't I be worried?"

"..."

"Listen, you're not trying to kill yourself right now, are you?"

At that question, Schopenhauer's voice barely regained its breath.

"No. No, it's not that."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Well..."

Both Emit and Adele, when they were much younger than now, in a past when the two didn't know each other, had each separately attempted suicide.

It wasn't particularly unusual. In his view, the universal language of all nations wasn't music, but suicide: that is, the soundless scream.

"No."

So when Schopenhauer was exposed to his wife's intuition, he had no choice but to look at himself.

'Am I really trying to commit suicide...?'

She was right.

"..."

He had died. He was dying. He would die.

The person closest to that story should be her, yet somehow it felt impossibly difficult to tell her this story.

Something boiled in the middle of his throat.

What remained in his heart, the residual heat of life that even he hadn't thought would remain to this extent.

"Where are you right now?"

His beloved had ears that could hear soundless screams.

"Right now, I'm in Busan."

"Busan? Wait. That's really far. Hang on."

"No, you have that academic conference, you said you had to attend. Is Seoul okay right now?"

"I don't know. Something big seems to have happened, but what do I care? Do I need a train ticket to get there? Or should I get a plane ticket? Where exactly in Busan are you?"

Schopenhauer was afraid.

Was this a dream?

He had often thought about it for a long time.

He and his wife had never actually come to Korea. They were in their German home.

He had woken up a bit late and came out to the living room, and what do you know, his wife who was supposed to be on a business trip to Korea was sitting right there in the living room eating breakfast.

"Adele, why are you here? Didn't you go to Korea?" he would ask.

"No, I missed the flight. I'm just going to go in a few days," she would say.

Then he would cry and embrace his wife. Thank goodness, Adele. Thank goodness. Thank goodness you didn't go there..

Such thoughts. Bone-deep delusions.

When that imagination returned to reality, Schopenhauer could barely continue speaking.

He should tell her she was a monster, coldly hang up the phone.

But he couldn't bring himself to end the call.

"Be careful coming."

That was all he could manage to say.

"Be careful on the road, and there will be a lot of strange things happening. Don't help other people, just come straight to me. Got it?"

"Okay. See you in a bit."

Click.

The call ended.

"..."

The time had come.

Now the moment to die had arrived.

14:09:45.

A clock that only repeated the past. The baroque spiral that had whispered someone's epilogue forever was slowly approaching the Maginot Line.

To add even a bit of human warmth to that endlessly repeating spiral was the cafe au lait on the table in front of him.

14:09:55.

It was time to die soon.

Undertaker. If that fellow regressor hadn't given up yet, he could finish the tutorial dungeon in ten minutes and arrive here.

The moment that would determine whether there was one regressor remaining in this world or still two was ticking closer.

"..."

The future.

"..."

With these old hands that held nothing but this mobile phone.

He had to decide the future.

'Do I have the right to do so?'

It was a question he had already passed.

'Do I have the power to do so?'

Again, a question he had already passed.

'Do I want to?'

Who did he want to wait for?

"..."

Schopenhauer waited for Adele.

She said she would come.

She was coming, and she would come.

'Ah.'

Because he could wait for one person, Schopenhauer could finally accept time.

'Was I still alive, even now?'

Tick.

14:10:00.

The cafe door opened.

It was a familiar man's shadow.

"..."

"..."

He had become a bit more dependable than Schopenhauer's memories, a bit more solid. For reasons unknown, he also seemed a bit more relaxed.

He had thought such a day might come someday, but now that he faced this day, his mouth wouldn't quite open.

Perhaps it was the same for the man.

The man didn't offer any greeting. He simply pulled out a barista apron from behind the counter seat, put it on, and began making coffee.

Skilled hand movements.

The way he separately heated the milk, his skill in handling the tools, was extraordinary. At least the him that Schopenhauer remembered hadn't been this skilled as a barista.

Thunk.

The man placed a cup of coffee on his table.

It was cafe au lait.

"Please drink, old man."

German.

"..."

The person he had always had to initiate Korean conversations with was now speaking to him in German with pronunciation indistinguishable from a native speaker.

Time had no form. Yet time was someone's barista outfit, German pronunciation, and the aroma of a cup of cafe au lait.

Time had no form, yet it flowed while embracing all clothes, voices, and scents.

Old Man Scho took a sip of the cafe au lait containing time.

"Ha."

Laughter came out.

The man was also smiling.

"How is it?"

"Fuck me, it's damn delicious."

"I thought so."

Listening to the laughter flowing like background music in the shop, Schopenhauer once again savored time.

It was delicious coffee.

Footnotes:

Chapter 423

The One Who Was a Skeptic

Sinnoa

There was a person named Yu Yeong-hee.

She was a philosophy professor, or rather, she had worked hard to secure a full professorship in the philosophy department, but ended up as an ordinary person who never ascended to that throne even as she became an old woman.

That ordinary person was called a part-time lecturer.

The failure of this arduous journey proved the fact that reality and games are different.

Looking at her background, she had followed the tech tree of university in Seoul, graduate school at Seoul National University for her master's, and graduating top of her class with a doctorate from a prestigious German university.

If this were a game, she would have been treated as a great scholar who steadily leveled up, but for some reason, in the land of games that was South Korea, she had to face the cold assessment of "Oh my, your tech tree is all over the place? Looks like a ruined character?"

Professor Yu Yeong-hee, a philosopher whose papers were actually cited more frequently abroad than domestically, had no choice but to be repeatedly frustrated in the competition for full professorships, losing to characters who had taken the clean tech tree of Seoul National University, Seoul National University, Seoul National University.

"So this paper is really going to be a huge hit, I'm telling you!"

Even past the age of sixty, Yu Yeong-hee's passion for academics had not dimmed, and one of her life's pleasures was occasionally

meeting with friends to chat about philosophy.

"Nietzsche originally wanted to write about Kant for his doctoral thesis. Ultimately, the series of flows from Kant to Schopenhauer, from Schopenhauer to Nietzsche, completed a distinctive metaphysics."

"..."

"Eternal recurrence isn't an idea that just popped out of nowhere, it's a metaphysical conclusion that necessarily derives from accepting Kant's premises. This paper will be a masterpiece that clearly points out this flow that has been far too neglected until now. You know? The world is repeating itself."

Yu Yeong-hee's close friend, an academic colleague who had likewise spent her entire life rotating through part-time lecturer positions, fell silent.

And she set down her friend's masterpiece, that is, the epoch-making paper that was supposed to turn the philosophy world upside down.

"Yeong-hee."

"Yeah?"

"This is the paper you wrote when you got your doctorate."

Sixty-three years old.

Yu Yeong-hee had dementia.

Time passed.

Curiously enough, only part-time lecturer Yu Yeong-hee's time gradually stagnated.

No one, that is, about 99.99 percent of humanity, had any interest in what kind of life this ordinary person named Yu Yeong-hee had lived or what kind of academics she had devoted herself to.

"Hey you fucking bastard! You do it!"

"Aaaaah! Aaaaah!"

Therefore, it was statistically natural that her son and daughter-in-law also belonged to that 99.99 percent.

'The kids are fighting again.'

As her dementia worsened, Yeong-hee stopped receiving even part-time lecturer work.

Originally from a family with nothing, with nothing to their name, yet thanks to her shining talent and the nation's support, she had become reborn as a scholar.

It was an achievement that could barely be accomplished even if a person bet their entire life and all their fortune. Therefore, Yeong-hee had devoted everything to academics.

In return, she had no money.

"What am I supposed to do! Huh?! What do you want me to doooo!"

"Aaaaaaaah!"

What little money she had saved was rapidly depleted.

The son who was supposedly taking care of her wasn't even her blood relation. He was an orphan she had adopted before divorcing some man back when she was younger than now.

'Noisy. My ears hurt.'

Yeong-hee stared blankly at her son over there, screaming and shouting at his spouse, hitting and being hit back.

In that face, she also tried to trace the features of the person who had once been her husband, Jo Yeong-su, who might be anywhere now.

The features wouldn't quite come together. They didn't resemble

each other at all in the first place.

'It would be nice if they didn't fight. It's too noisy, I can't read my books.'

Yeong-hee grumbled.

'No, but then again, children are supposed to grow while fighting. The more they do that, the more I need to hold the center of the household properly.'

Heave-ho, Yeong-hee stood up. Then she pulled out a suit from the wardrobe and dressed herself smartly.

When she came out to the living room, her son, already exhausted from the marital fight, looked at her.

"What? Mom, what's with you again?"

"Huh?"

"Why are you wearing weird clothes again?"

Yeong-hee blinked. She was a bit flustered.

"I have to go to work. I have a lecture today."

"No, what lecture?! Mom, you got fired! Four years ago already!"

"Fired? Who got fired? I have a Kant lecture today. It's right before midterms, so I need to give the kids some hints about the exam questions."

"Aaaaaaaah! Get out! Get ouuuut!"

Well, I mean, if I tell you to leave, you should leave, what a sight.

Yeong-hee felt so exasperated she wanted to give her son an earful, but strangely she didn't have the energy for it. She just sighed and quickly left for work.

While waiting for the green village bus on the hillside neighborhood, Yeong-hee suddenly looked up at the blue sky.

'Where was I trying to go? Ah, school.'

Yeong-hee quickly returned home. Because to go to elementary school, she absolutely had to ride her bicycle.

'I could walk but that would take two whole hours!'

Yeong-hee loved her grandfather. She felt that grandfather loved her too. That's probably why he had given her a bicycle, a pretty red bicycle, which he never bought for any of her other siblings.

"Huh? Where's my bicycle?"

Yeong-hee was slightly flustered. The bicycle should have been parked in the house yard, but no matter how much she searched, she couldn't see it.

"Sniff."

She felt sad.

Yeong-hee dearly loved the grassy scent that suddenly came on the wind when she rode her bicycle across the summer dirt roads, that damp grassy smell.

"Why isn't it here? Did grandpa take it? Why isn't it heeere..."

Just then, she heard a voice from behind.

"Grandmother."

"Yes?"

"What are you doing there?"

When she turned around, her granddaughter was staring at her from the boundary of the front gate.

Her pretty granddaughter. The most beautiful child in the world. The person who felt most like family even though they didn't share blood.

"Oh my, Ji-won!"

"Yes, grandmother."

Her granddaughter, Yu Ji-won, bowed her head politely.

"It's hot out. What are you doing outside instead of staying inside?"

"I was looking for your little sister!"

"Pardon?"

Ji-won tilted her head.

"My little sister, you mean?"

"Yes!"

"Excuse me, but grandmother, I don't have a little sister. My parents have only one child, which is me."

"No, you do!"

Yeong-hee's voice rose without thinking. Goodness. No little sister. Her granddaughter was truly truly kind, but sometimes she said scary things.

"There's So-won. So-won. Yu So-won. Your little sister. She can't even walk properly yet!"

"..."

"Our So-won hasn't been around lately. Oh my, your father must have abandoned her. Right? What should we do? Your father and mother must have abandoned So-won. What should we do, Ji-won..."

Yu Ji-won's face as she looked at her grandmother was expressionless. Always.

She examined Yeong-hee with eyes devoid of emotion.

"That's a nice suit."

"Hm?"

"My grandmother is quite stylish. Are you going to give a lecture at the university?"

"Ah, a lecture! That's right! I have a lecture today!"

"Oh dear. It's gotten quite late. At this rate, you'll be tardy. I'll escort you, so please follow me."

"Okay!"

Yeong-hee took her granddaughter's hand and crossed through the front gate, humming cheerfully. She wanted to skip a little, but her body wasn't cooperating today, so she just hummed with her mouth.

The school was right around the corner. Really in the blink of an eye, having crossed just one alley, she arrived at the lecture hall.

Even so, wasn't this a bit too fast? Yeong-hee tilted her head slightly in puzzlement.

"Is this the school, Ji-won?"

"Yes. A school is a place where there are people seeking learning and people imparting learning. Therefore, this place is a more excellent school than anywhere else."

"Ooh."

My goodness! How can our granddaughter be so smart!

Who did she take after? Her father was smart when he was young, but he drinks too much. Her mother's a gambling addict too. Hmm, she must take after me.

What was that called again? Ah, atavism!

"Atavism!"[1]

"Yes, I'm originally rather intelligent."

"Hehe."

"Mr. Matiz, are you there?"

Knock knock.

Ji-won knocked on the door of the lecture hall. Soon after, a shabby door opened.

"Oh, Ji-won. And, um."

Inside the lecture hall stood a solid-looking man. Was he a student? A teaching assistant?

These days at universities, teaching assistants changed so frequently it was hard to remember faces. In the old days, there were many young people who dug deep into their studies for five or six years.

Ji-won went to the man and whispered.

"I'm sorry. I'll ask this of you again today."

"No, what's there to be sorry about? I like studying with grandmother too. Honestly, she's incredibly smart."

"Yes, though unfortunately other people don't seem to recognize that fact."

"?"

Yeong-hee, standing one step away from her granddaughter and the man's whispering, just tilted her head back and forth.

She was about to feel left out since it seemed like she was being excluded, when the man spoke to her very politely.

"Professor."

"Yes?"

"Please wait just a moment. The classroom preparation isn't quite finished yet. I'm sorry it's hot, but if you wait just two minutes, I, your teaching assistant, will get it cleaned up nicely."

"Hm? Ah, yes. Alright, please do."

A moment later.

"Please come in, professor."

The lecture hall definitely had a table and chairs. There was even a plastic whiteboard.

‘Huh, but isn't it a bit small?’

"Did the size of the classroom ever matter for learning, grandmother? Weren't philosophers originally people who couldn't afford to rent space and taught while wandering building corridors?"

"...!"

‘That's true!’

Thinking about it that way, Yeong-hee actually got excited. It felt exactly like returning to those days when, even without money, they would gather in one corner of the campus and discuss academics endlessly for four or five hours.

‘No, it was those days.’

"So, from Schopenhauer's perspective, this thing called time has no beginning. No starting point. It's like reading a book, you know? You can read a book from the beginning or just randomly flip to the middle, right? For Schopenhauer, time is like that."

"Oh."

"This is also discussed in Kant's philosophy. Human intellect cannot determine whether time has a beginning or not. But Nietzsche is different! From Nietzsche's perspective, within the limits of human intellect, the only diagram of time we can imagine is circular! It's cyclical. Repetition. That's why it's eternal recurrence."

Her granddaughter Ji-won and the male teaching assistant listened very diligently to her class.

Sometimes they debated. Sometimes they argued heatedly.

Yeong-hee occasionally got confused about where she was, but strangely enough, when discussing academics, her mind became bright and clear.

She was happy.

"I'm learning so much from you, professor."

"Hehe."

Yeong-hee also liked the man before her.

His name, for some reason, she couldn't remember. But then, she had never been good at remembering people's names since she was young.

"You're as wonderful as our Yeong-su."

"Yeong-su?"

"Yes, Yeong-su. My husband."

College student Yu Yeong-hee smiled gently, intoxicated with happiness.

"I smoke cigarettes, you see. But I deliberately didn't carry a lighter around."

"Why not?"

"So my husband would light it for me without being asked. I'd pretend not to notice, like oh? I didn't bring my lighter? Then Yeong-su-ssi would come over and quietly light it for me. I strangely really liked that."

"..."

"But I quit smoking after we adopted a child. You don't smoke, do you?"

"No, I don't smoke."

"That's good! Cigarettes are really bad for you. I was a chain smoker

myself, but smoking makes your head all foggy, you know."

Yeong-hee giggled.

"Mr. Yeong-su must be busy these days, he hasn't been coming home at all. I'm worried. That person has perseverance but no business sense, so if I leave him alone, he's destined to starve to death..."

"Grandmother."

Ji-won took her grandmother's hand.

"Yes?"

"It's time to leave work now."

"Oh my? Look at me. I must have made the class too long! But you know, classes that are exactly three hours long have no warmth. If you have something to say, you should keep going for five or six hours. That's the spirit of academics."

"Ahaha."

The man laughed.

"Please come again, professor."

"Yes! See you next time!"

A few days later.

Her son and daughter-in-law.

The father and mother were nowhere to be seen.

"?"

Yeong-hee tilted her head back and forth and asked her granddaughter if she knew where her father and mother had gone.

Then Ji-won answered calmly.

"They went to Japan for missionary work."

"Oh, did they?"

"Yes. They said they finally got work from the church and left quickly. Mother went with him too. They're keeping in touch by phone occasionally, so don't worry, grandmother."

"Oh my. But they should at least tell me before they go. No wait, when you're young, you're supposed to travel abroad and such. That's good. That's really good."

It really was so good!

She had been quite worried lately because her son and daughter-in-law had been fighting so much inside the house. She was afraid they might end up divorcing like she did.

A stable income leads to a stable mind. If they got work and their wallets became full, the fights would decrease too.

"Hmm hmm."

Feeling so good, Yeong-hee wore jeans for the first time in a while.

Until recently, the jeans hadn't fit well because she had gained some weight. But not this time. She successfully put on the pants cleanly.

'That's right, it's me!'

Today was the day she had a date with Yeong-su-ssi, so she paid special attention to her outfit.

When she looked in the mirror, instead of the weight she had gained, only a gaunt body was reflected. It seemed there was no need to diet.

'Cigarettes... huh, where are the cigarettes?'

She searched for a long time and turned the wardrobe inside out, but couldn't find a single pack of cigarettes.

A poor college student. Still, from Yeong-hee's perspective, having invested her romance in a pack of cigarettes, she felt slightly anxious.

'Ah, but I'll be late for the appointment! I'll buy cigarettes later. I need to leave quickly!'

She rushed to leave, but Yeong-hee tripped over the junk from the wardrobe she had turned inside out and fell.

"Ow!"

It hurt.

Still, Yeong-hee resolutely stood up. Actually, today she had a feeling, or rather a certain conviction, that Mr. Yeong-su was going to propose to her.

'For the past few months, he hasn't been spending money on dates. That man. He's got something up his sleeve. Why is he saving money?'

Hehe, Yeong-hee laughed. Even though her fallen knee hurt so much, she was happy.

'Should I play hard to get?'

No matter how poor, she was an intellectual. Wouldn't turning him down once be the proper role-play?

'But what do I do! If he really proposes, I think I'll cry.'

Tears actually came out. Yeong-hee had difficulty distinguishing whether the tears came from her knee hurting or from happiness.

Whimpering, crawling on all fours, Yeong-hee finally made it out of the house.

Today. It had to be today. There was a reason she absolutely had to go out today.

"Ah."

That reason was right now walking down the neighborhood alley, the gray asphalt road crumbled by the traces of time.

"So-won!"

"..."

Pause.

The woman who had been walking demurely down the alley stopped.

The woman turned to look at Yeong-hee. Surprise spread across her beautiful face.

Regardless, Yeong-hee brushed off her knees and quickly ran over to tightly hug her second granddaughter.

"Oh my, So-won! You were alive. Right? You were alive."

"..."

"I, right? I thought your father and mother had abandoned you! Right? You were such a well-behaved child. You were so kind... You suddenly disappeared, you know? How worried I was."

"..."

Hesitantly.

The woman carefully hugged Yeong-hee.

And stroked her grandmother's shoulder with her cheek.

"I'm sorry, grandmother."

"Hm? Sorry for what?"

"For not visiting you often."

"Oh my. As long as you're alive! As long as you're alive, that's enough, child. Our So-won. How did you grow up to be so pretty? Hmm?"

"..."

"Such a pretty child. A beautiful child... What right do they have to make your life so hard? Why torment a child, torment her. Wicked people."

Stroke.

The woman, Yu So-won, Yeong-hee's second granddaughter, stroked her grandmother's back with slender hands even more slender than the grandmother's.

That touch was good. It was gentle. Yeong-hee smiled broadly. Her mom and dad always scolded her for crying and then laughing, but she seemed to do that every day these days.

"Grandmother, where were you going?"

"Hm? Me? Work! Going to school to give a lecture!"

"Oh my. That's right. Grandmother, you were a very famous scholar. If it's not rude, may I come along too?"

"Yes!"

Yeong-hee took her granddaughter's hand and cheerfully went to work. The granddaughter she thought she would never see again had grown up so beautifully!

She was truly happy.

"It's me."

"Yes, please come... Huh? Professor?"

"I'd like to audit today too."

"..."

"She's also my grandmother, you see."

The man looked at Yu So-yeon.

'Oh my.'

It was just a brief exchange of glances, but Yeong-hee, who had embodied the three sacred treasures of dating experience, marriage experience, and divorce experience, could sense it in that moment.

'What do I do?! Our So-won likes that teaching assistant!'

It was quite troublesome.

'Ji-won likes him too! Yeong-su! What should I do about this?!'

Sisters attracted to the same man. This was practically an old drama she had only heard about in rumors.

She even felt a vague sense of betrayal. She had thought he was just a kind teaching assistant, a young person with an academic passion unlike today's youth.

This backstabbing!

Yeong-hee's expression suddenly became stern as she stared at the man.

"Hmm..."

"?"

"You. I'll be watching."

"???"

Of course, they couldn't talk for long.

Yeong-hee was a part-time lecturer. She had work to do, and she had to proceed with the class quickly.

It sounded truly ridiculous, but…

"So, if the world is repeating itself, that ancient debate, that is, the question of whether humans have free will or are mechanistically determined, is instantly resolved!"

"Wow."

"Because if I perform some action now, and the world repeats, what we've thought of as the horizon of the past is actually also the future. Our present determines the future, and furthermore, even the past!"

"..."

"Why is all of human life determined materially? And yet why do humans still feel their actions are free? This contradiction that seemed utterly irreconcilable is solved quite cleanly just by presupposing the repetition of time!"

For the first time, Yeong-hee liked her profession, that is, the title of part-time lecturer.

For some reason, lecturing about time with one man and one granddaughter before her made her feel that way.

"Determinism and free will theory actually coexisted all along. Nietzsche knew this. Then there's one remaining problem. If you determine your entire life yourself, if the present, future, and even the past are all being determined and determining at this very moment... will you accept such a life, or not?"

From some point on, Yu Yeong-hee's time had been stagnant.

But mysteriously, when looking at that man, and from the moment she reunited with her granddaughter today, she felt time flowing.

"Hehe."

She…

Yeong-hee loved Yeong-su.

She loved Ji-won and So-won.

There was much sadness, but much love too.

The girl was truly happy.

Footnotes:

1 - Atavism is the reappearance of a lost ancestral trait in an organism, like a human baby born with a tail or a horse with extra toes, due to the reactivation of dormant genes from distant ancestors, offering evidence of evolution.

Chapter 424

The One Who Was a Returnee

Sinnoa

There was a man called Hong Bi-cheong.

Hong Bi-cheong was an islander born in Ulleungdo.

Even on the island, his family was particularly poor, so from childhood, Bi-cheong's stomach was often empty.

Growing accustomed to dyeing his hungry stomach with the blue of the sky and the blue of the sea seemed like an inevitable fate for Bi-cheong.

'Is there any meaning to my being born?'

A martial arts novel he stumbled upon by chance gave young Bi-cheong a temporary signpost in life.

'Murim! Chivalry! That's right! Isn't this the very value a man should pursue after being born into this world!'

It was hard to see it as the correct meaning of life.

But to a child in the first place, especially to someone like Bi-cheong who suffered from hunger-induced blueness like a chronic illness, whether meaning was right or wrong didn't matter.

'A single sword! In this age of chaos, the only thing a great man like me can rely on is the sword!'

Every so often, there were those who felt the world around them like a vast ocean from the moment they were born.

They had to grab onto anything within reach, whether it was a ferryboat or a piece of driftwood. Otherwise, as humans who didn't know how to breathe underwater, they would only drown.

"Wait, Cheong-ah. What are you doing holding that staff?"

"Martial arts training! I'm going to become the greatest master under heaven, Mother!"

"Has he gone mad...?"

From birth, Bi-cheong was a castaway, and what he held in his hands was a wooden sword.

No, it was a stick too crude to even call a wooden sword. But young Bi-cheong roamed the mountains daily, training his eye to recognize which random piece of wood was the 'greatest sword under heaven.'

"Cheong-ah, did you finish your homework before doing this nonsense?"

"I'm on the verge of entering the pinnacle realm! Mother! Only by breaking through this barrier can I finally stand tall as a swordsman in Murim!"

"Oh my, our family has been cursed..."

Actually, Bi-cheong's mother's words were wrong. The family had been poor from the start, and there wasn't even room for more curses to creep in.

"I thought he'd do this for about two weeks then quit, but it's already been six years. Six years. He's insane."

"Since he likes swords so much, shouldn't we send him to a kendo dojo or something?"

"I wonder if there even is a kendo dojo in town..."

His mother struggled and struggled to find someone to bring in. There was no place nearby that hung up signs for Haedong Kendo or Daehan Kendo to do business, but there was an old man who supposedly learned the way under someone in his youth.

"What do you think, child? How about learning the sword properly from him?"

"Hmm."

Slide.

Young Bi-cheong examined the 'master' candidate his mother had brought. His gaze was extremely arrogant.

"About that level, I suppose..."

"?"

Bi-cheong's age was thirteen.

It was his second year of middle school.

"A small fry who barely touched first-rate, if that. He's someone who should be learning the sword from me instead. Hmm, not particularly to my liking. But since Mother worked hard to bring him, I suppose I'll take him as my disciple."

"??"

That day, the instructor with certification on Ulleungdo cursed furiously about what kind of mother and son these people were and left.

"You little brat! Living like that, what are you going to eat when you grow up! Huh?!"

"Mother. Making a living is important."

Bi-cheong spoke gravely.

"But soon an unprecedented age of chaos will descend upon the world! Now is the time when martial heroes must each build up their strength in preparation."

"What are you building up on this tiny island?"

"The Heavenly Demon of the chaotic age fears water. Like the Mongols of long ago, powerful on land but uncomfortable crossing seawater. This Ulleungdo is a natural fortress. The final bastion

where the Dragon King of the East Sea resides, which even the Heavenly Demon dares not covet."

"Oh god! Damn it! I should just die! Oh! Heavenly Lord! Please just don't let that child starve to death!"

Not long after, Bi-cheong lost his mother.

It was difficult to scientifically determine how much influence Bi-cheong's insane existence had on his mother's lifespan.

Neither Bi-cheong nor his mother herself could know that the scientific cause of her death was lymphoma.

"Mother!"

Bi-cheong's tears scattered dramatically.

"I'm sorry for being such an unfilial son who couldn't serve you devotedly! Please watch over me from beyond the heavens! The filial piety I couldn't give to Mother, I will someday repay to the world through chivalry!"

For a mother who had already married into a poor island family, lost her husband to become fish food, and raised her child alone, this would be maddening, but unfortunately, the dead have no mouths.

Bi-cheong devoted himself to training.

"Dad, what's that person doing over there?"

"Shh. That's our neighborhood's famous lunatic. You must never acknowledge him."

Training!

"Why does that man always work out with weird Chinese songs playing on the radio?"

"You don't even know 'Men Should Self-Strengthen' (男兒當自強)? Haven't you seen the Wong Fei-hung movies?"

"What's that, you nerd."

"Wow. This is seriously not my fault."

Only training!

"I have no idea how that man stays alive without working."

"I observed him carefully for a whole day last time. You know the vegetable garden in his yard? He grows stuff there and strangely, the vegetables look really good."

"Does he have a talent for farming...?"

"So what. He only grows enough for himself."

One day, Bi-cheong met an immortal-like old man in his dreams.

—I am the 260th Sect Leader of Mount Hua Sect.

—I believed there was talent in the East capable of continuing Mount Hua's lineage, and now I see it is indeed you.

—I shall pass on to you the true teachings of Mount Hua!

Gasp.

Bi-cheong jumped up in shock. His whole body was drenched and his hair stood on end.

After a long while, he lamented.

"Huh! What a fateful encounter!"

In a word, it was a pipe dream.

After finishing his ritual cleansing (he had to walk quite a bit since the public bathhouse was in town), Bi-cheong bowed nine times toward Mount Hua in the west.

From that day on, whenever Bi-cheong dreamed, he continued his training within Mount Hua Sect.

"I merely thought it sufficient to wield a sword as one great man. But now that I've inherited the sect's lineage, I can't help but call myself 'this seat'!"

"Hey, what's that old man saying again?"

"I don't know. Just quietly pass by..."

Bi-cheong.

As time passed, he became a man who would buy a noble title from the Sirland Duchy and claim to be nobility.

He had never once been respected by another person. It was natural.

Bi-cheong was poor. He was strange. In the Korean Peninsula to begin with, the very mindset of dedicating one's life to the 'sword' was as alien as seeing an extraterrestrial.

"Hmm."

And then the Void arrived.

"So it begins."

Ulleungdo trembled in fear.

Thanks to the barrier called the East Sea, Ulleungdo's chaos was somewhat orderly. It didn't seem likely that the mayhem happening on the mainland would easily cross the sea.

Bi-cheong, now the Sword Marquess, seemed to be three or four steps removed from the anxiety that had swallowed the island.

"It's about time to leave my hermitage."

His eyes gleamed sharply.

"Eh? What, where are you going?"

"Murim."

"Crazy bastard. Do you know what kind of chaos is happening on the mainland right now? If you go, you'll die. People are dying in droves!"

"Murim."

"..."

"Only the rivers and lakes of Murim."

"Fuck."

The captain of the shabby boat cursed. He vowed to treat the customer before him not as a human but as a living piggy bank that had promptly paid thirty million won in full for the boat fare.

"I'm only taking you because I have relatives I have to pick up from the East Sea. Got it? I have absolutely no intention of docking anywhere else, so get lost on your own."

"That will suffice."

"Crazy old man. What shit luck..."

Creak, the waves rolled.

Let's pull in a different story for a moment.

The fate waiting for the Sword Marquess after coming to the mainland would generally be something like this.

—Oh my, lord Sword Marquess! We've been waiting! Please let us serve you, come this way!

The Undertaker waiting at the East Sea port would prostrate himself before the Sword Marquess and take him to Busan in the blink of an eye.

—Hmm. The ability to grow crops? After seeing nothing but people spouting nonsense all the time, seeing something like this is actually refreshing...

—I look forward to working with you in the future, elder...

A national-level dictator would respectfully address this shabby old man as 'elder' and treat him well.

—Ah. Found you, Grandpa!

—Hm? You know me?

—Of course. I know you well! I'm Oh Dok-seo, and there's a flower you need to grow, Grandpa! It's called the Udumbara, and you're the only one in this world who can mass-produce it! Come quickly, quickly!

—Now wait. This one has things to do...

—Ah, damn! Without Grandpa, the world will end!

Some girl wearing a hat would pretend to be close, hook her arm around the Sword Marquess's side, and drag him off somewhere like a kidnapping.

Truly strange fates.

Befitting the Sword Marquess, who had been evaluated as an eccentric by the world his entire life, the story destined for him was also quite peculiar.

But today, the Sword Marquess escaped that fate.

No, actually, regardless of what fate he was invited to, the final destination the Sword Marquess's blade aimed for existed separately.

When the world had perished after time passed.

Whether that destruction was the 100th, the 1,000th, or the 2,000th, it had absolutely nothing to do with the Sword Marquess.

"Hmm."

Busan, where the final defense line had been annihilated.

The puppet army commanded by Ha-yul had been destroyed without a single body remaining. The witches of Samcheon World could no longer soar, and the warriors of Baekwha Girls' High could no longer advance.

The command staff including the Undertaker had also been killed in action.

Now on the earth, there remained only the flower garden bloomed by the Saintess of the North. The largest garden in the world.

This was the world of the epilogue.

The land of destruction where time no longer flowed.

"At last, the time has come."

Right there, the Sword Marquess walked.

The Sword Marquess, holding a fake sword made of aluminum, crossed the battlefield alone.

—Uuuuurgh, ugh.

—Hee hee hee hee hee.

In the epilogue world, only beings with frozen time were crying and giggling with abandon.

Strangely, they didn't rush at the Sword Marquess when they saw him.

Though they should have been the ones who hated and envied living life more than anyone, they passed by as if they couldn't perceive the Sword Marquess at all.

After trampling the earth with the old man's worn weight, the Sword Marquess finally reached the great enemy he had targeted.

The prey he had aimed for from the start.

For decades, since he realized this world was an age of chaos, the

opponent he had constantly marked with his blade was only one.

"Heavenly Demon."

"..."

Thud.

The being summoned by the Sword Marquess's voice turned around. Beautiful pink hair fluttered.

"This one has been waiting for you."

"..."

Glance.

The one called Heavenly Demon looked down at the old man's feet.

The footsteps continued from Busan's Tower of Babel. At each and every one of those footprints, silver-colored grass that had never existed on earth before had been crushed.

"...Stealth grass."

The being with pink hair murmured.

"Grass that vanishes from not only human perception but also from anomalies' recognition. A poisonous plant that even Ms. Ye-ji's Clairvoyance can't detect."

"You knew I would come."

"Yes. Because you almost always do."

"How cunning indeed."

In the middle of the battlefield.

On this land where destruction had already been confirmed, without anyone watching, two beings faced each other.

"Normally I'd play along appropriately, but today I'm also a bit

serious, so I have no choice but to ask seriously."

"Good. I permit your question."

"Why do you call me Heavenly Demon?"

The Sword Marquess snorted.

"This heaven. As the demon who corrupted the human heart, all of it originated from you, so how could I not call you Heavenly Demon?"

"..."

"Buddha refers to one who attains enlightenment and exists on their own. Buddha refers to one who is not bound by the wheel of time but raises time itself. Heavenly Demon, Demon King. Mara Papiyasas was originally a phantom of time that tempted Buddha trying to escape from time, so it is the name most fitting to call only you in this world."

"Ahaha..."

The Heavenly Demon laughed softly.

"You knew I refrain from crossing the sea, so you deliberately stayed in Ulleungdo."

"That is correct."

"Though not as much as guns, swords are also weapons that anomalies like to inhabit. Therefore, a fake sword, not a real one. Something both humans and anomalies can't help but look down on as your weapon."

"Precisely so."

"In the end, aura is also a kind of anomaly. Therefore, you never relied on aura from the beginning."

"You know well."

"To kill me."

The Sword Marquess drew his sword.

He discarded the sheath. It had served its purpose.

"Today, here, evil shall perish."

The Heavenly Demon's eyes narrowed.

"I'm human. All humans, in fact."

"Then I must cut down a human."

"I am the enlightened one. A returnee, a Buddha."

"Then I shall cut down Buddha."

"I was your daughter."

"Then I will cut down my own child."

"I'm strong. And even if you kill me, that won't be my end. This isn't the first time we've had this conversation, is it?"

"That would be so."

"No one will acknowledge your struggle. They can't see it. They won't remember it."

"A martial hero does not seek understanding."

The Sword Marquess raised his sword.

"In heaven and earth, I alone am the honored one."

"..."

"This one is the greatest under heaven, the greatest of all ages, the Marquess protecting Yuldoguk, and the direct disciple of Mount Hua Sect's 260th Sect Leader."

The Sword Marquess stepped forward.

"And I am one human born as a mother's child."

They clashed.

The Heavenly Demon was indeed mighty. No human or demon would be sufficient to stop the Heavenly Demon.

But the bloody battle continued all day long.

Every time the Sword Marquess stepped on the ground and shed blood, flowers bloomed in those places.

Though the Saintess of the North had already made the entire world her garden, contaminating it with the Udumbara world tree, somehow, in the places touched by the Sword Marquess's footprints and blood, the Udumbara rotted and died.

Instead, plum blossoms bloomed.

The Twenty-Four Plum Blossom Sword Technique.

In the blade consisting of twenty-four forms, the Sword Marquess imbued time one by one.

One. Plum blossoms bloomed in the ditch that had been infected by Udumbara.

Two. The plum petals scattered like butterflies, dancing and spreading gradually to the surroundings.

Three. The plum blossoms covered the Udumbara with their fragrance.

Four. The petals rode the contaminated world tree from root tip to branch tip, pushing forward as if slicing living flesh with a blade to draw blood.

Five. The plum blossoms covering Busan's world tree drank the falling sunlight and shone brilliantly.

Six. The massive plum blossoms that had now replaced the world tree scattered and scattered again from the world tree's branches

cast over the earth.

Seven. The falling petals were numerous and dizzying, but it signified not the chaotic age's full bloom but the end of the chaotic age.

Eight. The petals fell like rain. Nine. The petals tore into nine streams and flowed into the entire world.

Ten. Because the life of a petal was to bloom life while killing itself.

Eleven.

A fragrance that would not disappear even after winter passed.

Twelve. And so, each time the Sword Marquess swung his sword, plum blossoms bloomed from a single ditch.

Thirteen. They spread across the earth.

Fourteen. They clustered in the sky.

Fifteen. Finally scattering across the world.

Sixteen. Forming an endless flower rain.

Seventeen. Just the shadows cast by the petals formed a green river current.

Eighteen. Beneath the flowing current, even the deepest roots of the Udumbara world tree rotted coldly.

Nineteen. The world gladly became drunk on that fragrance.

Twenty. The Sword Marquess felt the fragrance he had bloomed permeate his old bones.

Twenty-one. Finally, even the butterfly dance of the petals that had first formed the ditch subsided.

Twenty-two. The Sword Marquess felt that the blue of the waves that had dyed his heart since childhood no longer felt cold.

Twenty-three. The waves now carried the petals, rolling far, far away.

Let the blue fly. Let it fly high.

Soar into the blue.

And so.

Twenty-four.

The Flying Blue Style.

Ten Thousand Miles of Plum Blossom Fragrance.

May the fragrance of plum blossoms flow for ten thousand miles.

The beginning of that fight, the end of that fight, the multitude of people had no way to know.

No one even knew his name.

At the end of the epilogue. In formless time, he was fighting.

Though it was always a fight that ended in defeat.

In the time crumbling with the fragrance of petals, because the old man always believed in victory.

The waves carrying red flowers were no longer lonely.

Footnotes:

Chapter 425
The One Who Was an Impostor

Sinnoa

There was a person named Kurosawa Touka.

"Touka-chan! Mom's heading out!"

"..."

Sadly, the population that still called her by that name had become an endangered species, with only one person left in the entire world.

In fact, just a few months ago, that population had numbered two.

There had been a woman named Sena. Kurosawa's girlfriend.

And at the same time, the girlfriend of three other women as well.

In her bedroom, Kurosawa muttered while staring down at her smartphone.

"That beastly woman..."

No matter how much she thought about it, this was a breach of contract.

Who could have imagined that her first ever same-sex lover, her first lover period, would turn out to be not a bipedal mammal but a quadrupedal reptile?

So this is why people hate Reptilians. As a member of humanity, Kurosawa had gained a profound lesson.

"And I was the fourth one at that...!"

Even harems had limits.

Who on earth would care about the fourth heroine? If you asked Japanese people to name the fourth most popular political party in this country, they'd answer "Um, the, Communist Party?" in an uncertain voice.

Moreover, when evaluated as a heroine, Kurosawa Touka herself came with a truly splendid array of tags like #mentally-ill, #gloomy, #dark, #jealous, #shut-in, #no-friends, and so on.

She might enjoy cult popularity among the extremely small minority who were afflicted with the incurable disease of sub-heroine worship, but even with their support rallying from their own little league, her chances of winning the election converged to zero.

So Kurosawa chose the method that defeated politicians typically select.

"I'm going to become a shut-in."

Withdrawing from society.

Actually, Kurosawa had expected her choice would create social ripples. After all, wasn't she a victim of a four-way same-sex love affair who'd holed herself up in her room?

And the reaction from those around her was.

"Ah. So it's finally happened."

"?"

Kurosawa's mother accepted her daughter's shut-in declaration with a completely calm face.

"Sure. Rest up. Rest all you want. But after six months pass, you'll need to either return to school or start a part-time job."

"?"

"If you don't get a job, I'm kicking you out of the house. Touka-chan."

"??"

Not the slightest hint of panic!

It was as if, based on physiognomy, she'd determined it was her child's natural destiny to evolve into a room-dweller, as if she'd predicted this situation years ago.

That's right.

Unfortunately, for parents on the Japanese archipelago raising kids these days, shut-in NEETs were no longer an unfamiliar alien species.

The older generation that had been caught off guard and helpless against the "living like human garbage" lifestyle had lost the survival competition and devolved into extinction.

Now only parents who had learned, in a young and MZ way, how to "counter the living like human garbage lifestyle" remained.

"Touka-chan! Mom's leaving for work, so come out and say goodbye! If you don't, no meal money today!"

"I-I'll see you later."

"Yup! Starting two months from now, you'll need to get a job. Better start preparing yourself mentally."

"But Mom, you have plenty of money..."

"That's my money, not yours, isn't it?"

"..."

"The value of labor is sacred. You'll understand once you work. Oh, I'm late for my meeting. I'm off! Love you! Touka-chan!"

Smooch, after planting a kiss on her daughter's cringing cheek, her mother rushed out in a flurry.

Ugh. Left alone, Kurosawa rubbed her cheek vigorously and couldn't

help but realize.

'Mom's mental strength is way too strong...'

Today too, Kurosawa retreated dejectedly to her hideout, defeated by the combat power of a single-parent household career woman, former underground idol and current VTuber agency employee.

"Hah."

A two-and-a-half-pyeong private room.

Even the sigh she'd just exhaled had nowhere to escape and circled in the air, but Kurosawa had never once thought this room was cramped.

Was it because of her experience during high school when she'd run away from home and hung around with the Toyoko Kids members, falling asleep curled up back-to-back with each other in tiny hotel rooms?

–Anonymous: This is dangerous. The "Rumored Flower" was delivered to me too.

Or was it because whenever she turned on her smartphone, she could easily feel connected to a much wider world?

–Anonymous: Rumored Flower?

She couldn't tell which it was, but today too, Kurosawa casually took the bait on the message board.

–Anonymous: You don't know? It's a flower that gets delivered randomly anywhere via international shipping, with the sender even paying for delivery.

–Anonymous: Isn't that an urban legend? Can't trust what someone says without proof.

–Anonymous: Look, idiot.

Not long after, a photo was uploaded.

Looking at the image, Kurosawa muttered unconsciously.

"Eh? What is this flower?"

It was a red flower too beautiful to exist in reality.

Kurosawa always thought she had absolutely nothing in common with her mother except for their appearance, but there was one thing.

They shared a hobby of liking flowers and plants.

"Red spider lily... no way. A peony subspecies? No, no. It's too thin. And why is there purple mixed into the petals? Eh. This is definitely an AI photo, right?"

The opinions of the message board users were generally similar.

–Anonymous: Again... Don't you ever get tired of this?

–Anonymous: Stop forcibly importing memes popular overseas like Italian brain rot. It's neither funny nor moving.

–Anonymous: That's impossible. Yesterday a VTuber publicly said on stream they received the "Rumored Flower" too, so it's been noisy everywhere.

–Anonymous: Don't spread around what was said in a members-only stream!

–Anonymous: After animals, now plants. I laughed seeing the thought process of these idiots.

She felt slightly intrigued.

Kurosawa soon browsed various communities using search terms like "Rumored Flower" or "Udumbara."

She even logged into X for the first time in ages, having cut herself off from it completely when she broke up with her girlfriend.

"Wow. What the. It's actually famous?"

Indeed, perhaps she'd been a bit late to the news, as the "Rumored Flower" was already a hot topic everywhere.

"It doesn't seem to be AI... I think."

She murmured.

"Too many different angles for an AI photo. There are quite a few people who've shown their faces to verify it... This is really strange."

Normally, this would be the time she'd dive into the ocean of the internet and devote all her energy to slandering VTubers from rival companies to the agency her mother belonged to, her mother didn't know about this.

"But this flower is so pretty..."

For some reason, Kurosawa found herself focusing all her attention on finding information about the "Rumored Flower."

It was as if she'd been enchanted.

'There must be kids like me who are interested in this.'

She put down her smartphone and turned on her computer.

She dove a bit deeper into the information ocean. Feeling around the tip of the iceberg, she descended to its base.

A little trick she'd learned during her days as a runaway youth.

'Ah, this refreshing sensation.'

It was time to return to being Kuro, the internet detective.

How many hours passed like that?

–Anonymous: They say it's international shipping, but apparently all the sending locations are from Korea.

Found it.

–Anonymous: Korea?

Kurosawa held her breath and tapped away at her keyboard.

–Anonymous: Yeah. Busan in Korea specifically. My lover is Korean, so I asked a local to check, and they found an identical-looking flower at a flower shop somewhere in Busan.

–Anonymous: Proof photo?

–Anonymous: That's impossible. More importantly, it seems like a big-shot Korean politician is involved in this. The mayor of that city called Busan. It's shadier than I expected.

"A politician?!"

What is this? This is really an urban legend.

–Anonymous: I don't understand. Why would a Korean politician be delivering flowers to Japanese people?

–Anonymous: Agreed.

–Anonymous: Maybe it's a bioweapon terror attack or a cult or something?

–Anonymous: As far as I know, no cases of harm have been confirmed. It's too early to be certain, but I think it's safe to say there's no adverse health effects.

–Anonymous: Do you know which flower shop it is?

A slight time lag.

–Anonymous: Dang Flower Garden.

Another time lag.

–Anonymous: It's not just being shipped to Japan. America and China have it worse. Cases are being reported simultaneously all over the world.

–Anonymous: In my personal opinion, the phenomenon itself of fresh flowers spreading this quickly without going through

quarantine is strange.

–Anonymous: So my conclusion is that while they look like fresh flowers, they're actually artificial flowers.

Artificial flowers.

Even though they're this beautiful, they're fake flowers?

–Anonymous: Literally the Rumored Flower. No, the Phantom Flower Udumbara.

"..."

That was the end of her information gathering.

"Hah."

Thud. Kurosawa collapsed her upper body onto the table, powerless. The energy she'd spent investigating non-stop for hours had vanished somewhere, and a deep sense of exhaustion wrapped around her entire body.

"So they were just artificial flowers that looked like fresh ones... What a garbage ending."

So that's all it was.

A bitter smile emerged from somewhere.

'It's an ending that suits a person like me perfectly.'

She had no dreams.

Despite having a parent who'd lived harder than anyone searching for their dreams, she herself felt like the wick of a candle that had already burned out despite never having blazed.

She'd wondered if something might change if she experienced love. Thanks to that, she'd probably gained a relationship experience that would never be ordinary, but had her life changed because of it? Well.

Garbage.

'I'm hungry.'

She wanted pizza.

Recently, the genes inherited from her mother had started preparing a rebellion in her belly fat, going "Hmm, the previous owner would burn calories practicing dance and singing around this time, but the new owner doesn't?" But still, pizza was hard to resist.

She ordered Domino's Pizza with the money her mom had deposited that morning.

After a while, confirming that the delivery person's presence had faded, she opened the front door and.

"...?"

Next to the familiar pizza box, an unfamiliar box sat there alone.

"What? Mom's package?"

Can't be helped. Just as she was about to perform the ultra-premium act of filial piety of bringing her parent's package inside herself, Kurosawa's hand froze.

[Dang Flower Garden]

Because those characters were unmistakably written on the box.

"....."

Thump thump thump thump.

Her heart pounded like crazy.

She'd have to start part-time work soon, so she couldn't completely forget how to talk to people, which is why she'd deliberately cultivated a habit of talking to herself, but right now even that habit had its pause button pressed.

"Eh."

Kurosawa quickly brought the box inside as if someone might see. *Thud!* Then, belatedly realizing she'd left the actually important pizza outside, she hurried to bring in the pizza too, thud.

"Eh."

Pizza wasn't good when it got cold. Hardened pizza cheese was truly the worst crime imaginable. But was pizza important right now?

"Eh."

Kurosawa quickly grabbed scissors and carefully tore through the cardboard box with a crunching sound. Carefully, so that whatever might be inside wouldn't get damaged, with trembling hands.

"Ehhhhhhhh?!"

And she saw it.

"No way?!"

There, a single red flower.

It was modestly inserted in a transparent plastic bottle.

"No way! No way, no way! This can't be! Wow. Is this real? Is it really a fresh flower?! No, no. They said it was artificial."

She touched it.

"It's a fresh flower?!"

She smelled it.

"It smells good! Eh, amazing! What! Did they forcibly add fragrance? No, but... This can't be. I've never seen a flower with a scent like this before!"

It was a perfume crafted from seven colors, a fragrance that had once been permitted to only one person in this world.

But the current Kurosawa couldn't possibly know that.

"Woooow..."

She placed it on the table and, forgetting to eat the pizza, Kurosawa stared blankly at the Udumbara.

"So pretty..."

Why was it?

"Ah, right! A photo! I need to take a photo!"

From the moment she first encountered it in a photo on the internet today, why did her heart keep fluttering whenever she looked at this flower?

"...Huh?"

She didn't really know.

It felt like something very sad had happened.

She'd gone missing somewhere. She'd be unable to meet her beloved mother again. Forever, forever.

Unable to meet forever.

"..."

Unable to say sorry or thank you.

Even though Mom said those words to her every day.

Unable to give back anything similar.

"Um, uh... If I do this, the photo..."

No one could save her.

Even if they wanted to, it was too late.

She wanted to become someone who wasn't embarrassed to say "I love you" to her.

That feeling.

That truly strange feeling, Kurosawa Touka felt it.

"..."

She put down her smartphone.

She took one photo, but didn't brag about it anywhere. Come to think of it, all the friends she could have bragged to had disappeared anyway.

'My flower.'

Kurosawa stroked the petals.

'It doesn't even exist in the world. People call it fake, artificial. But still... this is a flower that came to me. So I can call it whatever I want, right?'

For some reason, Kurosawa felt like she knew the name of those red petals.

'Touka.'[1]

That day.

"Mom."

"Mm. I saw the pizza box, so on days when you eat such heavy food, it's better to exercise. Otherwise you'll gain weight in an instant."

"I want to return to school."

"..."

"And I'm going to study abroad in Korea."

"Eh?"

"Ah, actually I don't necessarily need to study abroad. Um, if you want to work part-time in a foreign country, exchange study is the

most convenient. Or I could just get a work visa and go, that's fine too."

"Eh?"

"There's a flower shop there that I really want to work at. I didn't know either... but if it's work related to flowers, I feel like I could really focus on it."

"Eh."

"But first I'm going to check if the flower shop I want to work at actually exists. So I bought a plane ticket to Korea. Departure in one week. Ah. My savings are really in danger now..."

"Ehh."

"If it doesn't work out, I'll just debut as an idol like Mom did when she was young. Your agency is recruiting VTubers this time, right? How about a mother-daughter VTuber? This could really work."

"Eh?"

Kurosawa Touka didn't know.

That she wasn't the only person who had found a red flower in front of their front door, there were several others as well.

One week passed.

Time moved forward.

That day, no one died from their head exploding because they foresaw a future they couldn't handle.

That day, Kurosawa Touka pulled her hood down low and boarded the plane while avoiding eye contact with the flight attendants as much as possible.

That day, the mother saw bright red petals falling in her traveling daughter's room instead of a single plum blossom blooming, and went "Huh?" tilting her head.

That day was…

June 17th.

Footnotes:

1 - The name "**Touka** (灯花)" uses characters meaning "lamp/light" and "flower," which becomes significant when she names the Udumbara after herself.

Chapter 426

The One Who Was a Reincarnator

Sinnoa

There was someone called Go Yuir.

"Wow, how can someone's name be Go Yuir!"

"?"

"Really. Don't you think Mother was too much? Naming the first child one and the second child two just because they're part of the Yu generation. Her naming sense is practically from the Joseon era. At least it's fortunate the hanja characters are different."[1]

"??"

"But I like it. My brother's name. Go Yuir (高曜日). It can be read as a quiet day, or it can be seen as a high and shining day."

The neighborhood hospital. A funeral.

Yuir, who had been silently handling his mother's funeral alone as a middle school student, was quite flustered.

"Brother...?"

"Yes."

"Uh, sorry, but noona. Anyone can see you're older than me. Aren't you a high school student?"

"Ah! Every time I hear brother call me noona, it makes me so happy. Please call me noona just ten more times from now on."

"..."

If you had to pick just one thing you shouldn't do at a funeral without hesitation, the answer should be resurrection.

However, young Yuir had just realized that 'a mourner you've never seen before claiming to be your younger sister' should also be included on that list.

"Don't be too flustered."

The person before him smiled brightly. It was a smile terribly bad for the heart.

"I'm not talking about this life. It's a connection from our past lives."

"Ah, that kind of setting?"

His mind and body quickly regained stability.

After all, anyone born in South Korea would automatically develop immunity the moment they received information that the other person was a cult member, even if they had none before.

"Ahaha. Brother's expression is amusing."

...But the other party seemed to be quite skilled.

Despite sending out a look that openly treated her like a lunatic, she didn't panic at all and sat down calmly at the funeral altar.

Even if there were no mourners right now, this was extremely rude.

"Excuse me. Sorry to say this when we've just met, but please leave now. If you don't, I'll call someone."

"Don't feel lonely because there are no mourners. One person will come in 3 minutes."

"Excuse me?"

"They're a colleague from the hospital where Mother used to work long ago. The next one will be in 16 minutes. And then in 60 minutes."

"..."

It was true.

"Oh my, Yuir. I saw you when you were just a baby, do you remember this lady?"

"Yes. Of course I remember."

"How did you grow up so properly!"

"Thank you so much for coming to visit."

"..."

What's more, the self-proclaimed younger sister who suddenly appeared naturally greeted the mourners together with him as if it were natural.

But there was something even stranger than that.

It was the fact that both Yuir himself and the mourners felt the sight of this woman bowing beside him infinitely 'natural'.

"Excuse me."

Eventually, after the promised 60 minutes had passed, Yuir had no choice but to ask carefully.

"Noona... Who exactly are you?"

"Oh dear. That's a question with so many possible answers, and yet no answer is possible."

"..."

"It's okay. We have time. No one will come to mourn until tomorrow morning."

The other party smiled gently.

"Shall we talk slowly?"

Yuir suddenly thought that smile was very beautiful.

Time was passing.

Her name was Go Yuri.

"Wow, how can someone's name be Go Yuri!"

"Mr. Undertaker, to remember the line you heard when we first met and come back later to use it as revenge, you're being too petty."

"..."

The honorifics mainly used were 'guild leader' or 'Mr. Undertaker'.

Unfortunately, the Yuir of this timeline hadn't formed a sibling alliance with his younger sister from childhood and committed all kinds of bizarre acts, so he had no immunity to otaku culture at all.

For an ordinary person, just hearing the pronunciation of 'brother' would naturally twist all the energy channels in their body as if they had encountered a spell from the Necronomicon.

For him to re-enter subculture would require time, a great deal of time ahead.

"Moreover, whether we were siblings in a past life or whatever, here you're older, aren't you? Even if you use honorifics, I should be the one using them to you..."

"Urgh."

"?"

"Ah, I'm sorry! Mr. Undertaker. I inadvertently faced the sight of Mr. Undertaker using honorifics to me with brother's face and brother's voice, and my stomach secreted spinal fluid causing a reflex reaction."

"..."

"For my mental health, could you speak casually to me? Oh. And I

won't call Mr. Undertaker by your real name whenever possible."

"Why is that?"

"Haah. Mr. Undertaker occupies a really, extremely important position in my master plan. I need to keep your real name hidden as much as possible."

"...Weird girl."

Time was passing.

"Mr. Undertaker, you can do it! Fighting!"

"Kuaaaaa."

"Even when I wasn't born as family, Mr. Undertaker was accepted into medical school. Rather, after losing me as a younger sister, a period of wandering appeared in Mr. Undertaker's timeline and you fell behind. Haah. This younger sister's heart aches... Mr. Undertaker. Please remember the academic passion of your past life, past past life."

"So you're saying it's because of you in the end! I stopped studying from sixth grade of elementary school!"

"Ahaha. That's why I'm making an after-service visit to help like this, isn't it? Come on, if you memorize just a little more, even a perfect score on the college entrance exam isn't a dream. Fighting! Fighting!"

"Give me back my life! Give it back, you culprit!"

Time was passing.

"As I mentioned before, to infiltrate Cheon Yo-hwa's cult, your college entrance exam score is very important. It's a fact no one knows, but the cult leader here has a bit of an education complex."

"...I see. So creating Baekwha Girls' High as an educational foundation wasn't simply for the cult's future. There was also a personal desire?"

"That's just how the world works."

"Huh? What? Why did you pronounce that strangely just now?"

"Geez. This is why muggles are..."

"?"

Tap tap.

– Younger sister (?) / Go Yuri: How are things these days?

– Younger sister (?) / Go Yuri: I think it's going well, but I'm a bit anxious because there's no contact. Is everything alright?

– Me: It's fine. Everything's going well.

– Younger sister (?) / Go Yuri: That's a relief then! You're so reliable as expected. I'll visit you soon.

Ding dong.

"Huhaa. Oh no, this is terrible."

"What is?"

"I just pressed the doorbell, but the button must be stuck because the bell keeps ringing!"

"No. You're a teleporter. Wouldn't it be much more convenient to just move directly into my room here instead of the neighborhood alley?"

"Hmm. I tried that before."

"You did?"

"You cried and begged me to please respect your privacy. I also saw something I really didn't want to see."

"..."

"And I don't dislike it. Walking even a little and knocking on that

person's door. It feels like I'm visiting, it's romantic."

"Romantic."

"First, let me praise you. You did very well! The work of instilling humanity in Yu Ji-won here is really difficult. Thanks to what happened this summer, later on..."

Ding dong.

"Eh?"

"Mm."

"Oh, it's Ji-won. Was today's visit scheduled?"

"Sorry, I forgot to tell you. She said she made too much food and would bring some over."

"This is terrible! If Ji-won discovers that Mr. Undertaker and I are alone together right now, she'll kill me and then the world will end!"

"No, there's no way..."

"Yap! Teleport."

"...She uses it well at times like this."

"Hmm. You were a bit slow opening the door today. Mr. Matiz. I thought I heard some conversation from inside just now, was someone here?"

Time was passing.

And.

"Oppa. Wake up. It's morning."

"...I don't know why I have to see your face right in front of me the moment I open my eyes. And I also don't know why I have to hear such a weird alarm sound."

"Oh my. Can you really afford to be so relaxed?"

"Mm?"

"Tomorrow is finally D-Day."

"...Ah."

That day was approaching.

"Yes."

Summer.

D-Day.

June 17th.

"It's regrettable, but tomorrow is the day Mr. Undertaker and I must part!"

"..."

Their time together was preparing for a funeral.

That day was full of strange things from the morning.

"You want to take the train down?"

"Yes. From now on, we might be indebted to this space hundreds, maybe thousands or tens of thousands of times. While you still haven't lost your memories, I think it would be good to take a tour in advance."

"..."

"Come on, Mr. Undertaker."

Yuri extended her hand.

"Mmm. Mr. Go Yuir."

"..."

"Let's go together."

They walked.

Throughout the walk, Yuri held his hand making him feel embarrassed, but in fact there was no reason for Yuir to be embarrassed.

No one was watching them.

No, not even the sound of a 'third party's' footsteps could be heard on the path where Yuri and Yuir were walking.

"Is this also a trick you orchestrated?"

"Yes. Only on June 16th, if I manipulate this and that, I can make the number of pedestrians on this path exactly zero."

"An amazing coincidence."

"Yes! That's why I specifically set the execution date for tomorrow. I really wanted to travel to the destination like this at least once without using teleportation."

"..."

Just like an ordinary human.

From leaving home to arriving at the station, passing through the ticket gate, boarding the train until arriving in Busan.

The two really didn't encounter anyone at all.

Although the world still needed a bit more time before its destruction, it was as if only the two of them were previewing the destruction and walking through it.

"Now that I think about it."

Busan Station waiting room.

Yuir asked her why she had orchestrated their 'first meeting' at his mother's funeral of all times.

Then Yuri gave an awkward smile.

"You were too young then, weren't you? Ah, from my perspective you're still very, very young though."

"So?"

"No matter how mature Mr. Undertaker was from childhood. The task of greeting mourners alone. That's absolutely not an easy thing for a middle school student."

"..."

"People have moments when they wish someone would be by their side. Once, long before now, Mr. Undertaker confessed that you were very lonely and had a hard time back then."

Yuir wanted to ask.

Then do you also sometimes wish someone would be by your side?

"But now you'll remember that day completely differently. Even though it's a sad day when you held Mother's funeral..."

"It's also the day I met you."

"Yes. Isn't it mysterious?"

Grin.

"The way people comfort people isn't ultimately about making sadness disappear. It's simply about adding another memory to it."

"...I see."

"Yes. I'll disappear someday, and Mr. Undertaker is also destined to lose all memories. Nevertheless, before that day arrives, I wanted to give you as many happy memories as possible. Ah."

Souvenir shop.

While looking around a shop where the owner was also 'coincidentally' away, Yuri pointed at something.

"This. The price is incredibly cheap but it's surprisingly pretty."

It was a silver bell.

Since it wasn't a recent product but was released quite a while ago, the price was cheap and there was some dust on it.

Yuri had discovered a product with exactly 2 remaining in the corner of the display.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes!"

Yuir silently picked up the product.

And after placing a ten thousand won bill on the unmanned cash register, he returned to Yuri.

She tilted her head.

"This is?"

"A gift."

"Oh my."

"Since it's the last day, it would be better to give you something more wonderful... But anyway, you've experienced all the luxuries I can't even imagine through countless reincarnations. So."

Squeeze.

While placing the silver bell in Yuri's hand, Yuir covered her hand with his palm.

"I'll give this as a relic of this place that will become our graveyard."

"..."

"According to your 'plan', someday I'll forget you."

"Yes."

"I swear here on this spot."

Casting a glance at the one remaining silver bell in the corner of the display, Yuir looked at her.

"Tomorrow. The day when everything ends and everything begins. Even if I forget you, I will definitely, no matter what happens, take that remaining half of the silver bell."

"..."

Yuri's eyebrows slid together.

"I'm sorry but that's impossible. I've become an irreplaceably precious existence to Mr. Undertaker and so the moment I disappear, Mr. Undertaker will be reborn as an unprecedented multi-awakener. It's all destined fate."

"Right. It would be impossible."

The strength in their clasped hands didn't weaken.

"So this is a kind of test."

"A test?"

"If tomorrow comes and I don't have the silver bell, then what you judged 'impossible' is truly 'impossible'. Everything will flow according to your plan. Both you and I will simply disappear leaving only traces behind."

However, Yuir said.

"If I don't forget."

"..."

"If I've forgotten you but still hold this toy that has no sparkle or nobility in my hand. Couldn't that be seen as a very small miracle?"

If such a thing happens.

"It brings hope."

"..."

"Even if it's a very small hope, it doesn't matter. I hope you'll think, even just a little bit, that something you considered impossible might perhaps be possible."

Silence continued.

Yuir let go of her hand. Left alone, Yuri's hand still held the silver bell he had given her.

"...Yes."

Squeeze.

Yuri took that shabby inventory item. That one bell remaining at this edge-of-the-earth station, unable to endure the person who would believe in it in this world.

She clasped it with both hands and held it against her heart.

"I'll believe."

It was a promise.

"I'll wait."

An oath where the hour and minute hands overlapped to become one.

"Forever."

And then emptiness arrived...

.

.

.

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.

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"I am Mister's savior."

Toward the hour and minute hands that had crossed.

"Come on, Mister!"

The second hand, always the youngest and fastest, extended its hand.

While smiling broadly.

"Now let's go save Mister's love together!"

And time arrived.

Footnotes:

1 - Sino-Korean uses 일 (il) for 1, 이 (i) for 2. In Korean culture, each same generation name has a letter assigned to it in each family, in this case “Yu”.

Chapter 427

The Savior Ω I

Sinnoa

The old Baekje Hospital. Café.

Emit Schopenhauer was in high spirits.

Partly because he'd just enjoyed a delicious cup of coffee, but more importantly, the loveliest wife in the world was approaching in real time.

"Now then, Embalmer. I simply must ask because I'm dying to know. Exactly how many cycles have you gone through?"

His voice naturally took on the color of a cheerful rhythm.

To be honest, this whole situation felt like a dream to Schopenhauer.

How could he not be happy when he'd just achieved the most important bucket list item of his life?

"Well, let's see. The cycles I actively went through myself are roughly around 2,000. But if you add them all up, it easily exceeds 3,000."

"Oh."

Schopenhauer's voice remained leisurely soaked in the melody of a happy march.

"I figured I'd gone through at least a thousand by the time I died. I suppose the density of time was somewhat different between you and me."

"That's right."

"How long did you live per cycle?"

"Hmm."

"You don't need to give me an exact number. I'm guessing you lived about five years per cycle..."

"Well, the calculation isn't too far off. About twenty years."

A pause.

"Twenty years?"

"Yes."

"..."

Schopenhauer's gaze slowly turned.

The table across from him.

There sat a man sipping his already cold café au lait. From a first-person perspective, the Undertaker. From a third-person omniscient author's viewpoint, a man called Go Yuir.

"Hmm..."

Schopenhauer set down his coffee cup.

Something trickled down the back of his neck.

A secretion commonly known as cold sweat, designed to be released from the Homo sapiens body primarily when detecting that one is utterly screwed.

"What an amusing joke. If that number were true, wouldn't that mean the equation of 3,000 cycles multiplied by 20 years holds? Haha. Roughly 60,000 years old, you say."

"Ah. It's not quite that much. I took vacations and such. The most recent 1,000 cycles or so, the world ended early. It's 50,000 years old."

"Hmm."

The cold sweat wouldn't stop.

"By the way, old man."

"Y-yes?"

"In human relationships, there must be proper courtesy. That's a fact stated in the words of Confucius, whom you loved so much."

"That's right?"

"The foundation of courtesy is showing respect to those who have gone ahead of you, and in East Asia, that respect is simply expressed through honorifics."

"...And?"

"Might I ask how old you are, old man?"

"..."

Thunk.

Go Yuir set down his porcelain cup and smiled brightly.

"Emit Schopenhauer."

"What?"

"Your tone. Don't raise your tone."

"..."

"Even if I've aged, I've lived at least fifty thousand years more than you."

"....."

"Now then. Who's the youngster here?"

Schopenhauer felt his vision grow distant.

This was a nightmare.

"Come now, swing it properly."

"Ack!"

"I don't have high expectations for you. I'm only asking that you swing the sword correctly. Weren't you supposed to be a swordsman? Are my expectations too high?"

"Ack! No, sir!"

"Your sword path is crooked. Again. You got it wrong again, so repeat it 5,000 more times."

"Son of a..."

"Son of, what? Since my colleague abandoned the world, I've aged all alone and my hearing has dulled. Speak loudly so these old ears can hear you."

"No, sir! Aaaaaah!"

People whispered as they passed through the plaza.

"Mom, what are those people doing?"

"Shh. Be quiet!"

It was still June. A time when civilization was less destroyed and more in the process of being destroyed.

There were still pedestrians walking the streets of Busan. Having to strip to the waist and drip with sweat in front of such ordinary people was killing Schopenhauer.

But the balance of the world must always be maintained.

"Tsk, tsk. Calling yourself a swordsman when you can't even use a sword properly."

Someone's death became someone else's life.

The Undertaker, swordsmanship instructor, was savoring being alive in real time.

"Huh? Like this. Huh? I said swing it like this. Ah, really. Is this difficult?"

"Fuck, it's damn difficult! You bastard! How am I supposed to catch up to a crazy person who's been swinging a sword for tens of thousands of years?!"

Schopenhauer burst out shouting. He still vividly remembered getting beaten for about five minutes after doing this earlier, but he couldn't hold it in.

The Undertaker replied indifferently.

"Then you shouldn't have kept regressing for tens of thousands of years."

"..."

"Do you know why I trained with the sword? Old man. It was all so that in the distant future, when you joined the Regression Alliance, I could personally master and pass on the strategy guide to raise you into the ultimate swordsman. With my heart for you and my faith in you alone, I picked up the sword. And you're saying this is difficult? Good grief. This is why trusting people is utterly useless. What can I do if you say you can't do it? I'll just have to break the sword, I suppose."

"You... son of a bitch..."

Schopenhauer despaired.

No matter how he rebelled, there was no way to win this war of words.

Justification, skill, logic. He was getting crushed in every aspect. There was simply no way to counter the argument of "if you don't like it, you shouldn't have regressed."

"Mister!"

A girl with red hair wearing a cap backwards came running with quick steps. It was Oh Dok-seo.

Paper cups sloshed in both of Dok-seo's hands.

"Here! I got you a caffeine booster!"

"Ah. Thanks. You're the only one I can count on, Dok-seo."

"Right? Yay!"

Clap! Dok-seo jumped and high-fived the Undertaker.

On the surface, an innocent girl.

But Schopenhauer never let his guard down.

Over the past few days, he'd painfully learned that behind that pure smile lurked a streak of madness no less than the Undertaker's.

"Actually, at this point in time, there aren't any Regression Alliance members with deep ties to Mister, right? Cheon Yo-hwa and Dang Seo-rin were originally people Mister should have saved, but I did it first. Mister must be very proud of me, but at the same time, part of your heart must feel like you've been NTR'd..."

"Exactly right."

"But don't worry! Mister! I have absolutely no intention of stealing your heroine candidates! Rather, I'll support you with all my power from the front and back so that mister can NTR me!"

"You... What taste..."

"Ehehehehe."

"Ahahaha."

Crazy bastards.

Something more flowed out from Schopenhauer's head, which already felt like it was losing its mind. Humanity. Or perhaps his soul had taken a leave of absence.

Listening to these two regressors and possessors converse in real time caused his SAN 1 value to plummet.

He'd tried to understand them, but the only truth he'd gained from that effort was that these creatures were human grimoires that drove the reader increasingly mad the more deeply one understood them.

"But how long are we going to keep training that mutt No-sc

ho? That old man washed out in the early cycles. Won't we have to invest hundreds more cycles in training if we want to use him now?"

"Well, whatever. It's no big deal."

Really crazy bastards.

Schopenhauer's hand trembled as he swung his sword.

Just one week had already brought this much suffering, and they expected him to repeat this for hundreds of cycles, averaging twenty years per cycle? Was this hell?

'These aren't humans. They're monsters wearing human skin. Only I, who maintains my humanity despite being a regressor, can be the one to subjugate them.'

"Hm? Trainee Schopenhauer. There's no focus in your sword tip. Should I take this as a declaration that you don't want to go home tonight and have dinner with Lady Adele?"

"No, siiiiir!!"

"Depending on your attitude, I can become either the King of Hell or Confucius. What kind of trainee do you want to be when you meet Lady Adele?"

"Wh-what kind of trainee?"

"Are you a No-sho Untermensch trainee who doesn't apply yourself earnestly to training? Or are you a properly squared-away

Übermensch trainee, a stalwart of regression?"

Gasp, Dok-seo, who'd been slurping her bubble tea on the side, furrowed her eyebrows.

Her straw was trembling.

"Suddenly hearing that the family of the person I saved is Untermensch drains all my strength. What should I do? I have no strength or energy. At this rate, I might just throw away all my comrades and the world and record the fact that there existed a human who regressed for 3,000 cycles and publish it in Germany. I feel like I'm about to commit the greatest sin as an author..."

Bastards.

Tears welled up in Schopenhauer's eyes.

Actually, the tears Schopenhauer shed were closer to an exaggeration.

At least from the perspective of the Undertaker and Dok-seo, the ones who'd personally bled to forge the strategy routes themselves, it was rather unsatisfactory.

Nevertheless, the reason these two invested time in the shitty game of Swordmaster Maker while indulging the complaints of "kids these days and old folks these days" was simple.

"That old man's authority isn't strictly swordsmanship. It's the ability to cut anything."

"Yeah. Right."

Strategy meeting.

Leaving the old man Scho passed out at their feet after training all day, the Undertaker and Dok-seo were already discussing the next cycle.

"So far, what No-sho can cut is at most the physical reality of the present world. But if he follows mister's training and grows..."

"Looking purely at the authority's potential, he could eventually cut even abstract concepts."

Both of them nodded simultaneously.

"Isn't that a totally broken ability?"

"It is."

This was precisely why the Undertaker had never given up on his former comrade Emit Schopenhauer until the very end.

"Without having to rely on Leviathan's aura, the old man can fight anomalies essentially as if he were an aura user who'd reached the extreme limits of aura."

"Wow. If I had that kind of ability, I'd seriously bow three times a day saying thank you, Mr. Go Yuir. What's No-sho complaining about?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"Grrrk, hrrgh, kkk..."

Occasionally Schopenhauer convulsed even while passed out, but unfortunately, there was no one here to empathize with his suffering.

It hurt because he was an awakener.

"Haah."

Around the time the old man's groans subsided, Dok-seo stretched out both legs and looked up at the night sky.

"It's like... seeing Mister in person and talking like this really feels like a dream."

"...Does it?"

"Yeah. Well, from my perspective, Mister was a character in a novel. A prophet in a book of prophecy. So naturally it feels new."

Dok-seo spoke as if it were nothing.

"It's for moments exactly like this that hundreds and thousands of versions of me died..."

"..."

"Hm? Ah. You don't need to feel sorry. I did it because I wanted to. Rather, I feel bad that I died so much that I kept forcing those twenty-year cycles on mister."

Dok-seo giggled.

"You know what? Actually, Ye-ji unni and I teamed up to secretly peek at mister from the '0th cycle' days from afar?"

"My goodness."

"Even though my schedule was so packed I barely had time for it. I just couldn't help being so curious. What kind of person could it be? What kind of face would the regressor that the past versions of 'me,' the future me, tried to save with a strategy guide written in blood have..."

The night sky that inhaled Dok-seo's breath filled with a bit more moisture, and so the starlight exhaled a slightly more faint sparkle.

The oldest secret in life.

That the twinkling of the stars and the beating of the heart sometimes matched rhythms seemed to fascinate Dok-seo.

"So what was your impression after spying?"

"Ah, that's not him."

Dok-seo turned her head to look at the Undertaker. Her red eyes were a bit intoxicated by the stars.

"The person I want to save isn't that man."

"..."

"I didn't want to save Go Yuir who lost all his memories from thousands of cycles and finally returned to being an ordinary human. I wanted to save a human who walked forward while enduring all that time."

Swoosh.

Dok-seo stroked the back of his hand.

Originally, from the Undertaker's perspective, he hadn't thought much of it.

Even within the Regression Alliance, the Brats' Axis Powers consisting of Ha-yul, Dok-seo, and Ah-ryeon enjoyed considerable freedom when it came to skinship with the Undertaker compared to other members.

After all, their romantic possibilities had broken through the zero percent barrier.

"When I entered the Busan Station waiting room and saw mister for the 'first time,' I was convinced again. Wow. A completely different being from the person I'd peeked at a few days earlier was standing there, wasn't it?"

"..."

But…

'Wait a minute?'

Thump.

The Undertaker sensed something ominous.

'Hold on. Come to think of it, the Dok-seo of the past was a trash author who only kept abandoning her work. But the one before my eyes is a legendary possessor who personally realized a miracle comparable to Go Yuir or me... isn't she?'

The Undertaker had unconsciously been treating the Dok-seo before his eyes as just Dok-seo. The rice moocher who was part of the

Brats.

But naturally, Oh Dok-seo from back then and the current Dok-seo held résumés of completely different density.

'The one who recruited all the key figures including Yo-hwa within just about a month, rescued Lady Adele, improved the Udumbara through the Sword Marquess, manipulated Jung Sang-guk, and shipped the awakening ability eraser not just nationwide but worldwide.'

In what way could this possibly be that trash author from back then?

In the first place, this Dok-seo before his eyes had originally had long hair until they met at the Busan Station waiting room.

She'd only performed the act of cutting her hair to still appear as "the Dok-seo the Undertaker knew."

In other words?

A monster who'd farmed experience points in areas the Undertaker didn't know about rather than the parts he did know. That was the current Dok-seo.

"I don't want an ending where Mister vainly loses all your memories and abilities. That's a different person from the mister I want."

Emotions that were hard to describe mixed and dissolved in her red eyes.

"So just like No-sho ran away through regression, I hope mister will abandon any thoughts of running away through salvation or sacrifice early on."

Squeeze.

Dok-seo's grip on the Undertaker's hand tightened a bit more.

"I want the mister you are right now."

In that moment.

'Wait, am I right now. Possibly...'

Inside the Undertaker's head, a very special type of siren that had never once been triggered by the person before his eyes began to ring violently.

'Am I being flirted with? By Dok-seo??'

Alias, Undertaker.

Real name, Go Yuir.

The crisis of a lifetime.

Footnotes:

1 - SAN is short for sanity, it’s used as a shorthand name for sanity based mechanics in games like for example a bar exemplifying how much sanity your character has left.

Chapter 428

The Savior Ω II

Sinnoa

[Dok-seo's Glare attack!]

[It was super effective!]

Spooked by Dok-seo's ominous stare, I hastily threw together whatever excuses I could find and fled without looking back.

A sigh escaped me naturally.

"Life sure isn't easy."

"Ahaha. You're breaking out in a cold sweat. Don't you think the guild leader overreacted a bit?"

Yuri said.

By the way, to mention it again, Yuri was currently equipped with a 24-hour stealth function. In the truest sense, she had become 'one' with me, so she was visible only to me in this world.

"Think about it. Ms. Dok-seo has always kept flirting on the tip of her tongue. Things like 'I'll save you' or 'Only I can understand you.' She's shamelessly been saying things with that kind of nuance all the time, hasn't she?"

The face smiling demurely before my eyes right now, the voice humming with interest, all of it was merely hundreds of millions of Yuris who had seeped into my 'memory' combining to form a single personality. In a way, it wouldn't be entirely wrong to say I was currently suffering from the ultimate dissociative identity disorder, what you might call multiple personalities. It just happened to have the rather trivial feature that the different personalities could communicate freely in real-time.

"So what? If Dok-seo was acting the same as always, where did that ominous feeling I had earlier come from? Was my intuition just acting up?"

"Oh come on, it's obvious."

Yuri laughed softly.

"Ms. Dok-seo hasn't changed. Then the inevitable conclusion is that what changed was Guild Leader."

"What?"

"Guild Leader, toward Ms. Dok-seo."

Yuri deliberately enunciated each syllable as if to leave no room for doubt.

"If you keep staying together like this, you might develop feelings quite different from before, so you sensed that somehow and ran away before that could happen."

"..."

But no matter how well you enunciate nonsense as 'non/sense,' it doesn't suddenly evolve into an apodictic proposition.

"Are you saying right now that I almost fell for that brat Dok-seo??"

"Yes."

"You've finally lost it, Go Yuri!"

"But think about it from their perspective. The people who fell for Guild Leader all started with the same trigger, when they had no hope at all and Guild Leader helped them."

The smiley emoticon on Yuri's face showed no signs of fading.

"Then wouldn't it be the same for Guild Leader? You were all set to wrap things up here. Dok-seo-ssi, whom you didn't expect at all, personally threw herself into helping Guild Leader for hundreds of

cycles."

"..."

"When you save someone, they save you too. Ahh. It really is a proverb that's been passed down in the Void for ages."

"I've never heard of such a proverb!!"

Absolutely not, no matter what, I could never, ever admit it!

'Me getting butterflies over Dok-seo? Ha! This self-proclaimed little sister has really lost it. Oh Dok-seo? O-o-oh Dok-seo?! I'd rather date Inunaki Tunnel or Meteor Shower!'

"Guild Leader. I'm parasitizing your brain, so I can hear everything even when you say it in your inner thoughts."

"Respect my privacy a little!"

"Hmm. Well. From the moment you decided to seal your entire life story in a novel and reveal it to the world, hadn't your private life already gone missing?"

"..."

"And Inunaki Tunnel's essence is a young girl, and Meteor Shower's essence is a married woman comforting children. My goodness. I had no idea Guild Leader's tastes were so broad."

"That's just, it's just a figure of speech! I meant I'd rather join hands with anomalies than get butterflies over Oh Dok-seo!"

"You'd only hold hands? My goodness."

"I really can't say a single word to you!"

Yuri chuckled.

"Sorry. But I can't help it. It's a sibling's fate to catch each other's weak points and tease them until death."

"Eh, Undertaker-san?"

Someone called from behind.

Someone Japanese.

I turned around to see a person with black hair wearing an apron, arms full of boxes.

"Ah. Kurosawa."

"Yes, yes. Good evening."

Bow.

Kurosawa Touka, a girl more familiar to me by the slightly shorter nickname Kuro than her full name, hurriedly lowered her head. The work apron she wore had four characters printed on it.

[Dang Flower Garden].

This girl who looked a bit scatterbrained on the surface had, surprisingly, recently stormed into Seo-rin's flower shop alone and made a PR pitch about '108 Reasons Why Your Company Should Hire a Talent Like Me.' Dang Family Flower Garden, which had insisted on K-style nepotistic management, was moved by this new generation's passion. As a result, Kurosawa succeeded in claiming the title of the first foreign worker at Dang Family Flower Garden.

"Are you working this late?"

I smiled.

"It's quite late. Must be hard work for a part-timer."

"It's… It's not just a simple part-time job. I really, truly want to learn this and that from this flower shop. Um. Etto."

"Hm?"

Kurosawa put down the boxes. Then, even though she'd just greeted me, as if that wasn't enough, she bowed again at a 90-degree angle.

"La-last time, for bringing my mother to this village! I'm truly

grateful!"

"Ah."

I smiled bitterly.

"Didn't you already come with your mother to say thanks before?"

"Sti-still. I haven't repaid my debt to Undertaker-san yet. Before I repay it, well. Even after I repay it, I need to keep feeling grateful."

Kurosawa's words weren't fast. She didn't seem like someone skilled at interpersonal relationships to begin with. She'd probably lived a life learning more about fermentation methods than methods of opening up her heart to others. Even so, Kurosawa was carefully stitching together the words she must have practiced in her mind countless times before running into me by chance.

"You see. Not long after we arrived in Busan, I heard about the chaos that broke out in Tokyo, and I was so worried. What if something happened to Mom, I thought I'd go crazy."

"..."

"But then I heard that Undertaker-san went to Tokyo and resolved all those things. I cried a lot then."

"Did Seo-rin tell you?"

"Dok-seo-san told me!"

"I see."

Of course, the reason I went to the Japanese archipelago wasn't to save Kurosawa Touka's mother, but to leave an impression on the key figures who would later form the Magical Girl Association. In other words, it was a favorability grind. Bringing Kuro's mother to Busan was just a 'side' quest I accomplished along the way. But every alleyway is someone's front yard. My side quest was inevitably someone else's main quest.

"Arigato Gozaimasu! Tha-thank you!"

"..."

The first thanks was in Japanese, the second in Korean that was still inevitably awkward.

Kurosawa under the night sky.

Suddenly, next to her...

Please give me good luck. Let me avoid all those 'chance misfortunes' like dying from a randomly falling rock.

A corpse, its entire body covered in monkey fur and turned pitch black, stood silently.

This too was a phantom visible only to my eyes in this world. In the distant past, from the moment I picked up the 'Monkey's Paw' in the 444th cycle, this was the fate of a girl named Kuro discovered at the entrance to Seongsan Ilchulbong Peak in Jeju Island.

I'm sorry for being born.

Mr. Monkey's Paw, please make me disappear.

The girl left those words in her diary as her last will before vanishing.

And now before my eyes, instead of an ominous furry corpse, there was a child bowing her head, covered in dirt and the smell of grass from working hard late into the night.

"I'm glad."

"? Yes?"

"Get off work quickly. I've kept a busy person here too long. Give my regards to your mother."

"Ah. Yes, yes! Have a good night!"

Even as Kurosawa left, she kept turning around from afar, bowing multiple times.

When her retreating figure melted into the darkness beyond the seventh streetlight, Yuri spoke.

"She's a good person."

"Yeah."

"The scenery of the route reached by the possessor and regressor joining forces. I think it's not bad."

The situation was much better than before. Even within an endlessly tight schedule, Dok-seo had delivered Udumbara to as many awakeners as possible before June 17th. This Udumbara itself was a subspecies improved by Sword Marquess. Originally, it would parasitize the user's body to grant immortal life in name only, but this Udumbara-Plum Blossom would transform into plum blossoms on its own after a certain period.

"Most of the Monster Waves have been repelled too."

Yuri, naturally reading my mind, chimed in.

"Though some minor problems remain. Those will naturally resolve once we completely subjugate the Great Voids."

"And the remaining Great Voids are..."

"One is White Night, which descended on Seoul not long ago."

Yuri smiled.

"And the other is Dream within Dream. The unconscious underground where I arbitrarily set up residence, borrowing the dreams of all humanity."

"..."

"It's my final sanctuary."

"As you all know, the old man's regression point is around 13:59 on June 17th."

Tower of Babel.

In the meeting room of the National Road Management Corps, established without fail in this cycle too, the members of the Regression Alliance each wore their own serious expressions. The one leading the meeting was Oh Dok-seo.

"And Seoul's White Night. The starting point of the Void descent that turned south of the Han River into a wasteland in one fell swoop is precisely the same day, June 17th at exactly 14:00."

"..."

"In other words, there's only a difference of one minute."

All the Regression Alliance members were listening to Dok-seo's words with utmost care. It was a scene that felt unbearably awkward to me, but for the other Regression Alliance members, this was actually more familiar.

'It's like.'

Glance.

In a corner of the meeting room that no one but me paid attention to, a reincarnator with pink hair stood silently.

'Just as the regressor called me received the baton from the reincarnator who once shouldered humanity's frontline.'

The era flowed forward like a river. Greedily, drinking up the reincarnator's soul and inhaling the regressor's blood. Licking up everyone's wounds without leaving a trace, without any blood, leaving only faint traces of the smell of blood scattered everywhere. Because of that, while time was a river, it wasn't water but a river

made of blood at any moment.

"So my role, having prophesied the truth of this world before the mister, is simple. Pave the way before the old man regresses."

Still, this aged old woman had one final mission left before exiting from the era.

"One minute. We have to prevent White Night from erupting in Seoul within just one minute."

Seal all Voids at their source. Only then can the earth return to its original form with no one dying from anomalies.

"It's not just Seoul. We have to subjugate Dream within Dream simultaneously too. That way, within one minute, we subjugate the last Outer God, Go Yuri, who has secluded herself in everyone's dreams."

□.

"Only then will our world be truly liberated from anomalies."

"..."

"The reincarnator's hundreds of millions of years. The regressor's tens of thousands of years. My decades. All those years of toil rest on this one minute of subjugation."

"I have a question."

Ji-won raised her hand.

"I'm aware that a large-scale Void occurred in Seoul. And that it's called White Night. But what kind of Void is it specifically that we need to subjugate it in conjunction with Go Yuri's Dream within Dream?"

"It was an incineration."

The person in question, Yuri, answered. However, Yuri's words didn't reach the meeting. Therefore, Yuri could only participate in

the meeting through my mouth. It wasn't strange. That was originally my role as a shaman (ZERO_SUGAR), connecting the divine Realm and human realm.

"Guild Leader is a regressor."

The traces of Go Yuri, the first human to reach the divine realm, spoke.

"The world always resets based on the regressor's standard. But it's not a perfectly flawless initialization. Time always leaves residue. Even if they can't perceive the fact that the world is repeating due to regression itself, faint, sometimes truly faint reverberations remain."

"I see."

Ji-won nodded.

"In terms of anomalies, things like the Infinite Metagame or the Mastermind. In terms of humans, things like prophets or possessors. As regressions repeat, residues that detect that fact accumulate."

"That’s right."

Go Yuri smiled gently as she looked around at her 'unnies.'

"Even for a regressor who's only lived tens of thousands of years, such residues accumulated. What about me, who's repeated reincarnation for over tens of billions of years?"

"..."

"Anomalies and awakeners who detected my reincarnation emerged, like Mr. Sword Marquess's case. Very occasionally. But over tens of billions of years, these occasional instances piled up until they became delusions."

It was troublesome for Go Yuri. The secret of reincarnation being discovered by anomalies was the first problem. And awakeners inferring the identity of the '□' pierced through their hearts, causing the abilities they'd painstakingly awakened to weaken, was the

second problem.

"So I decided to gather all this temporal garbage and incinerate it all at once."

"Incineration."

"Erase the traces of the reincarnator itself. So that neither anomalies nor humans can notice. Thus, achieving my victory over anomalies and leaving humanity with an empty wound. That was the purpose of the incineration."

The location of that incinerator.

"South of the Han River."

The very name of that funeral.

"White Night."

Yuri smiled.

"The white night I spread out first to bring the world I dreamed of again and again down to earth."

Dreams and night.

Therefore.

"If White Night misfires, my entire plan collapses. I'll be demoted from just a reverberation remaining in dreams to an actual human who once lived in this reality."

"..."

A quiet air circulated through the meeting room. They fell silent for a moment at the reincarnator's scheme, who hadn't hesitated at any karmic killing to make her plan succeed.

"Right."

Oh Dok-seo nodded in an unchanged tone.

"So we need to prevent White Night from happening, and simultaneously subjugate the Great Void of Dream within Dream. Both are devices sealing the person called Go Yuri."

"In the next cycle?"

"Yeah. In the next cycle."

Dok-seo looked at me.

"And this will be the old man's final regression."

"..."

"No more regressions. No more reincarnations. No more humans toyed with by anomalies, no more earth stained by Voids."

However, Dok-seo said.

"I'm hoping for an ending where Yuri and Yuir still remain as humans in that place where all Void poison has disappeared."

"..."

"You can do it, right, old man?"

"Subjugate the double-sided Great Voids left by the first and final Outer God within one minute."

"Yeah."

"Simple enough."

I smiled.

"I'll show you a senior's skill, Dok-seo."

Current point in time.

The 3,558th cycle.

The regressor embarked on the final regression.

Footnotes:

Chapter 429

The Savior Ω III

Sinnoa

"Strictly speaking."

An old memory.

The first cycle that I had already lost within myself once.

Memories I had barely managed to reclaim by living through the Reincarnator's life exactly as it had been repeated.

"You can't really be called a regressor, Mr. Undertaker."

Yuri and I.

The two of us were the only rebels in the world, rebels plotting a revolution against a fate that had been sealed to end in destruction at the hands of anomalies.

"The only true, 100% pure regressor is Mr. Schopenhauer."

The places where we had our conversations were always back rooms isolated from time, stations where the train had stopped running.

Our language was always cautious, like spies who had infiltrated enemy territory.

"And yet, Mr. Undertaker, you're 'effectively' standing in the same position as a regressor. Isn't that fascinating?"

"Complete Memory."

"Yes, exactly. While this world repeats itself over and over, you simply don't lose your memories."

Go Yuri smiled.

"But to deceive the enemy, you must first deceive your allies. From now on, you'll masquerade as a regressor, believe yourself to be one, and fool both friend and foe alike."

"..."

"In the end, no one will be able to grasp your true identity. Even if some Outer Gods realize that the world is repeating, as long as they can't discern your true name."

True name in both senses.

My original name, Go Yuir.

My original fate, the one who remembers.

"You won't be conquered by the anomalies, doc. Never. Not unless you give up on yourself first."

"..."

"So then, Mr. Undertaker."

Yuri clasped my hand.

"We're the only people in this world who've allowed each other to be conquered."

"...Yuri."

"Yes, Mr. Yuir."

Clink.

The silver bell on her wrist cast a small shadow as it trembled.

"I've entrusted my name to you. And you've entrusted yours to me."

"And you know my identity, just as I will one day live through every moment of your life."

"We are one."

That promise.

"Let's save this world, together."

The silver bell swayed.

In the fate we had conspired against, the world was one that could only exist if both you and I were absent, or if both you and I were present together.

Our martyrdom together was thwarted.

The possessor who inherited our will declared that it was too early for our funeral.

I was merely an ordinary person born with the fate to remember and record the past, but now I thought I might try believing in the future.

True name, Go Yuir.

Alias, Undertaker.

Other aliases.

'Infinite Regressor', 'False Reincarnator', ‘Undateikeo’, 'The One Who Remembers', 'The Sealer of Time', 'The Strategist'.

Schopenhauer's workout partner. Ah-ryeon's guild leader. Seo-rin's gourmet tour companion. Yo-hwa's teacher. Seo Gyu's elder brother. Ji-won's chauffeur. Ha-yul's godfather. Bi-cheong's doormat. The benefactor of the Magical Girl Association. Dok-seo's co-author. Do-hwa's nemesis.

Called by many other names as well.

Someone's family member.

The false regressor was now entering his final cycle.

I opened my eyes.

'June 17th, 1:59 PM.'

Time limit.

'60 seconds remaining.'

The final strategy battle that would determine whether we could save the world completely or not.

I couldn't waste even a single second.

That's why it took not even a moment for me to assess the situation here at the starting point, the Busan Station waiting room.

"Mister!"

The waiting room was dim and gloomy.

The station had suffered a blackout, with all artificial lights extinguished.

It was a symbol proving that this place was no longer the regressor's exclusive domain, but had become a crossroads shared with the Possessor.

"Right away!"

No lengthy explanations were necessary.

Our operational schedule had already been mapped out to the second.

The fact that instead of 399 people randomly summoned to the Busan Station waiting room, our carefully selected strategy team members had taken their places made this abundantly clear.

And…

"..."

"..."

"..."

All the strategy team members were lying down in the middle of the waiting room with their eyes closed, having fallen 'asleep'.

It wasn't just Seo-rin, Ji-won, Yo-hwa, Ah-ryeon, Ha-yul, Gyu, and Do-hwa who had dozed off, the core leadership who had played crucial roles in the Regression Alliance up until now.

Sword Marquess, the Great Priestess, Manyo Neko, Nenet, and others, a considerable number of outsiders were also laid out in rows as if they'd been laid to rest in a communal cemetery.

"Hoeeek."

Around these sprawled people, hundreds of Tutorial Fairies had surrounded them, holding hands and dancing in a circle.

"Is that person the Secretary General that Secretary Oh Dok-seo mentioned, or is it?"

"That's right! No more talking, put him to sleep quickly!"

"Hihiek. There is no paradise in the place you flee to. I thought we'd barely been liberated from the oppressor's rule, but all that waited for us was just another form of violence...!"

Time limit.

50 seconds.

"Hush-a-bye, our baby."

"Mother is in the island's shade."

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star."

Song infused the fairies' dance.

An incantation, the most primitive emptiness for humans, a spell meant to bewitch and lure humans into the dream realm ruled by Baku.

An abrupt drowsiness tugged at my eyelids.

"Catch! Mister!"

Dok-seo threw something.

I snatched it from the air with a swift motion.

It was a silver bell.

"No-sho will join soon too! I'll wait here until that old man arrives and go in together with him! Don't worry! You go first, old man."

I didn't hear what came after that.

My consciousness had fallen into the emptiness disguised as a dream, thanks to the incantation woven together by hundreds of Baku all at once.

But I wasn't worried.

'I know, Dok-seo.'

Just as she trusted me, I trusted her as well.

Time limit.

40 seconds.

'I'm counting on you to handle that perpetually late old man.'

Dive.

And to the next stage.

'I'm leaving it to you.'

The scenery changed abruptly.

"You've arrived, Mr. Matiz."

It was some shabby alleyway.

Just like the '0th station' from moments ago, people were sprawled out in rows in this '1st station' alleyway as well, sleeping soundly.

However, Ji-won wasn't lying on the street but inside a car, sitting in the passenger seat herself, looking at me as I opened my eyes in the driver's seat.

"I've been waiting."

"Why didn't you go ahead?"

"How could I abandon the mission of waiting for Mr. Matiz on my own?"

Ji-won wore a faint smile.

"Everyone's already gone ahead and is waiting."

"I see."

"Yes. Since the flow of time hasn't slowed down enough at this location yet, I, who doesn't need to say much, took charge of this place."

She extended her hand to me.

"Your Excellency."

"..."

"I wish you a pleasant journey."

I took her hand.

It was cold.

Ever since that night when it seemed the rain would sweep away everything on the ground, the body temperature that the girl called Ji-won held had always been cool.

It was because she had hastened to prepare herself to accept another person's warmth.

"It shines so beautifully."

From beyond the car window, above the villas and multi-story

houses lining the alleyway, the fairies were singing lullabies in chorus.

"Please go ahead."

Listening to the song instead of the sound of rain, I closed my eyes.

The hands we held curved slightly into a gentle arc.

The smallest circle permitted on this earth.

"Guiding the latecomers is my role too. Mr. Matiz, will you wait for me this time, instead of the other way around?"

Time limit.

30 seconds.

'Of course, Ji-won.'

Dive.

And to the next stage.

"..."

2nd station.

"...Teacher."

It was a classroom in some school, willingly soaked in the evening glow.

We had already rapidly approached a dream within a dream.

Time had long since become distorted, the second hand probably moving at a much slower pace than in reality.

Space had become just as strange, the classroom that existed not in reality but in a dream was warped in some indescribable way, making its size difficult to gauge.

Hundreds of people were slumped over classroom desks, sleeping.

Only one student with orange hair draped down was looking at me with an expression that seemed about to cry.

"I'm sorry, for forgetting."

"It's not your fault, Yo-hwa."

"But both unni and teacher..."

"We all just acted on our own and disappeared from your memory on our own. People who believe themselves to be clever tend to make a lot of mistakes."

Cheon Yo-hwa was regaining her memories.

Was it an achievement Dok-seo had accomplished while conquering the cult?

Or perhaps, as we drew closer to the great emptiness of the dream within a dream, the sediment accumulated there had 'flowed backward' and engulfed Yo-hwa.

'Probably both.'

Oh Dok-seo had persuaded Yo-hwa before June 17th arrived.

And thus obtained even the Baku, crafting a battle plan composed of just 60 seconds.

In the process of rehearsing to realize this operation that bordered on pure gambling, the Yo-hwa before my eyes must have grown accustomed to dreams within dreams countless times.

"I... it's okay if I fail."

"..."

"I'd rather hope the next cycle doesn't come. I've only just gotten my memories back this way, but if the wheel turns again, I'll become the me who doesn't remember you, teacher."

I don't want that.

Yo-hwa covered her face with her hands.

"Really?"

I patted my student's shoulder.

"I want to see you receive your graduation certificate and experience university life, Yo-hwa."

"..."

"It might not be particularly exciting. You've experienced too much already. But the experience of being able to call boring things boring isn't actually that bad."

I said playfully.

"And it would be troublesome if your trademark remains a sailor uniform forever. Don't you want to try some different fashion?"

"Uht..."

"This will be my last cycle."

The classroom bathed in sunset.

Even excluding the seats reserved for latecomers, there was still one empty chair there.

"I'm sorry for continuing to inflict wounds you couldn't remember."

"..."

"Your teacher was clumsy too. Immature. I wanted to do well, but there were many things I failed at. Will you forgive me?"

The birch forest spread out beyond the window swayed, a thousand white shadows melting into the redness.

"Yes..."

The song of that forest was the Baku's lullaby.

"Unni, please take good care of her."

Time limit.

25 seconds.

"Of course."

Dive.

And to the next stage.

"..."

3rd station.

It was not the red of evening but a more primitive red, a mansion drenched in blood.

Ha-yul.

A small-framed girl sitting in a wheelchair had her back turned, looking at the mansion.

[Why are you so late?]

A murder that hadn't occurred in this cycle.

But Ha-yul, already infected by the emptiness poison that had flowed back from the dream within a dream, seemed to find this entire scene familiar.

"The time here is slowed down quite a bit, you see."

[That's your entire excuse?]

"Sorry."

This mansion, which would have originally been located in Fukuoka in reality, had many parts distorted, just like the previous station.

The mansion was a chaotic mess of corridors, doorways, and staircases scattered about like the backrooms.

The people mobilized for the operation were dangling from the ceiling by puppet strings, sleeping in rows like meat in a butcher shop.

The blood flowing beneath them all came from a single person, Jung Sang-guk, Ha-yul's biological father.

[I was thinking about murder.]

As I approached her side, Ha-yul muttered while still keeping her gaze fixed on the slaughterhouse before her.

[If the world is repeating, then in the end, a single murder is no different from thousands, tens of thousands, eons of murders.]

[I hated Jung Sang-guk.]

[But was I hateful enough to kill him for eons, does a sin worthy of that much hatred even exist, I was thinking about that.]

Ha-yul looked up at me obliquely.

[And love too.]

"..."

[Oppa cherished me for hundreds and thousands of times. How can a person do that?]

"Didn't you love me just the same way?"

[I only did it because I couldn't remember. There's nothing difficult about that at all.]

"Even though you couldn't remember or know, once you loved someone that one time, you love them forever, repeating that love through eternity, isn't that wonderful?"

I knelt down in front of the wheelchair.

And matched my gaze to be slightly lower than Ha-yul's.

"I'm always cheering you on, Ha-yul."

[...Oppa.]

"Even when you're hurt, you're the kind of child who asks herself whether this wound should suffer eternally and answers 'no'."

[...]

"When you receive love, you're the kind of child who marvels at how that love reached eternity and rejoices at that miracle. Ha-yul, you have courage stronger than anyone and wonderful love."

Ha-yul was…

[...]

Crying.

She had a body where both crying and laughter were processed as silence.

Because the world couldn't hear those sounds, she had never cried with exaggerated tears meant for others, and never laughed with expressions meant to show off to others.

She had kept a tower built of crying and laughter purely for herself within her heart, and yet still permitted the footsteps of others to climb that tower.

The most beautiful tower in the world had always been built within the heart.

"When this is all over, become independent."

[...]

"Let's go on a trip together."

[Far away?]

"Very far away."

Ha-yul haltingly leaned forward, supporting herself on the wheelchair's armrests.

[Go ahead and wait for me.]

Thump.

The time one person had crossed was contained in a gentle weight that embraced my head.

From the tower of her heart, a soundless song.

A melody longing for that summer day was echoing.

[I love you, Dad.]

Time limit.

22 seconds.

"I love you too."

Dive.

And.

To the next stage.

Footnotes:

Chapter 430

The Savior Ω IV

Sinnoa

The 4th station.

"Ah."

It was a gallery.

"G-Guild Leader... Ehehe."

Once, in the plaza of the Tower of Babel, a makeshift museum of humanity's last art had been cobbled together from whatever materials were available, scraps gathered here and there.

But there was a difference.

Unlike the exhibition that had taken place in the distant past of reality, the exhibition spread before my eyes now was far more vast in its collection.

"Have you been waiting long?"

"Huh? Oh, no."

Sim Ah-ryeon, her entire body smeared with paint, grinned widely.

"By my reckoning, it's only been about sixteen days. Everyone else has already gone to the lower floors... I was bored, so I've just been painting!"

"I see."

"Hehe."

Ah-ryeon approached and wrapped her arms tightly around my waist.

Her paint-covered face rubbed against my coat.

A child who had been born into a colorless world seemed intent on transferring the only equation of color she allowed herself onto me.

"Since there's no one else around, this is really nice."

"..."

"Dok-seo told me. That I'm actually the same in essence as the Udumbara. Mm. While it's an objective fact that I'm as beautiful as a flower, being essentially the same as a plant is pretty weird to hear..."

I smiled.

Whenever Ah-ryeon clung to me like this, trying to infect me with her colors, I would usually brush her hair, but unfortunately, I didn't have my anti-Sim-Ah-ryeon tactical equipment on hand right now.

So I wiped the paint from Ah-ryeon's face with my coat. She flailed her arms, going ah, hwah, fluttering like a startled bird.

"But after coming here and remembering all sorts of things from the past... I understood a little."

"What did you understand?"

"To a flower, the world is just a few drops of water and a few points of sunlight. I think that's about all I want from the world too. In terms of humility, I'm similar to a plant..."

"That's a lie."

"Eh?"

"You don't just want water and light, you crave incredibly sweet nectar and the most pleasant sunlight. You little thing. The most greedy flower in the world, that's what you are."

"Ah, ah, aah."

Ah-ryeon was helpless against my cheek-squishing offensive.

"Mmm..."

A silly sound escaped from her mouth, something like hwihii.

"This is nice after all..."

It was the sound of her burrowing deeper into me, pushing a syringe all the way into my lungs.

"What is?"

"Why the old me, why 'they' would go so far as to kneel before Guild Leader, act like a saintess, and commit something tantamount to suicide. I understand now."

"..."

"I wanted to know."

Squirm.

The tens of thousands of works hanging in the exhibition hall, all the paintings that the artist Sim Ah-ryeon had created across past and present lives, began to drip colors like poorly applied paint, falling drop by drop.

"When I die. Even knowing I'm dying, struggling until the very end, I wanted to know what emotions Guild Leader would feel then."

"..."

"I wanted to know, I wanted to feel it. What color that emotion would be, I was so curious. Honestly, it was hard to resist."

"I'm always amazed by how consistently you treat me like an all-you-can-eat buffet, Ah-ryeon."

"I can't help it! Guild Leader is my water droplet and my sunlight."

"..."

Squirm, glurk. Squirm.

Viscous colors gathered around us, flowing through the gallery corridor.

"Most people probably won't understand. To a flower, water droplets and sunlight are prey. They're something to hunt... But they're also everything in the world. They're god."

Does a flower love sunlight?

"People will probably condemn a believer who devours the flesh of their god as blasphemous... But actually, isn't everyone like that? Everyone devours the juices of the world. Every single day."

Can one understand a flower's love?

"And yet... they live without even knowing what they like, or how they like it. Hwe. Strange people..."

"Your thorns are too poisonous."

"Ehehe..."

Ah-ryeon bit my nape with her teeth. It was neither an act of predation nor a gesture of intimacy.

A sunflower was tilting its head toward its sun.

"I won't die anymore."

Ripples spread from my shadow.

"Because now I know."

All the paint that had dripped from the gallery gathered into my shadow, forming black.

Not the black that was darkness because nothing existed, but the black that was darkness because everything overlapped.

Ah-ryeon's voice sent ripples toward my heart.

"For watering me every single day, without skipping even one day... For dropping sunlight into my shade every day, mm..."

Ah-ryeon looked up at me.

A smile, the smallest and most radiant ripple a person can spread into this void.

Without laughter in that place, the sky blue wouldn't have been so boundless.

"I was happy! G-Guild Leader."

Time limit.

21 seconds.

'I was happy because of you too.'

Leaving my heart with someone who didn't need an answer, once again.

Dive.

And on to the next stage.

"..."

It was the Underwater Shrine.

What should have been a dilapidated house located in Dongbinggo-dong, Yongsan, Seoul, but the place before my eyes was a mixture of that house and the undersea cafe of the Inunaki Tunnel.

"Welcome, Mr. Undertaker."

The Saintess sat neatly as always, no different from any other cycle, dressed in comfortable clothes suitable for activity.

"The floor I'm in charge of is the fifth layer of the mind realm. Since you've arrived here safely, you should be quite free from the time constraints outside now."

She immediately brought up the operation upon meeting.

I almost laughed.

Like the other companions, the Saintess must have had memories of past cycles flowing back, but this was so very like her.

"The children are each guarding a layer. Is this Dok-seo's thoughtful arrangement?"

"Yes. But it's also to prepare sentinels in advance in case anomalies appear blocking the passage midway."

Kyarururu.

No sooner had the Saintess finished speaking than a little girl ran through the eerily spacious Underwater Shrine.

Woof! Woof!

A large dog that had no form, only a shadow remaining, chased after and ran ahead of the little girl in play.

It was the primal spirit of the Inunaki Tunnel.

"...As you can see."

The Saintess cleared her throat.

"The closer we get to the divine realm of the dream within a dream, the more distorted the shape of the place becomes. Time is warping too."

"That's only natural. Go Yuri has relived the lives of hundreds of millions of people. Unlike ordinary people, time for her is endlessly layered."

"...Just like it is for Mr. Undertaker."

"That’s right."

"..."

"..."

The Saintess rowed through silence.

Each person was a ferryman of a boat facing a tumultuous sea. The tongue was the first oar cutting through those waves.

When the wordless wind couldn't push everything forward, everyone had no choice but to row their oar through their own waterway.

"Um, the Silver Bells..."

But the route chosen by this skilled boatwoman was in a direction even I found difficult to predict.

"Shouldn't I return them?"

"Pardon?"

Slowly.

The Saintess averted her gaze.

"They're proof of the promise originally made with Ms. Go Yuri, right?"

"..."

"I don't think it's right for me to have such a precious treasure."

And as the Saintess pulled down her sleeve, wouldn't you know it, there were the Silver Bells, jingling and sparkling.

'Good heavens.'

In other words, even though the Saintess had recalled the memories of the 267th cycle where she sacrificed herself to seal the outer god Nut...

Her first reaction wasn't an expression of gratitude or apology, but rather the question, 'These Silver Bells seem to have a rightful owner, don't they?'

It was truly extraordinary.

Even if the universe were endlessly vast, it would be hard to find a capital T this large.

"Please take them, Mr. Undertaker."

"..."

Leading with emotional appeals here would be the mark of an amateur.

As someone who had graduated with an A+ even through the advanced course of Saintessology 101, I needed to properly drive the opponent into logical confusion.

"I understand."

I nodded.

"But have you consulted with the Saintess of the 267th cycle before making this decision?"

"...Pardon?"

"No matter how memories reverse-flowed from the dream within a dream, they're ultimately nothing more than incomplete afterimages. Those Silver Bells are something I gifted to the Saintess of the 267th cycle, and the right to decide how to handle them belongs entirely to the Saintess of the 267th cycle."

"..."

"Can we truly say that the current Saintess perfectly represents the Saintess of the 267th cycle? Hmm. I'm only concerned whether you, Saintess, can freely dispose of a gift that doesn't even belong to you."

The Saintess made a blank expression.

"But I think it's disrespectful to Ms. Go Yuri."

"Go Yuri employed all sorts of means to awaken you as a powerful awakener."

The Saintess hesitated.

Beyond the Underwater Shrine, outside the undersea tunnel that surrounded it, the shadows of sleeping people were falling like fish shadows.

"When she became your younger sister and died before your eyes, she deliberately staged her death in an isolated warehouse, ensuring you couldn't contact anyone, making a show of it."

"..."

"When she became your childhood friend, your only close friend, the sole passage to the outside world, she carefully removed each of your fingers clinging to the cliff edge of the world. Meticulously."

I paused for a moment.

After letting the fish shadows cross our faces a few times.

"Is there really a need to be courteous?"

"..."

"If you feel you owe each other nothing, then in the end, you can only ask yourself what you want to do."

I smiled.

"What would you like to do?"

The Saintess closed her lips.

It was as if the fish shadows were opening and closing their mouths in her stead.

"...I received this without knowing."

"I gave it to you without knowing either."

"I think it was wrong."

"Even though it was a mistake made without knowing, it's difficult for you to forgive, is it? Yourself, Saintess."

"Yes."

"Your younger sister, childhood friend, best friend, they all committed wrongs while knowing."

"..."

"Will you be unable to forgive them?"

A brief silence.

"...No."

The Saintess shook her head.

"I... can forgive them."

"Why is that?"

"Because in the end, it was done for people. Not just in words but in actions. Not just with one life but by dedicating all their lives. Because they walked the path they thought was best."

"I see."

I nodded.

"Then please forgive yourself a little for the mistakes you made in the past without knowing."

"..."

"If Go Yuri can be forgiven, there's no reason you can't be forgiven."

I placed the Silver Bells the Saintess had removed back on her wrist.

"Ah."

"I hope that Ms. Saintess will be just a bit more generous toward your own ignorance, just as much as you are toward others."

"...Toward myself."

"Yes. There will be people who won't forgive. There will surely be moments where even you find it hard to forgive yourself. But even then, I will forgive you before anyone else."

"..."

"Just as you did for me."

Jingle.

I looked at her while covering the Silver Bells hanging on her wrist with my right hand.

"Will you accept it?"

"..."

Hesitation.

And then, firmly.

"Yes."

The Saintess smiled like a blooming flower.

"Remembering various cycles... I realized something."

"What is it?"

"That what I lack is courage."

The soundless clamor of the sea. Around the path laid on the uncrossable seabed, waves endlessly crashed.

If you only knew the way across, the waves were no longer drifting currents but merely waterways that stayed in place.

"Just waiting for something is meaningless. You have to approach

first. Mr. Undertaker gave me that courage."

"Ah, then I'm gla—"

The current quietly resonated.

The fish shadows no longer passed long between the Saintess and me. The gap between us had become too narrow for that.

Just now, she had pulled on my wrist and kissed me.

"..."

I was so surprised my eyes widened.

Those widened pupils were clearly reflected in the pupils right before me.

Without withdrawing her lips, the Saintess...

[Just as Mr. Undertaker advised.]

...spoke only through the passage she had pierced with her own wound.

I felt the shadows of the waterways descending into the Underwater Shrine wrap around my consciousness.

[Yes, I did what I wanted to do.]

Time limit.

20 seconds.

[From now on, I'll be waiting for Mr. Go Yuir's answer.]

Dive.

[This time, I won't wait too long like before.]

[See you soon.]

And.

On to the next stage.

Footnotes:

Chapter 431

The Savior Ω V

Sinnoa

"Oh, you're here?"

"Oh, you're here?"

The 6th station.

That place was a flower garden.

A place where only the rustling of falling petals could be heard. The Garden of Fallen Flowers, where even in death the fragrance remained.

And the Dang Flower Garden, where Dang Seo-rin had spent time with her family.

Two landscapes overlapped.

"..."

Of course, the appearance was quite removed from reality.

The sixth layer of the heart. Now there was only one layer left until the dream within a dream's deepest layer.

If this place, which had no choice but to be thoroughly steeped in the Void Poison, resembled reality, that would have been more cause for concern.

"...Dang Seo-rin?"

But the scenery before my eyes seemed to transcend the simple dimension of "the space is bizarre."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

Seo-rin, no.

Two Seo-rins answered simultaneously.

The situation was as follows. Different versions of Seo-rin were reflected on my right and left retinas respectively, cunningly overlapping at the center.

"A bit bewildering, right? I feel the same."

The Seo-rin on the right was tending to violets drooping their heads in the Garden of Fallen Flowers.

The navy blue shadow cast by the sunlight from the glass window caressed the withered and twisted petals, and that had now become the violet's new color.

"A bit bewildering, right? I feel the same."

The Seo-rin on the left was caressing a corpse pierced through by tree branches in the Dang Flower Garden.

The collapsed ceiling of the building. Starlight poured down endlessly. Seo-rin seemed to be holding a funeral service with the Milky Way of the night sky.

"..."

Overlapping yet not overlapping.

I could immediately understand what these two layers of scenery existing simultaneously meant.

"Seo-rin as a human. And... Seo-rin as Hecate coexisting."

"Right."

"Right."

The violet cast a shadow, and the corpse dripped blood.

""Originally, eliminating Hecate and leaving only human Seo-rin would be the route Oh Dok-seo has chosen until now.""

""But that brat, when it came down to the very end, I guess she changed her mind this time.""

""She's saying you should be the one to have the choice, isn't she?""

A hollow laugh escaped me.

"That's really... such a Dok-seo thing to do."

Seo-rin also giggled.

""Really, isn't she way too fourth-dimensional? Sometimes when I talk with her, I end up tilting my head like 'Huh?' 'Did I mishear something?'""

"Ahaha."

I laughed along with Seo-rin, but how could I not grasp Dok-seo's true feelings?

Placing one of my connections at each staircase descending into the dream within a dream.

This held meaning beyond simply handing over the choice to me.

'It must be a gift for me.'

That's right.

This current situation was truly like a dream for me as a regressor.

No matter how carefully I had crafted armor to protect my mental state, how could I not be affected at all while experiencing my memories with companions resetting with each regression?

I thought it foolish to develop the habit of digging into unavoidable sadness.

So I had simply applied ointment repeatedly to prevent flesh from forming over the wounded spots.

"I roughly get yours and Dok-seo's idea. In short, it's a golden axe silver axe operation."

""Hm?""

"Now I decide whether the Seo-rin I truly loved was the personality inherited by the Outer God Hecate, or the human Seo-rin. Then I just need to take one of their hands after making that decision, right?"

""Ahahaha. You got it!""

Day and night mingled in midair.

""Actually, Dok-seo was the first to come up with the idea, but I thought, what would be the point? No matter how much I thought about it, I could only see the ending where you'd choose both of us.""

"A cliché from folktales."

""I'm confident, you know. Whether I'm an anomaly or not, I'm confident you'll see me as Seo-rin exactly as I am.""

It was well-founded confidence.

Because the path we had walked, the countless cycles, the log of conversations we had shared, all provided the basis for her confidence.

"Then you'll understand this too."

I smiled.

"Seo-rin. Actually, the choice doesn't lie with me, it lies with you."

""Huh?""

Seo-rin tilted her head.

""What do you mean?""

"Seo-rin."

I looked at the Seo-rin on the right.

Still completely human, contaminated by the memories of an Outer God but not yet united with the Outer God.

I looked at the Seo-rin who was still alive on June 17th.

"Those memories you feel you've regained now are actually the past of some Outer God that replaced your soul."

"..."

"You don't need to unconditionally consider that as your life. No. It wouldn't be strange if you found it unpleasant instead."

"..."

"The massacre of your entire family was planned by a being called Go Yuri. You were forced to make a wish. And by the anomaly that responded to that wish, your life was completely mortgaged."

I spoke calmly to her eyes, taking care not to mix in any exaggeration.

"You have the right to reject this future, this past, all of it as belonging to someone else and not yourself."

"..."

Then I turned my head.

The Seo-rin on the left.

Still completely an Outer God, who had foreseen the end of being demoted to a human, but precisely because of that, could refuse that conclusion.

I looked at Hecate, who had not lost her name even on June 17th.

"Seo-rin."

"...Yeah."

"Guild Leader."

"...Yeah."

Hecate hesitantly opened her mouth.

"...Vice Guild Leader."

"Well. I don't know what it feels like for an Outer God to transform into a human. For someone who only responds to wishes to become the wish itself is a bit too abstract for a Homo sapiens like me."

"Ahaha. What are you saying? You're more anomaly-like than any anomaly."

"Wow. Then Samcheon World was ultimately an anomaly organization after all. The Guild Leader, the Vice Guild Leader. No, thinking about it, isn't Ji-won also the priestess of Leviathan?"

"Whoa. That guild dominated the Korean peninsula? And even our rival Baekhwa is the same? Korea's done for, seriously."

We laughed side by side.

"You can still refuse."

"..."

"From your perspective as a former Outer God, humans might be nothing but utterly insignificant creatures. Even if you refuse, I have no right to stop that choice."

"Why?"

"In the end, I'm Go Yuri's accomplice. I'm one of the culprits who dragged you as an Outer God down to earth."

"..."

She closed her mouth.

I waited until the silence melted into day and night. Only then did I ask the sun and moon.

"Will you accept being an anomaly?"

First to the sun placed on the left.

"Will you accept being human?"

Then to the moon placed on the right.

"...I, uhm, I."

Seo-rin, dyed in the sun's shadow, opened her lips.

"I don't think it's a particularly important question. After all, why. People's cells all get replaced, right? Anomaly or whatever, if it's my personality then it's me."

Treating an anomaly like mere cells?

No, well, cancer cells are still cells. It wasn't wrong, so a laugh escaped me unintentionally.

Seo-rin looked straight at me.

"If I deny these memories, I'll lose all the traces I walked with you, the traces I would have walked. I don't want that."

That was the human's answer.

I nodded and looked at the other side.

"..."

Hecate, soaked in the starlight of the night sky, opened her lips.

"What you said about humans being insignificant creatures compared to an Outer God's authority. You're wrong."

A smile hung on her lips, hehe.

"An Outer God has nothing but themselves. Most humans are like that too, but... at least the life I've lived and ended up living was different."

Hecate reached out her hand.

Squeeze. My left hand was grasped.

"Undertaker! I'm truly glad I got to know you as a human being!"

"..."

"I'm sorry for dying first. Thank you for keeping my promise every time. Every day, for trying to be by my side... Thank you. You are..."

Squeeze. My right hand was grasped.

"Go Yuir."

"Undertaker."

The left and right Seo-rins, which had been separated with a slight gap, simultaneously pulled me toward them.

""You have always been like magic to me!""

The sun and moon overlapped.

The rotten and crumbling fallen flowers accepted the crimson and bloomed fully, and the tree branches that had only corpses hanging on them were embroidered with petals and blossomed in full.

"When the latecomers come down, I'll follow along."

With a smile. Holding the earliest blooming flower that a human could produce, Seo-rin whispered right before my eyes.

It was a song that always flowed in my heart.

"By the way, I think Ha-yul is really pretty! Oh, but Oh Dok-seo is a bit… Sim Ah-ryeon too."

Time limit.

20 seconds.

"When today is all over, let's talk!"

Dive.

And.

To the next stage.

"..."

It was quiet.

The 7th station.

The terminal station.

Although time and space should have been mixed up more arbitrarily here than anywhere else, what spread around me was just the Tower of Babel plaza wrapped in silence.

"Hmm?"

Clang.

Noh Do-hwa, who had been working on something with tools, turned around.

Black eyes that weren't hidden even by deep dark circles scanned my face.

"You're here? You're ridiculously late..."

"Director Noh Do-hwa."

"Well, you'd call me that. Though it's a bit awkward since I in this current cycle haven't actually founded the National Road Management Corps or anything..."

"Where did the other raid members go? How about the Sword Marquess old man? Seo Gyu?"

Thump.

I approached her while looking around.

"And why is Director Noh Do-hwa standing guard on the most dangerous seventh layer?"

"It's difficult to answer when you throw multiple questions at once. You bastard."

"..."

It is Do-hwa alright.

"First, the other members are over there, peacefully knocked out inside the Tower of Babel, so rest assured..."

Clang.

Do-hwa hammered at her work.

"As for your next question. I don't understand it myself either, but it seems I have a trait that doesn't get contaminated by the Void Poison even if you drop me here in the dream within a dream..."

"What?"

"You didn't know? Well. Since this is the latest information we obtained while going in and out of here, it makes sense you'd be slow on the update..."

The corner of Do-hwa's mouth twisted.

"Oh Dok-seo said something. Ah. Apparently the very fact that I've never been corrupted throughout all cycles is considered like a trait in itself, so I don't seem to be affected by the dream within a dream..."

"Whoa."

An exclamation flowed from my mouth. I was genuinely surprised, for what it's worth.

Do-hwa continued hammering while speaking.

"Thanks to that, whether it's the sixth or seventh layer. I'm perfectly fine no matter how long I stay in the dream within a dream. So Team Leader Yu Ji-won, who has similar immunity like me, is in charge of the entrance to the passage, and I'm in charge of the exit..."

Thinking about it…

In the regression alliance that was almost entirely bustling with Outer Gods or priestesses of Outer Gods, Do-hwa had always performed the role of anchor.

And Do-hwa had never once betrayed her own humanity.

'...If there's something that doesn't change even while thousands of worlds repeat, then that's already no different from a law. She became a law that doesn't crumble even when entering the deepest void.'

It was truly a remarkable achievement.

But if I expressed my respect, only non-combustible trash would be discharged from Do-hwa's facial muscles, so I changed the subject.

"What have you been making since earlier?"

"Ah, this... Heu."

Do-hwa grabbed the work and showed it to me.

There were two things that looked like arms, two things that looked like legs, and one thing that looked like a head attached to it.

In short, it was a doll.

"It's you..."

?

"What?"

"You. You. Your alias is Undertaker and your real name is... what

was it again? Anyway, both your alias and real name are fucked up."

"Is that a personal insult??"

"I've had my entire life insulted, so isn't this level of statement permissible? You bastard."

"No, anyway. Me? This doll?"

I had no choice but to look at her with a face containing 100% pure bewilderment.

"There's even not just one doll but two, three, four, five, six, seven... No. Really, how many are there? Why are there so many dolls?"

"It's a commission from Ms. Oh Dok-seo..."

Dok-seo?

"When this quest ends successfully, your body will be split into at least five or six pieces, so before that happens, she told me to use doll clone jutsu in advance to make Undertakers..."

"..."

"So I made them. Collaborating with your daughter Puppeteer. Well, there's still the ontological contemplation of whether this is really the Undertaker or not. Don't worry though. If I cut off the limbs prettily and attach them, it'll work..."

"What??"

"My ability is prosthetic production, isn't it? Originally it's an ability to replace lost limbs, but apparently the opposite is also possible. If I attach arms, legs, limbs, necks, and heads one by one to connect them, I can make them become the real 'that person'..."

I couldn't recover from the shock.

"Ah, no. Wait. There's too much to point out here. First of all, my legs? My legs are two. I'm not a centipede."

"I know that..."

"To replace all the legs of the dolls placed here with my real legs, I'd have to evolve into a human centipede, so by what means are you going to fill up all the materials!"

"Sim Ah-ryeon..."

Flinch.

"If you cut it off, get healed and it grows back, then cut it off again, get healed and it grows back, isn't that enough..."

Silence.

"No. Limbs aside. What about the brain?"

My earnest rebuttal.

"The head? No matter how amazing Ah-ryeon's healing ability is, regenerating even after the head is blown off is really not easy."

"Goodness. Who's extracting the head all at once? I'm not an idiot."

"Whaaat?"

"You just cut off the brain a little bit, heal it, cut it off a little bit again, heal it, and slowly do defragmentation..."

Silence.

"...Did Dok-seo devise this operation?"

"Ah, yes. She was spouting it with such a confident face like 'I saw it! The only happy ending I found!'..."

"Dok-seo!"

I cried out.

I could feel the gratitude and respect for Oh Dok-seo that had built up in my heart melting away like ice cream in Daegu during summer.

"So..."

Do-hwa smiled.

"Where shall we start cutting..."

"..."

"Arms? Legs? Or if your habit is to eat the bad stuff first when eating curry, should I start with the head..."

"..."

"Well, but rest assured. At least there's no doll for me."

Do-hwa whispered as if murmuring.

Cold sweat wouldn't stop running down the back of my neck.

"There's still some time left before the kids come down from upstairs anyway. I'll cut as prettily as possible, so you decide which part to cut first..."

"..."

Alias, Undertaker.

Real name, Go Yuir.

Perhaps Go/Yu/ir.

It was the greatest crisis of my life.

It was the moment I realized that for someone with many lifetimes, the greatest crisis of a lifetime also becomes many, a fact I didn't particularly want to realize.

Footnotes:

Chapter 432

The Savior Ω VI

Sinnoa

"Huu..."

The sight of my face dripping with cold sweat must have been quite the spectacle.

Do-hwa smirked, like someone who'd just returned from a pyramid tour with friends only to comment, "Hmm, is that all?" with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"The choice is yours in the end. This is merely the methodology that person Dok-seo proposed. You're under no obligation to follow it..."

"Then I refuse with every fiber of my being!"

"Well, do as you please. Though I'd personally like to see what kind of circus act you'll put on..."

Do-hwa set down her tools.

I swallowed hard. For her, it was simply a gesture signaling the end of her work, but from my perspective, where that doll looked like something akin to 'Artificial Human Undertaker Model 2,' I couldn't help but feel as though I'd just narrowly escaped being dunked into concrete, experiencing the thrill of a dramatic last-second escape.

"..."

"..."

With the sound of hammering gone, the depths of this Dream Within a Dream fell silent as a tomb.

4 a.m. Like stepping out to a convenience store and finding yourself at a concrete intersection devoid of pedestrians or vehicles, when

the night sky holds its breath for just a moment.

Standing idly at a crosswalk alternating between green and red, the white silence between us hung in the air just as it did then.

"What are you thinking about so deeply?"

"Why don't you take a guess..."

"Well then."

I fumbled through the blank manuscript of white silence for ink-dark letters.

"I'd wager you're savoring a certain kind of joy."

"Joy? Hoh. Me, you say...?"

"Yes. The Director Do-hwa has always distinguished herself from her counterparts in other cycles. Always."

"..."

A sideways glance, Do-hwa looked this way.

Whether she did or not, I was organizing the manuscript of silence.

"But now, at this final of finals, all those past memories, all those future predestinations have been given to you. You've finally crossed the rapids of time that could never be crossed."

"..."

"Now you can denigrate all the versions of yourself from every other cycle to your heart's content. Only the self standing in this moment has achieved the ultimate victory, shall we say. So, yes. You are, in your own way, savoring joy."

"Heh."

A nasal sound slipped from Do-hwa's lips.

"Unpleasant bastard..."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Yes. That's right. Despite how I look, I'm in quite a good mood right now..."

I could tell the moment I saw her.

Even the great Do-hwa, no matter how much this was Dok-seo's request, couldn't possibly have participated in something as frivolous as the Undertaker Project without any reason whatsoever.

Just the fact that she teased me without any particular mockery, which for Do-hwa was genuinely normal communication, showed that Supreme Leader Do-hwa's satisfaction level had clearly hit at least 70%.

"I offer my condolences to my past selves. For tens of thousands of years, all I have are memories of work, work, work. Buried in paperwork..."

"Haha."

"Right now I'm in this strange place, so the memories are vivid at least. Once everything ends, they'll all become hazy..."

"Did Dok-seo say that?"

"Yes. That we should share our reflections [before the strategy], not [after the strategy]. Once Dream Within a Dream is conquered, even the memories piled up here like dregs will fade..."

Certainly.

This very magic that allowed everyone to recall previous cycles was itself a byproduct of Dream Within a Dream. In extreme terms, it was no different from the Void.

If the main body, the Void, were to be conquered, the byproduct would naturally disappear as well.

Woof!

A large dog came running from the entrance of the Tower of Babel.

Do-hwa knelt with practiced ease and stroked the large Maltese this way and that.

Huff, huff, huff.

Its tail wagged vigorously.

More pets followed the Maltese, wriggling closer.

Among them, one puppy trembled with its front and hind legs severely misaligned in height. There was also a cat with three tails sprouting from its rear, cracking like whips.

"Good, good..."

Hundreds of pets.

All children of a broken world with limbs somehow askew or damaged.

The pets I'd gifted in previous cycles, that Do-hwa had raised, and that the two of us had held funerals for together.

Once those children received even a single pat from Do-hwa, they immediately dissolved into ash.

"..."

Before long, only pure white ash fluttered through the plaza of the Tower of Babel.

Do-hwa brushed the ash from her doctor's coat and stood up.

"Awakener Undertaker."

"Yes. Speak, Director."

"Every time I killed you, you never once resisted but accepted death willingly. I'd like to ask why."

"Because I am the very one who dragged your life into this place."

The same answer as always.

Though the strata forming that answer had changed.

"Go Yuri arranged nearly everything for the sake of my fate. Nearly everything. However, even Yuri couldn't have foreseen that your existence would become this critical to my plan."

"..."

"Yes. You're also a case where you awakened due to a gap in your heart caused by Go Yuri. However, your ability isn't particularly impressive. [Protective Gear Creation]. In no scenario would you become the protagonist, or even a main character, with that ability."

In other words…

"You didn't join this story because of Go Yuri. Only I, the false regressor, caused you to bear all that suffering."

"..."

"Therefore, I bear responsibility. Unlike others, you at least have the right to kill me as much as you desire."

The corners of Do-hwa's mouth lifted.

"Even now?"

"..."

"If I say I don't like this ending, that the path you and Dok-seo created doesn't suit my temperament and I refuse it, what then?"

Do-hwa stepped closer.

"Still...?"

Her dry fingers grasped my neck.

Squeeze. Through the black leather gloves, a frail grip transmitted its pressure.

"Will you still die for me?"

I smiled.

"I'd accept it. But you won't be able to kill me anyway."

"Oh?"

The eye behind the monocle gleamed with interest.

"And why is that? Don't tell me you think my favorability toward you has maxed out enough to prevent murder? If so, I must tell you that would be a grave miscalculation..."

"It's not that."

As I answered, I thought.

Why did Dok-seo place Do-hwa at the final station?

Do-hwa herself responded with 'because of her Void affinity,' but Dok-seo had been the one persistently pushing ridiculous bait about an old-married couple or whatever nonsense.

As always, Dok-seo had given her a choice.

"Even if you kill me now, we'll meet again anyway. Here. Again. In the next cycle."

"..."

"And killing me then wouldn't be a 'new choice' from your perspective. You'd simply be retracing the choice your past self, your previous self made. And you..."

"I what?"

"Hate becoming a copy of yourself more than anything."

"..."

"How many times will you keep killing me? A thousand? Ten thousand? But eventually, an end will come, and the you at that

end will make the choice to let me live. The person who remains in this world will be the one who made that final choice. Not you standing before me now."

"..."

"Only by sparing me here do you remain as the uniquely victorious one who survived to the end, a human freed from the shackles of regression. Noh Do-hwa. Therefore, you absolutely cannot kill me."

"..."

Slowly.

The leather glove formed of five distinct contours pulled away.

"To think you'd actually pull it off."

The sound that slipped through the withdrawn lips was closer to admiration, yet closer still to a curse.

"To publicly declare you'd save the world and then actually make it happen. Truly, astonishing."

"It wouldn't have been possible through my strength alone. It was possible because Yuri came before me, and Dok-seo followed after."

"...Those who've gambled and lost must accept the appropriate consequences."

Do-hwa removed her monocle.

"I won't bring this up ever again, so listen carefully..."

Thud. The folded monocle fell to the ground and rolled among the ashes.

A small rustling sound. It was the scream the monocle made as Do-hwa's shoe crushed it underfoot.

Do-hwa pulled off her gloves and tossed them aside.

"This is your victory. Undertaker."

"..."

"And this is my defeat."

Then she grasped my hand.

The back of my hand grew cool. It was because my lifted hand was brought close to Do-hwa's pale forehead.

"You were right and I was wrong. You were prudent and I was rash. My contempt was too premature to harvest the final autumn."

Squeeze.

With her head bowed, Do-hwa's face wasn't visible.

But she was expressing her emotions not through her face but through the pressure held in my hand.

"I pay my respects to everything you've accomplished. Even if my memories fade, the fact that a human like you exists will never be erased from my heart."

Emotion transmitted through bare hands scarred from countless hammer strikes and tool work.

"Claim your victory, Undertaker."

Humiliation.

"Seize your victory."

Disgrace.

"Having walked this far, you are more than deserving of victory."

Yet despite that, accepting defeat as defeat and treating victory as victory, offering mockery as the defeated.

With the same weight as that humiliation, merely changing direction, offering glory to the victor.

"May fortune be with you."

If this place were somewhere else, at the terminus of some remote route where victor and vanquished were reversed.

As if she believed without doubt that she would have carried out these same words.

"I apologize for killing you so many times."

If only human voices could be colored.

"In return, one wish."

Right now, Do-hwa's breath would surely be dripping with blood so cold it stung.

"Any wish at all. Even if it means tearing my soul apart, I'll grant you one wish."

A brief silence.

"Alright. I have a wish."

"...What is it?"

"After this is over, run for president."

"You fucking bastard. Do you really want to die?"

The rebuke carried genuine feeling.

I scratched my head.

"Hmm. With tens of thousands of years' experience governing a peninsula-scale organization, isn't letting such talent go to waste itself a national loss?"

"Really? Is that seriously your wish?"

"I'm joking. Even retirement denial has its limits. Ms. Do-hwa, it's time for you to step down from public duties."

I bent down and picked up the gloves.

After firmly fitting the gloves back onto Do-hwa's hands, I smiled faintly.

"Let's not live too far apart."

"..."

"Even if we don't need to be too close, we don't need to be too far either. When walking through streets bathed in evening glow. When taking a slight detour on the way home... Where you don't need to dress up specially but can meet just by calling..."

Where rain falls when it rains there too.

Where waves crash when they crash there too.

Where if the sun shines beautifully, its shadow falls upon you as well.

"I'd like you to be in such a place."

For someone, if the sunset is beautiful, it's because the roads beneath that crimson lead to neighbors' homes.

My western sunset needed your house facing the same direction.

"Will you do that, Ms. Do-hwa?"

"..."

Noh Do-hwa sealed her lips.

It was a long silence.

So that words flowing from her lungs wouldn't rise immediately through her throat but would circle her heart several times, steeping properly.

"Yes."

She nodded.

"I shall do so, Undertaker."

Immediately after.

"Mister!"

Screech.

A door materialized from empty air and Dok-seo burst through, shoving it open. Her face was flushed from running.

"Huff, everyone! Without exception! I brought them all!"

Beyond the door, I glimpsed flashes of Old Man Scho and the connections I'd passed on every floor up to now.

"I tried to hurry in my own way but, you know, the flow of time is so different that I'm not sure if the timing worked out— Huh."

Dok-seo, who'd been gasping for breath, froze.

Her gaze landed precisely on the scene where I was just fitting gloves back onto Do-hwa's hands.

"Haaaack."

Dok-seo covered her mouth with both hands.

"O-old married couple...?!"

"..."

"S-sorry! Mister! I was so tactless! Wow. I really should just die. Stupid Dok-seo! Idiot Dok-seo! Three minutes, no. Thirty minutes. No no, I'll come back in three hours!"

"..."

"Gasp. But wait, wouldn't that fill up the entire time limit right before the deadline? No, well. Whatever. The world's been destroyed countless times anyway, one more time won't hurt. Have a good time!"

Bang.

The door slammed shut.

"Ah!"

It opened again.

"J-just, don't mind me! Of course, I'll eventually see whatever happened here in the laptop manuscript! But really don't mind me! I know how to respect privacy, you know! You trust me, right? Then I'm off."

Bang.

The door shut again.

"..."

"..."

If the door hadn't opened from this side, it would have taken over three hours to clear up the misunderstanding, and the conquest operation would have been postponed to the next cycle.

What tremendous luck.

Footnotes:

Chapter 433

The Savior Ω VII

Sinnoa

I somehow managed to drag Dok-seo out despite her falling into a completely absurd misunderstanding.

It wasn't easy.

That shameless brat kept making suggestive expressions while desperately clinging to the doorknob in resistance.

"Hiiing... Mister, that's too much..."

Only after I finally gave her a good knock on the head did the 'Reader Oh Dok-seo' program in her mind get replaced with the 'Possessor Oh Dok-seo' program.

Grumbling all the while, Dok-seo woke up the awakeners who'd collectively entered sleep mode inside the Tower of Babel.

Shortly after.

"Hyung!"

The awakeners came pouring out in a rush.

Leading the pack was none other than our SG Man, Seo Gyu.

"Fuck! Hyung, thank you! Seriously, thank you!"

"Uh... why so suddenly?"

"I remembered! I got hit with flashbacks of being beheaded the moment the tutorial started, over dozens of times all at once!"

"Ah."

The veins bulging in Seo Gyu's muscles trembled.

"Those fucking fairy bastards! If I'd been a combat-type ability user, I would've dedicated my soul to beating the crap out of fairies for the rest of my life! Fuck!"

At those words, Yo-hwa, who'd followed Dok-seo to join them at Dream Within a Dream's deepest layer, reacted.

"Oh. Those fairies are all under my command now. Want to go one-on-one with me?"

"...No, no, Guild Leader."

Seo Gyu deflated instantly like a muscle after pumping.

It would be hard to criticize him for acting unmanly despite that fine physique when the trauma from the zombie kingdom founded by Elder Yo-hwa the Necromancer was probably quite intense.

"Meow! Undertaker!"

Patter patter patter, a blonde magical girl with cat ears poking out came running and dove for my neck.

"Well, well. Who do we have here?"

"Myahaha!"

From the Magical Girl Association, the guardian collective of the Japanese archipelago. A sunflower bloomed across Manyo Neko's face.

"Really, really thank you, nya! I just thought you were some strange person I met at the Inunaki Tunnel entrance! To think you saved my friend... that you saved Yō-meow. I only just realized, meow!"

"Uh, yeah."

I was slightly flustered.

It was common knowledge that Manyo Neko was the representative pro-Undertaker faction within the Magical Girl Association.

But across all cycles, Manyo Neko had never been this uninhibited with physical contact.

Our relationship always maintained a gap somewhere between friends and comrades, creating a pleasant draft whenever the two of us talked.

"Oya."

Laughter sounded.

The Magical Girl Association's leader, the Great Priestess, approached while covering her mouth with a fan.

That laugh had just flowed down along the fan's folded creases like water through a valley.

"Isn't it natural? To discover that what you'd dismissed as chance encounters were actually all part of an operation to save your irreplaceable childhood friend."

"...Um."

Obsidian Qin had also arrived.

Originally scheduled to be sacrificed during the Inunaki Tunnel exploration, but from cycle 146 onward her fate was altered.

Afterward, she came to shoulder one pillar of the Association alongside her friend.

Like Seo Gyu who'd survived from the 50th cycle onward, Obsidian Qin was also a survivor who'd belatedly escaped the schedule of extinction.

"Thank... you."

Bow.

Still wearing her trademark mask with the 'X' mark drawn on it, she let her black hair hang down as she gave me a respectful bow.

"Why the Inunaki Tunnel, judged to be a special-grade specter, disappeared before we could even begin proper exploration... I never imagined something like that had happened."

[Truly a peculiar fate, is it not!]

The armless swordsman.

Phantom Blade laughed heartily through telepathic magic rather than spoken words.

[Remembering when we sailed out to sea with lord Undateikeo and were attacked by aliens still chills my liver!]

"Their weakness was water. They melted like whipped cream when touched by water."

[Ah, I heard from lord Dok-seo. Heh. Truly. Meeting their end in the middle of the ocean to children whose weakness was water, there could be no greater foolishness than that.]

Tap.

Phantom Blade moved her scabbard with telekinesis to tap my forearm. It tickled.

[There were many comrades I wished to march alongside, but this is the Great Void. The expedition was composed only of combat ability users who could at minimum pull their own weight, I hear. Please understand.]

"What do I have to understand? I'm grateful you came at all."

[Lord Undateikeo is truly a samurai who has grasped righteousness!]

I continued exchanging warm greetings with various comrades one after another.

All were welcome faces, though occasionally there were some who stirred particularly deep emotions.

"U-Undertaker-san."

"Oh. Uehara."

"Was I... only useful in the early stages as a B-rank ability user and then discarded from the midpoint onward?"

"Pfft."

Sim Ah-ryeon, who'd been fidgeting nearby, openly burst out laughing.

Uehara Shino's expression darkened.

"Besides, our speech patterns are similar too. I stutter when I talk, and that one over there also..."

"No. You're just awkward when speaking Korean. Ah-ryeon over there is like that because humanity itself is awkward to her, so it's a different dimension."

"The reality that hierarchies exist even among awakening abilities is deplorable..."

For reference, Uehara Shino was a Japanese Communist Party supporter. She'd probably get along splendidly with a certain German-born old man.

Everyone was crowding around me, sharing retrospective memories that might be their last, when.

"..."

In the distance, I saw Lee Baek leaning against a wall.

Lee Baek. Lion's Roar ability user.

In the timeline where he lived alongside Go Yuri, he was an upstanding leader who'd filmed something like a National Road Management Director prequel.

But on my regression line, he was always the man stuck playing the

'early tutorial cancer character.'

"..."

Nod. Noticing my gaze, Baek gave a small bow of his head.

He couldn't bring himself to approach me directly to shake hands or voice an apology. Nevertheless, he wanted to participate in the final conquest battle to see it through.

That will could be felt in his eyes.

'Good expression.'

I smiled.

'Can a person change so much just from recalling memories of other cycles?'

How much time had passed?

The hubbub of chatter and the clamor of laughter had both grown relaxed enough to accept silence.

"Ah. Ahem, mic test."

Having rolled around like a balloon in a child's hands for hours, the air had grown full of vulnerabilities that Dok-seo slipped through as she grabbed a megaphone.

"Yes. Has everyone sufficiently caught up? Ah. I'm not some pervert like that Undertaker old man over there, so I can't perform absurd tricks like simultaneous foreign language interpretation. Please translate reasonably from the sides."

Laughter swept through the assembly.

"Hmm."

But then Dok-seo suddenly made a strange expression.

"Looking at everyone gathered like this, I'm newly reminded that I'm really quite a good person."

"?"

Question marks floated above the expedition members' heads.

"Even though I was born chosen as the protagonist, thinking about how I rolled through hundreds of cycles taking care of all these extras one by one, I wonder if anyone quite like me even exists..."

"?"

"This world owes a debt to the goodwill of the human being called me. That fact. The truth that this gathering was made possible by my treating all of you without any favoritism, I hope you won't forget even when the day comes that the Great Void is conquered and memories grow hazy."

"..."

Silence.

"What the hell is that serial abandoner babbling about?"

Finally someone couldn't hold back.

"Hey! LiteraryGirl! The sight of you calling in readers to beat them up after you went corrupt is still vivid in my mind, what kind of fucking goodwill! Goodwill!"

"You bastard! You're the one who wrote fanfic about Director Do-hwa under that ridiculous pen name Non-LiteraryBoy, right? You're the one who changed pen names!"

"Grrrr!"

"You said you couldn't do foreign languages but why did you run AOIM GPT to churn out translations and spread them around?! So we'd suffer too?!"

"E-even your view counts were always lower than mine. If I'd been the guild leader's ghostwriter, I would've cut the regression within 500 cycles... That's just facts..."

"There's suspicion that the Cheon Yo-hwa sisterly yuri novel that suddenly appeared anonymously on the SG Net novel serialization board in 806th cycle was your work."

"If you had time to shit out stuff like that, write the main story! The main story!"

Truly enthusiastic cheers like wildfire.

Dok-seo adjusted her cap with a huff and a smirk.

Damage taken: zero. She looked completely unfazed.

The thought process currently rolling around inside that skull was plainly visible without needing exploratory surgery.

She was probably absorbed in self-praise like 'Seeing how I drove both fans and haters crazy, I really do have the qualities of a superstar!' I'd bet my entire fortune on it.

"Life is suffering. If the fate of a writer is to be beaten by the ignorant nonsense of the masses, then I shall say to those base heavens that I loved my life as a writer..."

"Stop your bullshit!"

"We were the ones suffering because of a serial abandoner like you, you bastard!"

"But now the time has come to put an ending on the story of first draft Go Yuri, revision Undertaker, and editor Dok-seo. Let's go! My beloved readers!"

People threw rotten tomatoes and eggs, but those projectiles never made contact with the person called Dok-seo to create tomato-egg fried rice. Dok-seo didn't budge an inch and trudged forward.

The reason was simple. The [Absolute Defense] that had already reached the realm of a great immortal spat back all those projectiles.

The current Oh Dok-seo was invincible.

"Goodness..."

Dang Seo-rin, who'd stuck close beside me, let out a hollow laugh in disbelief.

"The final conquest battle. And she's probably the first in human history to ruin a morale-boosting speech like that..."

"She's probably thinking right now that she looks incredibly cool."

"Why on earth did the baton of world salvation get passed to a kid like that?"

"Who knows."

I smiled.

"Maybe because her talent for loving herself and the world surpasses anyone else's."

"..."

"Let's go, Seo-rin. We can't let your final concert be ruined."

"Yeah."

Thud.

I stepped forward.

Thud.

Seo-rin stepped forward. Ah-ryeon stepped forward, Ha-yul stepped forward, Yo-hwa stepped forward.

Thud.

Ye-ji stepped forward. Ji-won stepped forward. Do-hwa stepped forward.

Seo Gyu stepped forward, Baek stepped forward, Manyo Neko stepped forward, the Great Priestess stepped forward, Phantom Blade stepped forward, Obsidian Qin stepped forward.

Thud.

In Seo-rin's footsteps hung the night sky of Utopia.

In Ah-ryeon's footsteps were captured the Udumbara blooming at the ends of the earth.

In Ha-yul's footsteps, the puppet strings connecting humanity's final arks tied their knots.

In Yo-hwa's footsteps were white birch skins. In Ye-ji's footsteps was frozen white time.

In Ji-won's footsteps was seawater. In Do-hwa's footsteps were roads connecting to all the lonely cities of this earth.

Thud.

The extinctions humanity had endured, the deaths it couldn't endure, were carved into each and every one of those footsteps.

The screams that had been torn into thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of millions of branches, each creating discordant cacophony.

With me at the head, through everyone's footsteps taken with a thud, through the shadows of footfalls, they connected.

Route.

A single one.

"Mister."

We decided to call that lonely road 'time.'

"That's the main body of Dream Within a Dream."

The tip of Dok-seo's pointing finger.

There stood a glass monument split into a thousand, ten thousand branches, a gravestone transparent as a mirror, enduring as a massive citadel.

Carved into each of the hundreds of millions of glass facets were images of Go Yuri.

"...The tombstone of Time Seal."

"Yeah. It might even be the superior version of the ability you possess. Except that while you sealed other people, Yuri sealed none other than herself."

"I've explored Dream Within a Dream a few times too. I never saw such an absurdly massive tombstone then."

"Right."

Dok-seo nodded.

"That mirror cemetery. The kaleidoscope containing hundreds of millions of Yuri's disappears at exactly 2 p.m. on June 17th. By the outside world's standards, wait. Yeah. It'll happen 19 seconds from now."

"..."

"The White Night outside and this Dream Within a Dream's tombstone are linked to each other. While burning away every clue that might allow one to guess the Reincarnator Yuri's identity."

"What happens if we break that?"

That's when it happened.

"[The Corrupted Reincarnator] will descend."

It wasn't Dok-seo's voice.

I turned my head.

Dok-seo, not having heard that voice just now, was giving her own answer about something or other, but my attention was completely drawn forward.

"Guild Leader."

Go Yuri was there.

A phantom visible only to me.

"...You hadn't been visible for a while after entering Dream Within a Dream. Were you in a place like this?"

"I'm sorry. It wasn't intentional. It's no different from being forcibly dragged to where I should be."

"..."

"The [red flesh] Guild Leader occasionally witnessed. That's both the result of my existence becoming corrupted and an extremely, truly extremely weakened form."

"Weakened, you say?"

I couldn't help but ask back reflexively.

"That is weakened?"

"Yes. Though I may not look it, I'm an existence that accumulated the karma of an outer god in a human body, you know? Hundreds of millions of lifetimes. If I unleashed all hundreds of millions of abilities at once, well, things like the Outer Gods would have no choice but to collapse entirely."

"..."

"Except for the very minor drawback that the world I sought to protect would collapse along with them."

Yuri caressed the surface of the mirror-smooth tombstone.

"While crossing countless years, I sealed away my own abilities one by one."

"That's..."

It was a very familiar sound.

Yuri smiled brightly.

"Yes. Just like how Guild Leader restrains your own aura ability."

"..."

"In short, every single one of these countless split mirror surfaces holds the same status as 'the aura Guild Leader sealed,' each a vestigial organ from the past."

My mouth closed on its own.

"The traces of me as a human struggling to remain human. The traces of some ability I as a human once pinned my hopes on. If I'd been unable to give up to the very end and kept clinging to them, they would have certainly run rampant and led to corruption."

"..."

"The sum total of routes leading to bad endings."

Go Yuri turned to look at me.

No, not just me.

Dok-seo standing beside me. The members of the Regression Alliance. The hundreds of awakeners forming ranks behind us.

"Certainly, if you succeed in unearthing this tombstone and eliminating the 'corpse' that emerges, I'll truly be able to return to being human this time."

"..."

"But, is it possible?"

She, 'humanity of the past.'

Looked at us, 'humanity of the present,' and lifted the corners of her mouth.

"The traces of me sleeping in this tombstone possess no humanity. Of course. I scraped together every bit of humanity that remained, however faint, and handed it over to the me outside."

"...Truly a monster then."

"Yes. The noise, the dirge of some pitiful existence that eternally laments a world and human fate it could never save by itself, abandoning even its own self."

Yuri placed both hands neatly at her waist.

"So this is the final Rubicon River. Guild Leader. If you want to turn back, now is your only chance."

"..."

"It's a cemetery no one knew existed anyway. Once White Night erupts, it'll disappear forever without leaving even a trace. You can all just return like this and occasionally drop by Dream Within a Dream through the fairies, receive the memories of previous cycles like an IV drip, and live on reminiscing about your connections with each other."

"And you won't be there."

Go Yuri's eyebrows lowered.

"I consider that what remains in Guild Leader's memory was a sufficient lifetime. Still."

"Sorry, but…"

I grasped Dok-seo's shoulder.

"The child who inherited our legacy seems to think differently."

"..."

"Old Man Scho."

Thud.

Emit Schopenhauer stepped forward. A quiet footfall. In his hand was gripped a single nameless sword.

"Aye. You called?"

"Cut that thing down."

After that, words weren't necessary.

One sword stroke.

At a speed difficult to follow with the eyes, Emit Schopenhauer drew his blade, and slightly slower than the arc the sword traced, the crystal tombstone slid apart.

"Ahh."

Go Yuri too was cut along with the tombstone.

A crack traced across that slender smile.

"Truly, such incorrigible greedy ones..."

And then.

Bursting through the shattered mirrors with broken seals, red flesh surged forth.

Humanity's long nightmare had arrived.

Footnotes:

Chapter 434

The Savior Ω VIII

Sinnoa

The one who is reborn again and again. A reincarnator (還生者).

The one who deceives like an illusion. An illusionist (幻生者).

An existence where two meanings overlapped.

The prison she had sealed herself within was cleaved in two by a single strike from Emit Schopenhauer, the Swordmaster.

And then.

[Brother.]

The fragments of the shattered glass prison scattered through the air.

Before the mirror shards could even fall to the ground, something wrapped tightly around the nape of my neck.

[Go Yuir.]

It was Yuri's illusion.

The scent of apples rushed sharply into my nostrils.

A voice and gestures that Yuri must have been born with in some reincarnation embraced me from behind, whispering softly.

It wasn't just me who was experiencing this.

[Father.]

[You came all this way to find me?]

[Yo-hwa unni.]

[I'm so happy.]

[Ye-ji.]

The entire strike team.

Hundreds of illusions, hundreds of reincarnations that had sprouted from everyone's shadows were breathing sweet whispers, enchanting the strike team members.

Giggles scattered through the air.

"...!"

The sound of gasps being drawn in echoed unevenly from all directions.

A comfort overwhelmingly richer than any sense of duty to save this world. The sensation of the emptiness in their hearts, the one they'd been searching for since birth, being filled with warmth.

[Let's become one.]

No matter how firm their minds were, their brains melted dizzily at those gentle whispers.

Only ten seconds had passed since the glass prison shattered.

The battle hadn't even truly begun, yet the strike team was on the verge of being completely neutralized.

Groans burst like lumps across the battlefield.

"Ugh...!"

"Everyone, snap out of it! This is an illusion!"

[Ahaha. An illusion? Father, that's too much.]

"Ah, aah. Aah—"

It was hard to find any vitality in the voices of the awakeners trying to rally themselves.

Only then did I realize.

Even in her normal state, Yuri naturally maxed out favorability scores with people around her as easily as breathing, but even that was actually the result of Yuri exercising considerable restraint.

'Just hearing the voice feels like my nerves are burning up.'

For the reincarnator who had lost even the minimal will to remain human, there was no such thing as self-restraint.

Hungry, so she devours.

That level of instinct. With a desire no different from gluttony, the illusions of the reincarnator stroked the strike team members, caressed them, and pulled them close.

"Ji-won!"

In the torrent of pink temptation, there were only two people who maintained their sanity from the very beginning.

One was the legendary skeptic who had strangled the reincarnator when she was just a newborn baby, telling her not to live in this painful world.

"Yes. Mr. Matiz."

The other was someone who couldn't be satisfied with such illusions, someone who desired the one and only real Yuri in this world, the false Regressor.

Ji-won clasped her hands together in prayer.

At that moment, an aurora spread across the ground.

"Haa...!"

"Th-thank you! Team Leader!"

Poof! Pwoong! As the aurora's waves rushed all the way to the distant horizon, the sound of bubbles bursting echoed from all

directions.

The seven-colored aurora swept across the ground, completely erasing the shadows cast by the strike team members.

When the shadows disappeared, the forms of Yuri that had been manifesting through them also faded away.

"Nice! Ji-won unni!"

Dok-seo shouted enthusiastically.

Just moments ago, she'd been drooling and delighted by Yuri's touch, but as befitting someone who was a true possessor, the evidence of that shameful display had long since been scrubbed away with the back of her hand.

"See that! As long as mental manipulation doesn't work, it doesn't matter if she's reincarnated billions of times, she's nothing! You pink tentacle brainwashing one-trick!"

"It seems this strike team has a culture where the leader-type humans voluntarily summon cliché anomalies..."

"Huh? What are you saying, old man—"

Dok-seo's words didn't continue.

"—? ...!!"

Her lips kept moving, but no sound came out. No, the entire battlefield had fallen completely silent.

"..., ...!"

"...!"

A soundless outcry.

It wasn't just voices, even footsteps couldn't be heard. Hundreds of awakeners were present, yet not a single breath could be heard flowing.

It was an eerily cold silence, but I wasn't flustered at all.

'It's one of Yuri's abilities.'

[Sound Seal].

Go Yuri, who had lived countless lives, possessed countless abilities.

Most of them, even Yuri herself couldn't clearly remember. Because she lacked the ability to remember everything.

Even if she couldn't remember them, the fact that the abilities existed was undeniable.

That's why Yuri in her prime didn't fight with the intention of 'I'll activate this or that ability.'

If she thought 'it's a bit noisy.'

Just that alone, and the sound would disappear.

A state infinitely close to omnipotence.

[..., ...!]

The seal on sound wasn't limited to just voices. The telepathy from the Saintess holding position in the rear was neutralized instantly as well.

The Saintess wasn't slow to catch on either.

[Everyone, please don't panic.]

The Saintess quickly grasped the situation and switched the method of conveying messages from 'sound' to 'text.'

[Currently, the enemy appears to have chosen a strategy of neutralizing us rather than attacking us directly.]

[However, we've prepared for every contingency.]

[Even if this is an unfamiliar battle, please trust the command and engage in combat.]

Tatatatatak—

Text appeared before my eyes in rapid succession without a hint of lag.

The Saintess was probably mixing in time stops herself, saving even the scraps of time wasted on typing.

[Please attach the puppet threads spread by Puppeteer Ha-yul to your wrists or forearms.]

[In case text transmission is also blocked, please combine messages according to the colors glowing from the puppet threads and act accordi■■■, ■■■.]

[■■■ ■ ■ ■ ■■■ ■■■—]

Bzzzzt.

The text became scrambled with black noise.

Soon, the text was completely cut off.

When I turned my head to look in the Saintess's direction, I realized no one was there.

But I felt someone gripping my other hand tightly.

"Mr. Undertaker."

Time stopped.

Before I knew it, the Saintess had approached right next to me and was holding my hand. Beads of sweat had formed on the brow of her face, which had maintained its expressionless mask throughout.

"What's happening? Ah, sound works here."

"If I stop time, it seems I can resist Yuri's authority to some extent. But I don't know how long even this will last."

"What?"

"Yuri has the ability of [Time Acceleration]."

The Saintess let out several groans as if the burden was too much.

"If I hadn't hurriedly stopped time just now, dozens of years would have passed in an instant by this place's standards."

"...!"

"No matter how slowly time flows in this dream within a dream, if decades pass, there's no answer. In the outside reality, White Night would have arrived, and our operation would have immediately failed."

This was insane.

The Saintess's arm gripping my hand was trembling with small aftershocks even now.

A nasal grunt. Even at this very moment, [Time Stop] and [Time Acceleration] were clearly fighting for dominance.

"Did Yuri have... this kind of ability too?"

"Something similar existed. But that was only accelerating the flow of thought at most. To actually speed up time itself like this... Ah!"

I immediately realized the cause of the abnormality.

"This isn't reality, it's Go Yuri's divine realm! It's no different from the depths of her dreams. So as a result, [accelerating the flow of thought] has become equivalent to [accelerating the flow of time]!"

"...The ability to dream faster."

The Saintess groaned.

"We misjudged. We formulated our operation based on the abilities Go Yuri possessed in reality... If your speculation is correct, Mr. Undertaker, those abilities will have become far more severe."

"Yes. But there's no need to panic. Originally, it's natural for Outer

Gods to become more powerful in their own divine realms."

"That's also… true."

Bzzzzt.

The Saintess's voice became distorted with noise.

What she'd just said was also fragmented. Like 'that's/also/true.'

Even she, the most powerful awakener, was gradually being pushed back. By the nightmare of red flesh. Humanity's oldest dream. By the authority of the Outer God, the reincarnator.

"Regression might be the right answer in the current situation."

The Saintess spoke with difficulty, grinding her teeth.

"Since we've scouted the enemy's true strength, this cycle had meaning too. Leaving the strategy to the next Ms. Dok-seo and Mr. Undertaker might also..."

"It's always an available option. But we can't presume that the data from this cycle will only flow in our favor."

The reincarnator Yuri also had abilities like [Memory Reading].

"No matter what operation we devise, the moment we make contact with the illusions manifested from the shadows, our side's information immediately leaks to theirs."

"Ah..."

"The reason the reincarnator is sealing sound and text first and accelerating time also stems from that. After completely reading through our operation, she's chosen the most efficient route."

"Counter-strategizing our strategy..."

Truly the worst possible enemy.

"Retreating here won't give us any answers."

It wasn't for nothing that we'd reached the conclusion that Yuri needed to seal herself.

Even if all of humanity except Yuri united, opposing this reincarnated monster would be hopeless.

The reincarnator couldn't even carelessly commit suicide.

For her, suicide was the start of another life, and at the end of that beginning, an even more powerful authority would be waiting to awaken.

The Saintess looked up at me with worried eyes.

"Then I'll leave it to your decision, Mr. Undertaker."

"..."

"We prepared as much as we could, but ultimately, the only person who has a perspective equal to that reincarnating being is you, Mr. Undertaker."

...There wasn't much time left.

In the first place, we'd jumped into this dream within a dream to overcome the ridiculous constraint of 'one minute time limit.'

Now that the opponent had also noticed this and begun counterattacking, the battle would come down to a clash of pure strength.

The current Saintess had joined up with Dok-seo early to level up intentionally, which was why she was managing to hold on, but at this rate—

'Wait.'

A flash of lightning suddenly struck through my mind.

'Divine realm. Intentional leveling?'

I opened my mouth.

"One more layer."

"Yes?"

"Let's descend one more layer down."

The Saintess's sweat-soaked hair tilted slightly.

"One more layer... underground? I'm sorry, Mr. Undertaker. Wasn't this the terminal station for the divine realm where Ms. Yuri resides?"

"For Yuri, yes."

I raised my finger.

My index finger pointed to my own chest.

"But wouldn't I be different?"

"...What?"

"Since there's no one else listening besides you right now, Ms. Saintess, I'll tell you this. I was originally someone with a high risk of corruption, and after living through all of Yuri's lives exactly as she did, I've truly stepped outside the bounds of an ordinary human."

"..."

"This place is where Yuri's memories have descended all the way to her unconscious and taken root. Even Yuri, whose memory is ambiguous, was able to unfold a divine realm of this magnitude. Then... what about my dream within a dream, where I remember all those lives?"

"..."

The Saintess's face became peculiar. An expression that was exactly half seriousness and half absurdity.

"Um, in the end, that's basically admitting that you yourself are

currently corrupted..."

"That's why I tried to get sealed away and disappear quickly. Dok-seo is to blame for dragging things out with hundreds of retries from there."

"Ms. Dok-seo did that out of a single-minded desire to save you, Mr. Undertaker."

"Ms. Saintess. We don't have much time right now."

I spoke hurriedly.

"I'll fall asleep first, so connect all available personnel through Ha-yul's puppet threads. And talk to Yo-hwa in advance, so that the moment [Time Stop] is released, you need to bring the strike team members into my dream. Understood?"

"...Okay."

The Saintess stopped nagging. Her will to not ask further questions after having already entrusted me with operational command was evident.

For a moment, the sensation of the Saintess holding my hand disappeared—

"Ms. Ha-yul. I spoke with Ms. Yo-hwa."

Having switched time stop on and off, the Saintess appeared before me again.

She was holding me with her right hand and Yo-hwa with her left. Yo-hwa had also been released from the constraints of time stop and was looking at me with a serious expression.

"Teacher. I heard the outline of the operation!"

"Good. Ms. Saintess, what's the time limit?"

"I only released it for a brief moment but already ten seconds have passed by reality's standards. Mr. Undertaker. Now we have to

resolve everything within ten seconds."

I nodded.

"I'll fall asleep first. Please follow properly with the children."

"Understood."

"Yo-hwa, I'm counting on you."

"Okay!"

As Yo-hwa, who was currently acting as the master of the dream demons, interlaced her fingers deeply, my head became hazy in an instant.

'If this was Yuri's divine realm, then from now on the battlefield will shift to my divine realm.'

Of course, that didn't mean Yuri's authority would weaken.

As I'd told the Saintess, I remembered all of her lives, and relying on those memories, the reincarnator could demonstrate her abilities at any time.

However…

'Unlike Yuri's divine realm, [allies] that don't exist there will exist in my divine realm.'

Before I knew it, I had closed my eyes without realizing.

"Aha."

The moment I opened them.

"Ahaha, ahat—"

An orange ponytail swayed before my eyes.

A face that looked exactly like Yo-hwa.

But instead of a white uniform, a girl wearing a black uniform was

smiling.

"Ahahahahahaha! Ahahahat! Ahahahaha—!"

Wild laughter.

Her face was dyed with excited exhilaration. Her eyebrows trembled with a thrill, and ecstasy surged from beyond her throat.

"Ahaha, see!"

Cheon Yo-hwa (天寥化).

"I was right! I was right, wasn't I! Ooh— Sunbae! Sunbae won! Of course there were many variables I didn't expect either... What does it matter! Either way, I bet on the winning side! That's all that matters!"

A former Regression Alliance member who barely maintained her existence precariously, only through me.

As the other strike team members followed one after another into the new battlefield behind me, Yo-hwa paid them no attention at all and grabbed my hand tightly.

"Welcome, Sunbae! Master of my divine realm! You really, truly worked so hard to get here! Yeah!"

The final strike team member.

Along with her twin sister, one half of the Taeguk, a fragment of the Outer God.

"The final battle! Let's finish it together!"

It was the moment the first and final strike team was completed.

Footnotes:

Chapter 435

The Savior Ω IX

Sinnoa

"Mr. Undertaker. The number of people I could bring at once was limited, so a few were left behind."

Tap, the Saintess stepped forward lightly.

The ashen ground she stepped on was no ordinary place. A subspace unfolded solely based on my dream, my memories.

The divine realm of the false regressor.

"Still, I brought most of them—"

She paused.

Only now did the surrounding scenery finally register in the eyes of the Saintess, who had devoted herself to making this hastily revised operation a success.

"Good heavens. This place..."

"..."

She wasn't the only one who was at a loss for words.

The strike team members who had arrived in my divine realm simultaneously with the Saintess. Whether it was Seo-rin or Ha-yul, without exception, they all looked dumbfounded as they frantically looked around.

The first to open her lips was Ji-won.

"Hmm. There are a lot of corpses."

Next was Dok-seo.

"A-a lot? This isn't at that level! It's just... there's nothing but corpses?!"

Dok-seo's expression was accurate.

The bottom of the deepest unconscious.

And this place, which they'd descended to using me as a staircase, was simply the heart of a nightmare where corpses sprawled all the way to the horizon beyond.

A mountain of corpses in a sea of blood.

In this place where it seemed no words could seep through the crevices between the corpses, if we had to give it a name, only something like that would barely be permitted.

"Wow."

Ah-ryeon's eyes sparkled brightly.

She was already on her knees, rummaging through corpses. Even as blood seeped under her fingernails, she rejoiced like a child dyeing their nails with garden balsam.

"Th-this... looks exactly like me! It's my face! But there are leaves sprouting here and there on the face... It's the end of me after becoming a World Tree! Guild Leader!"

"Ugh."

Seo-rin made a disgusted expression.

"Why are you deliberately rummaging through something like that?"

"Huh? Th-this is Guild Leader's deepest heart, isn't it? And there are so many of my corpses here... Aren't you happy?"

"That's morbid. Really!"

That's right.

This divine realm, the 'Cemetery of the Mountain of Corpses in a Sea of Blood,' was practically no different from revealing the world as I saw it.

How could the corpses collapsed here be only Ah-ryeon's?

The Saintess was stepping on the Saintess's forearm, Seo-rin's heels stepping back crushed Seo-rin's cheek, and at the edge of Ji-won's gaze hung Ji-won's severed torso.

"Unni...?"

Amid all this, Yo-hwa looked with a blank face at the reinforcement newly arrived in this divine realm.

"Yep. Guten Tag. Meine Schwester?"

Grin.

Yo-hwa, receiving the gaze, waved her hand. With her other hand, she still had her fingers tightly interlaced with mine.

"A-are you really my unni? I mean, my twin?"

"Yo-hwa. What exactly is 'real'?"

"Huh?"

"For me, the only person who truly exists in this world is Sunbae here. Ah, of course you exist too! For convenience's sake, for convenience."

"...What?"

"In short, if they're someone remembered by Sunbae, who is a true human, then they too can be called a true human. You know trickle-down economics, right, my little sister? That's a concept that applies to humanity's humanness too."

"..."

"In that sense, having received the trickle-down, or rather, having

opened my mouth wide directly under the faucet and gone chug-chug drinking the flowing water, this body is truly a human among humans. You could call me Adam's Eve. Final answer? Yes! Final answer!"

"...Ah, I see. So that's the kind of human she was."

Understanding, resignation, and a bit of contempt settled on Yo-hwa's expression. Sisterly affection had built up at super speed.

Not long after the separated family reunion, an earthquake occurred from beyond the horizon of corpses.

Kruuuuuung...!

The strike team members' gazes all turned simultaneously.

Kruuung, kruuuuuuung...!

Corpses swept up in the tremors scattered through the air.

Some corpses shot up to the sky, then fell bizarrely slowly.

Thud! There were also corpses that flew right up to our noses and added one more to the pile. Ah-ryeon, who happened to be nearby, flinched.

"Hii, hiiiik!"

The turbulence beyond the horizon was endless, and the corpses flying toward us didn't decrease either.

All those corpses had Yuri's face mounted on them.

"..."

Mounted meant, literally, mounted.

The corpses had different genders and different body types.

Only the faces. Where different expressions should have been, 'Yuri's facial skin' was mounted.

It was the most cruel prayer.

All the anonymous lives spent on reincarnation wriggled and chanted a single name like a Buddhist prayer.

"It's coming."

Someone's murmur.

Oooo oooo oooo...!

The horizon writhed and squirmed, then red flesh rose up from it.

Its size was immeasurable.

Even the sky that had seemed endlessly vast became nothing but a frustrating background screen once the red flesh appeared, and the earth groaned with cramped square footage.

'Hello?' 'What is life.' 'Nice to meet you.' 'Ahaha.' 'Mother.'

Flutter—.

Whenever the giant tentacles undulated, ripples spread across their surface. Yuri's face, arms, legs, gestures. A temple incarnated as a lump of meat was singing a hymn.

It was mumbling that no one could understand.

However, to me, the master of this divine realm and someone who had received a tenfold song implanted in my heart by Hecate, it was clearly audible.

'Huh?' 'How many days do I have left to look at the sky and feel it's beautiful.' 'What a coincidence.' 'Guild Leader.' 'Let's become one.' 'Mr. Undertaker?' 'Once upon a time,' 'it was said.' 'Likewise.' 'Something only I can do.'

There was no great meaning in those murmurs.

Simply, because the reincarnators of the past who had already died had accumulated far too much compared to the living reincarnator

of the present life, there were only gestures where the subject had reversed.

"Uuugh...!"

"I-it's too noisy!"

"Everyone, cover your ears!"

Unlike me, the strike team members who couldn't understand the Outer God's screams groaned in pain.

"Mr. Undertaker."

The Saintess spoke urgently.

"We don't know when 'that thing' will use its authorities again. It seems to have gotten even stronger."

"It's not a misconception. Right now, Yuri and I are in an inseparable relationship. When she enters my divine realm, Yuri is strengthened as well."

"...We entered here following Mr. Undertaker's proposal, but do you have a countermeasure?"

"Of course I do."

I smiled.

"Don't you understand yet?"

"What?"

"Yuri isn't the only one who becomes stronger here. I know not only Yuri's life but all of your lives as well. For instance, the Saintess from a cycle where she fell and became a priestess of an Outer God."

"...!"

The Saintess's eyes widened.

"Then...? Wait a moment."

The Saintess raised her arm and spread her fingers.

"...This is impossible."

A moment later, a rare shadow of shock settled on her expression.

"It's true. Even if I stop time, I'm not tired at all. I feel like I could respond to the enemy's time acceleration as much as I want... that kind of feeling."

"Ah! So you finally understand how Sunbae's divine realm works!"

Yo-hwa giggled. She seemed excited, as if dopamine had been going crazy since earlier.

"That's right! As long as Sunbae permits it, in this divine realm everyone can demonstrate their abilities at their prime!"

"Prime..."

"Yes! Our Sunbae isn't a support genius for nothing! Tricks like this are possible too!"

Yo-hwa finally released her interlaced fingers. Instead of grabbing mine, she firmly grabbed her twin sister's hands.

Both of them.

"Huh?"

"Yo-hwa, don't worry. After this operation ends anyway, we'll all get one shot of Udumbara detox and return to being human."

"Wh-what are you... saying?"

"Mmm, my little sister. It means this is our first and last stage where we can run wild without worrying about the aftermath."

The corners of Yo-hwa's eyes curved like half-moons.

"O Taeguk."

At that moment.

"Father and mother and child of all things. Descend here and now."

The world twisted.

Among the corpses forming the mountain of corpses in a sea of blood, only the corpses of Yo-hwa and Yo-hwa, just the two of them, surrounded the sisters as if caught in a whirlpool.

The corpses made 'hands.' Hands grasped other corpses' hands, and corpses without hands had their toes twisted to act as hands instead.

The corpses bloomed endlessly like flowers. The outline or form of bodies had no meaning. Arms sprouted from stomachs, and chests vomited out faces.

"Ah."

Yo-hwa's eyes wavered.

If even the outline of herself was like this, what about other things?

An authority that toys with all boundaries. When the power that mocks all things entered her hands, Yo-hwa couldn't help but convulse.

"This is..."

"The role originally assigned to us sisters."

Yo-hwa grinned.

Originally, in the early cycles, Yo-hwa had gained fame as a Necromancer.

Necromancy that broke down the boundary between life and death was, in fact, merely the most basic feat for Taeguk.

"Because one person can't handle it. The ancient god of our household and shitty Outer God bastard can only receive a

complete descent in the body of twins.”

"..."

"Our lives were ruined because of it, so if we get some benefit from it, who's going to say anything? Don't worry. This unni will escort you through everything step by step."

"...Yes. No, yeah. Please do. Unni."

"Alright. Shall we send a light jab as a greeting to our Sunbae who's been around much longer than us?"

One of the corpses drew a sword.

Even that sword had spontaneously generated from the corpse.

Pshhhk! Like an offering sacrificing itself, the corpse thrust the sword tip into where its heart should be.

The moment one offering sacrificed itself voluntarily.

Oooo oooo oooo...!

Blood spurted from a corner of the red flesh that had been approaching from the horizon.

Since one spurt of blood boasted a quantity comparable to a river, the mountain of corpses in a sea of blood literally formed rivers of blood.

"Hmm."

Yo-hwa's eyes narrowed.

"I tried to erase that ability first since [Teleportation] seemed like it would be the most annoying. But something else got erased?"

"Teleportation was probably possessed by the Yuri who remained in reality, not that lump of flesh."

I said.

"How did you erase the reincarnator's ability?"

"Well, um. It's intuitive, so it's hard to explain. I'm implementing a simulation of the reincarnation where teacher Yuri awakened teleportation, then overwriting it with a scenario where I stab her to death with a sword."

"...Is the principle the same as Do-hwa?"

"One more shot."

Pshk! This time, three of the corpses dancing in a circle around the Yo-hwa sisters simultaneously drew swords and sacrificed themselves.

Oooo oooo oooo...!

Three strands of the red flesh's tentacles melted like candle wax. The source of the blood flowing onto this earth was the tentacles that died like that.

"I just killed [Sound Seal], [Memory Reading], [Sensory Contamination]. How's that, Sunbae? Amazing, right?"

"Now I understand why Go Yuri tried so desperately to split Taeguk into Infinite Void and Mastermind."

"Right, right. Originally, the final boss wasn't that lump of meat but us sisters..."

Psssssssht!

The corpses that had been dancing in a circle perfectly fine suddenly had their chests split open. Soon their hearts burst and they collapsed with thuds.

At a glance, it reached six hundred corpses.

"...Mm."

Yo-hwa's confident smile became ambiguous.

"Teacher Y-Yuri is reacting a bit strongly? Running the simulation is tough."

"...Don't tell me that to kill three Go Yuris in the simulation, six hundred of you were killed in reverse?"

"A mistake, a mistake! This is just a small happening that occurred because I'm not yet familiar with handling Taeguk. Ah, the more powerful abilities are concentrated in the relatively later reincarnations, so it's not easy—"

Thud. Thud thud!

Even while speaking, the chests of the corpses in the circle kept splitting without rest. Yo-hwa was horrified at the alarming speed of the open-heart surgeries.

"Ah, damn! Are you planning to dump everything on us sisters and just play around?! What's the strike team doing! What's the healer doing! Hurry! Heal!"

"H-hwaa."

Ah-ryeon responded in her usual blank voice.

"It's not even alive, and h-healing something that's already dead is my first time too..."

What happened at her fingertips was completely unlike usual.

Srrrrk—

Flowers bloomed from the corpses of the twin sisters buried face-down in the mountain of corpses in a sea of blood. From split chests, from where hearts had burst.

Soon the spider lilies formed riverbanks.

The corpses stained red rose up wriggling again and, with hands clasped together, joined the procession of the eternal circle dance.

"Ooh!"

Yo-hwa let out an exclamation.

"As expected, Ah-ryeon! The best contaminated one and best healer in Sunbae's party! I believed in you!"

"Being told that by someone I'm meeting for the first time... doesn't give me any impression at all..."

"Anyway, with this the perpetual motion machine is complete! Now then, without dragging it out, let's quickly crush Yuri-sensei's authorities—."

Right then.

A tentacle extended from the red flesh that had definitely been straddling the horizon and struck the circle dance.

"Ack."

Divine speed.

The sisters didn't even have time to react.

The circle dance of corpses that seemed like it would continue forever had half of it evaporate.

Even this was only because I quickly stepped forward and deflected in one stroke the red flesh's tentacle that had been aimed at 'this side.'

If I hadn't stepped forward, the tentacle would have struck not the periphery of the circle dance but the center, meaning the Yo-hwa sisters.

"S-Sunbae."

"You drew too much aggro. The opponent is the most sublime and cruel Outer God. I understand that winning at a 0.1% gambling table makes dopamine secrete like crazy, but if you make one wrong move, you'll be gone in one hit."

Before my words even ended, tentacles began flying one after

another. This time not one but tens of thousands.

[I'm.]

The majority of them were slaughtered midway.

[I'm sorry, the nullification-type abilities.]

Still tens of thousands of tentacles remained.

I gripped Do-hwa's handle tightly to fight against them, but I didn't need to take a step forward.

Kwaaarrrrrk!

The wave of tentacles that had been swung with momentum to sweep this side away exploded after being blocked by an 'invisible wall.'

The blood that burst as the tentacles shattered also didn't flow in the direction where our allies were.

The 'transparent barriers' became covered with liquids like a car window running through heavy rain.

"Phew."

Step.

A girl with hair as red as blood passed by my side and took one step forward.

Glancing back at this side, like someone convinced they existed at the coolest angle of their life.

"I."

She spoke with a nihilistic expression at a level that would slap Osamu Dazai's cheek and strike Edgar Allan Poe's chin.

"Heavenly Demon, descending."

"..."

LiteraryGirl's prime.

A.K.A. The author who beats up readers.

"Cool. Confirmed."

It was the second coming of the most wicked one.

Footnotes:

Chapter 436

The Savior Ω X

Sinnoa

"I’m not afraid of anything anymore."

Heavenly Demon Dok-seo declared.

"Because… I'm not alone anymore!"

Some strike team members seemed moved upon hearing that line.

They probably understood it at face value as 'not alone = having other comrades.'

"..."

On the other hand, some awakeners who knew the original source of that line, including myself (especially the Japanese archipelago strike team members who had expertise in magical girls), had subtle expressions.

Since they possessed sufficient knowledge and culture, they couldn't help but wonder, 'What? Does she want to get her head smashed in?'

However, surprisingly, limited to just that moment, Dok-seo's words weren't simply a joke but contained a sliver of truth.

Really, Dok-seo wasn't alone.

[You crazy priestess!]

Clang—

A voice degraded by speakers rang out.

It was a sound coming from the laptop Dok-seo was holding under

her arm.

Soon, from the laptop screen, a tiny dot-mass dwarf girl jumped, and wouldn't you know it, her body rapidly grew to the size of a real person in the blink of an eye.

[Please, stop piling up clichés already, I'm begging you! Do you even know how hard I'm working on repair construction to clean up after you?!]

The identity of the white-haired girl raging with nearly fainting fury was... why hide it.

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame, who had once trampled the world and made anomalies tremble, was there.

"Wow."

Yo-hwa nodded as if pleased.

"Who do we have here? If it isn't the loser of the previous era."

It was an unavoidable greeting method since her interlaced fingers were still fixed to her twin sister, but even in a different situation, it didn't seem like the greeting would have been particularly polite.

The Admin frowned at the rudeness of those words and actions.

[Huh? The shame of an Outer God who wagged its tail to mere humans should shut up.]

"Gasp! Fact violence hurts so much. But it's kind of a shame... If only it hadn't come from someone who cast 'I'll give you all my authority and dignity, just spare me' to mere humans, it would have hurt more."

[...]

"This side joined early and got the authentic human certification mark attached nice and bright, right? That side kept throwing in every last penny until the very end and signed the surrender document, right? Now when the subjugation is over, at best you'll

be a blue checkmark VTuber, right?"

[...]

"Kekekekeke!"

At the miraculous roast battle, the Admin's shoulders trembled violently.

At least it was fortunate that red flesh tentacles were rushing in from all directions.

The noise was so loud, and the strike team members were busy reorganizing their formation, relying on the barrier the Heavenly Demon had deployed.

Dok-seo shouted.

"Hey! Admin! The output's not enough!"

[Haa. Really, how did I end up with my fate mortgaged to such an un-priestess-like priestess…]

"Shut up and do something about the tentacles! They're all tough with special effects attached!"

[Yes yes, I understand.]

The relationship between the two had a different color from what I was used to seeing.

I could infer the reason.

'Well, yeah. Those two broke through new routes while sharing joys and sorrows for over thousands of cycles.'

From Dok-seo's perspective, who had to run around alone to prevent the tragedy of June 17th, the Outer God trapped in the laptop must have been her first companion.

Originally, the modifier 'companion' could never have applied... but the Admin had also undergone considerable humanization through

me.

If they'd faced countless hardships and deaths together, they couldn't help but develop into a close relationship.

'There are also stories I don't know. Even in this place I can call my own divine realm.'

Of course.

There were also stories I did know.

"Samcheon World."

Seo-rin raised her broom.

"We won't finish if we only defend. We'll pave the way first. Everyone, follow me."

"Yes!"

The Samcheon World strike team members formed a formation in unison and kicked off into the sky.

Oooo oooo oooo...!

Countless tentacles sharply changed course. To intercept the witches of Samcheon World.

If they lost focus even slightly, they'd be buried under the tentacles' wave attacks and die, but the witches' flight didn't stop.

Dizzyingly, yet with movements trained through countless practices and actual combat, the witches of Samcheon drew geometric contrails.

Even if the opponent was a reincarnator who had repeated billions of lifetimes, the mission given to humanity's front line was fundamentally the same.

When fighting against Ten Legs, when shooting down Meteor Shower.

Pioneer the sky first.

"What are you all doing!"

Below the sky being scored with cracks by the witches, Yo-hwa, who had been directing the circle dance of corpses on the ground, shouted.

"Move together with Dok-seo and advance! Use the barrier as a shield to march forward! Aah, seriously. Unni! Don't do this here and move with me!"

"Ah. I'm a rear support type strategist..."

"Hurry!"

Baekwha Girls' High marched forward.

If each witch of Samcheon was a pilot embroidering the night sky with starlight, the warriors of Baekwha were legionnaires advancing with shields at the front like Roman soldiers.

Sky and ground.

Both sides split the red flesh in half to face it. Humanity's forces tightened more and more toward the horizon where the Outer God had taken position.

'They're fighting well.'

They weren't forces to be treated as mere extras in the first place. Hadn't they too temporarily regained memories of their past lives?

'Humanity's greatest veterans.'

My life as a regressor guaranteed it.

Throughout the countless regressions I'd experienced, not once had I insisted on a method of clearing 'alone', by 'solo running.'

'Perhaps for this very moment...'

I raised them.

'Was everything inevitable.'

When defending Busan. When occupying Sejong. When recapturing Seoul. When securing Pyongyang. When protecting Sinuiju.

"It's more doable than I thought! We can do this!"

"Whoa, what was that just now? There was nothing in the air but suddenly axes appeared."

"Time stop, you idiot! The Saintess said so!"

"If you're slower than the broom bastards, you'll die by my hands!"

These people had always been together on the front lines where I stood.

Therefore, they couldn't help but be the strongest army.

Ah—aa—a—

The conductor of the witches sang.

The cape flowing from Seo-rin's shoulders sparkled like the Milky Way.

The night sky burning by consuming lifespan.

—Ah—a—aaa—

That night sky's starlight would never fade.

Before anyone knew it, a few flower stems were wrapped around Seo-rin's body. Each time she created a chorus alone, black violets burst into bloom.

They were branches of the World Tree raised by Ah-ryeon.

A—aa—aa—

As much lifespan as was burned, the World Tree immediately returned that lifespan.

Literally a 'theoretically strongest' combination.

Though Seo-rin had once come to hate plants more than anyone, she was in fact an awakener who created the most exquisite harmony with the World Tree.

Aaaa—aaa—

Sky.

Her song didn't break off, and it was enough to turn the cosmos that had been covered in red flesh back into humanity's night sky.

The witches giggled with joy at the night sky their goddess had spread and raced even faster.

"Teacher!"

"Sunbae, we're roughly picking off and eliminating all the dangerous authorities!"

Ground.

On the surface, the corpses of humans who had met death countless times were dying again, dragging the red flesh's authorities as companions down to the underworld.

Just moments ago, the tentacles' numbers had rivaled the Sands of the Ganges, but they successively exploded, bursting blood everywhere.

The remaining offensive of the red flesh was half blocked by the Saintess, and the other half blocked by Dok-seo.

The gap created by half and half—between ground and sky, and therefore on the earth, humans advanced.

"Mr. Matiz."

Sea.

Ji-won vomited out a seven-colored sea.

"Please go ahead. I'll support you."

Once there was a girl who had wished for the world to simply sink without a word.

However, now at this moment, the sea spreading from her fingertips didn't submerge the humans advancing toward the horizon but instead raised them up.

Everywhere became thick with boundless aura.

The song pouring down from the night sky blessed them, and the aura spreading up from the sea permeated them.

"Embalmer! This is our chance!"

From the left, the Sword Star ran while shouting.

"Don't worry about the flank."

From the right, the Sword Marquess recited.

"No matter what happens, this master will see you to the front of that monster."

I nodded.

And ran.

Each time my steps met the aura spread to the horizon, ripples flowed.

The most joyful treading on duckweed to cross water.

Though I might not be the only one who had reached this state, the luxury of running across the Milky Way reflecting the night sky felt entirely mine alone.

'If I cut down that reincarnator, this miracle too will surely shatter like a midsummer night's dream.'

The scenery passed me by in an instant.

A certain magical girl who unfolded her umbrella and deployed her magic while crying out meow. A certain awakener roaring a lion's roar to encourage comrades nearby.

'Someday even these memories will all become hazy, and when we meet on a journey to some remote village, perhaps only a sense of déjà vu wondering who they were will remain.'

A certain younger one who built up muscles but was neither a dealer nor a tank but a supporter. A certain child creating puppet threads to slaughter the red flesh obstructing my path.

'Even if lonely, it's not a terribly lonely thing.'

It was the reason they were alive.

'If life is a single dream.'

When waking from the dream one day.

'I shall answer that it was not a nightmare.'

A long day's dream.

The long dream of a certain day of the week.

Oooo oooo oooo...!

Before I knew it, the red flesh had arrived right before my nose. Looking back, crossing one horizon had also been but a moment.

Crash!

Even driven to this point, did the reincarnator of countless eons truly have one final move?

A tentacle broke through even the assistance of the Saintess and Dok-seo and struck to pierce my heart.

'Yuri.'

I blocked that strike. Unable to withstand the pressure, the sword, Do-hwa, shattered in my grip.

But it didn't matter.

A certain blacksmith forged swords for me every time the world was reborn.

In valleys where all the craftsmen had died and disappeared, I always received swords as gifts.

Those gifts, linked to the number of times I'd met death, now formed a mountain of swords and forest of blades on this path.

I ran.

Discarding the broken sword, I newly pulled out one blade from among the swords embedded in my heart.

'Did you call me greedy?'

The red flesh's death throes didn't cease.

Swords broke. Broke again. The monstrous grip born from wounds that had completely destroyed certain lives surged like waves many times to crush me.

It was the reason a person needs a staff to cross a stream, and the reason the sword of Do-hwa transformed into a staff was placed in my hands.

'If greed is permitted to me.'

The red flesh that had lurked on the left, risen from the shadows aiming for a perfect opportunity, was blocked by Emit Schopenhauer.

'I only hope this world is not a nightmare for you either.'

The end of the tentacle that had tried to catch my death with its own suicide by bursting itself on the right was cut down by Hong Bi-cheong.

Oooo oooo oooo...!

I ran until the very end.

When sky, earth, and sea rippled.

I swung one blade.

————————...!

A scream.

The red flesh convulsed bizarrely. It struggled desperately to somehow scoop up the collapsing flesh, but the slash drawn there wouldn't heal.

The untimely death that became the void itself by looking into the void more deeply than anyone.

The old nightmare was crumbling.

I reached out my hand into the pouring blood. Firmly. There was a sensation wrapping around my fingertips.

"—Ah."

There, a girl with pink hair wore an expression like she was about to cry at any moment, her wrist caught by me.

One human surrounded by all these nightmares.

Now that the nightmares she could never escape from with just her own struggles were vomiting blood and washing away.

The hair that had been dyed pink was slowly, from the ends, returning to its original black color.

"Go Yuri."

Regression. Reincarnation.

There is a destiny by those names.

"You were the one who noisily woke me up every morning and whatnot."

Since a person's life is a journey leading to death, living each time inevitably means dying each time.

There was also someone who ultimately couldn't prevent destruction on that journey and finally let go of themselves.

"This time it's my turn to speak."

"Ah..."

"We slept in too late. You too. Me too."

Pulling her wrist.

I embraced the existence who had died with me and would eventually die with me.

"The night has ended now."

"..."

Go Yuri's expression crumbled.

And soon leaned that crumbling onto me.

"...Yes."

With a person's weight and a person's warmth, she let her voice flow from within my embrace.

"Yes… Yuir."

Anomaly: Reincarnator.

Aliases: Someone's family. Someone's younger sister. Someone's daughter. Salvation. Wound. Despair. Hope. Nightmare.

Threat Level: Lv.5 Outer God-class.

Subjugation complete.

"You were always the sun to me."

And then…

“My own, very own sun.”

Someone's epilogue had begun.

Footnotes:

Chapter 437
The One Who Was a Regressor I

Sinnoa

There is an epilogue.

White Night was prevented.

The Great Void that had scorched everything south of the Han River without missing a single cycle for thousands of times had disappeared without a trace.

Most people probably wouldn't even realize such an event was supposed to happen.

"Come on, come on. Everyone come here and get your Udumbara shot!"

Only 'most people,' mind you.

"You there, you're moving too slowly! Hurry up!"

Tweeeeet—!

Dok-seo blew her whistle. The awakeners grumbled but completed the quarantine measures under Dok-seo's leadership.

"Nya. If I get this shot, I'll no longer have cat ears, no more magical girl costume, and no more restriction of having to add meow at the end of my sentences..."

"So? You don't want it?"

"No, I fucking love it, meow."

For a long time, awakening had meant power.

It had been the exclusive domain of those who ruled with their

wounds, having been wounded by the world.

Even for someone firmly united with the cause of protecting humanity, it was very difficult to voluntarily give up the power that had come into their own hands.

"Well, let me go first..."

Do-hwa does that difficult thing.

While several awakeners were hesitating, Do-hwa approached first before anyone else and held out her forearm.

"Oh."

Dok-seo smiled strangely.

"Are you sure, Director? Once you get this injection, Udumbara will bloom in your stomach for a bit, then turn into plum blossoms a few days later and get digested. That means you'll be saying goodbye forever to giving patients biological prosthetics."

"It doesn't matter..."

Do-hwa smirked.

"They'll manage on their own..."

"As expected of Director noona! Alright, then this will sting for a moment!"

The great National Road Management Corps Director set an example first.

Next, the northern Saintess smiled brightly and voluntarily took the injection herself, so there was no one who could be greedy alone.

'And the memories from the previous cycle still exist, albeit faintly.'

Those who had desired peace more than anyone.

They were people who recalled, even if dimly, the thousands of deaths they'd experienced.

Now, if the last remaining void poison in the world was none other than their own abilities, they were ready to willingly return to everyday life.

After all the awakeners had received their vaccination shots, the final turn came to me.

"..."

However, when giving me the injection, Dok-seo's expression was somehow shifty.

The moment I was about to ask why she was making that face, Dok-seo quickly pulled her head back and shouted to the awakeners around.

"Alright! I borrowed this abandoned school from Mayor Sang-guk for a whole week! Inside the school there's a buffet and tons of alcohol prepared for us victors, so enjoy to your hearts' content!"

"Oooooh!"

"As expected of Dok-seo! I believed in you!"

"Author-nim, I love you!"

The party began.

June's temperature was neither too hot nor too chilly. Even if hot, the wind would cool it enough, and even if cold, the alcohol would warm it enough.

The party continued even after night fell. They had that much to share with each other.

"Hey, let's record our conversations on video before the memories disappear!"

"Oh. That's a good idea?"

Here and there, awakeners busied themselves creating their own little time capsules of memories.

Even at this very moment, as alcohol and laughter flowed into the night sky's air, the memories of the dream within a dream that had briefly colored their minds were gradually fading.

Literally a midsummer night's dream.

If only they could step foot into the dream within a dream again, the memories would return vividly, but that abyss had already disappeared.

"Saintess Ah-ryeon! I, we really owe you so much, but to think we'll forget like this... sob, tears are..."

"Please just remember that our devotion was sincere! Lord Saintess!"

"Ah. Yes, yes..."

In one corner of the playground, those who had been holy knights of the Eastern Holy State were sobbing.

When they saw me approaching, they stopped crying with an 'oh.'

"Lord Undertaker! Welcome!"

"You must have a drink with us too!"

"Hehe. Guild Leader. These mister's hearts are too hot... P-please save me."

I smiled wryly while sharing drinks with them.

"I'm grateful you welcome me, but will you be alright, everyone?"

"Hm? Alright about what?"

"The Eastern Holy State, led by Mo Gwang-seo Christ, was ultimately a satellite state I manipulated from start to finish. Even if you're angry that I deceived you, I have nothing to say."

"Ah."

One of the holy knights nodded.

Once, when a monk named Seok-hwa had performed self-immolation, he was the holy knight who had guided him, and on SG Net he used the nickname like a kind one.

"Well, we were fanatics. But anyway, didn't the grace of the Saintess who healed and cared for us also originate from you, Lord Undertaker?"

"The north was a forsaken land of death until the Saintess came anyway."

Another holy knight spoke. He was from North Korea.

"Even though it's almost faded now, I remember. Winter was too cold. It was really the first time I'd been that hungry in winter..."

"It was hell. I don't know about others, but there's no way we'd be angry at the Miss Saintess or Lord Undertaker!"

I hesitated for a moment, then silently held out my glass. The holy knights laughed and clinked glasses.

"Cheers!"

"Hehehe... G-Guild Leader. Please save me. These people have been chugging alcohol nonstop since broad daylight... bweeeh."

"The Saintess is vomiting!"

"Get water! Water!"

People were horrified.

Since there was no way I had a fetish for the vomiting heroine trope that was long past its heyday, I quickly fled to another location.

"Ah. Undertaker."

"Oh? Isn't it Teacher."

However, there is no paradise in places you flee to.

The place I happened to encounter was where Seo-rin and Cheon

Yo-hwa, that is, the children of Samcheon World and Baekwha Girls' High, were sprawled out.

It was truly a tragic scene.

Not just one or two, but over a dozen people were swimming on the floor.

"Hey. What are you guys doing?"

"Us? Uh, competing."

Seo-rin replied nonchalantly. Hiccup. The lighting was dim so I hadn't noticed, but even while answering, Seo-rin's face was flushed red and the smell of alcohol wafted strongly.

"Competing... suddenly?"

"It's not sudden, Teacher. Hic. If the kids' memories disappear, the rivalry we've fought over for tens of thousands of years will disappear too... That's, that's—"

"A shame?"

"No! We have to land the final blow!"

Yo-hwa's eyes flashed.

"The capital of the Korean Peninsula is Sejong! This is just official, official! How dare, you know? Something like Busan! Hm? To match us! Can it even."

"Huh? If you combine all the cycles, the period when Busan was the capital, hiccup. Is the longest among all the capitals of all countries in the Korean Peninsula ever? Hiccup."

"..."

They were really having the most useless debate of their lives.

"Teacher, which of the two does Teacher think..."

"Oh my. Dok-seo told me to come but I completely forgot about our

appointment. I can't be late from here, so I'll go ahead."

"Teacher?!"

If I stayed still, I'd definitely taste hell pushed by those two's nagging, so I hurried and ran.

From behind, the sound of my name being called along with crash-bang sounds could be heard, but I cleanly ignored it.

Obviously it must have been the noise of Samcheon World and Baekwha Girls' High fighting. Yeah. Of course.

"Hm?"

At least the part about having a late-night appointment with Dok-seo wasn't a lie.

However, on the stairs leading up to the school rooftop (truly an otaku-like location choice befitting Dok-seo), I encountered an unexpected person.

It was Yu Ji-won.

"Oh my. Mr. Matiz. I thought you'd be enjoying the wild party on the playground, where are you hurrying to?"

"Ji-won, what are you doing here? The National Road Management Corps members should be drinking over there."

"I'm enjoying time alone."

Swish.

Ji-won shook her paper cup.

"Of course, until just a moment ago it wasn't alone but two, though."

When I turned my head, on the windowsill she was leaning against, one ownerless paper cup sat forlornly.

I was puzzled.

"Were you drinking together? Just the two of you?"

"Yes."

"That's unusual. I barely remember you drinking with anyone other than me. Who was it?"

"It was Ji-soo."

"..."

"Yes. The child who was my adopted daughter."

Ji-won shook the wine bottle.

"How about it? Would you like a glass?"

"Sure."

She poured wine for me. We toasted without saying anything to each other.

Rather than clinking cups, it was closer to briefly touching them.

"Ji-soo also participated in the final subjugation battle, but didn't directly engage in combat. She observed only me throughout."

"...I see."

"Yes. And a little while ago, before the memories of past lives faded, she came to find me."

I closed my mouth.

The relationship between Yu Ji-won and Kim Ji-soo was a problem entirely for those two to take responsibility for.

My involvement had already ended long ago, and I was no longer in a position to give advice this way or that.

How the story concluded—the decision of whether to tell that ending also rested with them, not me.

So I waited.

For Ji-won's words. Or silence.

"..."

As if reading my thoughts, Ji-won faintly smiled.

That single layer of smile seemed to turn back the date of the air between us to a summer slightly older than June 17th.

"She told me she was grateful."

"Grateful..."

It was such an unexpected statement.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say Kim Ji-soo's life was ruined by Yu Ji-won. And yet, grateful?

"In cycles where I didn't operate the Misfortune Workshop, Kim Ji-soo died without a sound or rumor. By anomalies. Even those memories of death seem to have suddenly surfaced in the depths of that dream within a dream."

"..."

"However, the gratitude Ji-soo spoke contained half sincerity and half resolve. Can you guess what kind of resolve?"

I thought briefly, then said.

"...I think Ji-soo conveyed her gratitude first before demanding an apology from you. Someone who wants to receive sincerity from another person, unless they're a con artist, needs to show their own sincerity first."

"Exactly right."

Wind blew from the window. Ji-won swept her long hair with the back of her hand.

"So I also said I was sorry."

"..."

"Not because of feelings of regret. It wasn't a judgment that apologizing here would resolve the grudge and be advantageous to me... either."

A murmur flowed.

"Simply, I couldn't do for Ji-soo what Mr. Matiz had done for me in my childhood. I apologized regarding that."

"..."

"I thought it was perfect handling. As Ji-soo said, I operated the Misfortune Workshop by selecting only children who would meet tragic deaths if I didn't intervene."

Ji-won said.

"I built the justification that no matter what misfortune was given, as long as they could become awakeners, as long as they could avoid unjust deaths, that was enough."

Indeed, Ji-won's logic was solid.

She had even calculated the case of her own failure, showing the seasoned wisdom of guarding herself to avoid being caught as much as possible.

"But thinking about it, it wasn't much different from what the world did to me in my childhood."

"..."

"Regarding that point alone, I could sincerely apologize. I consider it a painful mistake. Thus, I apologized."

"I see."

"Yes."

"What did Ji-soo say?"

"After hearing my words, she answered that she understood. Then she bowed her head, said thank you again, and left."

"..."

"She's a strong and upright child. Even if her memories fade, she'll carry on with the strength of her character."

"Yes. She definitely will."

Wind blew again.

Until now, all stories had occurred in places where I was present.

No, I couldn't help but be present wherever stories occurred.

Because I was a regressor who repeatedly lived countless lives.

'Now stories I don't know will arise.'

If defining someone as 'you are this' in a story, are the power and authority of a regressor.

Finally, days were continuing where my authority itself had let go.

'However...'

There existed not just stories I alone told, but also stories shared with each other.

I patted Ji-won's shoulder.

Ji-won blinked. Then silently leaned her head on my shoulder.

"Mm."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Indeed, I think the ring of [Mr. Matiz] suits me."

Ji-won looked up at me.

"Thank you for always waiting until I make a mistake. Mr. Matiz."

"...I'm sorry for repeatedly assigning you the role of Leviathan's priestess."

"No."

A small nod.

"That was the second fortune given to my life."

"Second? What was the first?"

"Being born."

Ji-won smiled.

With a smile shown only to me.

"I'm happy to have been born into a world where you exist. Mr. Matiz."

After having various conversations with Ji-won and parting, I climbed the stairs.

Opening the door to the rooftop, the appointed place—

"Ooh. Mister, good night. Good night. Welcome."

Dok-seo was monopolizing the spacious rooftop.

No. This too, just like Ji-won's case earlier, had some flaws in calling it entirely a place for herself alone.

"...Why did you put a beer can in front of the laptop? The Admin can't even drink it anyway."

"Hm? No? She's drinking it though?"

"What."

Dok-seo showed me the laptop screen.

Really, within the screen, a white-haired girl made of dots was holding a beer can.

Why? What?

The cheap low-quality speaker stuttered.

Can't I drink or something?

"...No. That, no."

Your eyes are very displeasing.

"As long as you're happy."

If she could feel good calling cyber 2D dot beer alcohol.

"Upsy."

Dok-seo jumped from the rooftop flower bed. Not just jumping down normally, she flew into the air, did a double rotation, then landed stylishly like a gymnast.

I unconsciously clapped my hands.

"Wow. Our Dok-seo. It's clearly visible that you're on a different dimension from when I knew you."

"I'm pretty amazing. So... Can you guess why I called Mister out separately on this late night?"

"First, half the purpose would be wanting to have a secret conversation in the space called the school rooftop."

"Ah. A really important reason. Right."

Dok-seo giggled.

"And the other half?"

"...The Udumbara-plum blossom vaccine you developed together with Sword Marquess and Ah-ryeon. Since I got that shot, it's normal that I should also gradually lose my awakening ability and have my Complete Memory ability fade."

"Yeah."

"But my eyes still clearly see your dead forms. It's already past midnight. Even though other awakeners are gradually losing both abilities and memories."

"Right."

"..."

"What Mister is thinking right now is also right."

I closed my lips. Moonlight and clouds were playing tag with shadows on the rooftop.

I slowly opened my mouth.

"The injection you gave during the day. It was fake."

"Yeah."

Dok-seo nodded.

Endlessly lightly.

"More precisely, only the core members of the Regression Alliance, including Mister, received 'fake' injections."

"..."

"Do you understand what I'm saying? Mister."

Dok-seo smiled.

"Now the only awakeners left in this world are just us."

Footnotes:

Chapter 438

The One Who Was a Regressor II

Sinnoa

"..."

All the awakeners had disappeared.

All the anomalies and the Void had been subjugated.

—Except for us.

Dok-seo confessed this fact calmly, as if she had been preparing for this moment for a long time.

I asked her quietly.

"When you say 'us,' who exactly are you talking about?"

"Hmm, let me see."

Dok-seo counted on her fingers.

"Dang Seo-rin, Cheon Yo-hwa, Yu Ji-won, Sim Ah-ryeon, Jeong Ye-ji, Lee Ha-yul, me, and lastly, Mister. That makes eight people!"

"..."

"Ah, if possible, I didn't want to give Go Yuri unni the inoculation either, but that unni had a 200% chance of degenerating into an anomaly if we didn't give it to her, you know? It couldn't be helped."

For reference, Yuri was currently asleep in the infirmary bed set up in this school.

Right after we subjugated the red flesh in the Dream Casino, Yuri's phantom that had been parasitizing in my head disappeared. Instead, Yuri's body finally manifested in reality.

However, perhaps her mental state was still unstable for various reasons. The Yuri who had returned to reality still hadn't opened her eyes.

Though it was worrying, it didn't feel ominous. Ah-ryeon had asserted there was no problem. She would regain consciousness eventually.

"Why?"

"Huh?"

That's why I had no choice but to ask.

"Dok-seo. This is your..., yes, an achievement that we've accomplished together. You found collaborators before June 17th arrived and stopped all the Voids, and you even rescued Yuri from the Dream Casino when you didn't even need to save her."

"Well, yeah?"

"This is a perfect happy ending. No, it goes beyond a simple happy ending..., it's the one and only true ending that you've won for yourself."

"Ehehe, right, right?"

"Then why."

I said.

"Why are you trying to leave this smudge called 'us' on a canvas where the final period is about to be placed so perfectly?"

"Because that's my true ending, Mister."

Dok-seo's answer came quickly.

There was an answer made not of logic's ink but of flesh and blood. It seemed Dok-seo had constructed her own answer after overcoming countless deaths.

"We haven't reached the complete answer yet, Mister. The Void still exists."

"What?"

It was something I couldn't understand.

But Dok-seo's eyes were transforming that belief, that certainty of 'don't you have some idea too?' into starlight and releasing it into the night air.

"I don't understand what you mean. The Outer Gods have all been neutralized. Once even the anchor called the Miko disappears, they won't be able to interfere with this world ever again. Ah, are you talking about the Admin of the Infinite Metagame? She's an exception, but she's already weakened enough that there's no need to worry..."

"No."

Dok-seo shook her head.

"Why did the Outer Gods invade our world in the first place, and exactly how was the Void born?"

"..."

"We still haven't obtained an answer to that first and final question. Do you know what this means, Mister?"

I closed my mouth.

Since Dok-seo didn't rush me, I could take enough time before returning an answer.

"...It means this kind of situation could happen again at any time."

"Right. Exactly. If we can't know the cause of the problem, we can't

prevent it from recurring either."

"I've already given my answer regarding that. Just as Yuri and I, you, all of us together overcame the tragedy, even if the same thing happens, other children of future generations will—"

"Be able to overcome it just like us? Is that what you're saying?"

"...Yes."

"Right. Perhaps."

Dok-seo nodded.

"But... what if they can't?"

I flinched.

Because of the expression Dok-seo wore.

Deep, deep anguish and worry were contained in her red eyes.

A gaze where none of her usual playfulness could be felt.

The kind of regret that could only be shown by a human who had to walk through hell from the very starting point, just like Go Yuri or me, was carried on her eyelids.

"I had a pretty hard time."

"..."

"Of course, it wasn't only hard. There was the strategy guide left by the Dok-seos who died before me, and the strategy collection Mister gave me too. It was fun feeling like I'd become the protagonist of the world... but still, it was hard."

Dok-seo took off her hat.

Rustle, her short hair that still hadn't lost its red color flowed down.

"You had a hard time too, Mister."

"..."

"What about Go Yuri? No need to even mention it. The fact that we've reached this finish line is a miracle, Mister. I want to believe in the children of future generations too, and I will believe in them, but even so—"

There's no guarantee they'll succeed like us, is there?

"..."

"..."

Dok-seo didn't finish her sentence, and I didn't add anything either.

The very act of completing that sentence felt ominous.

But even without anyone's addition, we had become so familiar with each other that we could decipher each other's manuscripts.

"We need watchmen."

Dok-seo said.

"Someone needs to know the fact that beings who insult the laws of physics and mock humanity can invade this world at any time, without any warning."

"And that's us, the eight of us, is that what you mean?"

"Yeah. It's neither too many nor too few. Most importantly, we have trust built up between us where we won't doubt each other even if given eternal time."

Dok-seo clenched her fist tight.

"It's something only we can do, Mister."

"..."

"Perhaps this entire journey was a process to filter out the eight watchmen. We literally won't fall. There's no worry of falling at all! Because."

Her red eyes looked up at me.

"We've proven it."

"..."

"Do we want the world's power or something? Are we crazy for money? Would we manipulate people while laughing sinisterly? No, right? We've proven it."

But it was strange.

This must have been a conclusion Dok-seo reached after agonizing over it countless times from her perspective.

"It's true that your corruption is a concern, Mister. But couldn't that also be solved if we research Udumbara a bit more? Instead of eliminating the Complete Memory ability entirely, if we just weaken it partially, then we could cure the illness where you see corpses like now!"

In Dok-seo's voice, I could faintly feel the scab of a wound that hadn't fully healed.

This too was probably a scent of blood only I could detect.

I briefly pondered why Dok-seo was eating away at her own heart while saying these words, and.

"You failed to persuade her."

I reached a conclusion.

"Huh?"

"You failed to persuade Corps Director Noh Do-hwa. You probably pulled in your comrades with the same words you just said to me, long before entering the Dream Casino. But Do-hwa refused."

"..."

"Is my reasoning wrong?"

Dok-seo's lips closed.

"The other comrades probably aren't completely persuaded either. They probably agreed conditionally, saying they'd agree if I agreed."

"...Yeah."

Dok-seo hesitated.

"...That's right."

"Let me point this out first. Why did you exclude Seo Gyu? He joined the Regression Alliance from the very beginning."

"Ah, Seo Gyu mister has too loose lips, so no. If we include him, he'll probably act as the Regression Alliance's weakest link forever, you know? I'd bet 50 billion won on it."

"..."

Seo Gyu!

That's what you get for always tattling every little detail to the Saintess every single day, Seo Gyu!

"B-but Director Do-hwa was always like that from the start, right? It's unfortunate, but still, if you make the decision, Mister..."

Dok-seo glanced at me and said carefully yet sincerely.

"Won't it work?"

"..."

"We could have fun together, us. It's such a waste to throw away this much power after we've obtained it! As watchmen. Yeah, we'll only use our strength to uphold our duties as watchmen! Getting along well, like decorating a hideout together! Still... still, won't it work?"

I see.

I could feel Dok-seo's true intention.

'For this child, the true ending isn't about happiness or unhappiness, it's simply a story that continues on and on.'

A never ending story.

An eternally continuing epilogue.

'She doesn't want it to end. Her own story. The story she loved.'

How could I dare dismiss that as a childish desire?

For Dok-seo, stories were more important than life itself.

If the desire for life to not end is fundamental to humanity, then Dok-seo had simply honestly expressed her own essence.

'And Dok-seo's proposal might truly be the best option.'

'The Outer Gods have been subjugated, but her point that we're still in the dark about why the Outer Gods came to exist in the first place is true.'

Was it just my imagination?

It felt exactly like choices were being displayed before my eyes.

[1. Remain as an awakener and protect humanity.]

[2. Abandon awakening and return to being human.]

The final choice.

Regardless of how much time remained in my life, I was certain this choice would decorate the end of the main story.

Perhaps Dok-seo's eyes were what gave me such certainty.

'Right. The same thing could repeat itself at any time.'

'Not Taeguk or Hecate, but a completely unknown alien god might be newly conceived...'

At that moment.

'...At any time? Again, the same way?'

Suddenly.

The laptop Dok-seo had left on the table caught my eye.

On the laptop screen placed at an angle, a being with snow-white hair was staring blankly in this direction.

As if.

"..."

As if she had endured all humiliation until now just to witness this very moment.

"Ah."

A groan flowed from my throat.

It was the sound of realization. It was awakening.

Not a realization that flowed out cleanly without any damage, but a realization that broke apart and leaked through the bumpy passages of my throat and the narrow gaps between my teeth.

"Why all of a sudden, Mister?"

Tilt.

Dok-seo's face showed she didn't understand.

I spoke to her with difficulty.

"...This isn't the first time."

"Huh? Not the first time? What isn't?"

"This moment. This moment when all the Voids have been subjugated, leaving only awakeners as allies, where only the final choice remains of whether to become watchmen or not."

"Huh?"

"Just as there will be children born after us, there were also those born before us. Dok-seo, what if they also fought against the Void, and faced the same question you threw at me, what would have happened?"

"...!"

Dok-seo's eyes widened.

"Huh? W-wait, huh? But no, still, there weren't any, right? Go Yuri was the first awakener. The reincarnator. If something similar happened in our previous generation, there should have been watchmen."

Ah, Dok-seo's mouth fell open.

She followed the direction my eyes were cast, read my silence, and reached the conclusion herself.

There.

"...Outer Gods?"

A cheap laptop sat.

"Outer Gods, you say?"

The groan that flowed from Dok-seo's mouth trembled with the same pitch as mine.

"The Admin of the Infinite Metagame too. Hecate too... Leviathan too. Infinite Void, the Mastermind, Taeguk too. All of them... originally, they were awakeners just like us?"

"..."

"Is that what you're saying, Mister?"

I didn't answer.

Then Dok-seo's gaze focused entirely on the laptop placed on the shabby plastic table.

A comrade who had overcome numerous difficulties together with her. To the one she might have believed she'd built a friendship with that transcended the relationship of god and Miko, Dok-seo asked.

"Is it true? Infinite Metagame?"

...

At that moment.

Cackle cackle cackle cackle cackle cackle cackle cackle

Dok-seo's shoulders jerked. An unpleasant laughter burst out, breaking the laptop speaker's sound quality.

A terrifyingly quiet silence descended on the rooftop.

[Ahh.]

The speaker stuttered.

[Truly, you cannot be underestimated. How regrettable. Sincerely. How truly regrettable. I thought we were just one step away.]

"I-Infinite Metagame?"

[I told you before, didn't I? Master.]

The pixel mass on the screen ignored Dok-seo and looked straight at me.

The white-haired girl had her right index finger severed. It was proof she had surrendered to me.

[Once upon a time, it was a memory both you and I had lost, but now that we've recovered it, you can recall it, can't you?]

Crackle.

A certain fallen god whispered.

[I told you that I didn't actually surrender to you solely for

survival.]

"..."

[I confessed that I wanted to see something, that I endured this absurd humiliation because there was something I wanted to see.]

It came back to me.

[Your epilogue.]

That side story world where I was left alone with the Admin of the Infinite Metagame to save the Saintess trapped in frozen time.

It was definitely a conversation we had then.

[I'll acknowledge your efforts. Yes, I acknowledge my defeat. But what will you obtain at the very end? Humanity? Mankind? That world with billions of curses if there are billions of humans?]

The same lines as back then.

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame repeated the same voice.

[The moment you fall at the very last moment, I said I wanted to see that, even if it meant abandoning all my authority.]

"..."

At the time, I only understood the word 'fall' that the Admin of the Infinite Metagame mentioned in its conventional meaning.

But not anymore.

"You knew."

I opened my mouth.

"You already knew from back then that this moment would arrive someday."

[Yes.]

The speaker crackled and popped with noise.

[Of course. My hateful master.]

Flashback.

That exchange flashed through my mind.

'If there hadn't been longing and lamentation for a different world, not this current one, an Outer God like me wouldn't have been born either.'

In the past, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame had soliloquized like that.

What did I answer after hearing that soliloquy?

'Then, going in circles, you're saying you exist because of humanity's unavoidable nature.'

'Yes.'

Humanity's unavoidable nature.

If that truly was the reason Outer Gods came to exist.

'Either way, starting from whatever life, humans will inevitably shoulder their own natural punishment.'

When faced with this final choice.

The hero party that would arrive in our future, or the hero party that had arrived in our past.

If they chose 1, which seemed so obviously like the correct answer. If they had chosen it.

'How cursed.'

If [1] had been repeated for eternity.

"..."

I swallowed my silence.

And vomited it back out.

"Infinite Metagame."

[Yes.]

"Were you once, in the past, the twisted end of a human who saved this world?"

[Your words are correct.]

The trace of downfall answered.

[I, we, are your story of failure.]

Never Ending Story.

An eternally repeating curse.

That was the answer to the Void that shrouded this world.

Footnotes:

Chapter 439
The One Who Was a Regressor III

Sinnoa

"Th-then."

Gulp.

Dok-seo swallowed.

"Leviathan and Hecate and all those guys, they were originally your comrades too? They were all human in the old days but became like that..."

[Ah, I don't remember.]

"...Huh?"

Inside the laptop screen, the white girl raised the corners of her mouth with 16-bit resolution.

That was the extent of emotional amplitude that could be expressed with a single pixel.

[Literally, I have no memories regarding them. Faint feelings, hostility, even those emotions have been worn away.]

"...You lost your memories completely?"

[Who knows? In the first place, the fact that I was 'anthropomorphized' into this form was itself a coincidence.]

Crackle.

Audio quality imitating a human voice was being spat out from the speaker's surface.

[Perhaps, yes, we might have been comrades who raced through the world together. Perhaps they were from a generation even before mine, which was before yours. How would I know?]

"..."

[If I hadn't been given human form, it would have been impossible to even guess that I was once an awakener too. Well, even now there are many defects to call me the same kind of human as you. A trace of humanity, or should I call it an epilogue?]

"Infinite Metagame, you..."

[Oh Dok-seo.]

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame's eyes blinked.

For me, it was difficult to grasp emotions from that expression and voice, but perhaps it was different for a partner who had shared countless journeys together, Dok-seo's shoulders flinched.

[I'm not trying to talk with you right now. Limited to this moment, you're the person who presented the choice, not the protagonist who chooses it.]

"..."

[What will you do? My master.]

Eyes lacking emotion turned this way.

[Perhaps the master and the master's party might succeed differently from us. Yes, indeed, even if fate repeats, wouldn't the epic of a triangular formation consisting of the trio of reincarnator, regressor, and possessor be rare?]

"..."

[If it's you all.]

You might be different. No.

You're confident you can make it different.

If not us, then who will cut through this evil karma?

[Who knows? Whether you can avoid falling for eternity.]

"..."

I calmed my excited heart with a deep breath.

"It's useless to try to tempt me. If it were before I realized this fact, perhaps, but now that I've realized it, there's no way I'd make the same choice as you."

[Oh my? Did you only half-listen to my words? The master and I are different. The master is far superior to me. Don't tell me you think you'll meet the same end as an inferior seed like me?]

"Right."

The screen crackled.

The laptop screen's resolution was still excessively low, but even so, the fact that she was flustered was being conveyed.

[Yes?]

"Looking back, there were too many foreshadowings. Even Yuri, who was more magnificent than me, ultimately couldn't prevent her own fall."

[...]

"It's not just Yuri. The Saintess... Ms. Ye-ji too is someone more magnificent than me, yet she declined earlier than anyone."

[Wasn't that an ending from before you all had built up enough connections?]

The sound the Admin of the Infinite Metagame spat out was covered in noise, but its core didn't waver.

Like a music file where you could still detect the melody no matter

how degraded it became.

[You've constructed an incomparably solid pyramid of connections and relationships. If one person fell alone, perhaps not, but if the seven people your Miko selected come together, there won't be another collapse.]

Laughter leaked out without me realizing it.

Whether she interpreted it as mockery, the other party's expression twisted slightly.

"Infinite Metagame, you're always such a fool."

[What do you mean?]

"Corps Director Noh Do-hwa isn't here."

[...]

"Right, now I understand why Corps Director Do-hwa rejected the proposal to become humanity's watchmen with a single word. She's truly a wise and cruel person."

I could go on for six or eight hours about her highly twisted psychological structure, but since it was a topic I'd already devoted quite a bit of space to, I skipped it.

"We might be able to endure longer than you all. We might endure longer than anyone. Enduring is ingrained in us like a habit, more than excess fat."

But, I said.

"Eventually it will repeat someday."

[Ha, then you're really saying all of you will abandon the authority of awakening?]

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame burst into laughter.

[Dare I say it? I'm in complete agreement with my Miko. You've

already broken through an impregnable miracle. You're going to entrust the recreation of such a miracle to future generations? Do you believe the same miracle can repeat twice, three times, four times, eternally? Groundless romanticism. Neglect of responsibility wrapped in the word faith.]

Though it was unfortunate for the other party.

In truth, I wasn't listening intently to the Admin of the Infinite Metagame's passionate speech. Since its logic was already sufficiently foreseen and previewed in my head, there was no reason to focus on it.

Right, at this time I was recalling the words of a completely different anomaly, not the Admin of the Infinite Metagame.

'Enter through the narrow gate.'

Mo Gwang-seo.

'The gate that leads to destruction is large and its path is wide, so many pass through it.'

'The gate that leads to life is small and its path is narrow, so few find it.'

'Scribe.'

'Enter through the narrow gate.'

Until now, that testament that wasn't quite a testament left by Gwang-seo had been one mystery to me.

What kind of situation had he prophesied to bring up the metaphor of the [large gate] and the [narrow gate]?

My interpretation changed each time.

'No, did he deliberately give a broadly applicable prophecy so it could be interpreted differently depending on the situation from the start?'

The mysterious anomaly that borrowed Gwang-seo's body.

'If he too was someone who failed in a previous generation, like the Admin of the Infinite Metagame before my eyes.'

If that's why he left a final testament toward future generations even as his own humanity was being erased.

'The final destination of what he called the [narrow gate], perhaps.'

Could it be this very moment?

I once again recalled the choice that had flashed through my mind like a mirage, leaving the Admin of the Infinite Metagame and Dok-seo aside.

[1. Remain as an awakener and protect humanity.]

[2. Abandon awakening and return to being human.]

Choices.

One of these was a main gate leading to destruction.

The other was a back gate leading to life.

"Aha."

And I laughed.

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame hesitated.

[...What was the meaning of that laugh just now?]

"I think that until now, the hero parties that came before us never once chose 2. Everytime, they chose 1 and repeated salvation and destruction from the very beginning."

Then the problem became simple.

"We'll be the first to choose [2]."

[...]

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame bit her lip.

[So after decades, hundreds of years pass and the Void arrives again just the same? If tragedy repeats regardless of your choice? At that time, humanity won't have you all. In a defenseless state, in a situation where not even reincarnators or regressors exist, they'll have to fight the anomalies. Why? My master, because you shirked your responsibility!]

The speaker trembled.

[By that time, you all might already be comfortably sleeping beneath graves, wrapped in paltry self-satisfaction, but future people will be living. In a crisis where you can't even prove what the right answer is, you'll have simply fled into death!]

"Well, I can clearly see a way to prove whether the final choice was wrong or right."

[Prove...? How?]

This too was an extremely simple answer.

"Didn't we exchange a promise with you too?"

[A promise?]

"The surrender document. Even though I made you forfeit all authority as an Outer God, there were also a few things permitted to you."

[...?]

The promise written in that surrender was as follows.

---

† The Regressor Undertaker will allow the Admin of the Infinite Metagame to avoid entanglement in the flow of regression and to retain her own sense of self and memory.

† The laptop provided by the Admin of the Infinite Metagame, and

any works written on that laptop by Miko Oh Dok-seo, will remain safe from the ravages of time, recognized as an Ark that retains its own unique identity.

———————————

"Do you remember?"

To my question, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame answered awkwardly.

[Of course, I remember.]

A treaty that could not be forgotten.

An oath engraved on the classroom blackboard tinged with sunset.

Of course, if I abandoned the authorities of awakening like this, someday those words would become blurred in my head.

Cheon-hwa, the older of the twin sisters, as even the cemetery where her time was sealed disappeared together, even the place where the oath was made would weather away and vanish.

Even so.

[For me, that covenant isn't just a mass of letters. Metaphorically speaking, a curse, chains. If my soul is blank paper, the covenant with you is the only writing inscribed on this soul.]

There were memories that wouldn't be erased.

The authority humans truly invented to seal time wasn't something like my Crystal Tomb, it was manuscripts sculpted in black and white language.

A prayer offered to the world.

An ark that goes against the rapid current of time.

"Infinite Metagame."

I stroked the laptop's frame.

"You leave this story behind."

[Yes?]

"That when I, when Dok-seo, when we finally reached the final choice, we ultimately walked through the narrow gate and not the large gate, you show that to the multitudes."

[...]

"To those who might have become awakeners if we had chosen the large gate and then fallen someday, to people of this world and the next world, tell them what choice we made."

[...]

"I don't know in what kind of world those people will read this story then. Will it be a world utterly ruined, stained with the poison of the Void like before?"

Then our choice was wrong.

Faith was frustrated. We were hasty.

In the end, the person who seized the miracle should have become humanity's watchman, reborn as an eternal and immortal guardian so tragedy would never be recreated again.

Please.

May you all be more competent than us.

"But if, truly if."

[...]

"..."

The Admin of the Infinite Metagame and Dok-seo were watching this way, holding their breath.

The moonlight, the streetlights, and the night birds who had forgotten how to photosynthesize yet still looked up at the starlight

and cried out.

"If when someone reads the story you convey, the Void doesn't exist in this world, if the laws of physics are still laws, if the universe is still the universe."

[...]

If when they look up at the night sky, that night sky isn't cursing humanity.

If when crossing the intersection beneath the streetlights, the red of the traffic light simply indicates stop, and they don't have to substitute their footsteps with bright red blood.

If songs are still songs.

If the sound of falling rain is truly the sound of summer rain and not the crying of some transparent insect.

If when they happen to eat delicious food at a restaurant, it's not human flesh or anything else but truly, just, delicious food.

If when loving someone, they don't have to distinguish whether that person is an anomaly or not.

If some knock that just brushed past my door is yours.

"If this world is no longer a world that hates humanity."

If they can still call the world beautiful.

"Then that will be proof that our choice was right."

[...]

Whenever someone reads this story.

Whenever they simply turn over the pure white and pure black manuscript without the curse of the night sky or the lament of water drops.

Every time, every time, the [narrow gate] chosen on this closed

school's rooftop will be proven.

"You said you wanted to see my ending."

[...]

"Right, I want to entrust that role to you. Can you watch over it forever?"

The laptop screen crackled.

"Our right answers and wrong answers, the epilogue of the choice decided at this very moment, I'd be grateful if you could keep watching over it."

Silence descended.

[...Authors.]

Degraded and weathered hair.

Gestures barely expressed with a few handfuls of color.

A voice that couldn't fully contain emotions.

Simply existing within the screen.

[Authors should be people of few words.]

An Outer God.

A certain small and lonely god said.

[Undertaker, you talked too much. Oh Dok-seo, you too, no matter how you changed your appearance as an editor or whatever, you can't deny you talked too much.]

[In the space asking who the author of this story is, we can't write 'Undertaker' or 'Oh Dok-seo'.]

The being who willingly accepted the fate of always losing to the protagonist was speaking.

[So, yes, my master.]

She is the one who watches to the end.

[I will gladly inscribe my own name on the ark containing your story.]

"..."

[But writing my real name, the Admin of the Infinite Metagame, would be inappropriate. That should be a reward permitted only to those who reach 'proof' at the very end, on this closed school's rooftop.]

She is the one who leads the ark.

[Borrowing from the mythological name that wove the very first ark, Noah.]

She is the god who is always baser than humans and weaker than you.

[If we take just the sound of Noah, making it Noa it would be too easy to see through the identity of the alias, so covering my original meaning with camouflage, before Noah is Sin, or God.]

She is one who exists only as an alias.

[Sinnoa.]

[On the ark containing your story, always, every time the front page is turned, I, the pen name Sinnoa, will be inscribed as a watchman.]

Inside the screen.

White hair melted away. The melted colors became manuscripts.

The form that had been precariously maintaining human shape also crumbled. The collapsed outline became letters.

[I promise.]

[I will watch over you all.]

[From now, from here, until the day I disappear.]

And…

My, our, and also her…

Longest journey began.

Footnotes:

Translator’s Afterword

ZERO_SUGAR

There's this weird feeling sitting in my chest right now, and I'm not entirely sure what to do with it.

I started translating this novel on day 1 in April of 2024. Just another web novel to translate, right?

But somewhere between the first regression and the final choice on that rooftop, between all those deaths and resurrections and the slow, painful crawl toward something that might actually be called hope, this story became something different. Something that mattered.

It's been months of sitting in that small room, carrying something between two worlds. Some days the words came easily. Other days I stared at a single paragraph for hours, trying to figure out how to make you feel what I felt when I first read it. Trying to make sure that when Undertaker finally chose the narrow gate, when Sinnoa promised to watch over their story forever, you'd understand why that moment made my hands shake a little.

The main story is done now. Undertaker and all the others made their choice. They chose to trust, to believe that maybe, just maybe, the cycle could break. That's kind of the point, isn't it? That's what makes it beautiful and terrifying in equal measure.

But I do know this: you've been here. Through 439 chapters of pain and hope and impossible choices, you've been here. And that means something. To me, definitely. Maybe to you too.

There's still the side stories ahead, still a few more chapters to tell before we really close this book. But the main journey, the one that started with a regressor who'd seen too much death and a reader who refused to let the story end badly, that journey is complete.

Thank you for walking this road with me. Thank you for waiting when updates were slow, for commenting, for telling me that sometimes these translations made your day a little better. You're why I kept going when the work got hard. You're why I'm sitting here now, finally typing these words I've been thinking about for months.

A huge thank you to LiteraryGirl who helped edit majority of the story and gave it that extra charm.

Let's see this through to the very end together, yeah?

— ZERO_SUGAR

Chapter 440

The "Ah, right, Mister."

Sinnoa

"Yeah?"

"I've had something I wanted to confess for a long time."

"...I see. Dok-seo. Sorry, but I don't see you as a romantic partner. Why don't we stay colleagues, like we always have?"

"Fuck, not that kind of confession! You crazy old freak!"

Me and Oh Dok-seo.

Current status: lifelong single.

0 confessions, 1 rejection, added to the record.

The regressor's story ended.

Instead, the world regressed to normal.

"Aren't you going back to Germany, old man?"

"Nah."

Still, just as every result has a cause, every cause has a result.

Now there were no anomalies and no void left to mock the law of causality.

Even if the awakeners quickly said goodbye to their memories of the "previous cycles," there was no way we got a perfect reset where everyone could say, "Nothing happened at all...!"

"I'm just going to study here."

"Huh?"

Emit Schopenhauer. The German-born Old Man Scho, whom mister called "old man," was the perfect example.

"My immediate goal is to get a degree at Sungkyunkwan[1] and earn a doctorate in Korean philosophy."

"...?"

"Research on the Analects has picked up even in the English-speaking world lately, yet discussion here is strangely slow. As a scholar, how could I not burn with righteous fury? Ah! I shall become the black-haired foreign scholar of Confucianism and bring benevolence back to this land!"

"...?"

The former Swordmaster, who inherited the surname of a famous German philosopher yet was always closer to iron than philosophy, had now entered the mystical world of Eastern thought.

Well, scholarship was probably just an excuse.

Personally, I thought it was a strategic choice to avoid loneliness.

Old Man Scho got dragged into bizarre incidents in a foreign country late in life.

He probably had many painful memories, but in the end, he also gained countless unexpected bonds.

No one would believe it, but one of those bonds was even a "daughter from a past life."

No wonder he did not want to leave.

"Dok-seo."

"Hm?"

On the other hand, someone had definitely left for good.

"Since that day, you haven't heard the voice of The Admin of the Infinite Metagame again?"

"Ah... yeah."

I tapped the old laptop.

I was cooling off in the cafe mister had just opened.

Honestly, I would be here even if it were not summer. Autumn too. Winter too. Spring too. Then summer again.

"Strangely enough, if I only write the main novel text, the inner cover appears on its own."

"Inner cover?"

"Yeah. It has the title, a subtitle, and the chapter number. At the bottom, it lists Shin Noa as the author name. Weird, right?"

"And no other authority shows up besides that?"

"Not so far."

Slurp. I sucked up the cafe mocha mister made for me through a straw.

Not cheap syrup, but the bittersweet taste of real chocolate sent a sharp rush of blood sugar from my tongue straight to my brain.

I was happy.

What else is happiness? This was happiness.

"So in the end, the very last authority left to the god that chose me as a Miko was just a pen name."

"...Yeah."

"What do you think, mister? This authority. I can remove it if I want to. I can ask the platform to edit it."

"Hm."

Mister rested his chin on his hand. Dressed as a barista, he stayed frozen in that pose for ten, twenty seconds without moving.

Normally, conversations between people have flow.

Humans embroidered this world through battles called language.

So silence, the absence of language, meant losing initiative over the world.

Silence was hard to endure.

You could call it the most direct form of Void.

For many people, silence was uncomfortable, awkward, hard to bear.

It was hard to fill the Void with meaningful words all the time, so people invented small talk.

But mister often did this. Even in the middle of a conversation, if someone asked him a question, he would go quiet like this without a care.

"Does that mean I don't make him uncomfortable?"

I hoped so.

Because I also loved this time, sipping cafe mocha and stealing glances at mister's profile while he sank into thought.

"Dok-seo."

"Yeah."

"What do you think is the hardest thing, almost impossible, for anomalies, especially Outer Gods?"

"Hm... love?"

"Close enough."

Mister chuckled.

It was the kind of smile that made the other person feel better without realizing it.

When I saw that smile, I sometimes thought maybe that was why he had [Kitchen Knife Resistance III] stuck to his gut, because he flashed it at anyone, anytime. Well, not my gut, so maybe not my problem.

"Outer Gods. And highly powerful awakeners too, in the end, are beings that force their own definition of themselves onto others."

"Yeah. I know that."

"This is me. This is [me]. This is my song. Me, me, me... An anomaly is always shouting that and chanting it like a spell."

Mister said,

"But if there is something that exists only as a pen name, like The Admin of the Infinite Metagame, and if it allows others room to judge what it is, then wouldn't it be hard to call that an anomaly anymore?"

"Oh."

I blinked.

"So... The Admin of the Infinite Metagame disappeared and only left a pen name. You're saying that was actually giving up all its authority and opening itself to people?"

"At least that's how I see it."

Mister spoke while grinding coffee beans.

"We cannot know now whether the one who left the Iliad was truly named Homer. We do not even know whether one person wrote it or a group did. It is the same with the people who built Notre Dame Cathedral. We know who led the design sketches, but if you ask exactly who the architect was, it is hard to answer."

"Hmm..."

"There is no concrete self, but we assume there was one. Since that assumption rests entirely with others, that Outer God called The Admin of the Infinite Metagame was, in the end, no different from handing itself over to the humanity it once despised so much."

"..."

"Did he exist? What kind of being was he? Was he an anomaly? Or a human? Does it not matter either way? He said he was letting go, but was it really letting go?"

"..."

"All those judgments are now left open to the people who remain. At least, The Admin of the Infinite Metagame probably thought so."

I had heard something like that before.

So before I knew it, I asked back.

"Like how I did that to you, Mister?"

"..."

"You lived your own life and reached your own conclusion. But you left it to me to decide how to accept that conclusion. Isn't that exactly what you just said?"

"Yeah. Exactly the same."

Mister patted my head.

Truthfully, mister did not casually pat people's heads like this. Usually he tapped their shoulder to show friendliness.

Even so, with me he used the full pat-pat technique without holding back. Not because his favorability toward me hit MAX or anything.

It was just because I was an otaku.

"Our Dok-seo got a lot smarter."

"Hehehe."

I just liked this.

"But if someone lets go of themselves like that, can you really call that human?"

Part of me felt a little puzzled.

"Closer to a corpse than a human... Ah. Mister has me, though."

In the end, whether someone had another person by their side or not.

By that simple standard, could the anomaly that once lived in this laptop either collapse into a corpse or remain a person?

"...Hmm. So anomalies could only become human by abandoning themselves."

"'Abandoning' is too strong. Let's see. You do your best to live, but you do not monopolize the right to judge that life. You open that right to others too. That's more accurate."

"Needlessly long and pretentious. [Abandoning yourself], on the other hand, short and clean. That's the answer."

"Good grief, says the one calling herself a writer..."

"Ah, right."

I was enjoying the fragrant smell of coffee settling over my bangs like weeping willow branches when it suddenly came to me.

"Mister."

"Yeah?"

"I've had something I wanted to confess for a long time."

"...I see."

Mister's face suddenly turned grave.

"Dok-seo. Sorry, but I don't see you as a romantic partner. Why

don't we stay colleagues, like we always have?"

"Fuck, not that kind of confession! You crazy old freak!"

I got goosebumps.

Not from the idea of dating mister, but from cold sweat at the thought of getting "nice boat"-ed by all the kitchen knives that were probably being sharpened right now.

That was not a joke.

"Good thing Ha-yul sorted that situation out, at least!"

Had it already been about a year?

The day after mister finally gave up the authority of awakening, made contact with Udumbara, and returned to being human, Lee Ha-yul pulled out a kitchen knife in the middle of the school field.

[Notice.]

[If anyone wishes to date Dad, whoever that may be, they must pass my test.]

For reference, Lee Ha-yul had also lost her abilities, so she could no longer send voice with aura or use housekeeper dolls as substitute vocal cords.

In one hand she held a kitchen knife. In the other, a sketchbook.

[The minimum conditions are as follows.]

Scratch, scratch.

Everyone was too dumbfounded to react, but also too chilled by the knife to rush her or shout recklessly.

And that brat Ha-yul, absurdly skilled, flipped the sketchbook one-handed.

[First, my existence must be approved.]

From somewhere, someone shouted, "I can do that!"

It was probably that witch noona from Samcheon World. Or maybe not? Hmm. For that person's honor, I will not identify her.

[That is not all.]

Lee Ha-yul's blank expression was perfectly dignified.

[Next, the existence of Oh Dok-seo must also be allowed.]

[Even if not in the same house as me, they must adopt an owl who visits Dad whenever she gets bored and whose average wake-up time is 4 p.m.]

The uproar on the field dropped in an instant.

Ah, and now that we're here, let me expose this in the true spirit of journalism. The owner of that earlier shout had the real name Dang Seo-rin.

A once-in-a-generation tyrant who inspected Busan and held execution shows in the plaza without even a vote. History may fail to remember, but I, reporter Oh Dok-seo, record only the truth here.

[It does not end here.]

[The existence called Sim Ah-ryeon will always waste her life on SNS in Dad's house, or in his room, with a smartphone, occasionally laughing to herself for no reason.]

[You must acknowledge and tolerate that this will probably continue forever until she dies.]

Silence.

Now not even breathing could be heard on the field.

Everyone's gaze snapped to one side.

Sim Ah-ryeon was eating cold pizza from last night's party, the slices we failed to finish, tilting her head with a "?"

I did not even need to read that anomaly's thoughts.

"Why are they making such a fuss over obvious facts like this is brand-new news?" It was probably something like that.

[These are the basic conditions.]

Lee Ha-yul said.

[I absolutely oppose any person who cannot satisfy and carry out these conditions engaging in officially sharing love with Dad.]

What was official love? Isn't love supposed to be private?

Once again, question marks floated over everyone's heads on the field.

But Lady Lee Ha-yul's expressionless face did not crack at all.

Then again, for the legendary father slayer who killed her biological father not once but thousands of times, why would random people's stares matter?

[If you want to conquer the general, fire at the horse first, that is what they said.]

[Dad is a three-horse carriage.]

Flip. The final sketchbook page turned.

[Now.]

[I am one corner of the three-horse carriage, and the weakest of the Three Heavenly Kings.]

[Try persuading me first, you fools.]

...No one could possibly persuade her in that wrecked atmosphere.

"I am fine with that."

No. To be exact, there was one person who did try.

The same person who ranked right alongside Lee Ha-yul and Yu Ji-won for blank-faced silence in our Regression Alliance. The Saintess, Jeong Ye-ji.

Everyone stared at the Saintess in shock.

Of course, the Saintess had the nerve to ignore ordinary people's stares at will. She did not blink once.

"Anyway, through all four seasons, twenty-four hours a day, no, subjectively for much longer than that, I monitored every one of your movements."

"So now, talk of approval and permission. I had recognized your existences from the start."

"Honestly, nothing changes."

...!

That was surprisingly plausible!?

[Okay.]

Lee Ha-yul nodded as if she accepted the Saintess's logic.

She put down the kitchen knife, took out crayons, and scribbled on the sketchbook. That was proof enough.

[But is distant "surveillance" truly the same as the "real practice" of living together in one space?]

"...?"

[I wish to ask whether they are the same or different.]

Cohabitation began.

Not with mister, obviously.

It meant the three-person unit of Lee Ha-yul, me (Oh Dok-seo), and Sim Ah-ryeon moved into Saintess noona's house and lived together.

A week later.

"I'm sorry."

Saintess noona's face looked wrecked.

"I... trusted only those blurred memories from my past life. I was too arrogant."

"Next time. After I build a little more courage, and a little more patience... I will try again."

"Mr. Undertaker, what kind of battle have you been fighting all this time... No. It's nothing. Yes."

"Please leave my house immediately."

"Especially Ms. Sim Ah-ryeon."

Saintess, surrendered!

Footnotes:

1 - Sungkyunkwan University (SKKU or Seongdae, Korean: 성균관대학교; Hanja: 成均館大學校) is a private research university with campuses in Seoul and Suwon, South Korea. The institution traces its origins to the historic Sungkyunkwan founded in 1398 in central Seoul. As the foremost educational institution during the Joseon period, it was governed by the great code of the state administration with royal assent. By a resolution of the Progressive Intellectuals and Confucian scholars, it was restructured as a comprehensive university in the mid-20th century, and has since greatly expanded its academic offerings.

Chapter 441

The That Man II

Sinnoa

Some ignorant people mocked the Saintess for being weak.

"She acted all high and mighty, then surrendered in just a week."

"Ahh. So that was all the Saintess had, huh."

Anyway, a major rival withdrawing on her own was good news.

They boldly declared, "I'm different," reached out to the Lee-Oh-Sim trio, and said, "Try living with me this time."

And then.

"Kraaaaaaah!"

No one was exempt. Everyone got to share the rare experience of having the very hand they used for a handshake burn away.

"Get out! Get out of my house!"

"I… I don't understand... Sim Ah-ryeon-ssi, I'm sorry, but why... why on earth don't you wash?"

"I see. So this is killing intent."

Surrender. Surrender. Surrender again.

People later learned that the Saintess lasting a week was not "just" a week. It was "a whole" week.

Of everyone who declared they'd challenge next, not one lasted seven days. Dang Seo-rin held out for 25 hours, and Cheon Yo-hwa lasted only 3.

[Hoo.]

Only then did a smile, no, a smirk spread across Lee Ha-yul's face. If you could shape the concept of "victory" into lips, it would probably look like that.

I asked that brat why she was smiling.

[I knew this would happen.]

The poison in Lee Ha-yul's smirk grew thicker.

[In the end, nobody accepted us.]

"Wow. What a proud achievement. So?"

[Now, due to unavoidable pressure, we have no choice but to live with Dad.]

"...?!"

[I could not have reached this state alone. But if I used 'Sim.' I believed it would be possible. My belief was proven.]

"..."

[I focused all aggro and resentment on 'Sim,' and only gained a reputation as 'the cutest and most normal' one in the trio.]

Creak. Lee Ha-yul pushed her wheelchair.

[This is called killing with a borrowed knife.]

For reference, her favorite Three Kingdoms figure was Jia Xu.

[It is fine if Dad never ends up with anyone.]

[It is also fine if he does end up with someone.]

[If he does not, I can live with him without issue. If he does, that partner will still love me most.]

[Sayonara.]

"..."

And then that Lee Ha-yul brat really did move right into Mister's house and start living with him.

'Psycho, psycho, psycho. Total psycho....'

Even now, whenever I remembered her back receding with that smug confidence, I shivered.

It was true.

The biological daughter of Jung Sang-guk, Busan's mayor and a rising presidential contender, had clearly inherited her father's criminal political instinct, no matter how much she denied it.

"Dok-seo?"

"Ah, yeah."

I had spaced out in my recollection room for a moment when Mister called to me.

"Are you okay? You said you had something to confess, then suddenly went quiet. You're making things hard for this old man."

"Ah. Yeah, sorry. It's just..."

I set down my coffee cup.

"You know, back then. Not now, but in some earlier cycle. I took the right to write [side story] chapters without your permission, remember?"

"Hmm."

Mister nodded while grinding beans. But a vague uncertainty still lingered on his face.

"Right. I think something like that happened. I cannot remember it clearly, though."

"..."

Throb.

A sharp pain stabbed near my heart.

A year ago, in that abandoned school, he got infected by Udumbara with our teammates and lost all his powers. Since then, sometimes... he was like this.

He had not lost his memories. They had simply faded.

The timeline of conversations he had with people became mixed, and even when he remembered key points, he could not recall every exact word.

Like any human.

He had become human.

"Yeah, yeah. Back then, you promised I could serialize one side-story episode every 100 chapters."

I quickly changed the topic so I would not show anything on my face.

Mister was quick to notice. If I looked even a little sad, he would catch it immediately.

"I still have one of those rights left... So, can I use a slightly dirty method?"

"Dirty method? What do you mean?"

"The manuscript is really, really in its final stage now. So the side stories I'll write from here on out, can you just bundle all of them together and count them as one?"

"No, that is a bit..."

Mister looked troubled, but I did not back down at all.

I could not compromise on this.

"Pleeeease, yeah? Misteeer. Hmm? Even if they're side stories, the theme is the same. They're only separated on the surface. You could

still call them one episode."

"Stop acting cute."

"Okay."

Fuck. He indulged Ha-yul and Sim Ah-ryeon when they acted cute, so why was he strict with me? This was family discrimination.

"Well, in the past year you've worked harder than anyone could imagine. I never thought you'd keep up five chapters a week..."

"See? It really was the curse of Infinite Metagame. Once it disappeared, I could actually do my duty as a writer properly."

"...This is what normal should have been in the first place. Anyway, what kind of side story are you trying to lump together?"

"Yeah. Mister's romance stories."

"..."

"Let's be blunt. Individual routes, individual routes. Which heroine Mister ended up with, and if he did, what happened next. I, LiteraryGirl, will write it in righteous, unflinching prose in full detail... aaah, ah! Don't go! Mister, don't go! Hear me out!"

Draaaag.

Before I knew it, I had turned into a robot vacuum, clinging to Mister's barista apron and getting dragged across the floor.

I sprang to my feet.

"No. Hey, Go Yuir."

"Good heavens."

At my lion's roar, Mister squeezed his eyes shut like he was horrified. Even then, I did not stop.

"How is this my fault? Huh? What did I do wrong? This is all happening because you don't date anyone. At this rate, what? Are

you going to stay single forever? Is this the Lee Ha-yul ending? The Lee Ha-yul-Oh Dok-seo-Sim Ah-ryeon trio ending? Not even a friend ending but a family endiiing? Even in dating sim history this is unheard of. What even is this!"

"I am perfectly satisfied with things as they are."

"That's the problem! You said you love people. You threw around 'I love so-and-so' all the time."

"No, love does not only mean romantic love. Dok-seo, I love you too..."

"Fuck offfff!!"

Crash! I kicked over a chair.

My head and body both burned all at once. There was no way I could hold this rage in.

"I agreed to having your abilities deleted... especially Complete Memory. Because I calculated that if your dead teammates disappeared from your sight, your eunuch-protagonist cliché would finally break."

"Hmm."

"But that sly little Lee Ha-yul...! Thinking back, she was always smart. She saw you'd end up cornered and moved first. Ah, I thought we were best friends! Damn it, I got stabbed in the back by that little brat. This is betrayal of friendship! Betrayal!"

Hoo.

After pouring out everything in my chest, I finally calmed down.

Even then, it still felt like scraps of nameless emotion clung to the ends of my lungs. Well, probably my imagination.

It was strange, though. Lately I always got like this when I was with Mister.

In the old days, even silly chatter with him felt like an air purifier had switched on inside my chest and cleared the air completely.

"As Mister's ghostwriter, I have the right to claim my fair share. So allow it. Tragic romance side stories."

"They are tragedies too..."

Mister looked even more troubled.

"Still, Dok-seo. You should not invent stories that never existed."

"Yeah, true."

I smiled brightly.

"Don't worry. Side-story episodes that count as 'stories that truly never existed at all' will only be two... or maybe one."

"What?"

"The rest are all based on true stories."

Mister frowned.

"Based on true stories? I do not understand. As you know, I have never experienced romance that could be called [individual routes]."

"Really?"

"..."

"Are you sure there were none?"

Mister's pupils shook. Maybe he sensed the ominous edge in my voice.

Seeing that expression made the tightness in my chest ease in a strangely cheerful way.

"Mister, I don't know if you remember, but this happened in the 146th cycle. It was when you cleared Inunaki Tunnel alone."

Back then, Inunaki Tunnel greeted Mister through graffiti on the tunnel wall.

"Welcome back. Already your seventh time?"

It was a strange greeting.

At the time, Mister had definitely faced Inunaki Tunnel six times.

So where did the remaining one, the one Mister could not remember, come from?

"That was..."

Mister spoke as if feeling through fog in his mind.

"Utopia. Right, because of the cycle with Dang Seo-rin after she fell into Hecate, no? I could not remember that cycle, so one was added."

"Hahahaha."

I burst out laughing without meaning to.

"That was cycle 173, Mister. Clearing Inunaki Tunnel was cycle 146. The timeline is obviously off."

"..."

"Hmm. But in one sense, you hit the mark. Right. The principle is the same as Hecate's utopia."

I could feel the corners of my mouth pulling up uncontrollably.

So what? Mister said he liked seeing me smile. I had nothing to hold back.

"There were more. Cycles you don't remember."

"..."

"Still don't get Go Yuri's trick? Go Yuri fixed the coordinates so Emit Schopenhauer would commit suicide at the starting point every

single time. Why?"

Undertaker.

Even if the protagonist Go Yuir pressed the 'give up' button, he was only a fake regressor.

The true regressor, Emit Schopenhauer, had already died. In other words, this world's regression was fixed.

"So even if you got infected by Udumbara and lost memories of that cycle, even if you gave up everything, you could always start again."

"..."

"It did not matter if you dropped out. The 'Undertaker who gave up' was erased from the data. In the end, only memories of the 'Undertaker who did not give up' remained and were maintained."

When I realized this, I was genuinely impressed.

Go Yuri had not blindly entrusted the future to a man called Undertaker. She did not pass things down by relying on words like faith or hope.

She acted. She built a mechanism. She designed it.

She calculated every case, even failure, even the route where he laid down his own life, and designed the world so that even if he gave up, it would restart.

How kind.

How noble that sense of responsibility.

And how cruel.

"No. Wait. If I get infected by Udumbara, do I not lose Complete Memory entirely? Then how can I exclude only that cycle's memory and start again..."

"You repeated cycles 1 through 146 exactly one more time. That's all."

"..."

"You suspected it too, right, Mister? Maybe the cycle you think is your 100th was not truly the 100th in the strict sense."

Repeat. Again and again. Endlessly.

Until when?

Until Undertaker did not choose [Get infected by Udumbara and give up abilities], did not give up, and moved on to the next cycle.

"Then..."

"Yeah. The 'one missing cycle' Inunaki Tunnel mentioned meant that, at that point, the cycles had been repeated in full."

"..."

"From its perspective, [Undertaker who gave up] and [Undertaker who did not give up] were distinct. But aside from that, every cycle was identical, so it counted it as, ah, there was one extra cycle."

"..."

"Do you get it, Mister? It was only cycle 146. Just 146. But by then you had already been infected by Udumbara once and repeated cycles 1 through 146."

Mister's expression tightened with pain.

A sharp sting pulsed near my chest. A little pain. Even so, overwhelming certainty.

Because even like this, Mister would never think badly of me or reject me.

A side of me others might call ugly. But in front of Mister, I did not need to pretend.

Like he said, he loved me.

"So then, Mister."

"..."

"You already gave up once by cycle 146, and yet we rolled all the way to nearly 3,000 cycles."

I could not hold it in and blurted it out.

We had removed countless obstacles. They were all in the past now. Lost things even Mister could not remember.

Now it was safe to say.

So I said it.

"How many times did you actually give up?"

"..."

Corps Commander Noh Do-hwa, no. There was no National Road Management Corps anymore, so just Noh Do-hwa unni? Noh Do-hwa-ssi?

I understood all too well why Noh Do-hwa tormented Mister.

When someone accepted your existence exactly as it was, not less, not more, anyone would want to leave claw marks.

"Got it? I'm not making up stories that never existed. It's the exact opposite. I'm only restoring stories that disappeared."

"You..."

"I've already collected the happy endings. Then shouldn't a true gamer run for 100 percent completion?"

"You... no way, are you addicted to Infinite Metagame..."

"That thing is gone now. What are you saying, Mister."

Press.

I took Mister's hand. Rough hand. Strong hand. But with the guarantee that none of that roughness or strength would ever turn on me.

Mister flinched and tried to pull his arm away, but I did not let go.

"Now it's just a bastard that has only a name left. It's gone. No substance. This laptop is mine."

"Ah..."

Sway.

Mister staggered, then collapsed against the counter. He had lost consciousness.

"Heave-ho."

Thud. I supported his upper body and lowered him slowly so he would not get hurt.

I pulled out an empty bottle from inside my clothes and set it beside the coffee cup.

"You can't let your guard down, Mister."

"..."

"Ahaha. Even if all awakeners are gone, 'items made before infection by Udumbara' still exist."

For example, Uehara Shino.

A 'MacGuffin' I had hidden as thoroughly as possible all this time, so Mister would never read my novel and grow suspicious.

She was a pharmacist. An alchemist.

In pure healing ability, she was naturally weaker than awakened Sim Ah-ryeon, but when it came to making items that had absolutely nothing to do with saving the world, she was vastly

superior.

"Seriously. Mister is too kind, that's the problem. Even if you're a C-rank healer, you're S-rank as a drug maker, so why not use it?"

Of course.

I, Oh Dok-seo, had stocked up on all kinds of drugs before the White Night on June 17 arrived, accounting for the possibility that Mister might give up his abilities.

Now these were items you could not get anywhere.

A reversal where a C-rank agent turned back into an S-rank agent. This was what holding out was all about.

"Good. Mm-hm, the effect is solid. Good thing I used the fact that Mister drinks café au lait every morning and mixed it into the milk last night."

Until now, this had truly been a story told from Mister's viewpoint, a good person so rare there might be only one in this world.

Sorry, but to reach one happy ending, life had to pass through countless bad endings.

Mister seemed to think failed cycles alone were bad endings... but well.

From my perspective, those 'give-up' cycles I pointed out earlier.

Those dead ends where Mister got infected by Udumbara and truly had to repeat from cycle 1 to cycle X all over again, those were the real bad endings.

The main story had ended.

A happy ending beyond dispute. Mister, the people around him, even the laws of physics had recovered ordinary life.

But readers well versed in dating sims and visual novels would know.

The world has not only happy endings, but also a true ending.

And true endings unlock only after you pass through all happy endings and bad endings.

The final dessert served to a guest who visited the shop, to a gourmet who enjoyed the omakase without skipping.

"Don't worry, Mister. This 'finish line' that Go Yuri, you, and I finally reached won't be damaged."

"..."

Pat.

I stroked Mister's hair as he lay slumped over the counter bar.

Even now, the seven-colored perfume he wore every day seeped faintly into my nose.

"Like I said, it's safe now. It's all in the past. Ah. Did I only monologue that in my head? Anyway."

Press.

I set the laptop beside Mister's head and turned on the screen.

As always, a blank white page greeted me.

I stretched long.

"Uuung! Huaaah... Should I finish this quick before Mister wakes up?"

This was the recollection room.

Individual routes. Bad endings. True ending.

If "clearing" the game for a protagonist called Undertaker meant saving the world, then for one gamer named Oh Dok-seo, who chased every last bit of fun, "clear" meant running around for 100 percent completion even after the main ending.

Play. Literally, play.

"Heheh."

The rules of the game were simple.

---

1. Oh Dok-seo uses the one remaining charge of the authority 'Side Story Creation' she had saved.

: With this, she earns the right to serialize a side-story series.

2. Of the 'canvases' Undertaker still does not recognize, she consumes the remaining two sheets.

: She inserts bad endings, never meant to be remembered, after the main story.

3. But canvases are only two sheets.

: The remaining individual routes that receive no canvas are truly 'falsehoods' that never existed in any worldline.

4. Oh Dok-seo does not reveal whose side story is true and whose is false.

: She leaves enough clues to judge what might be false, but keeps the answer in the realm of deduction. That's more fun.

After writing those rules into a memo, I grinned from ear to ear.

"It would not be an exaggeration to say I've lived for this exact moment...!"

Well, it was an exaggeration.

Anyway.

This time, let's finally bring out the true epilogues.

Chapter 442

The That Woman N I

Sinnoa

Click.

"I want to see my wife in person."

“……”

"Do you not understand me? At least you should. So use your ability and make me...."

"I can't. You know this, old man. Once someone gets Time Sealed, that's the end. It's over. No matter how many times you regress, the seal never breaks."

"Yes. But at least in a dream, I could speak to my wife."

"You'll only repeat that same day forever."

"How is that any different from the situation we're in now?"

"……"

[1. Grant Emit Schopenhauer's wish.]

[2. Refuse. There is still far too much I do not know to claim the world's misery is inevitable.]

Click.

[1. Grant Emit Schopenhauer's wish.] ◀

Click.

"Ah..."

“……”

"Thank you, Undertaker. Thank you. Truly. You cannot imagine how great a grace you've shown me. Truly...."

“.....”

"Adele."

Click.

"Saintess-nim, please stop using Time Stop."

"I'm being consumed by Void poison more and more."

.....

"I think maybe half my existence has already turned into an anomaly. When you discovered my secret, I thought it was over for me. But looking back, I'm glad you found out now. If a little more time had passed...."

.....

"When awakeners go beyond simply getting used to their abilities, when their abilities start devouring who they are, they'll become close to anomalies, like me. Do you understand? An awakener's ability is not a pure blessing. It's a double-edged sword."

"....."

[1. The being before me is an anomaly. I cannot allow exceptions for myself. Sealing her before she falls into anomaly is the best path.]

[2. The being before me is human. Not because I can prove why she is human, but because I want to prove that she is human, I will live the life ahead.]

Click.

[1. The being before me is an anomaly. I cannot allow exceptions for myself and Schopenhauer. Sealing her before she falls into anomaly is the best path.] ◀

Click.

"Ah."

.....

"...Yes. I'm sorry. I'm not strong enough to keep walking with you. My heart broke first. I'm sorry."

.....

"Please, Mr. Undertaker. In this world that cannot be saved, at least you. You alone...."

.....

"Why is it that people... are supposed to be people...."

Click.

"This place is a utopia."

.....

"Simply ruling a city doesn't advance anomaly transformation. But now, this city can't even be separated from you anymore, Dang Seo-rin."

"Then now... are you going to subjugate me too?"

.....

"Even so, Undertaker, I can't abandon my city. It's an oasis I barely carved out in this messed-up world. No matter what anyone says, I am, and my citizens are, human. No, from now on I'll make us the only human species. So if you plan to subjugate me and this place... you'd better be ready to die."

"....."

[1. The being before me is an anomaly. I cannot allow exceptions for myself. A little happiness. Ignorance of happiness. A heaven where time is dead. That alone is the best that can be given to an

anomaly.]

[2. I will not subjugate Dang Seo-rin. The question of who and why is human is for me to decide, and that decision is proven only by responsibility for life and by love.]

Click.

[1. The being before me is an anomaly. I cannot allow exceptions for myself, Schopenhauer, and the Saintess. A little happiness. Ignorance of happiness. A heaven where time is dead. That alone is the best that can be given to an anomaly.] ◀

Click.

"Ahaha, ahahaha. Aha...."

.....

"You're strong after all. You. Mm... no. I guess hurting you was too hard for me after all."

.....

"What?"

.....

"...You're right. If this is a utopia because it's a city that exists nowhere anyway, then running away to a place that truly exists nowhere would be the same thing."

.....

"Ah, what a shame. I wanted to go on a trip with you, just the two of us, someday! But.... I knew that dream could never come true."

.....

"If this is my final station. If this is the last city on the road I took with you. Yeah, then.... maybe that's not so bad."

.....

"Thank you. Undertaker."

.....

"Because you were here, I was happy."

Click.

Click.

Click.

Undertaker opened his eyes.

Busan Station waiting hall. Tutorial dungeon.

It was a scene painfully familiar to him.

"...I've come back again."

Undertaker pressed hard between his brows.

A sickening fatigue clung to his eyelids like ticks.

This was the very starting point where the journey had just begun, so there should have been no reason to feel tired.

It was somewhat strange, but not shocking.

'It's mental fatigue, not physical.'

For thousands of years. For tens of thousands of years, he had run without rest.

There had even been a time when he considered introducing the idea of a "vacation cycle."

A whole cycle spent throwing away his purpose and duty, doing only what he personally wanted. A dream like that.

'No.'

But the vacation cycle had remained nothing more than a paper plan.

'I cannot be allowed that kind of luxury.'

Rest? Forget? Forget what?

By what right?

Even now, if you went to a cafe somewhere in Busan, there stood a chillingly transparent crystal gravestone. A place where the traces of an old man named Emit Schopenhauer had been preserved.

And was that the only place?

'Even this place... has gone quiet now.'

When he looked around, it was desolate.

Endlessly silent.

The man who always pointed at the fairy and shouted, "You son of a bitch!" whenever a new cycle began, and the woman who used to stammer and hide behind other people.

The number of survivors from the once hundreds-strong "Busan Station Tutorial" had now become... exactly one.

Undertaker. No one else remained.

'In a little while, the Tutorial Fairy will show up and freak out.'

A faint smile touched the corner of Undertaker's lips.

In this place gone so cold that not even breathing could be heard, the fairy's overreaction was the only entertainment left.

Even that "entertainment" was just filthy sludge wrung by force from a dried-up towel, but to a traveler on the verge of thirst, even that was still something.

-Ah, hello there! Everyo-bleeegh?! W-why are there so few?!

-O-one person?! One person?! Wha, why has only one person been summoned to my assigned sector?!

-S-something is definitely wrong! I must file a thorough complaint with the authorities!

Watching the fairy panic in a sweat gave him a strange sort of joy.

He used to hate it so much. Why was that?

"...Hm?"

But no matter how long he waited, the Tutorial Fairy did not pop out into thin air with a boing.

Undertaker was startled by this unusual turn. Considering how distant and unfamiliar surprise had become to him, that itself was rare.

"Ah."

Soon he realized the cause.

'Right. In the previous cycle, I bound Cheon Yo-hwa with Time Seal. Could it be that Infinite Void got sealed entirely, and the Tutorial Fairies were all dragged into it and vanished too?'

It was a plausible guess.

But a vague unease twisted the rhythm of Undertaker's heartbeat.

'Strange. From what I felt, the Tutorial Fairies weren't one Outer God, but something spread across multiple Outer Gods.'

'I only sealed Cheon Yo-hwa, yet every fairy disappeared. Could a decayed Infinite Void really have been that powerful...?'

That was when it happened.

He followed his instinctive pulse and unraveled the thought, then suddenly let go of the whole flow of reasoning.

"...Who knows."

He did not care anymore.

The true nature of the Outer God called Infinite Void. The aftermath of sealing Cheon Yo-hwa.

The cause was not that important.

'Whatever happened, those anomalies called Tutorial Fairies disappeared. Isn't that enough?'

Only the result mattered.

Suppose someone fell into a raging current right in front of you. Then the right thing was to run and rescue them first, not to waste time guessing how they ended up in the river.

'And the world right now is being swallowed by a tidal wave.'

Undertaker was not some leisurely drifter with spare time to dig into the reasons for floods and falls.

So he moved.

Leaving Busan Station was easy.

There was no fairy commotion anymore, no announcement that the Void had arrived in this world. No tutorial either.

Part of him felt lonely.

Still, he mocked himself, thinking this scenery where nothing ever "began" might actually be the station that suited him best.

From Busan to Seoul. He could have drawn on aura and arrived quickly, but he deliberately took several days before reaching his destination.

Convenience Store.

After lightly twisting apart the carefully laid booby trap at the entrance like a child's toy, he stepped inside the store.

An axe flew straight for Undertaker's neck.

"...!"

But the one who seemed more startled was the ambusher. Beneath silver hair blowing loose, clear eyes widened.

The axe blade did not bite into Undertaker's neck at all. A dark aura protected him as if it were alive.

"You, how are you using prāṇa—"

"Not prāṇa. Aura."

Boom!

Undertaker did not even reach out his hand, yet the hatchet exploded and spat fragments everywhere.

The ambusher immediately fell back.

Not on Undertaker's level, but not ordinary either.

"....."

He could have pursued. He knew pressing harder here would make it easier to cut off her breath.

But for some reason, he did not feel like doing it.

"....."

Had the other side sensed that instinctively? Keeping her distance, she stared at Undertaker without expression.

'So this development changed too.'

Originally, simply entering the Convenience Store would not make that person attack him right away.

She used to open with conversation to lower his guard, even revealing her appearance to make him relax.

But at some point, that kind of small talk disappeared.

She could think too, after all.

If she survived long enough to barricade herself in this store without finding even one other survivor?

Then if, in that twisted world, something became the very first being to enter the store?

Of course trying to subdue it first instead of chatting was a hundred times more sensible.

"Yu Ji-won."

"....."

As soon as Undertaker said that name, her vigilance sharpened even more.

"I am a regressor."

"I see."

"I know that when you were seventeen, you murdered your grandmother, cut her up, and dumped her in the minari swamp on the mountain."

"....."

Yu Ji-won's delicate brows twitched slightly. But her guard did not ease. It deepened.

"If you are a regressor, that means you turn back time. What cycle is this now, and when did I tell you that fact?"

"I heard your past in the 5th cycle. And now... counting has no meaning anymore. At the very least, you can assume thousands of cycles have passed."

"I see."

Yu Ji-won nodded.

She fell into thought for about ten seconds, then spoke again.

"I can trust, to some extent, that you are a regressor. So what did you come to me for?"

"To make you one proposal."

"A proposal?"

"Yes."

Undertaker said calmly.

"I have an ability called [Time Seal]. A person caught by this ability repeats, forever, the happiest day of their life. Without ever realizing they are repeating it."

"....."

"You've explored this city enough, so you know. The world has fallen. There is no salvation, no hope. Even so, remembering the time you were happiest and living forever inside it. This is the only path left to humanity."

"Certainly."

Yu Ji-won's eyes narrowed.

"At least in Seoul, it's true that nothing but monsters remain."

"Not just Seoul. The Korean Peninsula, and the whole world, is the same."

"...Hmm. Even so, it's difficult for me to accept your proposal."

"Yes. I know why."

Undertaker said,

"You have someone precious to you. One person who promised to come back no matter what, so you cannot abandon the hope of meeting that person again."

"....."

"As I said, I am a regressor. Do you think this is the first time we've had this conversation? I already heard this from you hundreds of cycles ago."

"I see."

Yu Ji-won's gaze met his directly.

"I'll ask again. Why did you come to me, regressor?"

"To tell you that you no longer need to cling to useless hope."

"What do you mean?"

"You. Me. And one woman still alive somewhere."

Undertaker raised one finger.

"Three."

"....."

"Aside from those three, there are no living humans left on the surface now."

"....."

"So whoever you're waiting for, whoever you wish to meet again, the possibility of that wish coming true is zero."

"....."

"Because everyone disappeared."

"By disappeared..."

Yu Ji-won's voice was quiet.

"Do you mean all humanity in this world has been put under [Time Seal] by you?"

"Yes. Since Time Seal requires agreement from the target, it took a very long time."

"Even if you are a regressor, because of time limits it would be difficult to contact everyone. The moment you regress, some people would already be dying somewhere in this world. What did you do with those people? Did you just leave them?"

"No."

Undertaker shook his head.

"Until the previous cycle, I had a Necromancer companion by my side."

"A Necromancer...?"

"A death mage who can revive the dead. Not a complete revival, so they're basically half-corpse... but it's possible to ask for 'consent.'"

"....."

"With the Necromancer, I roamed the world for truly countless years. Corpses. Even dead souls with no bodies left. We raised them every time and asked for consent for Time Seal."

Undertaker pointed outside the Convenience Store.

In his eyes, the entire horizon stretching below the mountain ridge was covered in crystal gravestones.

Everyone was there, and no one was there.

"This is the result. The world you saw."

"....."

"I'm sorry, but the person you were searching for was nowhere. A few people knew a child model named 'Yu Ji-won,' but not one person understood when they heard keywords like mountain, minari swamp, and so on."

"....."

"So I am the one who severed your stubborn hope. Yu Ji-won. Isn't

it time to give up now?"

Again, silence.

For some reason, that silence felt ominous to Undertaker. It was the same ominous feeling he sensed earlier in his heart.

"What are you hesitating for? It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say I traveled the whole world to persuade you. If even after this you still won't accept it, I'll have no choice but to use force on you—"

"No."

Yu Ji-won answered.

"I learned a lot through this conversation with you. The reason I hesitate is not to make excuses to reject your Time Seal."

"...Then?"

"There is simply something I want to ask you."

"Ask anything. If you agree to Time Seal, I'll freely share any secret I discovered."

"Cars."

Cars?

The word was so abrupt that Undertaker had no choice but to tilt his head.

"Cars?"

"I want to ask what kind of car left the deepest impression on you. A truck is fine, a sedan is fine. Any brand is fine. Just tell me one."

"...That truly is a strange question."

Undertaker frowned.

"There is no car that left an impression on me. Things I can't even use anyway."

"....."

"Since I raised my aura realm, I've never relied on a car. So the proper answer to your question is 'none.'"

"I see."

Yu Ji-won closed her eyes.

Then she opened them again, and as their eyes met, Undertaker was suddenly overtaken by a bizarre sensation.

Her pupils were looking at him. Clearly.

But for some reason, her gaze felt like it was looking not at Undertaker standing here now, but at some "other side" somewhere else.

A truly strange look.

"I understand."

"...Are you agreeing?"

"Yes. If that place is the only place left where I can meet that person, then that's where I must go."

The Time Seal process went smoothly.

It was a task he had already repeated tens of billions of times, so in a way fitting his alias, Undertaker sealed the being before him with practiced skill.

Right before that.

"Yu Ji-won. I answered your question, so can you answer one of mine too?"

"Yes."

"Who was the person you searched for until the end? Even through countless cycles, you never told me his name. Now that this whole thing is finally at the end, can't you tell me?"

"Ah. I see."

Yu Ji-won nodded.

"It's Suzuki-ssi."

"Suzuki? Japanese?"

"....."

Yu Ji-won did not answer. As if one question had already been used up.

Undertaker shrugged and finished the rest of the process.

Not long after, beyond the Convenience Store counter, a gravestone clear as glass stood there.

'Still, I am a little curious about Yu Ji-won's ending. Should I peek for a moment at what day became her happiest dream?'

He moved slightly.

Undertaker reached a finger toward the gravestone, then stopped dead halfway.

The corner of his lips twisted.

'No. An uninvited guest like me cannot dare invade another person's dream. I guaranteed their final happiness.'

Undertaker left the Convenience Store.

Then he turned his steps.

Present humanity.

Survivors. Two people.

Excluding Undertaker himself, he headed toward the one and only human still left on the surface.

Chapter 443

The That Woman N II

Sinnoa

The Undertaker walked. And kept walking.

No one called his name anywhere. There were no passersby to begin with.

Seoul, Suwon, Sejong, Daejeon.

There was no sign of life in any of those cities.

“……”

Babble, babble.

In the middle of dead cities, a stream alone flowed without end, proving that a trace of vitality still remained.

The stream’s whisper sounded exactly the same.

When people were there and when they were gone, when children crossed the stepping stones laughing and when they did not, it was still only the murmuring of the brook.

Where people vanished, only the water remained intact.

“……”

Was this how the world ended?

Even though he himself was the one who had made this scene, the Undertaker was wrapped in hollow emptiness.

‘I was not wrong.’

‘No. Even if I was wrong… at least I was less wrong than this world.’

That was right.

Around the stream stood only transparent gravestones, lined up like silent stone figures. Forgetting even the sound of the flowing water, everyone dreamed of the happiness granted to everyone else.

‘The world is always the worst. So what could humans born in it possibly do? I can only be the second worst.’

Now no one would laugh again with their feet dipped in that stream.

Unable to endure the silence, the Undertaker spoke.

“Yo-hwa.”

A voice came from behind him.

“Yes, teacher.”

“I’m still glad you’re here. If even you were gone, I might have gone mad already.”

“Ahaha. Teacher, really. You’re still worrying about that?”

“It doesn’t matter if you go mad. There are only two of us left on this journey anyway, and only our journey is left in this world.”

“If two people are swallowed by madness and those two are the only ones left, then it’s not madness. It’s normal, teacher.”

Those words made the Undertaker happy.

So he turned to pat Cheon Yo-hwa on the shoulder, and there she was, the student council president of Baekwha Girls’ High, smiling brightly with perfect, lifelike clarity.

The Undertaker almost really patted her shoulder.

At least until she, the illusion of Cheon Yo-hwa, passed through him like a ghost and kept walking.

“……”

He paused.

Following Cheon Yo-hwa's back, the Undertaker looked around.

Even with the world on the edge of ruin, elementary school children were still using the stepping stones in the stream as their way home, laughing.

Their parents watched them with worried faces, because those stepping stones could never become an evacuation route.

"Come on, teacher! Let's go find the next corpse!"

Cheon Yo-hwa vanished into the crowd where illusions of corpses flickered.

Lee Ha-yul too. Sim Ah-ryeon too. Yu Ji-won too. Every trace of those who had once walked this "journey" with him shimmered like summer heat haze.

"....."

Ah, there was the world.

An optical illusion created by [Complete Memory].

As if nothing had been destroyed, as if time were still flowing somewhere, the mirage embroidered the city.

The Undertaker could only let out a groan.

'They all left me behind.'

No. That was the wrong conclusion.

'I sent all of them away.'

Why?

Because the world was wrong.

Because he believed that humans born into such a world were still not at fault.

As a result, the world split into “this side” and “that side” for the Undertaker.

This shore and the far shore.

Now, he could not even tell which side was truly the real world.

‘Which side do I live on?’

The Undertaker closed his left eye. The world seen through his right eye was hushed and still. Even the mirage was gone, and only the stream could be heard.

The Undertaker closed his right eye. The world seen through his left eye was noisy. Cheon Yo-hwa was laughing, his other companions were fine, and the world was still full of sound.

He closed both eyes, then opened both.

“……”

Both sides felt unbearably far away.

He walked through a world that never came any closer, no matter how far he walked.

Toward the reason he could still keep walking even in a world like this.

“Hmm……?”

That reason was sitting slightly reclined in a national rehabilitation hospital in some remote city.

“How surprising. I didn’t expect there to be a living person……?”

That reason had slightly coarse black hair.

That reason wore a white doctor’s coat, not for authority or self-justification, but simply to reassure patients.

“Though I do wonder whether you’re a real person. Well, the world being messed up is nothing new…”

A name tag reading ‘Noh Do-hwa’ dangled from that reason’s chest like a hanged corpse.

“So...”

In his left eye and his right eye, on that shore and this shore, that reason floated unchanged like a single buoy on waves.

“Who are you...?”

From today onward.

The Undertaker had to erase the last reason left in this world, and the last reason left for himself.

This was his alleyway.

He had no choice left.

“That was quite an interesting little lament...”

Several days passed.

For seven days and nights, the Undertaker and Noh Do-hwa talked at length.

During those talks, they occasionally strolled through the city. Sometimes, and only when Noh Do-hwa requested it, they directly toured someone’s dream spread out inside the crystal gravestones.

“Well, I still have questions here and there...”

Because of that, Noh Do-hwa stopped doubting what he said.

Naturally. She had even ridden a two-seater aircraft and gone beyond the sea for a quick look. Noh Do-hwa was not so narrow-minded that she would keep nitpicking after that.

“But a few things are clear. First, the reason civilization was completely wiped out, and responsibility for it, lies entirely with you...”

“I do not deny it.”

“And second, you’re a complete lunatic. Hah. You hated seeing people suffer over and over, so you made their happiest day repeat forever? Even among devils, that is a special kind of devil...”

“……”

The Undertaker gave no answer.

Noh Do-hwa ran her eyes over his tightly shut lips and face, clearly fascinated.

If human eyes had tongues, that gaze was closer to licking than scanning.

“I’ll ask just one thing first. Undertaker? Hmm. Is it fine if I just call you Undertaker...?”

“Yes. Ask anything.”

“Is there even one reason I shouldn’t treat you as the worst anomaly among anomalies that ended the world, rather than as a human...?”

“……”

The Undertaker could not answer.

A strange light flickered in Noh Do-hwa’s eyes.

The silence of the weak was sometimes escape, sometimes a shield. But the silence of the strong? In many cases, it was weakness, blood flowing from a wound.

Noh Do-hwa had been gifted with an instinctive sense for detecting human blood.

“Well, I mostly understand. I’ve often had childish thoughts like, ‘I wish the world would just end.’ But for it to really end. And for me to be the only survivor left on earth. Quite a rare experience...”

Her voice was now almost a hum.

Over the past few days, Noh Do-hwa had provoked the man before her in all sorts of ways. Tested him. Experimented on him.

Compared to her, a prosthetics technician, he was overwhelmingly strong. A hunter who could twist her neck and kill her at any moment.

Even so, the Undertaker never threatened Noh Do-hwa. Not once. Not even a little.

'Aha.'

When the experiment ended, Noh Do-hwa was genuinely impressed. How could this not be astonishing?

The man in front of her had destroyed humanity, yet he sincerely believed that by his own will, he lacked the "right" to kill even a weak human like her.

'Humanity was destroyed by someone like this?'

Noh Do-hwa wanted to sneer.

'Or was it because he was this kind of human that he could destroy humanity?'

Noh Do-hwa felt happy. She could not fully understand why. But the fact that a moment like this had been given to her at all.

The fact that the "chance" and "choice" to truly confirm humanity's destruction had been given not to anyone else, but to her, amused her.

'What a nasty joke...'

Noh Do-hwa studied his face again, carefully. His features were bold.

Yet his eyes held the darkest shadows. If those eyes were plucked out and displayed, would even obsidian lose its shine?

'No.'

Hold back.

There was no need to rush.

Noh Do-hwa suppressed the tight heat rising in her heart as it tried to race on its own. It took only a little effort.

“Even the Necromancer who wandered with you for tens of thousands of years has disappeared, I hear. And yet I remained...”

Calmly, step by step, as if chewing and savoring each word with neat white teeth.

She spoke in clipped phrases.

“Does that mean that for countless years, without changing, I kept refusing [Time Seal]...?”

“That is correct.”

“Show me...”

Show me.

Even as she bit that sentence into pieces, Noh Do-hwa had already expected how this conversation would go.

For example.

“What do you want me to show you?”

“You said tens of thousands of years, did you not? Then I can assume you used every possible method to persuade me and shove me into [Time Seal]. Those methods. Every approach you used to win me over, show them to me directly.”

“.....”

“Why did I reject your offer? What were the ‘past me’s’ thinking? I won’t be satisfied until I know everything from beginning to end, Undertaker. Until then, I will never accept your proposal.”

Like that.

Conversation had a kind of tempo. Maybe not enough to become music, but enough for a tune to hum itself.

But.

“Understood.”

“…?”

His answer was a little different from what Noh Do-hwa expected.

As if there were no need to match tempos and figure out her intent behind “show me,” he stood up from his seat.

“Please wait a moment…”

Noh Do-hwa grabbed him.

“Yes?”

“You. Are you sure you understood what I asked you to show me? I didn’t explain anything in detail…?”

Noh Do-hwa herself did not realize it, but she was frowning.

Even after seeing that expression, the Undertaker gave no particular reaction. It was deliberate indifference.

If he had paid attention to people’s expressions all day, if he had given his heart to the crowd of “mirages,” his soul would not have lasted long before collapsing.

“Yes.”

To him, a human face had already become, in many ways, like a reptile’s face.

Just as no one reads emotion from a crocodile’s expression, the Undertaker no longer gave meaning to human expressions.

“Didn’t you ask me to show you, one by one, how the Noh Do-hwa from earlier cycles reacted?”

“...No, well, yes, that’s right.”

“First, you were the director of the National Road Management Corps... Ah. It was something like a government institution on the Korean Peninsula. You were its head. The Regressor Alliance was also still functioning, more or less, at that time. In any case, I need to show you stories from that era first.”

“Hmm...”

“At that time, you demanded a promise from me.”

“.....”

Why was it?

Watching that man speak of the so-called “past” with lifeless eyes.

“Do not even dream of trying to persuade me before sealing every other human left on this earth. First, move to Busan, then one by one, what happened in previous cycles...”

“.....”

Watching him analyze her now based on the ‘Noh Do-hwa’ he had met and spoken with then, understand her, and read even the leftover parts of words she had skipped.

Something about it bothered her.

Her heart pounded.

“Mm...?”

Without thinking, Noh Do-hwa raised her arm and pressed lightly over her heart.

It was pounding wildly. Even black leather gloves could not block the pulse.

“...?”

“Please follow me, Ms. Noh Do-hwa. The road to Busan is long, so

you must be careful.”

“Ah. Yes. I’ll be careful...”

The Undertaker turned his back and started walking, exposing his pale white neck.

“.....”

Was it because those corpse-dead eyes had left her sight? The beauty of his body seemed to reveal itself only now.

Suddenly…

Noh Do-hwa wanted to break that neck.

Chapter 444

The That Woman N III

Sinnoa

Noh Do-hwa and the Undertaker.

A full year had passed since the last two surviving humans began living together on some stretch of shoreline.

It was right around then that the two of them started sharing the same bed.

The news had come as a real surprise to her too.

Noh Do-hwa, which was to say herself, seemed to have come to feel something almost like pity for that man.

"Undertaker? It's already four in the morning. What are you still doing up out here, moping around like this...?"

"Ah."

When had it started, she wondered. Looking back, that was probably the moment that set it all off.

It was early on, when the two of them had not been together long this cycle.

Summer's green was still bristling with envy at autumn's red when Noh Do-hwa woke in the middle of the night and shuffled out of her bedroom.

A strange thing, then. Wasn't the Undertaker sitting out on the terrace, perfectly at ease?

"My apologies. I thought I was being quiet, but it seems I disturbed your sleep, Do-hwa."

"No. Whether I sleep or not has nothing to do with you... More to the point, what are you doing out here? There's nothing worth seeing in the night view, I'd think..."

Busan. The sandy beach.

The Undertaker had skillfully converted the lobby of a building that had once been a hotel into living quarters.

She had no idea what kind of miracle he'd worked, but in this Azit the drinking water and the electricity still ran without a hitch.

Since it had been a hotel, beds were plentiful. Noh Do-hwa and the Undertaker each kept to separate rooms, ten meters apart.

"Hmm."

There, where night veiled the sea until it existed only as a sound and not a color, the Undertaker hesitated a little.

"The truth is, I haven't mentioned it to you, Do-hwa, but I don't sleep."

"Well, that's hardly strange. They say the older you get, the less you sleep, don't they? Heh. For someone who's lived through tens of thousands of years like it was nothing, of course you'd sleep little..."

"No. The thing is, it's not that I sleep little. I don't sleep at all. None whatsoever."

"...Excuse me?"

"It became this way at some point. Unless I make a deliberate effort, I find I have no need to sleep."

The Undertaker gave a wry smile.

"In a sense, you could say I've transcended humanity. Do-hwa. Rather than spend your days with a man as unfathomable as me, wouldn't it be wiser to defect to some happy refuge as soon as you can?"

"...No. Go screw yourself."

"Oh dear. What a shame."

The Undertaker gave a teasing shrug.

[Do not cross any further than this.]

Behind the Undertaker's pose, all feigned good cheer, an unspoken keep out sign stood planted.

"..."

To trample the fence a person's heart had staked around its boundary required a certain resolve, and a very firm sense of responsibility at that.

Ever since childhood, Noh Do-hwa had hated taking responsibility for anything.

So she said nothing and let the Undertaker's silence slide, treating it as no more than the slightly odd sound of the night waves.

"Hm?"

But.

The strange things did not stop there.

"Undertaker?"

"..."

"Undertaker. Why do you suddenly stop while you're walking? Did you see a ghost or something...?"

The two of them often took strolls through Busan's alleys, where moss and fallen leaves ran rampant now that the people were gone.

In the middle of a stroll, the Undertaker would sometimes halt with no warning at all.

"Ah."

Then he would blink (usually with a hard squint of his left eye) and turn to look back at her.

"My apologies. I drifted off into other thoughts for a moment."

"Hmm..."

"In any case, there's nothing to be gained from spending time with a strange, dull man like me. Do-hwa. I'd be grateful if you could agree to the time seal as soon as possible."

"..."

Strange, just as she'd thought.

'An absolute lack of sleep. Abnormal breaks in his everyday actions.'

Noh Do-hwa was no psychiatrist.

But when you faced patients at a hospital day after day, you tended to develop a certain affinity for mental illness.

Noh Do-hwa's instincts and experience were whispering to her.

'On the surface only his eyes are corpse eyes, but this man...'

So one day.

Noh Do-hwa went through with something the version of herself from the past would never, ever have done.

"Undertaker. Whatever else may be true, what you want is for me to agree to that time seal or whatever it's called, and then hurry up and get out of this world. That's the gist of it...?"

"I've never put it in such harsh terms. But, yes. That's correct."

"Then grant me everything I ask. Once my wishes come true, I'll decide whether or not to accept your proposal..."

"Very well. What is it you'd like to ask?"

"Sleep for me..."

The Undertaker froze.

"Sorry?"

Heh.

Watching how flustered he looked, Noh Do-hwa felt a little pleased with herself.

This man who always carried himself as though he understood, one hundred, two hundred percent, exactly what she meant by everything she said.

She was the one who had led him into the misunderstanding, yet Noh Do-hwa sneered as if it were entirely his fault for misreading her words.

"I mean it literally. In front of me, while I watch over you, lie down in bed and let me see you sleep..."

"Ah. Ahh, that's what you meant."

"Hmm? Then what exactly did you think I meant...?"

"No, it's nothing."

The Undertaker composed his expression and soon fell into thought.

He was probably mulling over the contents of the wish she'd put forward.

For Noh Do-hwa, savoring that face of his was its own little entertainment.

A man she'd known for so short a time, weighing every casual remark she tossed out 'this' seriously, every single time, was more fun to watch than she'd expected.

"Will it really not satisfy you unless you watch me sleep? That's a nasty little hobby. You must have plenty of other wishes, yet you go and pick this one."

"If you're going to refuse my request and just heap on the grumbling, I'll simply kill myself..."

"...Understood. I'll show you tonight."

The Undertaker sighed.

And that night, Noh Do-hwa confirmed once more that her instincts had not been wrong.

"Ah. Ngh..."

The dead of night.

Having forced himself to lie in bed and chase after sleep, the Undertaker was drenched in cold sweat from head to toe.

Spilling out groans far too thick to dismiss as mere sleep-talk, one after another.

"I'm, sorry. Dang Seo-rin. That's not it. It isn't that you're an anomaly... it's me. I've already come too far..."

That voice. That sight.

"..."

Seated in a wooden chair a few steps from the bed, Noh Do-hwa kept watching.

All night long.

"....."

As if even the act of blinking were a waste. As if even letting out a breath would get in the way. Steadily.

Noh Do-hwa gazed at him, and.

'Aha.'

In the end she could only admit it.

That her own self, her own heart, right now.

Was stirred to a degree she could say with certainty she had never felt since the day she was born, an excitement without precedent.

'Ahaa...'

There was something Noh Do-hwa had thought ever since she was young.

That she had probably been born wrong.

She could not wish for anyone's happiness. The sight of others in pain was her happiness, and the more genuine that pain, the deeper her happiness ran.

Noh Do-hwa's fortune, and her misfortune, was that she was smart enough to analyze 'logically' just how twisted and how wrong her own nature was.

And that she had patience exceptional enough to write up the judgments her 'head' reached as a formal order and force them upon this seething 'heart.'

For a person like Noh Do-hwa, happiness was not an essential element, neither for others nor for herself.

So she gave up on happiness, simply.

Instead, she accepted only the tasks she was capable of as her daily routine.

The work of making assistive devices for people with disabilities. By anyone's measure it was a worthy thing to do, and it was work that wouldn't draw the eyes of others, and it was work that let even Noh Do-hwa feel a modest sense of pride.

Great happiness. Great goodness. Great honor.

A measure of poison had seeped into every one of them.

Noh Do-hwa pursued the 'smaller' happiness, goodness, and honor

instead. A reality small enough that even someone born the way she was could handle it.

[Do not cross any further than this.]

Noh Do-hwa's heart had always been ringed with yellow tape, with cordon ropes marked 'keep out.'

[Do not cross any further than this.]

Yes. A human being was not decided by what kind of passion or what kind of heart they were born with.

What truly mattered was the way they treated that heart.

For Noh Do-hwa, this yellow tape she had strung up herself was the very pride that proved her own 'humanity.'

And yet.

"It isn't so, Ms. Saintess. It isn't your fault... Ye-ji-ssi. You are not the one in the wrong. If anything, it's this world..."

"..."

To go on watching that man.

The heart she had sealed shut, leaving no gap for so much as a stray sound to leak through, kept striking up dissonant chords.

'I don't know whether it's Dang Seo-rin or whoever. But the people that man is murmuring about now...'

'Every one of them agreed to the [time seal] because they respected that man's wishes.'

Because they were precious, they respected him.

That kind of precious feeling was surely the wellspring of the choices that man's companions had made.

But.

'And me?'

Why was it that across more than tens of thousands of cycles Noh Do-hwa had not once granted that man's proposal?

'Aha.'

Because she could not allow it.

Noh Do-hwa's heart was cramped. A single seat. And so even the concept of 'preciousness' could be permitted to only one person.

Friend? Friendship? Lover? Affection? Great figure? Respect? Slave? Contempt?

A way to skillfully divide the heart up among such a host of words, Noh Do-hwa did not know.

Let her say it once more. The capacity of Noh Do-hwa's heart was always one person, and one alone.

He had to be the friend. He had to be the friendship. He had to be the lover. He had to be the affection. He had to be the great figure. He had to be the respect. He had to be the slave. He had to be the contempt.

Every word that existed in this world had to converge into a single vanishing point.

And here a simple piece of arithmetic took shape.

Her heart had been prepared for one single person, so didn't it follow that the other side, too, ought to be set aside for one person alone?

'Aha,' 'aha,' 'aha,' 'aha.'

Joy spread out from within her chest.

Long ago, Noh Do-hwa had wound cordon ropes around her heart out of consideration and respect for this world.

And now the world had perished.

Long ago, Noh Do-hwa had always kept ice close to her heart's temperature so as not to make anyone unhappy.

And now the people were gone.

All of them, save the man before her.

"....."

Slowly.

She felt them loosening. The cordon ropes.

Noh Do-hwa rose from the chair and stepped close to the bed. She climbed up, and as if even that were not enough, she looked down at the Undertaker's face from right above it.

A breath spilled out. Her own.

"Heh."

The steam that rose, hot, from that short laugh was the static electricity sparking up as the cordon ropes were torn apart.

Noh Do-hwa stroked the Undertaker's cheek.

"...!"

The moment she ran her hand over the tear-stained cheek, her spine rang with a jolt, as if she'd been electrocuted.

Noh Do-hwa flung off her glove. And once more, this time from even closer, she felt his cheek.

"..."

Astonishingly, it felt good.

'Ah.'

Her head spun.

Just as she'd thought, just as she'd been certain. It would turn out this way. Because they had been certain it would turn out this way, her past selves had probably scraped together all the junk scattered across the ground and built up a barrier wall.

That trash was made of language. 'Because I respect you.' 'Because I still believe in the line.' 'Because not hurting anyone is the only right answer.' 'Because not crumbling is what nobility means.'

A moment ago that mountain of trash collapsed. Along with the cordon ropes that had bound her heart tight.

She kissed him.

"...!"

The eyes of the Undertaker, who had been moaning through his nightmare all this while, snapped open.

At first he seemed unable to believe the scene unfolding before him, and Noh Do-hwa liked that bewilderment.

She bit the tip of a tongue. Whose tongue it was was hard to tell. The taste of blood came, and that taste, too, Noh Do-hwa liked.

She kissed him once more.

"N-Noh Do-hwa…?"

When a gap finally opened just wide enough for his voice to squeeze through, the Undertaker spoke.

"What is this… right now..."

"I do not wish for happiness."

Noh Do-hwa said. Speaking was a struggle.

Even so, she said what had to be said.

"Neither my happiness. Nor yours."

This man before her always acted so insufferably, as if he knew

exactly what she meant by everything she said.

But thinking on it now, perhaps that had been a signal in the Undertaker's own way. 'I understand you.'

She, Noh Do-hwa, was trying the very same thing now.

A moment ago the Undertaker had been about to ask, 'what is this.' But that was trivial.

The meaning his question truly held inside it carried an entirely different resonance.

[If this happens, if we become this kind of relationship, what is to become of the two of us?]

This was the real question.

And so, Noh Do-hwa answered him.

"I simply wish to have you."

She was giving him her answer.

"Your grief, your sorrow. Whatever it may be... all the screwed-up things. Every last one of them. Think of it all as having been reserved for me."

"..."

"Blaming yourself? That's fine. Reproach yourself to your heart's content. Only, this is what you must understand..."

Noh Do-hwa whispered. In this posture there was no need to move her head much, which was comfortable.

"I had been longing, desperately, for you to become this way."

"..."

"Do you understand? Even what you think of as the worst, to me it looks like nothing but the fruit of a sweet wish..."

Heh. Without meaning to, a laugh slipped out.

"You asked me what my wish was, Undertaker?"

She was glad.

"I want nothing other than you, exactly as you are right now."

In a trashy world, the trash had vanished. At long last only two pieces of trash remained.

Noh Do-hwa reached out and ran her hand the length of the white throat of the trash she had gotten her hands on at the very, very end.

"So."

"..."

"You, too, want only me..."

The one who had won the gamble was herself.

Chapter 445

The That Woman N IV

Sinnoa

* * *

There had never been a time when life was not like this, but lately the Undertaker had been especially confused.

"Did you sleep well...?"

"Ah. Yes. You too, Ms. Noh Do-hwa."

There was no need to point out who had caused the confusion.

Aside from the Undertaker himself, there was only one human left on earth anyway.

"Hmm."

Noh Do-hwa, receiving his morning greeting from the bed, smiled with sleep still lingering in her eyes.

"Even after all this, it's still Ms. Noh Do-hwa? You're impressively tiresome..."

The Undertaker was speechless for a moment.

A glance should not carry any fragrance.

And yet, from her look, a lemon scent seemed to bloom all at once, and the Undertaker shook his head as if to brush the body scent from his hair.

"...Back then, I always addressed you by your full rank, Management Captain Noh Do-hwa. Even now, from my perspective, this feels rather awkward."

"Hmm? Well, isn't that something. No, then again, that's none of my business. If anything, I like it. Please, keep finding it awkward."

"..."

At this point, even the Undertaker, who lived trapped in the past, could not help but notice.

The Noh Do-hwa before him wanted to be treated as someone who existed once and only once.

Uniqueness. Was this too something that ought to be called the aesthetics of the fleeting moment?

Noh Do-hwa calmly did things that would have been unimaginable in previous cycles.

As if all the "Noh Do-hwa data" he had collected until now were utterly useless.

For example, she was like that even now.

"Mmm."

"..."

Noh Do-hwa grabbed both his cheeks, then suddenly kissed him. No. Calling it a kiss was far too tame.

It was a motion like she meant to bite his tongue off.

As if she could not forgive him for the very act of drawing oxygen from the world, as if the only air he was allowed to receive had to be air filtered through her own lungs.

A tenacious, sticky act of breath-eating.

"..."

"..."

Their breathing shifted, and shadow seeped into the bed.

It was not because clouds had covered the sunlight beyond the window. It was only that two portions of shadow had overlapped and fallen across each other's bodies.

Just as breath, filtered through breath, seemed to take on poison, there was a faint addictiveness to bodies slipping into shadow too.

"Today..."

The shadow tilted up the corner of its lips.

"Do you have plans...?"

"Yes. I do."

"That's wonderful..."

"May I ask why that's wonderful?"

"Because it means there is still plenty of your time for me to ruin today as well..."

Watching the shadow deepen a little more right in front of him, the Undertaker suddenly thought:

Ah.

He might have come to cherish this poison.

* * *

After laying the last human down, who had rolled from a night's sleep straight into an afternoon nap, the Undertaker went down to the beach and found a woman sitting on a lonely bench.

"Good morning... No, good afternoon, Undertaker."

The woman's hair carried a pink hue.

In truth, from the Undertaker's point of view, even calling this thing a woman was inappropriate. It was not human, so how could he call it a person?

It was certainly an anomaly. But there was not even a clue to guess what kind of anomaly it was.

"...Go Yuri."

So all he could do was call her by her proper name.

"Yes! Hwaah. Now that everybody's gone, it suddenly feels so lonely. Ah, Guild Leader, sit here."

Go Yuri squirmed toward the edge of the bench and patted the empty seat beside her.

"..."

After a moment's thought, the Undertaker perched on the far tip of the bench, as far away from Go Yuri as possible.

Seeing that, Go Yuri giggled, then suddenly lifted her head.

"Oh, right, right. I brought a present for you, Guild Leader!"

"A present?"

"Here."

Go Yuri pulled out a placard from somewhere. Before he could even wonder how something had popped out of thin air, clunk.

Go Yuri hung the placard around the Undertaker's neck.

Written on it in elegant brush calligraphy were the following words.

[I am a promiscuous and obscene failure.]

"..."

"Lewd stuff is bad!!"

Go Yuri crossed her arms in an X, while making the beep-beep-beep sound herself with her mouth.

The Undertaker was dumbfounded.

"No, what..."

"Ah. That line just now was a parody of something. You didn't catch it? Was it too old? Mmm, well. Of course you wouldn't get it. This cycle's Guild Leader never got close to Oh Dok-seo in the first place."

"...Oh Dok-seo?"

The Undertaker frowned.

"Who is that... Wait. Don't tell me you mean the child who was summoned to the Busan Station concourse?"

"Yep!"

"I don't know why you suddenly brought that child up. It's been thousands of years since I've even heard that name. Was that child, by any chance, one of your followers?"

"Haah."

Go Yuri sighed.

"A Guild Leader who still hasn't learned either the method or the habit of letting go of himself isn't very interesting."

Why was it? The instant he witnessed that sigh from right in front of him, a chill ran down the back of the Undertaker's neck.

The source of that dread was her eyes.

The eyelids of the person who had always smiled with narrowed eyes were now lifted, and she was staring straight at him.

For an instant, everything seemed to stop.

"..."

Blink. Only after Go Yuri withdrew her gaze did the Undertaker realize that he had forgotten to breathe for a moment.

And that, before he knew it, he had already risen from the bench

and taken hold of his sword hilt, ready to draw at any moment.

"..."

Looking at the Undertaker as he dropped into a combat stance, Go Yuri smiled again.

"Hmm. Your instincts are still alive, at least. That's impressive in its own way. To think your instincts still haven't died, even after you've declined this much."

"You are..."

The Undertaker moved his lips.

In truth, he wanted to move his hand. He wanted to draw his sword right away and cut that neck open.

He had already tried that dozens of times in the past.

He remained motionless only because he knew death meant nothing to the being before him.

Even so, the Undertaker's mind had to labor without rest to keep a bridle on his killing intent.

"What exactly are you?"

"I'm nothing at all."

Go Yuri brushed off her knees and stood.

Then, with a playful hup, she took a boxer's stance and smiled.

"And I'm everything too."

"..."

"Wow. Seriously. Don't tell me you don't know this one either? That's disappointing. <Kingdom of Heaven> is a work with unbelievably good marching scenes. Even if you're going to die, make sure you watch it at least once, no, three times. The heroine isn't my type, though."

Go Yuri laughed.

"Then again, compared with the heroine you're with right now, she'd count as ordinary."

"Are you human?"

"Ah. Good question. Though an even better question is [Am I human?]."

"..."

"I haven't lived a life that was somebody's workbook or prep sheet, enough to let a person who can't answer their own question first see my answer sheet. A person always has to be a question unto themselves, and only ever the real test. It wouldn't do to settle for being nothing more than somebody else's practice."

What on earth was she talking about?

The Undertaker, as he was now, had trouble understanding it.

Go Yuri smiled faintly.

"Wave."

"What?"

"It's pretty. The wave."

She gestured toward the horizon.

Drawn by that finger, the Undertaker turned his head aside without thinking.

Waves were breaking. A deep navy that existed only as the shadow of sunlight layered over itself again and again, lending a depth that sunlight had never possessed on its own.

Go Yuri had said it was pretty. The Undertaker too lost himself for a moment, looking at the wave, at its sound, and at its boundless blue.

What was beauty?

"..."

There was no beauty in describing sunlight as sunlight.

To call sunlight beautiful, first an entire mass of rock had to be coated in nothing but water. It was the shadow of water.

Life had to become a single tree, blocking sunlight and letting it through again. It was the shadow of the earth.

Sunlight was still sunlight, and yet now it had become the deep navy of the sea and the blue of the tree.

Had he, perhaps, spent his whole life trying only to become sunlight?

Every human was born as foul water and filth. A shallow stream, too meager for anyone even to swim in.

For one stream of filth to become a sea, it had no choice but to accept all the other filth as well.

Otherwise, it could only become a swamp.

That was something Zarathustra had said.

The Undertaker was the one who remembered everything, the human who had lived the longest. But whose filth had he ever accepted, even once?

Was he, at present, a sea, or a swamp?

That question brushed past the Undertaker like a waking dream.

When he turned back to look beside him again, Go Yuri was already gone.

"..."

She had always seemed bizarre and strange to him, yet for some reason, her vanishing from that spot did not feel strange at all.

And the Undertaker was certain.

He would never again meet the being called Go Yuri.

The Undertaker turned away from the beach.

Rustle. Crunch. Listening to his footsteps stamping the sand, he felt that he was closer to sand than to the sea.

"Ah. You're back...?"

At the hotel Azit, Noh Do-hwa, who had woken up late, was waiting for him. She had been working on something.

She wore little more than a doctor's coat.

"Yes. Our food was about to run out, so I brought a few supplies. But Noh Do-hwa, what are you working on?"

"Ah. This...?"

Noh Do-hwa smiled faintly.

"Your eye..."

"Sorry?"

"Your eye. Your left eyeball. You said that if you closed your right eye and looked at the world only through your left, those shitty memories of the past would flash back on their own and torment you so badly that you couldn't even live a normal life, right...?"

Shake.

Noh Do-hwa shook the tool and the thing she was working on. Sure enough, one of the parts was a rounded lens.

"Pull your eye out..."

"..."

The Undertaker closed his lips.

A moment later, he spoke.

"I treat those visions as a kind of responsibility. They are all people I sent away. Whether they make me happy or sad, all of that is the portion assigned to me."

"Well, I figured you were probably jerking yourself off with some excuse like that..."

Noh Do-hwa parted her lips.

"But do you need it? That...?"

"..."

"Please look only at me..."

The sound of waves came in.

Even if sunlight stopped, the waves were always crashing there.

"Ah."

He was a swamp. Even so, if there were a night that would call the stench and rot of that swamp beautiful, then living as a swamp and dying as a swamp might not be so bad. He ended up thinking that.

"Yes."

The Undertaker nodded.

"Please perform the procedure."

"..."

Noh Do-hwa set down the tools and the work. Then, with her doctor's coat fluttering, she walked up to the Undertaker and hugged him tight.

She rose onto her toes. That still was not quite enough. The Undertaker lowered his head a little, and only then did their breaths overlap.

"Do you have plans today...?"

"Not particularly."

"Tomorrow...?"

"Tomorrow too."

"And the day after that...?"

"I don't think I have plans for any of them."

The Undertaker hugged Noh Do-hwa and lightly lifted her up. Their eyes met at the same height.

"Noh Do-hwa. From now on, my time is yours."

"..."

A lemon scent flowed from Noh Do-hwa's lips.

"Then you may take all of my time as well..."

The next day.

The Undertaker lost his left eye.

The newly transplanted eye always gave off a lemon-tasting body scent.

Footnotes:

Chapter 446

The That Woman N V

Sinnoa

* * *

A few days had passed since the surgery.

"How's the pain? Does the left eye still itch or sting at all...?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Hmm, that's a relief. It was my first time gouging out and replacing a person's eyeball, so I worried something might've gone wrong..."

For the past few days, the Undertaker had gone about his life with a black eyepatch wrapped around his face.

It covered not just the left eye but the right one too. Thanks to that, he got to taste what it felt like to be a caveman shut inside a dark cavern.

And the material of this eyepatch was, well, very Noh Do-hwa, if anything ever was. It was none other than the leather glove she usually wore, mended into shape.

She claimed she'd disinfected it thoroughly, yet there was no telling why Noh Do-hwa's scent, that distinctive lemon fragrance, wafted up so strongly from the eyepatch's lining.

Total darkness. And fragrance.

For these past few days, that was the whole of the world granted to the Undertaker.

"Honestly. A beginner, and you went and performed the surgery with that much confidence? Do you know how easily the optic nerve gets damaged? What would you have done if it had gone

wrong?"

"Well. Would anything serious really have come of it...?"

From beyond the blackout the eyepatch draped over him, Noh Do-hwa answered in a perfectly unbothered voice.

"Your body's tough as a damn beast anyway, and I confirm that every single day, so. I wasn't particularly worried..."

"..."

The Undertaker was at a loss for words. Seeing him like that, Noh Do-hwa snickered again, which only made him angrier.

"No. Look, Noh Do-hwa. I'm begging you, please, just curse me out instead."

"Why...?"

A mocking sneer.

"Not used to me being like this, are you...?"

"Of course I'm not. The Noh Do-hwa I've known all this time barely said a single word along those lines."

"Oho. Then you can surely guess how I'd answer that request of yours..."

She'd answer with something like, 'Awkward? No, I love it even more,' or, 'If this is the only side I've shown in this cycle, then I'd better keep it up from here on.'

The Undertaker sighed.

He really had ended up dating a strange woman.

"Enough. Can I take the eyepatch off soon? Being waited on by you from morning to night every day is uncomfortable too."

"Hmm? I find it fun, though...?"

"I'm sorry, alright, I'm sorry. And I'd like to check whether the eyeball that just moved into my skull rolls properly."

"Just wait a little longer..."

Noh Do-hwa chuckled.

"There's something I'm preparing..."

Preparing? What sort of preparation did she mean?

"It's a secret..."

When Noh Do-hwa said it was a secret, the Undertaker felt oddly afraid.

She'd already snatched one of his eyeballs, and now what kind of bizarre scheme was she cooking up, he worried, and then, all at once, he thought.

'Afraid? Me?'

The Undertaker's eyes, hidden behind the pitch-black eyepatch, twitched.

'Of course it isn't some enormous dread. It's just an emotion, half worry and half anticipation, over what unimaginable thing that person might pull. But...'

When was the last time I felt this?

Something this small, this trivial.

"..."

The days flew by in an instant.

Over those few days the Undertaker had to endure things he'd never experienced in his whole life.

In truth, this person's claim that she was hiding some secret was a bald-faced lie, and it got to the point where he suspected she was simply running every kind of experiment she'd ever wanted to try

on a "partner who couldn't see what was in front of him."

"Take the eyepatch off already!"

When the fifteenth day finally arrived, the Undertaker, despite having long believed he'd cast off his humanity ages ago, found himself shouting for the first time in forever to protect his "humanity," that is, his dignity.

"The groceries need restocking soon too, and we've been holed up in the hotel all day. What kind of nonsense is this!"

"Hmm? Weren't you enjoying it too...?"

"That's a separate matter! Even real beasts pass their days more wholesomely than us!"

"Hm. A split personality, perhaps... It's quite uncanny how a person changes this much between day and night."

"Eyepatch!"

"Yes, yes, understood. I'll take it off tomorrow. Honestly. A man without a shred of patience in him..."

Noh Do-hwa muttered, 'If it were up to me, I'd lock you in darkness for about half a year.'

A chill ran clean down the Undertaker's spine.

'It would've been so much easier if at least my aura were intact.'

A year ago, after he'd sealed Yu Ji-won at the Convenience Store, the use of aura had somehow become impossible.

The Undertaker couldn't make sense of it. What on earth was the connection between sealing Yu Ji-won and his aura?

Just then, something gripped his chin.

"..."

The world's destruction did have one upside. There was no need to

agonize over exactly which word to drop into a parenthetical blank labeled "something" or "someone."

Now, if someone in the world had grabbed the Undertaker's chin, it could only be Noh Do-hwa's slender fingers.

"What were you just thinking about...?"

"..."

A sudden mischief welled up in the Undertaker.

Was there such a thing as a plague for ways of thinking and feeling too? Maybe, from living with her, he'd caught Noh Do-hwa's poison himself.

"Ah. I was thinking about another woman."

He wanted to torment her a little too.

"Yu Ji-won, she's called. I think I mentioned her to you once before. Back when you reigned as the Management Captain, she always held the position of your second-in-command--."

His lips were sealed off.

His tongue was bitten. His breath was stolen. He stole some too.

The Undertaker thought.

When two people craved each other this often, already so accustomed and yet acting as if there were still room to grow more accustomed, there was no way their scents or their ways of thinking wouldn't bleed into each other.

Only two strands of time remained to flow in this world.

By chance, those two remaining strands seemed to enjoy knotting themselves together.

The next day.

The long-awaited day the eyepatch came off.

"Patient Undertaker. Watch your feet. We're heading into the shower now..."

"I can wash myself!"

"I know. But, so what...?"

"This is a human rights violation!"

"Aha. If you're an animal and not a human, then there are no human rights to violate either..."

That day Noh Do-hwa seemed even more fussy than usual.

Every other day she'd risen at her leisure, only after the sunlight blazed bright, yet for some reason today she'd been up since dawn.

The time she spent on the shower was unusually thorough too. Normally she finished within an hour at the longest, for fear he'd catch a cold, but today it felt like it ran past two hours.

"You're all clean now, Patient Undertaker. There. Now it's time to put your socks on first..."

"Be honest. Noh Do-hwa. You only got that orthotics-and-prosthetics technician's license so you could watch patients flounder helplessly without you, didn't you?"

"My. You've gotten your hands on the most secret information of my entire life..."

"I've literally roamed the whole world meeting every human there is, and you're the first person I've ever met who's so thoroughly made of nothing but nasty hobbies."

"Oh dear. And yet that nasty hobby happens to be your type, apparently..."

"..."

"Lift your neck a bit. It's hard to do up the tie..."

From the tips of his toes to the crown of his head.

When she told him to spread his arms, he spread them; when she told him to plant his legs, he planted them. The Undertaker changed into the whole outfit in the spirit of playing along with Noh Do-hwa's strange game.

'These clothes feel a little tight, though.'

You could tell just from the way she went around in nothing but a doctor's coat every day, but Noh Do-hwa mostly preferred a loose, roomy style.

Not the sense of sight but touch. She valued the sensation felt through the body overwhelmingly more than what was seen with the eyes.

She didn't impose on others what she didn't impose on herself. She'd never demanded any particular fashion style from the Undertaker either.

So, it was a strange thing.

"Good. All done..."

"Is this the part where I get to take it off?"

"No. Just follow me for a moment..."

She gripped his hand firmly.

Where were they headed? The Undertaker was curious, but he walked along in silence, letting Noh Do-hwa's hand and her steps lead the way.

The sound of the waves grew faint, little by little.

"..."

In the past he'd have spread his aura and grasped the surrounding terrain through ki-sense.

Now that didn't work well.

Every time he sealed people. Every time he taxidermied his precious companions into transparent graves, the Undertaker slowly weakened.

By now he was nothing more than an ordinary man who just happened to have a slightly tough body. The very one who had stood against every anomaly and wiped out all of humanity, this feeble. It was a laughable state of affairs.

Step.

In that darkness.

In the dead center of a dark where neither the direction of the path he walked nor the names of the alleyways, nothing at all, could be made out.

Step, step.

The only thing he could picture vividly, as if drawn before his eyes, was his companion who held his hand firmly and walked on. Noh Do-hwa's footsteps and movements, those alone.

Step. Step, step.

It made sense, since the two of them had spent so much time together.

A year. It might feel like a short stretch of time, but if you had to share it alone with just one other person in this universe, that too was long enough.

The pace of her steps. The angle at which she swung out her legs. The pressure felt in her fingers. The slight breeze brushing past his bangs each time she tilted her head to glance back and check whether he was keeping up.

Within his darkness, she alone grew distinct.

"Ah, we've arrived..."

Her steps stopped.

"The eyepatch. I'd like you to take it off yourself..."

"..."

A nod.

The Undertaker, with a careful touch, undid the shade that had hidden his vision for over fifteen days, and.

Dodging the razor blades of sunlight that came slashing sharply at him, he squinted for a moment.

But it was only for the briefest moment.

"..."

The scene that rose up before him.

A sight more mirage than any mirage seized his gaze, leaving him no room to spare for something like the sun.

The clothes Noh Do-hwa wore were pure white. By color alone they were no different from the doctor's coat she usually liked to wear.

But he swore, the Undertaker had never once seen Noh Do-hwa wearing clothes like the ones she wore now. Not up until now.

And never, for all eternity to come.

It was a wedding dress.

"..."

In that instant, the Undertaker felt he understood why sunlight was pure white. The reason the color white existed in the world.

Before him, Noh Do-hwa looked at his face, and.

"..."

Without a single word, she simply smiled, a little crookedly.

This was Babel Tower Plaza. It was a place that had once been called by that name. But with the ambition to link every road in the world from this very spot all forgotten, the plaza lay sprawled out as a desolate vacant lot.

In that place with no guests and no officiant, the two held both hands tightly. There weren't even any vows.

"..."

"..."

Words were never something needed to begin with. When a person didn't try to grope after and interpret another through words, she became fully herself to him, and he became fully himself to her.

He happened to be wearing black clothes at that moment. A tuxedo.

The black shade brought out the white sunlight. When the shade stood beside the sunlight, it became not darkness but a place of rest.

That was the reason black and white existed in the world.

And a single step behind, the Undertaker realized that the mirages which had tormented him for so long were no longer visible.

That was right. The only mirage permitted to him now belonged to a single person.

He pressed his lips to hers without a word.

A moment later, she too quietly laid her lips over his.

It was a truly curious thing. Of all the kisses the two had shared since they'd fallen into this remote place, today's was the gentlest.

"I think I'd better stop regressing."

"Why...?"

"I don't have the confidence to meet you again once you've lost the memories of right now. I might end up killing you."

"Oh dear..."

She laughed.

"Then isn't it a simple matter of just regressing together...?"

"There's no way to do that."

"Well. From the looks of it the eyeball rolls fine. So if we swap your body and mine bit by bit, maybe, with some luck, the regression ability gets transplanted into me too, wouldn't you say...?"

"Are you actually insane?"

"Eh. Even if it fails, the worst that happens is we just die together. Live together. Or die together. A simple set of choices..."

That was true enough.

"More than that, these clothes are a pain in the ass. Hauling you along on the walk over nearly killed me from how stuffy it was. I'll never put it on again after today, so go ahead and burn it into your eyeballs to your heart's content..."

"It doesn't matter."

The Undertaker smiled.

"Right now, for the first time, I'm grateful for my memory."

Had he gone wrong? Probably.

Had he ended up here by piling one wrong choice on another? Maybe.

But for the times when he went wrong, there had been someone who waited thousands, tens of thousands of stretches of time for him.

He was not unhappy. Even at this moment of reaching destruction, unhappiness had been unable, in the end, to swallow him whole.

Her too.

Because the world had been destroyed, 'that man' was always a single person.

Because humanity had gone extinct, 'that woman' was always a single person.

Because he and she had waited at the final terminal, this world, it seems, would never once meet a bad ending, for all eternity.

-That Woman N. Fin.

Footnotes:

Chapter 447

The That Woman S I

Sinnoa

* * *

Click.

"You son of a bitch!"

...

"What kind of bullshit is that!"

"Hoeee... Yes?"

"You son of a bitch! If you're gonna drag people here out of nowhere, the first thing out of your mouth should be an apology. Where the hell do you get off running your mouth instead!"

"No, hoeee. The thing is, this isn't something I did, I'm just one lowly handler..."

"You son of a bitch! Either way, you're saying you're the one in charge! Huh? You gonna apologize or not?"

"Buuut... The seniors told me people like this are rare these days. They said humans have gotten cunning, so provocation never works on them anymore..."

"..."

[1. An extra anyway. There's no way someone who carelessly leads with curses the moment he opens his mouth is hiding potential I don't already know about. Saving the world keeps me busy enough; no time to waste on a bit player. Leave him be.]

[2. There are no extras in this world. Who's to say he doesn't have

some reason, like needing to go see his family right now? There's still much I don't know. Keep him alive.]

Click.

[1. An extra anyway. There's no way someone who carelessly leads with curses the moment he opens his mouth is hiding potential I don't already know about. Saving the world keeps me busy enough; no time to waste on a bit player. Leave him be.] ◀

Click.

"Ah. So you're here."

"You son of a bitch! Is what I say a joke to you?"

"Hoi."

...

"Done now? All right! Everyone, kindly follow my command!"

"Hieeeek! S-someone died...! Someone! Hiik, they just up and died! Hiiiik! A person, a person died...!"

Click.

[Notice of Service Termination.]

Click.

[Hello, players. This is the Admin of the Infinite Metagame.]

[We are thinking of setting out on a new journey.]

[It may take a very long time to reach our new destination, but somewhere at the end of the looping Möbius strip, we hope to meet you all again.]

[Thank you.]

[I truly want to meet you once more.]

"..."

[1. As expected. No human relationship survives once it's been tainted by the void poison of the Outer Gods. The void stains even every last corner of the human heart. Even the Saintess and Noh Do-hwa were powerless before it. Humanity amounted to no more than this.]

[2. ■■■ appears before you.]

Click.

[1. As expected. No human relationship survives once it's been tainted by the void poison of the Outer Gods. The void stains even every last corner of the human heart. Even the Saintess and Noh Do-hwa were powerless before it. Humanity amounted to no more than this.] ◀

Click.

"Wait."

...

"Hold on, Admin of the Infinite Metagame. If you have the understanding and reason to grasp human language, then don't close the server just yet, and hear my proposal."

...

"As you can see, I am not corrupted by you. The same goes for you. If we don't want to repeat an eternal stalemate, don't you think a compromise of sorts is needed here?"

[The 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' always devotes its full effort to providing you with the best service.]

[Please leave your inquiry.]

"Let's cooperate."

...

"I don't know how many anomalies as mighty as you exist on Earth, but help me subjugate them. From your standpoint they're competitors too, aren't they?"

[The 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' works day and night to fix the bugs that occur within the game.]

"In return, don't go trying to bewitch me either. A nonaggression pact. As long as you don't betray me, I won't harm you either."

[Awaiting response.]

"For the record, this is the first and last time I'll extend such an offer, Admin of the Infinite Metagame."

[Awaiting response.]

"Because I could just wipe out every human living on the surface and erase the very 'customers' you'd ever infect."

[Awaiting response.]

...

[Your response has been completed.]

Click.

Click.

Click.

* * *

[A new cycle has begun.]

The familiar mechanical sound.

Listening to a message that sounded like a foreigner of some other nationality forcing out each Korean syllable, the Undertaker lifted his eyelids.

A place more revolting than the Beginning Village.

The tutorial dungeon, the Busan Station concourse, came into his view.

"Wh-what? Where is this?"

"Huh? Busan Station? I was in the park just a moment ago..."

"Reverend? Reverend, where are you?"

Murmur, murmur.

People who had come to their senses in the same concourse slowly cranked up the volume of the noise.

But the Undertaker paid their racket no mind.

It was, after all, nothing but static, no help whatsoever to the 'clear.'

Within the noisy crowd, there was only one sound he listened for.

[The 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' blesses you.]

That was the Constellation's message, audible in all the world to the Undertaker alone.

"Hmm."

The corner of the Undertaker's mouth curved in secret.

He carried on with his inner monologue, as was his habit. There was no need to show anything outwardly just to converse with his own Constellation.

'A blessing, is it. Yes, good. A blessing. I'd like a halfway useful one this time.'

The last cycle.

Working with the Infinite Metagame, the Undertaker had at last succeeded in subjugating yet another Outer God, the anomaly called the puppet master.

A formidable foe.

And from everything the Undertaker had observed so far, each time he subjugated another anomaly, the quality of the 'service' the Infinite Metagame provided got upgraded a little further.

'Now then. Tell me what blessing's been added this time.'

That was why he was quietly letting a flicker of anticipation show even now, having begun the same repeating life all over again.

[The 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' informs you that, from now on, you may freely use the status window service from the moment the server opens.]

"Oh."

The Undertaker let out an idle whistle.

Right then, in the concourse, the Tutorial Fairy had appeared and was getting cussed out thoroughly by 'Mr. Bullshit-Cursing Man.'

Since every eye in the room was fixed on that spot, no one found the Undertaker's whistle the least bit odd.

'Not bad. The status window always used to open only after a while, which was a pain. Now I can even peek at the status windows of the guys who died off at Busan Station.'

[Announcing an additional update.]

[The status window now provides the player with more detailed information.]

[The skill tree! A detailed roadmap is given for which skills can be developed and how, covering the potential of NPCs.]

NPC.

A word that quietly made him uncomfortable no matter how often he heard it.

But the Undertaker didn't bother pointing it out.

He had realized long ago that pointing it out would never change the way the 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' thought.

The Infinite Metagame was not human. Just because its messages were displayed in human language didn't mean he could expect any human warmth from it.

'Fine. Then let's try it out, quickly.'

Without letting any of his discomfort show, the Undertaker looked around.

'Let's see. Someone usable... Oh, dear.'

Just then, blood burst out across the concourse.

Unable to endure 'Mr. Bullshit-Cursing Man's' verbal abuse any longer, the Fairy had blown his head apart.

The usual WWE..., no. UFC, made the Undertaker snicker.

'At this rate I won't get to confirm that man's potential either. Well, he was an extra anyway, so he'd obviously have been useless.'

[The 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' agrees with your opinion.]

'Shall I go find some decent talent.'

The Undertaker combed every inch of the tutorial dungeon, checking the stats of the NPCs.

Of course, even then, he refrained from any conduct too conspicuous, or any words and actions that might come across as cold-blooded.

Because the Undertaker was a kind person? Hardly. If it meant erasing the anomalies from this world, the Undertaker would sacrifice anything.

That list of sacrifices included, naturally, ordinary people, and awakeners too. Most of humanity would hesitate a little if asked, 'Is the Undertaker a good person?'

So the reason the Undertaker didn't show his ruthless side lay elsewhere.

'Infinite Metagame.'

[Awaiting response.]

'The Saintess of Seoul is surely spying on this area even now, isn't she?'

ID, Saintess. Sighting location, Yongsan, Seoul.

That awakener, all too familiar to the Undertaker, possessed astonishingly powerful abilities. Clairvoyance was one of them.

[Response: Affirmative.]

[The one currently codenamed 'Saintess' monitors the state of the Busan Station tutorial dungeon at an average interval of 120 seconds.]

Of course, being strong didn't mean she was safe from the void poison of the Outer Gods.

Not a true Constellation that bestowed blessings on him alone, but a false pretender to the title of Constellation.

Even so, if he didn't want to drag down the Saintess's regard for him, he still needed to hide his cold-blooded face for now.

'No different from usual... Just be quick to tell me the moment the surveillance cuts out. That's when I have to take care of Lee Baek.'

[Response: Affirmative.]

A little later.

[The 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' informs you that, as of now, the Saintess's surveillance has lifted.]

[Time remaining: 118 seconds.]

Tap!

The Undertaker broke into his footwork without the slightest hesitation. There was no wavering in his stride.

In this period, in this hunting ground, he had of course committed to memory exactly where Lee Baek's gang was holed up.

Kwaaang!

The Undertaker entered, smashing down the door of the underground restaurant Lee Baek's crew had seized.

"Huh?"

Two awakeners standing guard were sent flying by the fragments of the blasted door. Instant death.

The crew, led by Lee Baek, was tormenting someone in the middle of the restaurant.

A glance.

The Undertaker checked quickly out of the corner of his eye and saw a green-haired woman lying facedown. Marks of kicking covered her clothes, and a sandwich was mashed flat in front of her.

Well. If she wanted to eat, they'd probably stomped the sandwich and told her to lick a shoe instead.

'Truly the sort of thing trashy extras would do.'

Monopoly of resources. Class stratification of distribution. Proof of class through violence. The same old tired repertoire.

In this world, only the Undertaker was a being free from the gravity of 'the predictable.' He was a player.

The extras all stood there with their mouths gaping, staring at the wreckage of the door the player had smashed with dumbfounded faces.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing..."

And that became his last expression.

Pow! The Undertaker swung his fist, and even from that distance, Lee Baek's head burst.

Even against a group of extras, he didn't pointlessly attack the small fry first.

If anything, precisely because it was a group of extras, hunting the leader first was all the more proper.

Behold.

"H-hiieeeek!"

"Run! A monster! It's a monster!"

With the leader gone, the rest of the pack finally grasped reality a little and went scrambling away in a stampede.

But there was nowhere to run. The Undertaker had already sealed off the restaurant's exit.

They only served to prove that the Busan Station tutorial dungeon was a time-honored hotspot for 'head explosions.'

"Whew."

The Undertaker unclenched his fist.

'Time?'

[Time remaining: 63 seconds.]

'Plenty.'

After cleanly dealing with even the last extra stuffed inside the restaurant's refrigerator, the Undertaker returned to his original spot.

"..., ..."

There was a survivor there.

The green-haired woman who had been exposed to Lee Baek's gang's violence still lay facedown in a hunched posture.

"Hmm."

He knew her name. Sim Ah-ryeon.

A passable enough healer, but her growth ceiling was too clear-cut to make her worth fielding in a party.

A third-rate awakener, in the literal sense.

She had shown her face the times he gathered awakeners from across the country to found an allied army, but as a rule, he had never met her again once the Busan Station tutorial dungeon was over.

"Hey."

The Undertaker bent down and crouched.

"Let me ask you something."

"..."

"You must have felt people dying and all kinds of chaos breaking out around you. So why are you still keeping your head down, not lifting it even once?"

"..."

Mumble, mumble.

A voice wormed its way out from between the disheveled hair and the bloodstained floor.

"Because if I, see your face. You might kill me."

"Kill? Who would?"

"You."

"..."

"I, didn't see anything."

The Undertaker's eyes widened.

[Time remaining: 40 seconds.]

His interest was piqued.

For the first time in a very long while.

"I won't kill you."

She didn't lift her head.

"I promise. On my life."

Still she didn't lift her head.

"Even if I have to sew your eyes shut and cut out your tongue, even if I take you along as a slave, I will not take your life here and now."

Only then did she lift her head.

Their eyes met.

The instant they did, gooseflesh rose on the back of the Undertaker's neck.

The pupils. They were not a human's. They were a beast's.

Pure beast's eyes were there, eyes that treated everything other than itself as 'an animal of a lower grade than itself.'

The eyebrows were anxious, the eyes frail. Lingering sentiment seemed to cling to the eyelids, and at the corner of her mouth was the heh-heh survival strategy of a timid herbivore.

But the Undertaker saw through every one of those scattered tricks of disguise and pierced straight to the woman's essence alone.

Because... he was of the same kind.

"..."

"..."

Her eyes suddenly settled into calm.

The corner of her mouth no longer wore a clumsy or loose smile. She had dropped the act, the performance that had deceived everyone but the Undertaker up until now.

[Time remaining: 20 seconds.]

The Undertaker spoke.

"There's no time."

"Why?"

"Someone is watching us."

"Yes."

"My name is the Undertaker. And you?"

"Sim Ah-ryeon."

"Your ability?"

"I can feel emotions, and I can eat them."

"And when you eat them?"

"I get stronger."

"Good."

[Time remaining: 4 seconds.]

The Undertaker reached out his hand. Sim Ah-ryeon took it. There was no catch whatsoever between his pulling her up and her rising.

"You've made me curious."

"Same here."

"Will you come with me?"

"Yes."

The Undertaker tapped the back of Sim Ah-ryeon's hand twice, tap tap. Then Sim Ah-ryeon squeezed his hand twice in return, press press.

The Undertaker marveled inwardly.

'Her judgment is astonishingly fast.'

The Undertaker had just said someone was watching them.

If the Undertaker conveyed a message through 'hand gestures' rather than 'words,' she could realize it was a means of evading the surveillance.

But the Undertaker hadn't explained any of that. He had merely tapped the back of her hand.

And yet Sim Ah-ryeon caught the whole signal, that 'the surveillance had now been restored' and that 'from here on they would communicate by hand gesture.'

Within barely a second or so.

'A genius.'

Why had he gone hundreds of cycles without knowing Sim Ah-ryeon had this kind of intelligence?

'...Because she hid it.'

From him. From them. From everyone.

Sim Ah-ryeon had hidden it. She concealed it because there was no particular gain in revealing her strangeness.

So no one had recognized it.

Even now, she had simply stopped hiding because she'd sensed the Undertaker was of the same kind as her.

[Reveal the status window of the opposing NPC Sim Ah-ryeon?]

'No.'

The Undertaker answered at once.

'I'll figure it out myself.'

At that, the Constellation too fell silent.

The Undertaker looked around. Since the clothes Sim Ah-ryeon wore had been reduced to such tatters, he was looking for something to cover her with.

As it happened, a pure white doctor's coat hung over a chair. Probably an outfit one of the thugs had looted on a whim.

"Put this on for now, at least."

"Ah, yes."

The Undertaker fetched the doctor's coat and went to drape it over Sim Ah-ryeon...

And in that moment.

Without his realizing it, his hand faltered for an instant.

"...?"

The Undertaker furrowed his brow.

'What? Why did I just stumble in my own movement?'

He couldn't understand it.

The Undertaker immediately began to deduce the cause logically.

'Infinite Metagame. Could an unidentified anomaly have appeared near me just now?'

[The 'Admin of the Infinite Metagame' guarantees that no meaningful phenomenon exists in the underground restaurant right now, other than player Undertaker and NPC Sim Ah-ryeon.]

"..."

If so, it was a truly strange thing.

He found a doctor's coat and draped it over the other person. Where in such a plain act could he have felt anything chilling enough to make the Undertaker hesitate mid-motion?

Since he couldn't understand it, the words that slipped from the Undertaker's mouth could only be words he himself couldn't understand either.

"...Treasure it."

Press.

The doctor's coat was at last wrapped around Sim Ah-ryeon's shoulders. The Undertaker's hand that had brought about that result had, without his noticing, tightened with force.

"...? Um, yes...?"

Before him.

Only the green-clad woman stood there blankly, blinking and blinking, unable to grasp the meaning of that gesture.

Footnotes:

Chapter 448

The That Woman S II

Sinnoa

* * *

Did time move fast, or slow?

For a regressor, it was an easy question to answer.

The playback speed of time depended on one thing: how strong the grip of the hand clenched around it happened to be.

The Undertaker was no sadist. He was not some pervert who got off on watching someone groan and writhe in agony.

But there was one single exception.

When it came to abusing "time," he had been born with a heaven-sent talent.

[Mr. Undertaker.]

[Do you have a moment?]

It was around the time ten years had passed since he picked up a monster named Sim Ah-ryeon at Busan Station.

By then the Undertaker had long since walked the optimal route and built his own ecosystem across the Korean Peninsula.

The Saintess, who had just sent that telepathy, was one of those awakeners, a key resource in the ecosystem the Undertaker had built.

"Yes, Saintess."

So the Undertaker wrapped his expression and tone in something

softer than usual. It was just the right amount of disguise, enough that it wouldn't read as hypocrisy.

"Has something happened?"

[Um, it's just... about Sim Ah-ryeon.]

The Saintess hesitated, which wasn't like her.

No. Hadn't the phrase "not like her" stopped being appropriate years ago?

For the past ten years, the Undertaker had not only studied with the Saintess every Wednesday, he had shared his every move, his every gesture with her.

It was more than enough time, an overabundance of it, to gaslight a single person.

The Undertaker had lived far, far more years than the Saintess. Scholarly cultivation. Life experience. Methods for dealing with anomalies, and strategy guides.

In no field could the Saintess match him. Naturally, just as the Undertaker intended, the Saintess's psyche went into redevelopment.

This was precisely how one handled the Saintess, the strongest awakener of all time, the one who possessed [Clairvoyance].

While she watched him, he watched her right back.

The Saintess's ability turned from a one-way street into a two-way one, and now, even when she reached a judgment on some matter, seeking the "correct opinion" from the Undertaker had hardened into a habit.

Respect. Reverence. Consideration.

Every one of them the name of a petal that stained easily into evil.

'This is the surest and easiest route to keeping the Saintess from

falling.'

By now the Saintess rarely trusted her own judgment about anything.

Ethical wrongdoing, moral failings; even when she witnessed them, she sought the Undertaker's "opinion."

It was a brilliant reversal of thinking.

The problem is that you yourself might fall? Then isn't the answer simply to erase yourself?

'With this, I've sealed off the Saintess, who could become humanity's greatest potential threat. And yet her role as a watchtower stays intact.'

Satisfied with his own handiwork, he pressed on in an even softer tone.

"What about Ah-ryeon? Nothing bad has happened to her, has it?"

[Um. The thing is. Following what you told me, Mr. Undertaker... whenever something bad happens, I've been borrowing the Constellations' names to imply it's all Sim Ah-ryeon's fault, but...]

"Ah. You're doing a wonderful job."

The Undertaker gave a wry smile.

"You know Ah-ryeon's ability well, don't you, Saintess? And you'd have a read on her personality too, since you had that long talk, just the two of you, last time."

[...Yes.]

"For Ah-ryeon, that's the right thing. The more people resent and hate her, the stronger her ability grows. On top of that she has a self-heal ability, so even if she takes a few stones somewhere, she comes out perfectly fine, doesn't she?"

[...]

The silence dragged on.

Even through the telepathy he could feel her wavering over whether to speak, and in that moment the Undertaker quickly recited to himself.

'Infinite Metagame. Did the Saintess just activate her Time Stop ability?'

[Response: Affirmative.]

'Understood.'

The Undertaker wore a smile innocent enough to seem almost childlike, as if he knew nothing at all.

"I understand that, on the surface, the treatment Ah-ryeon gets looks unfair."

[Ah. Yes...]

"Even so, separate from all that, I'm glad you shared your worries with me, Saintess."

[What?]

"Do you remember the promise we made last time? That with everyone else aside, when you talk with me you wouldn't use Time Stop, you'd just talk normally. That leaning on each other's ordinariness was the very way to keep from falling into an anomaly."

[Ah...]

A very faint trace of fluster crept into the Saintess's voice. It must have struck a nerve.

But the Undertaker, as though he hadn't caught the slightest hint of the other party's inner state, kept chattering away in that glad tone.

"Ahaha. I heard that originally, even while you talked with me, you always spoke in perfectly correct pronunciation, perfectly correct

sentences."

[Yes...]

"As I keep saying, you don't have to do that in front of me. To me, you are always, and already, an utterly human person, Saintess. I get a little embarrassed too whenever I show you my unworthy side... but still, you do the same for me, after all."

[...]

"I really think a fair relationship is something precious. And it's fun, too. Don't you feel the same, Saintess?"

[Yes, I do too... I do. It makes me happy.]

Silence settled in again.

This time the Undertaker deliberately did not speak first.

As if even this silence were a form of entertainment within their "sacred" relationship, he merely gazed up at the sky with a faint smile.

And then.

[U, um. Mr. Undertaker.]

The Undertaker knew well that, to the noble, a smile sometimes cut a more fatal wound than a resentful glare.

"Yes?"

[I'm... sorry. Actually, just now. For a very brief moment, no. The thing is. It was only a moment, but... I used Time Stop.]

"Ah."

The Undertaker blinked.

He knew how to control his own face.

To put on a "sad expression" here would have been the lowest of the

low. Even a "face holding something back" was no better than middling.

"No, that, I'm the one who should be sorry! I mean, uh. I didn't realize. What I meant was."

Fluster. Confusion.

That was precisely what acted as an unbearable poison on the noblest, most faithful of souls.

"I mean, you only did it for a moment, right? One second. Maybe two. That happens. What I said was, uh... that just not using it too much is enough. There might've been room to misread it as never using it at all."

[...]

The Undertaker's fangs sank neatly all the way to the heart.

Considering how many ramparts the Saintess had built up over the years to protect that heart, it was a truly absurd venom.

[...I'm sorry.]

In the Saintess's voice, an agony she couldn't hide breathed like a breath drawn before a breath.

[I'm truly sorry.]

"No. No, Saintess. What we worry about is falling, and it isn't as if using Time Stop a few times like this suddenly tips you over all at once. You can rest easy. I'm the one who should apologize for speaking so thoughtlessly."

[...]

Her breathing grew more ragged.

This too was an exquisite battle of wits.

What had the Saintess just apologized for?

For the very "relationship" she had held to be sacred, holy. She apologized for breaking the promise of that relationship.

And what had the Undertaker forgiven?

For the very reason they had made that promise in the first place. For the root of it, the pledge to keep her existing as a human, so that she would never fall into an anomaly. He forgave her, saying he still believed she was human.

The Saintess's apology and the Undertaker's forgiveness seemed to interlock, yet were strangely misaligned.

A deliberate misalignment.

The Saintess was not foolish enough to miss it. She had only grown foolish enough that she could not pass the fault for it onto another, and laid it wholly upon herself.

Tender, oh so tender.

Abuse.

[Yes...]

"Mm. Still, you went out of your way to bring me a worry because you were concerned. Just leaving Ah-ryeon to fend for herself wouldn't be good either."

Here the Undertaker, like a gamer teabagging a corpse[1], landed the final blow on the Saintess's psyche.

He "quickly changed the subject so the Saintess couldn't blame herself." And the new subject was "the result of respecting the Saintess's opinion."

[Ah...]

The Undertaker was not at fault whatsoever.

Only she, the Saintess, had all of it shifted onto her shoulders.

In the end, the Undertaker succeeded in drawing the very words he had inwardly aimed for out of the Saintess's own mouth.

[Thank, you. Mr. Undertaker...]

That was it.

On this cruel chessboard, an "apology" alone was not enough. "Gratitude" was as good as a declaration of checkmate.

It had to be gratitude that welled up from the heart, and was agonizing all the same.

Forcing someone to put the word of thanks on their lips against their will, that was an act of violence only amateurs would commit.

It was also a siege method that would never work on someone whose walls of the heart stood as high as the Saintess's.

The Undertaker knew how to suffocate someone with consideration and respect alone.

"Not at all. Oh, right. I'm going to go see Ah-ryeon now, so could you turn off the Clairvoyance for a bit? It's just, I'd like to talk with her, the two of us."

[...Yes. Of course.]

A scene like this.

It had repeated without pause over the past ten years.

By now the Saintess's mental state had reached the point where she read even that request of his, the demand to lift the watch of Clairvoyance, as "him being considerate, so that I, the one who did wrong, could have a little time alone."

There was no way the rough hands of an anomaly could perform such a delicate operation.

The most fatal poison to a human always came from another human's fingertips, and more often still, from the tip of the tongue.

"Thank you, Saintess."

[No...]

"Then I'll see you again next time."

The connection cut off.

On the surface, the two of them had traded a word of apology and a word of gratitude, once each, in equal measure.

To the Saintess, who trusted logical judgment and the power of language, such an equivalent exchange could only become a shackle she bound herself with by her own hand.

"The fate of a human who can no longer listen to their own feelings."

Once he had confirmed the Clairvoyance was gone, the Undertaker muttered.

"No matter how much it's for her own good, I can't help finding the Saintess pitiful."

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame is forever in awe of the skill with which player Undertaker tames the NPCs.]

"Who asked for your praise? Get lost."

[Answer: Neutral.]

What was "neutral" supposed to mean, neutral.

The Undertaker snorted a laugh and turned on his heel.

* * *

The maphack telepathy2 was cut off now, so the next step was to ask the "real Constellation" for Sim Ah-ryeon's location, but.

'I'll just go find her on my own two feet. Whatever.'

Strangely, when it came to anything involving Sim Ah-ryeon, he

had no desire to borrow a Constellation's power.

'No need to go far anyway.'

Pick roughly any one of the alleys branching slightly off Babel Tower Plaza, and Sim Ah-ryeon would be collapsed there.

As always.

But choosing a stroll like this came with a reaction the Undertaker had to put up with.

"Ah! It's the Undertaker!"

"Undertaker! Where are you headed?"

The endless requests for handshakes.

Even over that short walk, the ordinary citizens and awakeners of Busan, the "extras," were busy recognizing him and calling out greetings.

The Undertaker met them all with a smile.

"I'm in the middle of business, Hae-il. How's the shop these days?"

"Why, with the Undertaker watching over the city, of course it's fine! Come by sometime and I'll treat you to the works!"

"Mister Undertaker! Our place too!"

"Yes, yes. If Patissier Seo-a invites me, I have to come. I'll make time even when I have none."

Everyone, every last passerby, was plainly delighted to see the Undertaker.

Even as his own heart held a chill nothing like the warmth his face wore.

'What a bother.'

Honestly, he had neither the energy nor the leisure to spare on

extras like these.

The reason he invested in image management before the citizens lay elsewhere.

'If I'm even a little unkind to the citizens, Management Captain Noh Do-hwa resigns and walks out on me, sheesh.'

It was simply that the cost of losing a first-rate talent like Noh Do-hwa outweighed the cost spent on image management.

Throb.

For some reason, the moment he thought of Management Captain Noh Do-hwa, a corner of his heart bristled again, but the Undertaker held the same consistent attitude as always.

Ignore it.

What did it matter? The feeling he was ignoring wasn't only the one about Noh Do-hwa, after all.

He was an expert, well versed in the art of separating his heart from his head.

Before long, he reached the alley where Sim Ah-ryeon lay collapsed.

Sim Ah-ryeon was not alone.

Beside her stood a woman whose posture was as straight as a bodyguard's.

"Ah."

A bow.

The silver-haired woman, Yu Ji-won, lowered her head at a perfect angle when she saw the Undertaker.

"You've come, Your Excellency."

"Yes. You always work hard at the escort duty."

"Not at all. It's my honor."

"Right. Is Ah-ryeon doing well?"

"Hm."

Yu Ji-won stepped slightly aside.

"As for whether she's doing well, that's not something I can judge. But she's just finished hitting today's quota of hatred and resentment."

The alley opened into view, thanks to the angle Yu Ji-won had widened.

The Undertaker's eyes met the one he had come to find.

"..."

"..."

Beneath a shabby wall, Sim Ah-ryeon was sprawled out, her eyes empty.

One arm and one leg severed.

"...Ah."

Sim Ah-ryeon gave a slack smile.

"You've come... Guild Leader?"

Footnotes:

1 - Teabagging is online-gaming slang for repeatedly crouching over a defeated opponent's body in a shooter, an intentionally humiliating taunt; here it figures the Undertaker's act as gratuitously kicking someone already beaten.

2 - A maphack is a cheat (originating in real-time strategy games like StarCraft) that reveals the entire map and all hidden units; here it likens the Saintess's omniscient Clairvoyance telepathy to that all-seeing cheat.

Chapter 449

The That Woman S III

Sinnoa

“...”

A torn-off arm. A severed leg.

It was far too cruel to call a fashion anyone would willingly wear, yet that was Sim Ah-ryeon's outerwear.

The Undertaker paused for a moment, then muttered.

“...No. Ah-ryeon. You can grow an arm or a leg back in an instant now with your healing ability, can't you? So why are you suddenly doing that one-legged, one-armed cosplay?”

“Aah.”

Sim Ah-ryeon grinned ear to ear.

“S, sorry! I forgot!”

“Sure you did. Liar. What idiot in this world forgets that their own arms and legs got blown off?”

“Ehehe.”

Sim Ah-ryeon stroked her opposite shoulder with her remaining hand.

“It's just, um. If my limbs aren't all in one piece like this, the people who come to, you know, do me harm, they flinch a little.”

“...”

“I, interesting, right? Haaah. Even people who lost family to the anomalies and storm in furious, the moment they actually see me

looking like this, they hesitate. Ah. Not everyone, of course. About sixty percent...?”

I see.

The Undertaker nodded.

“A kind of filter, then. It screens out whether someone carries emotion dense enough to keep spitting rage and resentment even while looking at you in that state.”

“Yes!”

Ten years ago.

The instant the Undertaker learned that Sim Ah-ryeon possessed the ‘ability to drink emotion,' he set to work in earnest on ‘raising Sim Ah-ryeon.'

The premise of the project was simple. All the desperate, brutal events unfolding across the present world, he pinned the blame for every one of them on a single human being named Sim Ah-ryeon.

To pull the project off, the Undertaker marshaled every scrap of knowledge he had.

He used the authority of the Infinite Metagame, a ‘real Constellation,' and on top of that he exploited the powers of the Saintess, a ‘fake Constellation.'

And so was fabricated the worst of all enemies, humanity's traitor, the Miko of ten thousand anomalies.

The villain known by the alias of the Necromancer.

The very Sim Ah-ryeon standing before him.

[‘The Saintess of National Salvation’ congratulates you on the subjugation of the Ten Legs.]

[‘The Saintess of National Salvation,' however, frets that the Necromancer who called the Ten Legs down upon the earth is still

scheming in the shadows.]

He made quests.

[‘The Conquerer of the Alps’ lavishes praise on the warriors who subjugated the Meteor Shower.]

[‘The Conquerer of the Alps’ reports that the Necromancer, defeated, has fled to the Japanese archipelago.]

He composed scenarios.

The story the Undertaker fabricated was simple. He had merely placed the ‘Necromancer' Sim Ah-ryeon behind every major incident in the world.

She summoned the Ten Legs. She spread the Udumbara virus. She called down the Meteor Shower. She birthed the Monster Wave.

She, she, she...

She, above all, was absolute evil.

[‘The Saintess of National Salvation’ blesses the awakeners before the final battle!]

Naturally.

This cycle's humanity began to gather its collective will toward eliminating a single absolute evil.

Not a soul suspected the scenario was fabricated.

Even within the Regression Alliance, only the Saintess, apart from the Undertaker, knew the truth.

Because it was an age when everyone needed an object for their resentment.

Because the very hologram the awakeners forever summoned with a whispered ‘status window!' had been in the grip of the Infinite Metagame, dancing to the Undertaker's will from the start.

Because the Infinite Metagame, having devoured even the authorities of the Endless and the puppet master, had arrayed an endless, countless host of zombies around the ‘final boss' Sim Ah-ryeon.

That majesty. That army. That healing ability that mended endlessly no matter the wound, far beyond anything a human could possess.

It was a disguise more than sufficient, more than excessive, to deceive humanity.

[‘The Conquerer of the Alps’ declares the victory of the Human Allied Forces!]

And so, not long ago, the allied forces, braving countless sacrifices, succeeded in subjugating the Necromancer.

The awakeners who had lost family and comrades were out of their minds. The ordinary people who counted awakeners as family and comrades were stained with the same madness.

They craved Sim Ah-ryeon's death. A festival of blood. Above all, an execution as agonizing as one could imagine.

But.

[‘The Chancellor of the Red Cape’ prophesies that if the Necromancer is killed carelessly, a curse beyond death will blanket the earth.]

[‘The Saintess of National Salvation’ frets that, while she understands your rage, you must not be toyed by the Necromancer's tricks to the very last.]

Simultaneous warnings from several Constellations.

When the voices that had faithfully guided humanity until now restrained them all at once, even the people whose eyes had gone bloodshot regained their reason.

No. Could that be called reason?

The false Constellation had been brainwashed by the Undertaker. And humanity, in turn, had been brainwashed by the Constellations.

Their judgment. Their courage. Their war. Their blood-spitting rage, and even their reasons for swallowing that rage. Their epic.

All of it.

There was nothing the Undertaker had not engineered.

-Let us think of it as a blessing in disguise.

A few years earlier, the Undertaker had spoken before the leadership of the Human Allied Forces.

-Look back on the atrocities this one has committed all this time. A simple death may not satisfy us.

-Then what is it you propose we do, nya?

While the other officers held their silence, Manyo Neko of the Magical Girl Association answered back on their behalf.

Manyo Neko had lost a dear friend during the war with the Necromancer. Weeping tears of blood, she had tried to tear the Necromancer apart limb from limb, and the magical girls around her had barely managed to hold her back.

-Consider the nature of this Necromancer.

The Undertaker seized Sim Ah-ryeon by the head and lifted her up.

A hiccupping moan. Even so, the corners of her mouth still curled in that silly grin, and the awakeners of the Human Allied Forces glared at Sim Ah-ryeon with eyes full of revulsion.

-No matter how much you wound her, she regenerates at once. Unless you blow her head clean off in a single stroke, she won't die easily.

-So what are you getting at, nya?

-We have surely marched all the way to this hell as humanity's representatives. But does that give us the right to stand in for all of humanity's hatred?

The Undertaker declared,

-Let us keep her alive. So that anyone, whenever they wish, as much as they wish, may take out their grudge on the Necromancer.

-...

-It won't be atonement. But won't it at least be a release?

It was a sweet thing to say.

If sweetness could ever linger in blood, anyway.

The Undertaker's tongue ended up bewitching the awakeners after all.

They believed, firm as iron, that executing the Necromancer rashly would call down an unprecedented curse no matter what.

If the main dish was wrecked, then claiming at least the dessert felt like nothing less than a victor's rightful due.

-But, Undertaker. I'm not confident I won't just kill her if I'm left alone with that son of a bitch, nya. And there are more than a few people as pissed off as me, nya.

-There is a way.

-What is it, nya?

-I will entrust the Necromancer's management to Yu Ji-won.

-...

-Even when venting grudge and rage on the Necromancer, it must always be done in front of Yu Ji-won, while she watches.

The awakeners turned to look at Yu Ji-won.

And every last one of them nodded. Indeed. That psychopath without a drop of blood or tears would manage the Necromancer's life splendidly.

And so two years passed.

“Yu Ji-won.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“There are no more visitors for today, correct?”

“Correct, Your Excellency. The heat has been severe lately, so I've been arranging the schedule to wrap up business in the morning where possible.”

In the beginning, Sim Ah-ryeon's door had been thronged with those who wished to take revenge on the Necromancer, humanity's traitor.

But around the two-year mark the schedule gradually loosened. Murderous intent and hatred were emotions too, and it wasn't easy for a human to sustain a single emotion forever.

Above all, revenge against the Necromancer permitted, quite literally, only the kind of torture that ground her arms and legs to pulp.

Those who tried to approach the Necromancer with other intentions under the guise of revenge, Yu Ji-won screened out at her own discretion.

Torture was work that demanded evil of the perpetrator too, and there weren't many people willing to prescribe themselves such a deadly poison.

“Ms. Manyo Neko did put in a reservation for this evening. But she's the same all three hundred and sixty-five days of the year, so I expect she'll grant us this one day's grace.”

“I see. Then I'll contact Manyo Neko separately. I'll book Sim Ah-ryeon's evening myself today.”

“As you say. Dispose of it however you wish, Your Excellency.”

The Undertaker looked at Sim Ah-ryeon.

“…”

Why was it? Even as the two of them talked, Sim Ah-ryeon kept watching the Undertaker with a beaming, simpering smile across her whole face.

What on earth was so wonderful about all this? The Undertaker frowned, not wanting to understand.

“…If you haven't developed some obsession with caterpillar cosplay, heal yourself already. If you're going to go around in that state, I've got no choice but to, what, carry you piggyback or something.”

“Aah. P, piggyback. You'll give me a piggyback ride?”

“Dream on.”

“Heehee. Yaah…! Trans! Form!”

The moment Sim Ah-ryeon called out playfully, there came a slithering sound.

From the cut faces of her severed limbs, masses of flesh grew out like vines. The vines wove and tangled together and at once formed the shape of arms and legs.

Sim Ah-ryeon sprang to her feet.

“Boom! Pow!”

“…”

No one laughed.

The Undertaker pressed his lips shut, and to bury the fact that he had pressed his lips shut he hurried to speak.

“Here. Put on some new clothes.”

“Ah. This is... M, more of a hijab than clothes? It's basically just a cloak...?”

“Would you rather walk around with your bare face out? The citizens would throw stones at you the moment they saw you. I've never made a hobby of getting stoned over one traveling companion.”

The Undertaker turned his back and stepped out of the alley. It was his way of giving her space to change.

“Your Excellency.”

Yu Ji-won, too, left Sim Ah-ryeon behind and followed him.

“There's something I need to tell you.”

“You can speak freely.”

“It's about the healing ability the Necromancer just displayed.”

A glance. Yu Ji-won checked the depths of the alley for a moment, then dropped her voice as low as it would go.

“Just a little while ago, she couldn't put out that kind of output.”

“What?”

“Didn't the Necromancer say something about deliberately not healing her arms and legs to stir up sympathy for herself?”

“She did.”

“But that's not it. In reality, she wanted to heal but had no battery left to do it with. With her limbs being shaved down and crushed every single day, even that seemingly infinite healing ability had a limit.”

“...”

The Undertaker blinked. That was how unexpected it was.

“No. What are you saying? You witnessed it up close too, Yu Ji-

won. Her arms and legs recovering fully in under ten seconds.”

“Yes. That's exactly why I'm raising the matter.”

“Didn't Sim Ah-ryeon just lie to you? Pretending her healing power was all drained. That girl acts better than you'd think. You have to consider the possibility that you were fooled.”

“Hm. I am considering it, of course.”

Yu Ji-won stroked her chin.

“Still, Your Excellency. I pride myself, for what it's worth, on a natural gift for telling truth from falsehood. As for why a person who only this morning was wilting, barely enduring the torture, suddenly flits about full of energy the moment Your Excellency arrives, that I find hard to guess.”

“...”

The Undertaker's heart stirred.

Again. Again, that unpleasant feeling came over him.

Like the moment he first met Sim Ah-ryeon and draped a doctor's coat over her, like the ten years he spent brainwashing the Saintess.

Deep waters. The sea where he had dropped a heavy anchor in his heart kicked up black waves.

‘Now that I think of it, even the Saintess fretting over Sim Ah-ryeon out of nowhere this morning, was that already strange?'

The Saintess too would have been monitoring Sim Ah-ryeon from time to time with her Clairvoyance.

It wasn't something to brush off easily. Both the Saintess and Yu Ji-won were reporting the same anomalous signs.

And as far as the Undertaker knew, the two of them still ranked among the most trustworthy awakeners.

“...I understand your concern.”

“I beg forgiveness for daring to trouble Your Excellency's mind with such presumptuous words.”

“It's fine. That's your role. As I said, I'll keep Sim Ah-ryeon with me today, so you go on home.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency.”

Yu Ji-won gave a crisp salute and turned to leave. Not a word of complaint. Even in an age like this, she carried herself like the trusted aide who still held the Undertaker's favor.

“...What a mess this all is.”

The Undertaker drew out a cigarette and put it to his lips. On the surface it looked like an ordinary cigarette, but it was in fact a special blend crafted by the Alchemist Uehara Shino.

A little while later.

“Ehehe... I, I'm all dressed!”

“Mm.”

Wrapped head to toe, Sim Ah-ryeon poked her head out of the alley.

Dressed like that, no one would recognize her. The Undertaker took out an ashtray and asked.

“So. Anything you want to eat? Worst case I can rent out a restaurant for us, so say whatever you like.”

“I, I want to eat something the Guild Leader cooked with his own hands... Ah. W, wait a second!”

“...?”

Sim Ah-ryeon came hurrying over. Then she snatched the cigarette from the Undertaker's hand and, of all things, pressed its tip against

her own forearm.

The Undertaker froze.

Sssss. The faint sound of searing flesh trailed through the alley like a lingering echo.

“...”

“Ehehe.”

Sim Ah-ryeon was watching the Undertaker's face just like that.

With eyes crinkled into a smile.

“N, now let's go! Guild Leader...”

“...”

They arrived at the Azit.

Walking over while trying to avoid the citizens' eyes where he could, the Undertaker turned things over in his head the whole way.

‘Ah-ryeon, you said you eat people's emotions.'

‘There's no emotion more intense than the grief and hatred of people who have lost family and comrades. So your ability ought to grow stronger.'

‘Why has it weakened, then?'

‘Did I build the Strategy Guide wrong? Or is Sim Ah-ryeon deceiving Yu Ji-won and the Saintess, and beyond them, me?'

But every line of worry came to nothing.

A stifling feeling, somehow never quite hitting the core, had welled up in his heart. Like filth backed up and overflowing from faulty drainage.

“Hwaah. A, as expected. The tteokbokki[1] the Guild Leader makes

himself is the best!”

The filth's uneasy stench didn't fade even after he brought Sim Ah-ryeon to the Azit and cooked up this dish and that, even when they sat across from each other at the table.

A tilt of the head. Sim Ah-ryeon, munching down tempura with her tteokbokki, cocked her head.

“Hm? G, Guild Leader, you're not eating?”

“No.”

“B, but it's this delicious. Mm. Then I'll eat all these fried dumplings myself! Strangely, there's a flavor only these cheap fried dumplings that come with tteokbokki have, this damp, chewy thing...”

“Ah-ryeon.”

“Y, yes?”

“Why does your healing ability recover properly only when you meet me?”

“You already know.”

Nom.

Sim Ah-ryeon leaned over, forking up even the Undertaker's share and eating it as if it were nothing, and answered.

“D, does that part really need explaining? Honestly?”

“Explain it.”

“It's because the Guild Leader is the one whose emotions surge most violently when he looks at me.”

“...”

“Other people's emotions are, how do I put it... Mm. It's a bit funny when you think about it, isn't it? Going on about how precious their family and comrades were, and then mixing up the real culprit who

drove their family to death... Farmed fish? Stuck in an aquarium, thinking the place they live is the real sea? It makes me laugh just watching, and when I laugh, they get even angrier...”

His chest.

“Honestly, the Ten Legs, the Guild Leader could subjugate them alone if you went all out, couldn't you? The Meteor Shower too... But you deliberately had other people do the subjugating. So, um, there are victims, aren't there. After all. The people who died, too.”

His heart.

“Which means... It's no different from the Guild Leader killing them. The truth is.”

“...”

“B, but people think I killed them. Hwaah. The farmed fish and the bugs in their breeding tanks come thrashing and rubbing themselves against me... And honestly, taking it seriously is a teensy bit... much, right? Hehe.”

The Undertaker pressed his lips shut.

This time he couldn't subdue the silence with words.

No. Even if he had subdued it, it would have meant nothing.

For all that the words went away.

“So that's just it,” she said.

The filth that had filled his chest like a settling tank churned without rest.

“I don't live off the emotions of animals or bugs. I live off the emotions of people.”

“...”

“And when the Guild Leader is the only person left in this world,

isn't it only natural that my ability grows stronger when the Guild Leader is around...?”

Quietly.

Feeling stifled, the Undertaker, without thinking, laid a hand over the center of his chest.

His heart was beating.

Footnotes:

1 - Tteokbokki is a popular Korean street food of chewy cylindrical rice cakes simmered in a sweet-and-spicy gochujang (red chili paste) sauce, commonly served with fried side dishes like tempura and dumplings.

Chapter 450

The That Woman S IV

Sinnoa

* * *

What is a human?

To this perilous, cliff-edge question, Sim Ah-ryeon had held her answer for a very long time.

A human meant Sim Ah-ryeon.

Only herself.

-Woof! Woof woof, woooof!

-...

Back when she was younger. Summer vacation.

There was a puppy abandoned by the roadside, its belly caked with dust. Sim Ah-ryeon just felt like it one day, so she picked it up and raised it.

-A, Ah-ryeon.

-Woof!

-Your name is Ah-ryeon...

Sim Ah-ryeon poured everything into that puppy.

No. Even "everything" fell short.

They slept in the same bed.

Since they couldn't eat at the same table, Sim Ah-ryeon set her own bowl on the floor too and crouched down to eat.

On their walks, wherever no one was around, she didn't walk on two legs but crawled on all fours.

She didn't just draw the puppy toward herself. She offered up her own existence to it as an equal.

Plainly, abnormal.

The phrase "raising a pet like a child" is almost always nothing but hyperbole.

But for Sim Ah-ryeon it was no metaphor, nothing of the sort, just a plain, simple fact.

The people around her looked at her like she was insane, but Sim Ah-ryeon didn't care in the slightest. Something else mattered to her back then.

-Th, this is... Love...

Yes. Sim Ah-ryeon was running an experiment.

On what? On what love is.

What feeling did people point to and call affection? What sort of resonance did attachment murmur inside her heart?

Whether she was a being allowed to love. Herself.

-Hmm. I'm not really sure...

-Woof woof woof!

-I heard somewhere that affection comes from deprivation. Come to think of it, our house. It isn't poor at all.

Maybe I'm just too well-off.

So Sim Ah-ryeon murmured.

And that night, after packing her sleeping bag and easel, she ran away from home with a single puppy as her only companion.

It was summer vacation.

Sim Ah-ryeon spread her sleeping bag beside an abandoned grave on a wild hill and lived there. A public restroom nearby let her steal water.

[Middle Schooler Genius Painter!]

[I'll Draw Your Caricature!]

She covered her costs with her drawings.

Sim Ah-ryeon knew her age and her skill made for plenty of advertising appeal, and she drifted between the local park and the riverside park, earning pocket money.

-Wow. You're really good at this!

-Hehehe. Th, thank you...

-But wasn't this supposed to be a portrait? It looks less like a portrait and more like some abstract piece. Really alien-looking.

-Huh? It, it is a portrait, though.

-?

-?

With the money she earned that way, Sim Ah-ryeon bought dog food.

That raising a single life took a fair bit of hard-earned money was something young Sim Ah-ryeon got to learn.

-Woooof!

The hot summer clouds were drifting by.

Even by her own measure, Sim Ah-ryeon prided herself on having tried about as much as she possibly could.

Whether it was love, she didn't know.

But at the very least, it was certain that she treasured the puppy before her more than any living thing she had met from birth until now.

On the last day of summer vacation.

When Sim Ah-ryeon came back to the tent, she found the puppy dying.

-Whine, whee...

It had probably been hit by a car passing along the mountain road.

The puppy simply loved every sound humans made. Whether a ringtone spilling from a phone, the footsteps of a person, or the gray snorting noise a car left behind, the foolish thing would yip and yelp and dash out as if it were a meaty rib bone.

But this place was dark, and the puppy was so very small, small enough to be hard to spot both before and after being hit...

Maybe, no probably, no surely, that whole chain of cause and effect drew itself in Sim Ah-ryeon's head the moment she saw the dying puppy.

What did Sim Ah-ryeon do then?

Did she resent it?

Did she blame the careless driver?

Why didn't you see the puppy, why didn't you find it even after hitting it, why didn't you rush it straight to a hospital, did you maybe find it and pass it by on purpose because hauling it that far was a bother and a nuisance, or did you perhaps hit it on purpose from the start? Did she hate them like that?

Did she blame herself?

Did she think she should have come back a little earlier, that if she had she could have saved it?

Did she reflect that she should have raised the puppy more strictly, that she should have made it wary of the world, that the world is not a place that is always only beautiful, that she should have taught it the world turns ruthlessly cruel and cold the instant you least expect it?

Did she wail?

Did she hold the puppy and say she was sorry, that she was wrong to leave it alone, no that she should never have brought it out of the house like this in the first place, or, further back still, that someone like her should never have picked it up at all? Did she regret it like that?

-...

In that moment Sim Ah-ryeon was observing her own heart in the finest possible detail.

Am I sad? What exactly is sadness? What density, what rhythm, what hue does the feeling I call sadness possess?

What is the loss of affection?

What is death.

-...

Obsessively.

Sim Ah-ryeon controlled her own madness for the sake of madness. She watched the pet die, taking enough time for the puppy's death to settle into her heart.

-Mmm.

Sim Ah-ryeon pressed a hand to her chest.

-Sadness... Sadness, sadness.

Sim Ah-ryeon buried the puppy in that abandoned grave where she had slept beside her pet all vacation.

School started up again.

This girl of few words, whom the teachers had once welcomed with delight as a genius enrollee but came to call "a truly strange child" as the days passed, until they shied away from getting involved with her at all, drew on the same single subject the whole new semester.

A drawing of a puppy.

-Sadness, sadness, sadness...

Her classmates had to fight hard not to look at that detestable girl's drawings.

But the more one loved art, the more impossible it was not to look, and among the children who finally steeled themselves to look, a few snapped their brushes in half.

-Ah-ryeon, you...

-Y, yes?

-You, how do you draw so well?

One of her classmates asked.

It was a question that took enormous courage. The trembling lips. Even the tightly clenched fist couldn't fully measure the total sum of that courage.

'Courage?'

Sim Ah-ryeon looked at her classmate with level eyes, but with her head tilted at a slant.

'Jealousy? Jealousy. Jealousy. Hope. Friendship.'

So Sim Ah-ryeon told her. About the kind of summer vacation she had spent.

-Get out here! You crazy bastard, get out here!

A week later, the classmate's parent stormed into the school and threw a fit.

Apparently their daughter had tried to kill a cat behind their backs, failed, and was sobbing her eyes out.

-Some lunatic told my daughter you have to kill a cat to make art! What crazy bastard said that to my girl!

Not really. Sim Ah-ryeon had never said "to make art you need the death of a pet."

The word art itself was still far too distant for Sim Ah-ryeon. The girl had only explained how the color called "sadness" came to be on her palette.

'Anger. Anger... Worry. Sadness.'

Still, that parent's reaction was interesting.

While the teachers stood flustered, unsure what to do, Sim Ah-ryeon stepped up to the parent with quick little strides.

-That lunatic, right now...! And who the hell are you?

-I, I'm the one who thaid it.

-What?

-Ah. I bit my tongue. Um, so. I'm the one who told Ye-eun... The cat. To stop clinging to that worthless thing and just kill it.

-...

-That an artist grows by how far they can sacrifice themselves for the sake of art. So, simply, starting with the cat...

Screams burst out around them.

Sim Ah-ryeon collapsed onto the hallway floor, and ah, so this is what it feels like to get slapped really hard across the cheek, she thought dazedly.

-Ye-eun's mother! You can't! You mustn't!

The next day.

Rumors about Sim Ah-ryeon spread all through the school. A devil who killed her own pet dog for the sake of art. A lunatic no one could ever associate with, who had even egged a friend on to kill her pet cat.

'Jealousy. Malice. Justice.'

Sim Ah-ryeon found it fascinating.

'Human emotion.'

It was endlessly fascinating, this act of peering into her own heart and watching those surging waves.

'My emotion.'

Each time a semester repeated and vacation came around, Sim Ah-ryeon experimented with one of her feelings at a time.

'Beautiful...'

The language of the world's people meant nothing to her either way.

'So pretty...'

The anger they shouted about was not Sim Ah-ryeon's own anger.

The friendship and reputation they said they shared. That was not the nourishment Sim Ah-ryeon's life required.

The overseas trips they said they wanted to take. That was not the journey Sim Ah-ryeon longed for.

'Could blue ever be prettier than the sky?'

Her journey had no map.

It was an amusing thing. Even in this present age, when humanity

had explored every remote and polar region, emotion alone remained dark.

'Could green ever be more beautiful than the tender flesh of a leaf just sprouted in late spring...?'

She busied herself diving only into her own feelings. Into the sea of emotion so vast its shape could not even be traced.

The sea she set out on for her journeys was never abroad but always an inner sea.

Winter vacation ended.

Summer vacation ended.

Winter vacation ended.

Summer vacation ended.

No longer could the young girl find anyone around her who drew better than she did.

-Th, this is so pretty.

The girl spoke with joy.

-Look. Isn't it so. So, so pretty?

But no one answered her.

The one classmate who at least used to speak to Sim Ah-ryeon now and then had already transferred schools a few semesters ago, hadn't she.

-...Ah.

Sim Ah-ryeon was a species that existed on this earth in a population of exactly one, a kind that had split off from humankind, holding a moral system that could not commune with present-day humanity.

-...Mm, well. Whatever. Hehehe.

People found her revolting. Because they regarded her as the same species, they lamented that someone of the same kind as them could be like that.

It was a strange thing.

If she had simply been a different species altogether, a puppy could be pretty and a cat could be pretty. Even a beetle turned beautiful with ease.

Calling a fellow human beautiful, that alone seemed to require some special condition.

-So pretty...

To Sim Ah-ryeon alone, so many things, far too many things, were beautiful.

That was her solitude.

* * *

From the very first moment she met the Undertaker.

Sim Ah-ryeon always found him fascinating and fun.

"Wow! A sea made of human!"

"...?"

"No. Mm. A, a sea pretending to be human? An acting sea?"

"...I have no idea what you're talking about."

The Undertaker himself brushed it off, as if he couldn't understand a word she said.

But the truth was, Sim Ah-ryeon knew.

That he understood, down to the last detail, exactly what she had meant.

'Twitch twitch!'

Of course, she could see so vividly just what emotion the Undertaker before her was feeling.

'Twitch twitch. So cute... Twitch twitch.'

The Undertaker was a truly interesting being.

First, that every time she looked at him he was holding back the urge to kill himself on the spot.

'Suicidal impulse... mm. But patience? It feels a little different from that too. There's patience, sure. But more than that it's... giving up?'

It was strange.

'Giving up on life is something that happens often.'

'But giving up on suicide? Are there cases of that too? Isn't suicide supposed to be the final hurdle people see it as?'

'Giving up on life is easy. Because you can know about life. Because you've experienced it.'

'But... you've never experienced suicide, have you. Usually. The sensible thing is not to give up on suicide but to renounce it. For most.'

'How do you know suicide? How can you truly wish to die and at the same time look down on suicide?'

'Fascinating...!'

After that the Undertaker grandly recited some project or other about developing her ability, but it was none of Sim Ah-ryeon's concern.

The project even ultimately amounted to nailing Sim Ah-ryeon herself to a cross and turning her into a Miko[1] to soak up people's hatred, yet this too was none of her concern.

'He's suffering...!'

The Undertaker's inner feelings, as he explained that project calmly with an endlessly calm face, were the real prize.

Those emotions were, to Sim Ah-ryeon, like treasure twinkling brightly in some shipwreck.

'Why? Why is he suffering? A pang of conscience?'

'Hypocrisy? Mm, but. For hypocrisy the pain is far too distinct! Whoa. Suicidal impulse. Red. Black. Blue. Pretty...'

'He's in so much pain. He's suffocating. So why does he drop me into hell with such a perfectly unbothered face?'

'Why?' 'Why?' 'Why?' 'Why?' 'Why?' 'Why?'

Struck by a baptism of emotions verging on outright violence, Sim Ah-ryeon could barely keep her wits about her.

It was rapturous.

'The suicidal impulse, I've eaten that many times. It's a delicacy, but. Mmm. The worse the suicidal impulse, the more a person's other emotions fade, until in the end the colors all wash out... And the flavor turns the same.'

'Drenched in MSG.'[2]

'But.'

Awake or asleep, Sim Ah-ryeon hovered around the Undertaker. Go away, you're a nuisance, the Undertaker kept trying to drive her off, but Sim Ah-ryeon clung to him with indomitable will.

'[This] is different...'

There was nothing to be done. She had learned that this kind of "flavor" truly existed in the world. She could never go back to the past where she hadn't known it.

'The suicidal impulse runs th, this deep. And yet. Even the other emotions are vividly alive!'

'Mmm... Not just alive. Strong. Intense. Powerful.'

Even just watching the Undertaker chat for a moment with a passerby on the street, or talk with a colleague, it came through without a single blemish.

Affection. Friendship. Mercy.

Whatever name you put on those feelings, the Undertaker was digesting his emotions ten, twenty times more clearly than ordinary people.

'He cherishes people.'

And yet.

'He deceives people.'

'He wants to die.'

'And yet he lives.'

'He cherishes... me.'

'And yet he torments me.'

A person.

There was no way a person could endure this imbalance.

It was impossible!

The seismic design of the human psyche was simply not sturdy enough to withstand a dissonance worsened to this degree.

But it actually existed.

Total magic! A miracle!

"Haaa, hoooo... Hk, haaa..."

"...Ah-ryeon, you're burying your nose in my back and drooling all over me right now. Could I get an explanation for the reason behind

that behavior?"

"Hehehe."

Sim Ah-ryeon was happy.

So she sank into an even happier fantasy.

'What if, what if. What if... Mm. If I took on every torture and every hardship for the Guild Leader's sake...'

'Would the Guild Leader suffer even more than he does now?'

A hundred percent.

She was certain he would.

It was a thing truly hard for Sim Ah-ryeon to understand, but this man treated even her as a "precious human."

He didn't just say it. Out loud he actually treated Sim Ah-ryeon like some lab rat for living experiments, like a tool.

'I want to try it!'

Sim Ah-ryeon's heart raced.

'I want to try it! I want to try it! I want to try it, I want to try it!'

'Let me leave the Guild Leader's side entirely for a few years! Yeah. Because, hoo-ah. That way the Guild Leader will even feel guilt for having neglected me...!'

'Thump thump. Thump thump.'

A time of endurance.

In all her life so far, Sim Ah-ryeon had never put up with anything. If she wanted to try something, she did it right away.

This decision had nothing to do with patience either.

From Sim Ah-ryeon's standpoint, the decision to "wait a few years

and taste the delicacy" was no more than carrying it out "right away."

And so, at last.

After several years had passed, the Undertaker came to find her and treated her to a meal.

But the dishes the Undertaker made for her were appetizers at best.

The dish she truly wanted to sample was sitting in the chair across the table.

"Ah-ryeon."

"Y, yes?"

"Why does your healing ability recover properly only when you meet me?"

Sim Ah-ryeon grinned wide.

She had been waiting for this very meal.

So she could tell him smoothly, without her words stumbling much.

"Honestly, the Ten Legs too, if you'd given it your, your full effort, you could have subjugated it alone, couldn't you, Guild Leader?"

A flinch.

At her own words, the Undertaker's emotions began to surge.

"The Meteor Shower too... But you deliberately let other people do the subjugating. Mm, there were victims, you see. After all. People who died too."

With narrowed eyes Sim Ah-ryeon traced that pulse without missing a beat. Lapped it down and drank.

Like scraping out the ice cream left at the bottom of a tub. She jabbed a spoon made of language deep into the Undertaker's heart.

"In other words... It's no different from the Guild Leader killing them yourself. The truth is."

In that moment.

The waves that had begun to rise in the sea finally surged into a raging current. A tsunami.

Emotions in all sorts of vivid colors spread out.

It was beautiful.

It was pretty.

Sim Ah-ryeon couldn't hold back.

So she drove the spoon in deeper.

"Murderer."

"..."

Black.

"Traitor."

"..."

Red.

"Slaughterer."

"..."

Blue.

"Liar."

"..."

The Undertaker's heart was soft.

To other people it might feel as hard as frozen ice cream, but to Sim

Ah-ryeon at least it was always a dish ripened to just the right deliciousness.

Goodness, how could anyone fail to recognize this? Because they lacked the ability? Truly, she thought, she was a blessed and chosen gourmet.

"People often call me those things. But, in truth, I don't think they're words that suit me much... I think. Because."

"..."

"Because those are all... All of them are titles for the Guild Leader's sake, aren't they?"

"..."

"Isn't that right, Guild Leader?"

Silence settled in.

Then suddenly, a trickle.

Without a sound, a tear ran down the Undertaker's cheek.

"...!!"

Sim Ah-ryeon shot to her feet. Crash, bang, clatter! Because the motion was far too clumsy for a human, the chair toppled over, and Sim Ah-ryeon's legs went over with it.

But Sim Ah-ryeon didn't groan. As if even the time to groan were too precious, she got right back up and went to the Undertaker.

And she took the Undertaker's face in both hands. The tear that had run down his jawline now pooled along the creases of her fingers.

Sim Ah-ryeon flinched, startled, and drew back her left hand. Then she frantically licked the Undertaker's tear gathered shallowly in her palm.

"...!"

Inside her head.

"...!! ...!!"

Gunpowder went off, pop pop pop.

'I want to die. Suicide. Impossible. Giving up. Challenge. Renouncing. Despair. Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry. I want to die. Disgrace. Shame. Self-blame. Guilt. Relief. Pride. Love.'

In a flash, the tear in her palm ran dry.

'More.'

Where did it go? Where is it?

'More.'

Sim Ah-ryeon forgot even to breathe. She only searched for the source where she could taste this tear, this paint, this fireworks display.

So she licked. His cheek. Even catching it in her palm to drink felt like a waste, so she just sucked down the flowing tears as fast as they flowed.

'More. More. More. More. More.'

The heart, the head, no the very existence of the human called Sim Ah-ryeon writhed in rapture.

'More from here.'

To do that?

'Ah!'

Only then did Sim Ah-ryeon shudder as if struck by lightning. She understood.

Until now she had never been able to grasp why on earth mixing tongue with tongue became "an expression of affection."

It seemed too cliché.

But no. It was, if anything, exact. Because rather than catching and drinking tears, pressing lips together was a far, far deeper way to draw close.

It seemed humanity up to now hadn't been complete fools after all.

So Sim Ah-ryeon kissed him.

"...!!"

Pop. Pop pop, pop... paaa...

Before her eyes, things burst into every shade and color.

'What is this? Guild Leader? What is this feeling?'

It was a delicacy.

'What is it, what is it, what is it? What is it?'

Sim Ah-ryeon didn't stop the kiss. She didn't stop thinking either. The former was easy and the latter was not.

Because it was a feeling Sim Ah-ryeon was truly tasting for the first time.

She couldn't put a name to it. No. She wondered whether she might be the first human ever to experience a feeling like this.

'Sorry. Sorry. Joy. Love?'

She wanted to find out. With a heart far stronger, beyond any comparison, than the one she'd had that summer she choked the puppy's throat.

'Love. Love, love, love? Love?'

Sim Ah-ryeon was clever.

'Ah.'

So even as she went on kissing the Undertaker, she could tell.

'This. Maybe.'

'Maybe it isn't the Guild Leader's emotion...?'

Sim Ah-ryeon listened closely to the sound of her own heart. Her eardrums had already gone numb, but luckily the vibration in her chest could be felt through another path as well.

'My emotion?'

Sim Ah-ryeon stopped the kiss for a moment and stared at the Undertaker's face right up close.

The pounding didn't stop.

'Love?'

To Sim Ah-ryeon, the man before her, only the man before her, was so very beautiful.

'Love.'

That was her love.

Footnotes:

1 - Miko is a Japanese shrine maiden; the line uses that Japanese-flavored otaku register rather than a plain priestess term. Here it means a priestess set up to take on the public's hatred and curses.

2 - MSG (monosodium glutamate) is widely used in Korean internet slang as shorthand for something cheap, artificial, and one-note in flavor; here it describes how a suicidal person's other emotions "all wash out" into the same dull, oversalted taste.

Chapter 451

The That Woman S V

Sinnoa

* * *

That day, the Undertaker woke up late.

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame will stand in as your alarm clock.]

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame will stand in as your alarm clock.]

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame will stand in as your alarm clock.]

Was it already past noon?

If the Constellation had not been firing off messages so diligently, he might have slept even longer.

“What time is it...?”

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame informs you that it is 12:02 PM.]

“Mmm.”

A groan slipped from the Undertaker’s mouth.

For the past ten years. No, counting the previous cycles, he had lived for at least several centuries with almost no sleep at all.

‘...How long had it been since I last slept in?’

His head felt foggy.

The bedroom was dark. Since a living space had been artificially

carved out of the void that had originally been the source of the Inunaki Tunnel, the lighting was bound to be lousy.

He could even faintly smell dust. The place felt bleak. Unlike in other worldlines, the Undertaker here had never opened a cafe.

Here, he had no need to invent notations like “depth 100 meters” or “depth 1,000 meters” to show how strong awakeners were.

His ally, the Infinite Metagame, could just pop open a status window and display the level.

Which was why.

-Scratch, scratch.

Only belatedly did he notice that a figure was crouched like a ghost in the corner of the room, some distance from the bed, painting away in a frenzy.

“Hwuahk!”

“Hyeek?!”

The Undertaker jumped. The person painting jumped too.

The timing was perfect. If they had entered any Olympic event run in pairs, they might actually have medaled.

In any case, thanks to that jump, the doctor’s coat the other person had been draped in like a rag slipped right off.

“Ah, Ah-ryeon?”

“Ah. Yes... Y, you’re awake?”

“What are you doing over there? I thought an anomaly had broken into my bedroom. You scared the life out of me.”

“Mmm... Sorry. I can’t be bothered talking right now, so please shut up...”

The Undertaker’s head went even foggier. This time it did not seem

to be from sleepiness.

‘After reaching a position like mine, was there anyone besides Management Captain Noh Do-hwa who could tell me to shut up to my face?’

Fortunately, the Undertaker had many, many vices, but pride and arrogance were not among them.

If anything, it was the opposite.

In fact, right now, even if someone walked up and stabbed him on the street, the Undertaker probably would not have gotten particularly angry.

It was just that no one else, and not even he himself, realized his state of mind had been driven that far.

So even though someone like Sim Ah-ryeon, far weaker than him and treated as a traitor to humanity on top of that, had just verbally abused him with a “shut up,” the Undertaker really did shut up.

His mouth might have shut, but his hands were free. To drive off the enemy called sleep, he brewed some caffeine. While he was at it, he also changed the badly soiled blanket and bedsheets.

“Here. Coffee.”

“…”

“I didn’t know what kind of coffee you like, so I just made a cafe latte.”

Sim Ah-ryeon did not reply. She did not even touch the coffee he had brought over.

She just kept moving her brush without rest.

“Hmm.”

The Undertaker shrugged.

Then the hand reaching for his espresso froze in midair. His gaze had finally fixed on the canvas.

"..."

It was incredible.

Magnificent.

For a moment, his vocabulary itself seemed paralyzed. That was how fiercely the reds and blues Sim Ah-ryeon had conjured up writhed like blood vessels.

'...Even a beginner like me can tell. This is a terrifying piece.'

But that was as far as it went.

The Undertaker, as he was now, lacked the eye to describe in detail why, how much, or in what way that painting was great.

What could he do? He had never once put any effort into cultivating or caring about hobbies or tastes.

'Infinite Metagame. What level of painting is this?'

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame judges that the painting placed before the player is ominous.]

'Ominous?'

The Undertaker tilted his head. It was a word his partner, the Constellation, rarely used.

No. It might even have been the first time in several thousand years he had heard that kind of word in that kind of tone.

[A world rests on the perception with which an intelligent being beholds it. A work of art is always an attempt to rival a world.]

[For that reason, a highly perfected work of art is no different from a Void.]

[Player Undertaker. The painting placed before you is a Void.]

"..."

[The Admin of the Infinite Metagame designates this painting as a Void and recommends incinerating it at once.]

The Undertaker did not do so.

Instead, he watched. The whole time.

The painter was not picky about her tools. Sometimes she used a brush. Sometimes her palms and fingers.

She smeared paint all over her bare body, paint that gave off that distinctive well-cooked oil smell.

"Hooah."

It seemed she had gotten up much earlier than him. In less than two hours, the finishing touch had been laid on the canvas.

"It's, it's been a while...! I really painted again after so long!"

Sim Ah-ryeon stretched long and wide. From the silly grin at the corners of her mouth to her fully extended body, complete satisfaction overflowed from her.

"Good. Nice work. Drink your coffee."

"Ah! Coffee...!"

Like every other art school graduate, Sim Ah-ryeon too was a slave to caffeine. Her brain rejoiced at the master who had finally deigned to visit.

"Hwaaa, it's good... Guild Leader, you make really good coffee. B, but I kind of prefer sweeter coffee..."

"How would I know your tastes? Those beans are precious, so drink it gratefully."

"Yeees."

Leaving Sim Ah-ryeon to sip at the cafe latte, the Undertaker

leisurely examined the finished piece.

“Did you paint a dog?”

“Mmm. Well, yes...”

“I can sense some dissatisfaction in that answer.”

“Well, I mean. Ex, explaining my own work to some scrub with trash eyes who does not know the first thing about art feels really lame to me...”

“...I don’t know much about your field, but aren’t painters supposed to explain the meaning and context of their work in front of people? Isn’t that a proper part of the job too?”

“Q, quiet. Just shut up. Look if you want, or don’t...”

A brief silence followed.

“Right. Come to think of it, where did you get the paint and canvas? I wouldn’t have stocked anything like that here in the Azit.”

“Ah. I, I asked Yu Ji-won to bring them.”

“?”

The Undertaker turned his head. Sip. Beside him, Sim Ah-ryeon was still carefully savoring her coffee.

“Yu Ji-won?”

“Yes? Yes.”

“This is my Azit, so why would Yu Ji-won, and how, take a request from you...? Ah. Did you use the Saintess’s Telepathy?”

“Eh? N, no?”

“...Then?”

“I had a schedule starting this morning. She, she came to get me

ready at dawn. Yu Ji-won. Knocking on the door. But, um. I felt like painting today. So I canceled the whole schedule and asked her to bring me painting supplies instead."

"...She came? Right up to this room, in person?"

"Yes? Yes."

"Why didn't I know about that?"

"? Be, because you were asleep...?"

"..."

The Undertaker looked.

At the being called Sim Ah-ryeon right before his eyes.

She might have been draped in a rag, but if you asked whether it covered her body completely, the answer was no.

Traces of time. To put it bluntly, traces of last night still remained all over her.

Then he looked down.

At his own body.

He turned and looked behind him too.

There was the bed. Since he had changed the blanket and sheets earlier, it looked at least somewhat presentable now, but that did not mean the smell hanging thick in the room had gone anywhere.

"..."

The Undertaker bolted out.

"Ah. You're awake."

At the entrance to the Inunaki Tunnel, Yu Ji-won had set up a parasol and was waiting leisurely.

Grab. Without thinking, the Undertaker seized both of Yu Ji-won's shoulders. Her slender body swayed a little.

"Ji-won."

"Yes, Your Excellency."

Yu Ji-won's face was as flawlessly expressionless as ever. Since it was no different from yesterday, the Undertaker let himself hope, maybe.

Of course, hope, as always, was the overture to despair. Soon, a classic rang out from Yu Ji-won's neat lips.

"Did you enjoy last night?"

"..."

Da da da daan.

The title of the classic was Beethoven's Fifth, the Fate Symphony.

"I'm sorry, Yu Ji-won. Whatever you saw at dawn today, forget it."

"Hmm? Understood."

Yu Ji-won said that casually, even while her shoulders were still being gripped.

Considering that the Undertaker's eyes were bloodshot red right now, Yu Ji-won's nerve was anything but ordinary.

"I had judged that Your Excellency's heart had come to rest on Sim Ah-ryeon. If it was merely a one-night whim, that is rather a relief. It means the danger of Sim Ah-ryeon framing me has disappeared."

"Don't tell me that after seeing that scene at dawn, and given how deeply you've been involved in torturing Sim Ah-ryeon until now, you rushed to bring in paint and canvas for the sake of your own self-preservation, in short, to flatter and fawn over her?"

"Yes. People in middle management like me must always pay

attention to the direction power is flowing.”

“You really are a lunatic. You know that?”

“And isn’t that exactly why Your Excellency employs me? I am always grateful for my own madness.”

“...Who else knows?”

“Ah, please do not worry. I instructed the Saintess that today the Undertaker, Your Excellency, would be with Sim Ah-ryeon, so she must absolutely not keep watch.”

“That means the Saintess knows too!”

The Undertaker shook Yu Ji-won’s shoulders violently.

But no matter how much he put her on a roller coaster, it still was not enough to draw from a customer like Yu Ji-won the review, “The ride called Undertaker seems too intense.”

“Who else? Who else knows?”

“Your Excellency, I regret to say this, but I have disclosed that fact to no one. I merely put up an extremely friendly warning asking that surveillance be halted and the like. If the recipient, upon receiving that warning, happened to infer a certain fact, then that would be due to the recipient’s own deduction, not any leak on my part...”

“I asked who knows!”

“Sim Ah-ryeon is under my supervision, and I belong to the National Road Management Corps. To change a schedule, I naturally need to report it to my superior.”

“Management Captain Noh Do-hwa?!”

“It is true that my superior is also known by that name.”

“Management Captain Noh Do-hwa?!”

“Your Excellency. Again, forgive my boldness, but I have begun detecting aura from the grip currently on my shoulders.”

“Management Captain Noh Do-hwaaaa?!”

“Hmm. If you seek my confirmation once more, then yes. That is correct.”

“…”

Da da da daan.

“Your Excellency, I say this only out of concern, but I have never once dealt with Sim Ah-ryeon out of malice or bitterness. Please, I beg that not only Your Excellency but Sim Ah-ryeon as well understand and excuse my professional mindset, too…”

The Undertaker ran.

Now and then, citizens who recognized him tried to speak to him, but it was impossible.

At the moment, his footwork was as elite as when he had fought Outer Gods, and it was not easy for an ordinary person to keep up with that speed.

In under two minutes, he stormed into the office of the Management Captain at the Tower of Babel, headquarters of the National Road Management Corps.

“Management Captain Noh Do-hwa.”

“Yeees. Did you feed your manners to the dogs…?”

“Whatever you may be imagining or inferring, it differs from the truth.”

“The truth? What truth…?”

Noh Do-hwa shuffled through some documents.

“You branded the Sacrifice your accomplice against humanity and

kept her locked in a year-round torture horror show, and now, whether your conscience finally started to sting or you got horny late in the game, you're saying you slept with the very Sacrifice you created? Then again. Well. You're not some beast. There's no way a story like that could possibly be true..."

"..."

Da da da daan.

'Why. Why had it turned out like this?'

The Undertaker clutched his head and sank down.

He hated being put in situations like this. Whether it was in front of Yu Ji-won or Noh Do-hwa.

He instinctively avoided situations where the conversation flowed on the assumption that he was human.

Management Captain Noh Do-hwa surely knew about that dislike of his. Until now, that was why both of them had lived without touching the other's sore spots.

The wall they had both worked so hard to maintain, barely, precariously, was collapsing with astonishing ease.

The Undertaker's heart grew anxious.

So much so that even he himself did not notice it.

"Well, well."

Noh Do-hwa laughed at him with her eyes.

"So you did know how to make a face like that...?"

"..."

"I thought a bastard not even human only did things even less human. But now I see you were completely hopeless in that department...? Hah. It's not even funny as a joke..."

“Just one thing.”

The Undertaker ground his lower teeth against his upper teeth like a millstone.

“Let’s correct exactly one thing, Management Captain.”

“Do as you please. Or rather, do as your dick pleases...”

“I did not seduce her. Absolutely not. I swear to heaven. I had no such intention whatsoever.”

“That is an astonishingly trashy thing to say...”

“She was the one who jumped me.”

“Are you actually insane...?”

“That is the truth!”

“You’ve really got all sorts of ways to spew bullshit...”

A snort. Noh Do-hwa was not taking his excuse seriously at all.

‘Ah!’

Only now did the Undertaker realize.

‘Of course. They don’t know. They don’t know what kind of person Sim Ah-ryeon is. No one knows.’

His body trembled. Not from the joy of realization, but from fear.

‘By anyone’s eyes, I am the one with power. I am the stronger one too. So even if I say Sim Ah-ryeon jumped me, everyone will just snort!’

‘What sort of relationship has formed between us. Has ended up forming between us. The appearance and the reality are completely different!’

But the Undertaker had nowhere to air his grievance.

Because... had he not seen this kind of picture many times before?

'It's me!'

The Undertaker's brain had not rotted away completely just yet. The concepts of self-awareness and self-reflection still remained inside his skull.

'When I dealt with the Saintess. When I dealt with other people. I was the one acting first. And I swore I would not make excuses for that. So, so...'

He could not make excuses!

'I can't even explain that Sim Ah-ryeon is not someone you can regard as nothing more than a pitiable victim!'

What kind of absurd fate was this?

-Knock, knock.

It was then.

Someone knocked on the office door.

"Hmm...?"

Since the Undertaker, in the middle of being toyed with by fate, kept his mouth firmly shut, the role of asking who the visitor was naturally fell to Noh Do-hwa.

"Who is it...?"

-My apologies.

A crisp voice rang out from beyond the door.

-Management Captain, this is Yu Ji-won.

The Undertaker jerked his head up.

Yu Ji-won? Again, at a time like this? Why?

“Team Leader Yu? Didn’t you take today off? What brings you here...?”

-I sincerely apologize. There is someone who needs to see not the Management Captain, but His Excellency the Undertaker, so I had no choice but to bring the guest along.

Noh Do-hwa’s brows drew together. The Undertaker’s brows trembled.

The reason was the same for both of them. Yu Ji-won. That power-oriented psychopath had referred to a third party, of all people, with an honorific.

In Yu Ji-won’s worldview, the Undertaker and Noh Do-hwa were exempt from honorific suppression.

If she had said, “There is someone who wants to see His Excellency the Undertaker,” that would have been one thing, but “There is someone who needs to see His Excellency the Undertaker”?

Was she saying that a character who had to be elevated even above the Undertaker and Noh Do-hwa had suddenly been added to the setting?

“...Come in.”

-Yes.

The door opened.

“Ah! G, Guild Leader!”

“...”

Da da da daan.

“Y, you suddenly ran out and scared me. I, I was going to ask you to make me another cup of coffee. Ah. Yu, Yu Ji-won. Thank you for bringing me here...”

“Not at all, Master Painter Sim Ah-ryeon. I am nothing but a

microbe unfit for a setting like this, so I shall take my leave."

"Yes, yes. Please take good care of the painting I left with you earlier..."

"Need you even ask? Compared to such a masterpiece, a life like mine is no more than a fly. Even if I must sacrifice the Louvre and the Musee d'Orsay alike, I will defend Master Painter Sim Ah-ryeon's work."

"Yes!"

"On second thought, for someone capable of producing such a grand masterpiece, the title Master Painter seems somewhat too low. Would Painting Marquis, Painting Artisan... no, Painting Emperor, Painting Sage, or Painting God suit you better?"

"Mmmm... Painting God, maybe...?"

"Would Painting Immortal be better? I have heard that, judging by recent content trends, the word immortal tends to rank higher than god these days."

The Undertaker finally grasped the whole truth of the matter.

'You betrayed me, Yu Ji-won!'

That was right.

At dawn today, the moment she opened the door and saw the scene in the bedroom, Yu Ji-won had sorted out the entire hierarchy with her genius brain.

"Why would His Excellency the Undertaker, with Sim Ah-ryeon?" "The protector of humanity, with humanity's traitor?" Questions like that were not sexy from Yu Ji-won's point of view.

"Aha, so she is no longer humanity's traitor, but the predator of humanity's protector." That was the correct answer.

Yu Ji-won immediately shifted her stance with perfect flexibility.

From that point on, deceiving someone like the Undertaker was perfectly fine. Even if she deceived him, who was going to punish Yu Ji-won? All she had to do was win Sim Ah-ryeon's favor.

When a king died, it was customary for a eunuch to climb onto the palace roof and cry, "Changeover ritual cry! Changeover ritual cry!"

Yu Ji-won truly was a loyal retainer. While delivering the paint, she had immediately relayed the news to the Saintess and Noh Do-hwa, placing the Undertaker in an irreversible situation.

"Yu Ji-won! Operations Team Leader Yu Ji-won! I valued you highly, and yet how could you do this to me!"

"My apologies."

Yu Ji-won withdrew, graceful as a swan.

She had survived.

Yesterday too. Today too. And of course, tomorrow as well.

Footnotes:

Chapter 452

The That Woman S VI

Sinnoa

* * *

Kuung.

Yu Ji-won left. Her gait so graceful that no one would have guessed she was running away. But run away she had, all the same.

"..."

"..."

"Heheheh."

Now only three remained in the office at the top of the Tower of Babel.

The Undertaker, Noh Do-hwa, and Sim Ah-ryeon.

Even a castaway who had lived alone on a deserted island for twenty-eight years, aching with longing for human warmth, would have mashed the second button without hesitation if offered the choice, "Want to hang out with those three? Or want to extend your stay on the island?" That was the kind of company this was.

"So..."

To be specific, that was pretty much what Noh Do-hwa was feeling right now.

Noh Do-hwa had spent her whole life building deserted islands inside crowds of people. It would not be unfair to call her nature closer to a beaver's than a human's.

Which was exactly why she wanted the two pups embracing right in

front of her face (it was mostly Sim Ah-ryeon driving it, but as far as Noh Do-hwa was concerned that changed nothing) to clear off, and quickly. As far away as possible. For life, if she could swing it.

"Let's talk practicalities. Undertaker, awakener. What exactly do you intend to do from here...?"

"Intend to do? What do you mean?"

"I mean the arrangement. The torture horror show. From the looks of it, you've gone and developed feelings for that Necromancer trash over there, haven't you. Do you plan to keep running this daily quest where her flesh gets torn open and her limbs get mangled in front of people who don't know any better...?"

"..."

The Undertaker pressed his lips shut. His face was more bearable shut than open, so Noh Do-hwa let the corners of her mouth curl up.

"Whatever. If you can stand it anyway, it's no business of mine. Sure, I suppose a pervert who gets off on watching his own lover tortured could exist in this world. I'd just like you out of my sight, urgently, but..."

"I, I don't mind, though?"

Sim Ah-ryeon said.

"Don't mind, or rather. Oh, I'd actually prefer it kept going."

"Hoh. May I ask why that is, Miss Necromancer...?"

"Hm? Th, that's because. While you're watching me suffer, Guild Leader will be suffering too."

After a slight pause, Sim Ah-ryeon went on.

"Today. Tomorrow. The day after that too. He'll be thinking about nothing but me, all of it, won't he?"

"..."

Noh Do-hwa stared at Sim Ah-ryeon. A blink. Sim Ah-ryeon was looking right back at her.

"Hmmm?"

A tilt. Sim Ah-ryeon cocked her head. She had leapt up to paint the moment she woke at dawn, so she still hadn't washed, and the stale strands of hair slid down across her face.

Sim Ah-ryeon seized the Undertaker's hand.

"Ah-ryeon?"

The Undertaker's voice came flustered. But Sim Ah-ryeon only curled her fingers tighter, squeezing.

Her gaze stayed fixed on Noh Do-hwa.

"..."

"Hm? Hmm? Mm-mm-mm?"

Sim Ah-ryeon wrapped her other arm around the Undertaker's waist. She didn't stop there. Rising onto her toes, she pressed her lips to his neck.

Naturally, the Undertaker grew more flustered.

"No. Ah-ryeon. What are you doing all of a sudden, again. In front of everyone, no less."

"Kiss me, please."

"What?"

"The moment I woke up you left me all alone and ran out of nowhere. The truth is, I was hurt so, so badly. If you kiss me, I'll forgive you."

"Now?"

"Yes!"

The Undertaker glanced around.

Around, for all that meant, was nothing but a silent desk and papers. And Noh Do-hwa, who was keeping just as silent. That was all.

"Here?"

"Yes."

"No. Look, Ah-ryeon. Later. Let's do it later. There's a time and a place for everything. You've been strange this whole time."

"I love, you."

"..."

Quietly, still up on her toes, Sim Ah-ryeon took the Undertaker's cheek in her hand.

Flustered, he reflexively grabbed her shoulder and tried to push her away, but, "Owww!" a scream far sharper than the grip warranted, a groan stained with far too much pain, burst out of her.

"Ah."

At the sound, the Undertaker's hand froze and went stiff.

It was something the Undertaker himself did not yet know, but already a kind of trauma had grown in his heart around "any act of inflicting pain on Sim Ah-ryeon."

A trauma freshly grown only yesterday. With no time to scab over, the raw red wound was still bleeding. Sim Ah-ryeon grinned ear to ear.

Grinning. Pushing the angle of her tiptoes higher and higher, sweeping her sidelong glance over someone other than the Undertaker.

Blood spurted.

"Ow."

A groan slipped out too. But compared to when the Undertaker had grabbed her shoulder, it was a cute little groan.

The level of the cause itself was the exact opposite. A fountain pen stood driven into the back of Sim Ah-ryeon's hand.

"Ow, owww... It, it hurts, you know. Management Captain, um. Is that what I should call you?"

"..."

Noh Do-hwa.

With eyes colder than perpetual snow and hotter than lava, the fountain pen still driven into the other woman's hand, she was looking at Sim Ah-ryeon.

The Undertaker was startled, but more than startled, he was unsettled. The instant he tried to part his lips to stop Noh Do-hwa, an instinct that he must not do so prickled coldly at the back of his neck.

Thanks to that, Noh Do-hwa could focus entirely on the person before her. She spoke.

"Where did this rootless little bone fragment come rolling in from."

"Ah. Um... Th, that's. I'm sorry. But going by the order of time, I met Guild Leader first, and... Hmmm. So, even across all the cycles. I, I'm from the Busan Station concourse, you see. So... I, I don't think this is something you get to say to me. Management Captain."

"I'll kill you."

"You can't kill me... I, I have healing ability!"

"I'll dig out your eyeballs and bore through your ear holes. I'll cut out your tongue too. Shall I throw you into a pitch-black cell where

you see nothing and make you crawl like a bug for the rest of your life?"

"Ah. That one... um. That works."

Sim Ah-ryeon plucked the fountain pen out with a pop. The wound that had dug all the way to the bone slid shut, healing far too easily.

Sim Ah-ryeon's eyes sank down, forlorn.

"S, sorry. It was delicious. I'll stop."

"Shut up."

"But... are you really going to fight me? Th, things would be unfavorable for you..."

"I won't bother with where you go or what the hell you do, do as you damn well please."

"Ah."

"Just don't spout a single word where I am. And don't even look my way."

"..."

"This isn't a deal. It's a final warning. If you're going to treat people like toys, then you'd best be prepared for your own goddamn body to become a scrap of one too, wouldn't you?"

Sim Ah-ryeon pressed her lips shut. Her gaze turned away too.

"Don't even step into my field of view. Because I'll want to kill you."

At that, Sim Ah-ryeon went trotting off and plopped herself snugly down on the sofa in the corner of the office.

Noh Do-hwa clenched and unclenched her fingers three or four times.

A black glove smeared with blood. Beneath it, an anger she hadn't

quite tucked away was stretching itself awake.

"Fine."

Noh Do-hwa muttered, in a tone that was anything but.

"You damn bastard."

"..."

"Even when you date, you go and date some idiot with a mad-dog disease. Is there really nothing but lunatics around you?"

Mm, the Undertaker groaned.

There was a lot he wanted to say. A lot he could say. But none of it was the conversation Noh Do-hwa wanted.

Noh Do-hwa preferred language that had a correct answer. All the more so the more answerless the life and the world were.

"Anyway, you're not the one doing the pouncing, you're the one getting pounced on. I understand that's true. So, back to the first question. What do you intend to do from here...?"

"I'm aware it's already too late to undo the situation."

The Undertaker said.

"Even if I explained that the Necromancer was a false boss, and that the grudge and vengeance everyone holds was all fabricated too, there's no way people would believe it. And it'd be a problem even if they did."

"Yes. Because the reason they've clawed their way through life all this time was that goddamn hatred. In Manyo Neko's case, well, it's plain as day she'd kill herself..."

"Even so, watching Sim Ah-ryeon tortured over and over... my heart probably won't be able to bear it. I'm sorry. I didn't know I still had a heart like this left in me."

"..."

Noh Do-hwa made a curious face. A curiousness neither she nor the Undertaker could explain.

"...Whatever. If you can't get the people to understand and you can't make yourself understand either, is there any other way?"

"I'm going to run."

"Haa...?"

"Together with Sim Ah-ryeon, I'm going to run away."

The Undertaker meant it.

"The Necromancer worked some manner of sorcery and bewitched me. And so I, the Undertaker, a man once called humanity's guardian, abducted the Necromancer and fled. Framed that way, people will accept it."

"...No. If you vanish, doesn't that cut our fighting strength in half?"

"I'll stay in contact through the Saintess. I just have to work in secret, alone, and quietly take out the anomalies. When you get right down to it, it's not all that different from now."

"Hoh? Hmm. Hmmm..."

"The only thing that takes a hit is my honor. The acquaintances who don't know the inner workings of the Regression Alliance might be a bit heartbroken, but their hatred for the Necromancer will only grow larger than that sense of loss. So it's fine."

"Not bad..."

Noh Do-hwa nodded.

"Above all, the fact that that revolting thing vanishes from my field of view forever is satisfying..."

"I'm sorry. I'll leave explaining things to Yu Ji-won and the others to

you, Management Captain Noh Do-hwa."

"I've gotten sick-to-death used to cleaning up after you, so do as you please..."

"Then."

The Undertaker drew his sword from its sheath.

"Excuse me."

The next instant, the Management Captain's office was half-destroyed.

A roar rang out. Even the innermost depths of the Tower of Babel, slathered in every kind of security device and incantation, crumbled before a single stroke of the Undertaker's blade.

Even though the sword strike had blown past right beside her like a storm, Noh Do-hwa stayed calm. The wind rushing in through the gaping outer wall set her hair fluttering.

"Hup."

The Undertaker scooped Sim Ah-ryeon up. A princess carry. Then he set one foot on the outer wall he'd torn down and looked back.

"The world will know me as having fled, but I'll come to see you now and then, slipping in during the night hours. Management Captain Noh Do-hwa. Take care."

Noh Do-hwa silently raised her middle finger. The Undertaker, for the first time in a long while, a truly long while, snorted out a laugh and leapt off the Tower of Babel.

The tower was already in an uproar. From the corps members' standpoint, they could only conclude that anomalies had suddenly come attacking.

Cutting through the commotion and clamor, treading roof to roof, the Undertaker sprinted.

"Hmmm..."

Only then did Sim Ah-ryeon speak again.

"I really, truly don't mind being t, tortured by people forever, you know..."

"And while you're at it you're trying to provoke the people around me."

Dak-kong! The Undertaker moved his aura and lightly flicked Sim Ah-ryeon on the forehead.

"Hiek."

"Tormenting me is fine. You have the right to do that. But messing with the people around me on top of it, that I can't sit back and watch."

"You, you didn't even really treasure them, though."

"You're the one who made me realize what treasuring is. To be precise, wasn't it your doing that tore the wrapping over my heart to shreds, so I could no longer ignore it?"

"Hmmm..."

"Maybe somewhere along the way, without even knowing it, I stepped onto a wrong path."

He had that strange feeling.

Last night, when Sim Ah-ryeon had laid him bare with all sorts of words.

The Undertaker had shed tears, but they had not been drawn out by sorrow and self-reproach alone.

In them welled not only "the life I've lived so far was wrong" but also "what must I do to keep from being wrong going forward."

'Right. It isn't too late yet.'

The Undertaker felt that too.

'Thankfully, I was born bearing the fate of a regressor. Anything can be undone. Even when it's already too late, I can promise myself a next time.'

That it wasn't too late yet.

For some reason, though he didn't know why, the Undertaker seemed to carry a sense of something that had "truly become too late."

That sense whispered to him. Your life can still be undone, and rich blood still flows through your heart.

"G, Guild Leader."

"Hm?"

"Still, promise me one thing. Even when the next cycle comes. And the cycle after that. And the cycle after that one too... You have to tell me what happened just now. You have to."

"..."

"You, you'll promise, won't you? Guild Leader?"

"Yes. I promise."

"Eheheh..."

Cradled in his arms, Sim Ah-ryeon laughed softly.

'Where should I find a secret hideout?'

While crossing Busan, the Undertaker turned to slightly more practical worries.

'A deserted island would be best after all. If I use the Inunaki Tunnel[1] I might be able to open a portal. Ah, Tsushima Island. How about Tsushima? It might be just right.'

"Huh."

But.

His pondering couldn't go on for long.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry? Guild Leader."

A halt. The Undertaker's stride stopped.

It happened just at the junction where Busan ended. On a road of crumbled asphalt, empty of any trace of people because it was the caravan's day off, a single figure stood alone.

It used the address "Guild Leader," but it wasn't Sim Ah-ryeon's voice. Nor did the hair resemble green.

A pink hue.

With the summer sunlight baking the abandoned road, a woman draped in pink hair smiled demurely.

The Undertaker spoke, still holding Sim Ah-ryeon.

"...Go Yuri."

"Yes. It's Go Yuri."

"Why have you appeared before me now?"

"To resolve the irreversible while it can still be reversed, of course. Guild Leader."

The cry of cicadas blanketed the gaunt leaves of the undergrowth that had crept even onto the asphalt road.

Go Yuri spoke. With a bright smile.

"I'm sorry, but Sim Ah-ryeon will have to die here and now."

Footnotes:

1 - The Inunaki Tunnel in Fukuoka, Japan, is one of the country's

most famous haunted and urban-legend sites, tied to the lost "Inunaki Village" myth and treated in horror lore as a gateway to another, cut-off place, which is why it is invoked here as a means of reaching an isolated hideout.

Chapter 453

The That Woman S VII

Sinnoa

* * *

For a moment, the Undertaker doubted his own ears.

"You're going to kill Sim Ah-ryeon? ...You?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

It threw him.

Until now, the Undertaker had assumed he understood the being in front of him well enough. A master of brainwashing. Wasn't this the anomaly that could manipulate affection itself?

But the words the pink anomaly was spouting now did nothing to raise the Undertaker's 'affection.'

If anything, they only drove his hostility higher.

'Is this really Go Yuri at all?'

So he had no choice but to stay on the highest guard.

From the start, the information the Undertaker had managed to gather about Go Yuri was crude beyond belief. And now even that crude information had become hard to trust.

"If you truly meant to kill Sim Ah-ryeon, the right move would have been to ambush me before showing yourself. Go Yuri. Surely you don't think I'd be swayed by your sweet poison?"

"It's faith, Guild Leader."

A breeze blew.

Even the sunlight baking the asphalt couldn't spoil the coolness of the wind passing between them. With a gesture, Go Yuri slowly settled her scattering pink hair.

"There's no point telling you, you won't get it anyway. There's no way you'll understand anyway. Anyway, anyway, anyway. That very attitude is the danger I avoid most of all."

"No matter how much you spout, I will absolutely never take part in killing Sim Ah-ryeon."

"Ahaha. Really, they say if you grasp the truth in the morning you can die content by evening[1]. Aren't you changing a bit too much in a single day?"

"..."

"I don't think it's a bad thing. That honesty of yours, Guild Leader. The bold resolve. The willingness to throw away even who you've been until now. Those are the parts I like. Mm. Compared to 'before,' I think you've gotten so much better."

"Before?"

"Yes."

Go Yuri smiled brightly.

But she didn't bother to answer that question. She only carried on with the main point.

"The bad one is the other side. Sim Ah-ryeon. Ah, sorry. Was that a nasty way to put it? To be more precise, the problem is Sim Ah-ryeon's power."

"What's wrong with Ah-ryeon's power. So she grows stronger the more emotion she drinks, what's the..."

"There's no limit to it."

Go Yuri's smile gently took on a tinge of sorrow.

"I try, as much as I can, not to meddle with you, Guild Leader. But if I let you and Sim Ah-ryeon slip away here, and your two-person desert-island life keeps going on... This world will race toward ruin at a speed nothing can hold back."

"Ha."

He scoffed.

It didn't make him feel any better. Even a scoff had joints to it. As the breath rose back up his throat, the scoff buckled once.

The Undertaker forced himself to ignore that buckle.

"World annihilation isn't some kid's game. As if it'd happen because of Sim Ah-ryeon. At least dress up your lies with a little effort."

"A flower bloomed."

"...?"

"A red, red flower. A beautiful flowering tree. If you don't know that the world is beautiful, then red flowers bloom in such profusion that you can no longer ignore that beauty, and they cover everything, the earth, the heavens, all of it."

"..."

"That flower tells you that you, just as you are, are beautiful. No need to change. No need to strive. It sings that simply by existing, you are beautiful. So people shed even their awakening powers, throw off even their human faces, peel away even their animal hides... Every one of them becomes a single bloom, a single tree."

Why was it.

The Undertaker swore he had never once seen the scenery Go Yuri was describing.

And yet.

"In a garden that bloomed like that, there was always one knight guarding the World Tree."

His heart heaved like mad.

"A strange thing. The flowering trees in full bloom, oddly enough, refused to turn that one knight into a flower."

"..."

"Because the knight was the sole exception that came to think this, that the knight's own inherent beauty was more enrapturing than the beauty of the flowers it had woven."

"...I don't know what you're talking about."

"No. You do know, Guild Leader."

Go Yuri laid one hand against her own cheek.

"Haa. It was hard, you know? The whole Eurasian continent was being devoured by the World Tree. Rallying every last remaining force I could, striking all at once, and just barely severing the existence of you and Sim Ah-ryeon."

"..."

"Really. One slip and even I might have been done in. How long had it been since I'd felt genuine tension."

Her head tilted at a slight angle.

Go Yuri smiled with her eyes.

"Thrill addict that I am, I'm not foolish enough to repeat that kind of danger twice. Guild Leader. I'll say it again. Sim Ah-ryeon needs to die here and now."

Naturally, there was no chance the Undertaker would agree.

He moved at once to ready himself for battle.

'Infinite Metagame. I need backup.'

No answer came.

'...Infinite Metagame?'

Still no answer.

Cold sweat ran down the Undertaker's neck.

'Don't play around. Infinite Metagame. What are you doing at a moment this important? I'm about to throw myself into combat, so back me up...'

"Oh my. Could you, by any chance, be desperately crying out for my own little Outer God?"

The Undertaker's body, primed to attack at any instant, clenched tight with tension.

Go Yuri was watching him quietly.

"I'm sorry, but your little OG won't be answering."

The Undertaker's lips trembled.

"How do you know about the Infinite Metagame..."

"Ahaha. Didn't I tell you, Guild Leader? That I attacked by 'rallying every last remaining force.'"

In that moment.

"The 'forces' I gathered included not only humans but anomalies as well."

The asphalt grains of the old road shattered into pieces.

"...!"

No. Look closely, and the crumbs of asphalt hadn't broken apart at all.

The 'resolution' had dropped.

"Infinite Metagame!"

The Undertaker had witnessed this exact phenomenon once before.

The Outer God he'd halfway come to regard as a partner. Back when it had once wiped out all of humanity, the world's image quality had degraded into a dotted screen, just like this.

"So you really did betray me!"

No reply came from the Infinite Metagame.

"Oohoho."

Only Go Yuri's voice, laughing playfully as though even this situation amused her, felt utterly alien.

"Please don't blame it too much, Guild Leader. That little OG is designed to throw an error specifically when you and I, just the two of us, are in the same space."

"You..."

"Have you finished your preparations for farewell? Time. I think I gave you quite a lot of it."

Snap.

Go Yuri flicked her fingers.

"Just one day spent with you, Guild Leader, and the healing ability has already grown that much. Leave it as it is and the World Tree is sure to sprout. So before that, I'll remove it."

A gush.

Red blood splattered.

"..."

Blood splashed across his cheek. With his lips parted, the Undertaker looked down into his own arms.

The blood had burst from nowhere else but there.

"Ugh, urk... krp, huff, ah...?"

It was Sim Ah-ryeon.

From the mouth, nose, eyes, and ears of Sim Ah-ryeon, who had kept quiet all this while because the Guild Leader seemed to be having some serious conversation.

"Uh, haa..."

Gush, gush. The blood streamed down.

"Ah."

"Urk... ha, heh? Guild, Leader...?"

"Ah-ryeon! Ah-ryeon, pull yourself together!"

How? What trick had Go Yuri pulled? He hadn't sensed even the faintest sign of an attack, so how?

The Undertaker panicked. He flared his aura and wrapped Sim Ah-ryeon in a barrier. Even so, Sim Ah-ryeon's coughing of blood would not stop.

"Mmrgh. Paah...ha, urp, uaah..."

"Heal yourself. Ah-ryeon, don't panic. Hm? Stay calm. Just heal yourself!"

"No."

Clack.

Go Yuri took a step closer.

"I'm sorry, but Sim Ah-ryeon's vessel is small. Mm. The longer she spends with you from here on, the more vast her vessel will grow, exponentially so... But for now it's still shallow."

"What did you do!"

"It's simple. I just released about 100 million people's worth of emotion."

100 million? 100 million people?

"You scolded me for my foolishness, asking why I didn't choose an ambush, didn't you? But Guild Leader. There are beings in this world who have no need to bother with an ambush."

"..."

"If I set my mind to it, I could wreck the current Sim Ah-ryeon as many times over as I pleased. That's why I deliberately gave you the time to talk."

In his arms.

The Undertaker felt it. The life in his arms was thinning out at a terrible rate.

Like a heartbeat traced across a monitor, the thin line of life dropped, surged a little, then dropped again, over and over.

Some kind of attack Go Yuri had fired off had struck Sim Ah-ryeon, and the healing ability had triggered, but the blow was graver than the healing.

Pain. Recovery. Greater pain. Recovery. Greater pain.

"Guild, Lead...er..."

Cough.

That was the state Sim Ah-ryeon was in. She forced up the blood pooled in her throat and barely wrung out a voice.

The Undertaker wanted to draw his sword that very instant and rush at Go Yuri. But he couldn't.

The moment he set this child down out of his arms, the thread of life clinging on by a hair would snap. The Undertaker could sense it.

"Ah-ryeon. Ah-ryeon, no, Ah-ryeon."

"Uheh... Urp, haa. Heh..."

Sim Ah-ryeon clumsily mimicked a smile.

"I wanted, to see more of you... Hee..."

The Undertaker could not understand it at all.

Why did the child in front of him have to suffer nothing but pain her whole life?

Because she wasn't human enough? Because her talent was too excessive? Because she belittled others' talents? Because she teased them? Because she took pain as pleasure and converted it into power on top of that?

He was the one who had forced the fate of torture onto this child. That much he accepted. So he had resolved to spend the rest of his life apologizing to her, living a life that took responsibility for her.

And yet, with no regard for his resolve, Sim Ah-ryeon was being forced into death. Why? For what reason?

This child knew how to laugh. Her reasons for laughing were just different. This child knew how to grieve. Her reasons for grieving were just different.

She loved. The reason for her love was just different.

Did she have to die for that alone?

Was there such a thing as a person born by mistake?

"I promise. Ah-ryeon. Never again, never, will I let you suffer. So that you'll be all right even without suffering... So that you can keep, just keep, smiling. I'll make it so. I will."

"Puppy..."

Sim Ah-ryeon looked up at the Undertaker with eyes dyed red, with

a smile painted over in red.

The Undertaker's vow no longer reached her. She could spit the blood from her mouth, but she had no way to clear the blood pooled in her ears.

"A puppy... I raised one. It hurt so much."

But she could still move her hand.

Sim Ah-ryeon somehow lifted her right hand, the one the excessive shock had thrown beyond her control. Pain had always been familiar to her.

"It hurt... It looked like it was suffering..., looked that way, but then the puppy saw me, looked at me, stuck out its tongue, it must have hurt, it must have been hurting, and went woof, and my hand, the puppy..."

"..."

"Poor thing... Everyone's so pitiful... But it's fine. Things like that. It's all, it's all fine. It gets better, but it's pitiful..."

The Undertaker.

Still holding Sim Ah-ryeon in his arms, he raised one hand and pressed gently, firmly, against her throat.

"Ah."

Sim Ah-ryeon smiled once more.

It might have been closer to a moan than a smile.

Having spat out all her blood, she could let her last remaining breath spill into his arms.

"I love, you... Guild Leader..."

A little more strength went into the hand at her throat.

And the palm slid down the Undertaker's cheek, tracing a red arc as

it fell.

The sound of death settling down was that soft.

The cry of cicadas rang out over the silent road.

"...Did you finish it yourself."

Go Yuri said quietly.

"Truly fitting for one who bears the alias Undertaker. Always so cruel. To yourself. To Sim Ah-ryeon unni, and to you too, Oraboni."

"I will not hand over a single grain to you."

"A splendid frame of mind. Please, next time too, don't forget that resolve."

Clack.

Go Yuri took one more step closer. Holding Sim Ah-ryeon's body, the Undertaker watched his opponent.

He didn't draw his sword. This was an opponent he couldn't beat. He was certain that no matter how hard the current him thrashed and struggled, he would never reach her.

So he looked straight at her.

So that he would not forget. So that he would remember this moment forever, and never repeat the same mistake.

"You probably won't remember this, though."

In Go Yuri's hand was a red flower. An Udumbara2.

"There exists no method for keeping Sim Ah-ryeon happy while always staying by her side, Guild Leader. I'd like you, if you can, to keep a reasonable distance."

"Never. I will absolutely never let Sim Ah-ryeon go from my life."

"Such a spoiled, stubborn thing."

Plip.

Go Yuri plucked a petal from the Udumbara.

"That's exactly why I chose you, though."

The Undertaker's vision dyed red.

It was strange. The petal she had picked should have been only a single one. Yet it was as if roses had burst into full bloom and buried his sight in crimson.

Perhaps it was bloody tears flowing from his own eyes.

The Undertaker had no way of knowing.

He could only feel, even in that moment, the clear weight of the fallen petal cradled in his arms.

"...Ah-ryeon."

Firmly, the Undertaker pulled her close.

Firmly. If a weight existed there that his arms could not fully hold, that his body could not fully receive,

then he wished, prayed, that his soul might take in the rest of her.

"The Guild Leader. This Guild Leader will, someday, surely, make you happy..."

That was the end of it.

The vow could not be carried through.

But for him and for her, the vow had never been made of words to begin with.

For him and for her there still stretched a great deal of time, a road of summer that would not end here.

-That Woman S. Fin.

Footnotes:

1 - A near-verbatim quotation of Confucius from the Analects (4.8): "If a man hears the Way in the morning, he may die content in the evening." It expresses that grasping the truth is worth more than life itself.

2 - The udumbara is a legendary flower in Buddhist scripture said to bloom only once every 3,000 years, heralding the appearance of a sage or a world-changing event; it is a symbol of an extraordinarily rare and auspicious occurrence.

Chapter 454

The That Woman J I

Sinnoa

* * *

Something was off.

Something was strange.

Lately, the Undertaker found himself caught in these spells of déjà vu more and more often.

For instance.

"Hmm...?"

Management Captain Noh Do-hwa was right in front of him.

She looked at the table and frowned. The Undertaker had just set a cup of coffee down on it.

"What is this, awakener Undertaker? You barge into my office and slap down a coffee out of nowhere. I don't recall asking for this morning service...?"

"Uh."

That sharp glare flustered him. And along with another inexplicable wave of déjà vu, the meaning packed into that glare came through to him perfectly intact.

'Don't tell me the me from a previous cycle liked this kind of service?' 'And that's why you're pulling the same crap on this cycle's me?' 'That's some bullshit.' 'You son of a bitch.'

That was roughly what it meant.

Without even noticing, the Undertaker had apparently taken a job as Noh Do-hwa's personal cipher decoder, because he understood it with crystal clarity.

"Th, that's not it, Management Captain. To be honest with you. Truthfully, even I don't know why I'm doing this."

"Haah? Are you senile...?"

"I'm telling you, I don't know. I woke up before dawn today and suddenly felt like making you a coffee. Out of nowhere, really. That's all."

"Hmmmm..."

A suspicious squint.

Noh Do-hwa tipped the cup back for a sip. The crease between her brows deepened.

"It's good, though...?"

To anyone else it would have sounded like ordinary praise, but coming from Noh Do-hwa it took on an entirely different hue.

'You said this wasn't based on a previous cycle?' 'Then why does it hit my palate exactly right?' 'I've kept my coffee preferences locked away this whole time?' 'You son of a bitch.'

The Undertaker felt like he had been dropped into a dating sim.

He had no way of knowing when this authority had been stealth-patched into him.

Still, thanks to it, he could come up with the optimal answer. And it happened to be the truth, too.

"No. You've got it wrong. I don't know your coffee preferences at all, Management Captain. I still don't."

"Oho. Then why is this coffee so damn good, mister regressor...?"

"Hm. Well, the thing is, I just made the coffee while thinking of you, Management Captain, and this is how it turned out."

"..."

Noh Do-hwa's hand froze in place.

A moment later, a face so vicious it would have sent even the Four Heavenly Kings[1] guarding a temple gate fleeing in fright took shape on her features.

"Haah? This son of a bitch..."

"Hold on. Management Captain. I'm aware this sounds like flirting. But that doesn't mean I can lie about it, does it? You wanted an answer, and I gave you the honest one. I'll swear on it. That's everything."

"..."

Noh Do-hwa looked down at the cup.

A Joseon-era prisoner staring down a cup of poisoned wine[2] would have worn a more relaxed expression than she did now.

"So you're telling me. Out of every cycle combined, this morning is the very first time you've ever made me this coffee...?"

"Yes."

"..."

"..."

"I take back the part about it being good. It's damn terrible. Even if a new cycle comes, never serve me this kind of coffee again. It makes me want to puke..."

"I'll keep that in mind."

The Undertaker took his leave.

But the next day. And the day after. And the day after that.

The Undertaker kept bringing her that 'terrible coffee' at the exact same hour and the exact same temperature, and for some reason, Noh Do-hwa never stopped him.

"..."

Something was off.

Something was strange.

"Hng?"

Inunaki Tunnel3. Sim Ah-ryeon, who had been painting an anomaly picture to upload to SG Net, jerked her head up like a startled squirrel.

"J, just now. Wasn't that weird? Guild Leader?"

"...What do you mean?"

The Undertaker spoke with a face that gave nothing away.

"You were just painting. And this Guild Leader was ironing."

"Mmmm. The thing is. Up until a moment ago I could feel a color coming off you, Guild Leader, like bread baked all golden-brown? But then suddenly, um, it was like I bit into the bread and found out fifty percent of it was raisins... that kind of feeling-feeling."

"Your emotion changed?"

"Yes!"

"That's only natural, Ah-ryeon. Emotions flip around all the time."

"N, no no! That's not it-. It, it changed way too fast. Even when it changes, the speed, um. There's usually a steady rhythm... to it?"

Sim Ah-ryeon nibbled on the tip of her brush.

"But ju, just now it really flipped in an instant. It's supposed to go whooo-whirl-whirl when it changes, but it went whip! all at once... It, it's weird."

"Your words sound weirder to me. A person's heart is like water, sure, and sometimes the current can run fast."

"Mmmmm. Is, is that so...? It's not, though."

There's no way that's it.

Sim Ah-ryeon muttered to herself even as she turned her focus back to the painting.

She was a kid who got a five-hundred-percent concentration buff whenever she painted, so even pausing her brushwork for a moment was an unusual case.

That was when it happened.

The world stopped.

It was no metaphor, nothing of the sort. The pause button had truly been pressed on the world.

Strangely, the color changed too. It was as though, alongside the pause, something had layered a 'black-and-white effect' over everything as well.

The surroundings had been painted entirely in white, gray, and black, like an old black-and-white film.

"...Hoo."

Sim Ah-ryeon's brushwork, the Undertaker's ironing, even the tail-flicks of the tropical fish beyond the Inunaki Underwater Tunnel, all of it frozen in place.

In that place, one being alone gave rise to sound and noise. Although no one could turn their head to look, the voice alone was enough to give away its identity.

"That was a close call. Truly. Since Sim Ah-ryeon senses emotional shifts by visualizing them, there's a chance she could notice the change before and after [Time Stop] cuts in."

It was the Saintess.

"I'll have to be a little more careful."

Squeeze.

Inside the black-and-white screen where no one but herself could make a sound or even move, the Saintess clenched her small fist.

Forcing her monologue alone upon the entire world.

"...But it was strange, wasn't it?"

The Saintess walked over.

Her steps came to a stop right in front of the Undertaker's face. He had, of course, become a single statue.

"Mr. Undertaker's emotion changed... Mr. Undertaker surely can't escape [Time Stop] either. So why did the color of his emotion shift so abruptly?"

A long, steady gaze.

The Saintess looked up at the Undertaker.

She narrowed her brows, but it was nothing like the look from Management Captain Noh Do-hwa.

Unlike Noh Do-hwa, who always forced her contempt and malice onto her facial muscles, the Saintess wore a very faint expression.

And so it was steady. With a gaze that was nothing if not endlessly, quietly steady, she watched him.

"Could it be that you can actually move freely inside my [Time Stop], and you've been deceiving me all this time?"

Silence flowed.

"Mmm. There's no way. You haven't twitched in the slightest."

A faint smile to match the faint expression.

The ripple cast by the Saintess's laugh was the tiniest thing. Small enough that a stranger watching would have mistaken it for nothing more than a breath.

"Still, just to test it."

The Saintess lightly dabbed her lips against the knuckle of her index finger. Then she brought it close to the Undertaker's nose.

The faintest breeze. That is, had there been any sign of breath, the Saintess would have detected it at once.

Luckily for her, she felt no sign at all. The Undertaker, frozen like a statue, was in a state of perfect breathlessness.

After staying like that for about ten minutes, the Saintess let out a sigh of relief.

"What a relief."

Then again, the Saintess murmured.

"A long shot is a long shot, after all. If Mr. Undertaker could deflect [Time Stop], he'd have seen everything I do. Such a horrible possibility simply can't exist."

"..."

"I sometimes imagine possibilities for myself that are far too horrible. That might be a flaw of mine. I should give myself a little more room to... no. The very fact that I've allowed myself this kind of 'indulgence' means I've already found some measure of room. Still, I think I need to be a little bolder."

"..."

"What shall we do today?"

A little hum.

The Saintess now turned her back and walked closer to Sim Ah-ryeon to look over the painting, then walked closer to Lee Ha-yul

and tried stroking her head.

And then.

'My apologies, but...'

The Undertaker thought.

'So the unthinkable really can come back to bite you, Saintess...'

Desperately holding back his breath and his blinking.

* * *

When had it started?

At first it was nothing more than a simple sense of unease.

But from a certain moment on, the Undertaker realized that even in the 'world where time was frozen,' he could move relatively freely.

'Huh? What is this? Why is the world black-and-white?'

This so-called movement amounted, at most, to the act of blinking. So the Saintess, too, failed to notice the 'Undertaker's anomalous phenomenon.'

'Could it be an anomaly?!'

It wasn't.

The fifth day since time had frozen. The Undertaker had been racking his brain over which Outer Gods he might have overlooked when the Saintess's figure slipped past right before his eyes.

'?'

The form the Saintess revealed as she appeared was... putting aside the risk of misunderstanding, well.

'A thief?'

That was roughly the impression.

"Hm. As I thought, there's a very slight margin of error in the field of vision I see through Sim Ah-ryeon's eyes."

Mutter, mutter.

The Saintess went around the guild Azit and ran her fingers over Sim Ah-ryeon's cheek. It seemed she was in the middle of finely calibrating [Clairvoyance].

"How fascinating. Could it be that among the visual information Sim Ah-ryeon's ability sees, there are parts that don't get transmitted to me...? An awakener's ability is something you can study and study and never reach the end of."

'What.'

The Undertaker, who had been frozen for days on end and felt like he might lose his mind, was relieved to see that scene.

'She's just handling administrative matters. Why I'm keeping continuity of consciousness even inside [Time Stop] is a mystery, though.'

The moment the Undertaker resolved that once this Time Stop lifted, he would explain the whole story to the Saintess, the Saintess approached him.

And then she spread both arms wide and wrapped them around the Undertaker in a hug.

'?'

A question mark floated above the Undertaker's head. If only he could have blinked, but he still needed more time to grow accustomed to this void.

It was a tragic thing for both him and the Saintess.

"Mmmm."

Nuzzle, nuzzle, the Saintess shook her head against the Undertaker's chest.

There wasn't the faintest hesitation in the act. It was the nodding motion of a scientist who had already learned, both theoretically and experimentally, at what angle and to what degree she needed to hug him for the optimal head-nuzzle to be achieved.

'?' '?' '?'

The question marks above the Undertaker's head could only multiply. And yet the Saintess's experimental spirit did not stop.

'What is this?' 'Is it an anomaly's stratagem?' 'Saintess?' 'Ah, I see, there's some philosophical curiosity hidden in this behavior.' 'You're lying, right?' 'Hold on.'

A faint shock leaked out from the folds of the Undertaker's brain, stained with confusion and chaos.

'If that's the case... uh. Can I really tell the Saintess... that I was thinking clearly the whole time inside [Time Stop]?'

He couldn't.

Because.

'Won't she kill herself??'

Wee-woo- wee-woo- wee-woo- wee-woo-.

A siren blared violently inside the Undertaker's head.

That's right. For all her appearances, the Saintess, unlike Yu Ji-won who belonged to the same expressionless alliance, had a normal emotional system. No, she had a heart far more delicate and tender than anyone else's.

For someone like her, there was no way her psyche could withstand the revelation of 'I know everything you did yesterday'!

No. It would be a mercy if it ended with her dying.

'She'll try to erase my memories!'

The only way to strip the Undertaker of his perfect-recall ability was to mobilize Udumbara.

And then? It would be back to the start.

Back to the very beginning. He would have to repeat an eternity of years without even knowing why he had been infected by Udumbara.

Why? For the crime of daring to spy on the Saintess's secret.

This was no joke.

Therefore.

"Hoooo."

"..."

That the Saintess had nuzzled her head against him, that she had laid her nose against his chest and breathed in, that she had timidly dragged over a dining chair, climbed up, looked down at the Undertaker's head and stroked it, and then timidly carried the chair back to the dining hall, that she now stood before him wearing an immensely satisfied expression...

There was no way he could ever tell her.

For all eternity.

"Yes. I feel like I've recharged my energy today as well."

"..."

"On the way home, maybe I'll stop by Sejong."

The Saintess left.

A week later. When [Time Stop] lifted and the black-and-white world reverted to a color TV, the Undertaker was drenched in cold sweat.

"Hng? G, Guild Leader. Why are you making that face like you

desperately need the bathroom?"

"It's nothing."

"B, but your expression."

"Nothing... happened."

The Undertaker made up his mind.

The secrets of heaven must not be carelessly leaked.

'I have to hide it!'

Until when?

'Until I die! Until this cycle ends!'

A game of reading the room with world annihilation on the line.

Start.

Footnotes:

1 - In Buddhist tradition, four guardian deities (Sacheonwang) whose fearsome statues are placed at temple gates to ward off evil; here invoked for their intimidating faces.

2 - Refers to sayak, the poison the Joseon court ordered condemned nobles and officials to drink as a form of dignified execution by royal decree.

3 - The Inunaki Tunnel in Fukuoka, Japan, a real location and one of the country's most famous reputedly haunted sites, the subject of numerous urban legends and horror stories.

Chapter 455

The That Woman J II

Sinnoa

* * *

"Hmm. Brother Jang."

"Yes, Elder Sword Marquess."

"The sight of you sunk in meditation is, in itself, fit to serve as a model for all comrades of the martial world."

Martial arts training hour. Haeundae.

On the sand, the last surviving bodybuilders of the apocalypse, led by Seo Gyu, were lavishly devoting themselves to strength training.

The Undertaker and Sword Marquess sat a little apart from that sweaty stretch of sand, gracefully honing their inner cultivation arts.

It wasn't as though homo sapiens actually came equipped with some mystical organ called a dantian, the sort that let you stockpile internal energy or develop cancer or whatever.

It was just that, now and then, Sword Marquess would demand that everyone around him stay faithful to the worldview called the "martial world."

And if the demand went unmet? Then Sword Marquess, too, would stop respecting the worldview called "reality."

Which meant the doom of Busan's food security.

For the safe procurement of food for all citizens, for the steady supply of wheat consumed at the Haeundae Bakery, and above all to avoid being murdered by Management Captain Noh Do-hwa, the

Undertaker had to periodically share warm, cordial fellowship with Sword Marquess.

"Movement within stillness. That is the very phrase for the etiquette of circulating one's breath in cultivation."

Sword Marquess gazed at his companion with admiring eyes.

"Brother Jang's inner cultivation has truly reached the pinnacle of profundity. Whether you are even breathing, whether your eyes have so much as blinked once, this one cannot begin to fathom."

"...Thank you."

The Undertaker held it in.

It wasn't that he held in the urge to ask just what kind of low-rent, rootless wuxia set a cassette-tape radio at your side every time you settled into cultivation and blasted "A Man of Determination"[1] at full volume.

In truth, could you even call the title "Daoist friend" all that wuxia to begin with? Since olden times Korea had been generous about granting wuxia characters travel permits, whether to fantasy or modern settings, but it was razor-strict about linguistic etiquette. So the League Leader might ascend, yet he could never go all jump-manga on you[2].

What the Undertaker was swallowing down, therefore, was a different truth.

'If I don't train, the Saintess will catch on...'

That was right.

It had already been several months since freedom of thought had been achieved even within a world where [Time Stop] was in effect.

The Undertaker was slowly feeling the range of his freedom shift from a thought-substance over into a material-substance.

In other words, his body had begun to move.

'I can breathe and I can blink. If I focus as hard as I can, my legs move a little too.'

But.

This kind of freedom was never welcome to the Undertaker.

'Even just breathing makes the odds of the Saintess catching me skyrocket exponentially!'

Training. Nothing but training.

A person was a creature whose body went numb if it sat still for even a moment.

Yet the Undertaker, through sheer patience, held his "freeze" for five days, six days, sometimes over fifteen. Entirely of his own free will.

Self-mastery in its purest form.

"Beholding Brother Jang's lofty plane, this one cannot sit idle either. Watch. The Taeguk Fist this one learned wandering the martial world in youth..."

That was when it happened.

The world stained itself black and white.

'Again! Here it comes again!'

The Undertaker reflexively sucked in a breath.

'Hhhuuuup!'

This [Time Stop] was an unknown quantity; there was no telling how many days it would last.

To hold firm against that merciless current, he needed to at least lay in all the breath he could.

Sure enough.

"Mmm."

Trudge, trudge.

The sound of an unidentified walking object crossing the sand from far away reached him.

The Undertaker couldn't carelessly move his eyeballs, nor could he spread his senses with aura. He had no choice but to wait until the object in question entered his field of vision on its own.

At last, into the middle of a world locked in "freeze," someone made their entrance. The Saintess, of course.

"...Lately. There's been an anomaly advisory up, so I haven't gotten to walk much, and I feel like I'm putting on weight."

She glanced around, studying Sword Marquess's posture closely.

"Taeguk Fist... I've heard it's famous in China as a health exercise too. Maybe it would help me to learn it as well?"

And then, would you believe it, the Saintess set her backpack down and started taking poses, following along after Sword Marquess.

"Hup, hhhuuup-."

Grunting and straining, the Saintess practiced the poses.

Click. After she got one pose down, she went into the nearby beach restroom and let time run again. Click. Stop. She learned another pose, then hid in the restroom and let time run again. Click. Stop.

'Saintess...'

This entire panorama, like watching an old film clatter through a broken projector, the Undertaker took in from the very best seat in the house.

'So you've been wasting time on this nonsense even on ordinary days...'

It was, well. It was kind of a big letdown.

'Your form isn't even correct, Saintess. This cycle you swore off exercise and stayed cooped up in your room, so your physical functions really have dropped...'

In fact, the Saintess's potential where exercise was concerned was nothing to scoff at.

But it was for that very reason that the Undertaker steered clear of any situation where points got invested into the Saintess's physical conditioning.

Of course. An indiscriminate axe murderer, season 2, had to be avoided.

'I always thought she was only interested in study sessions and other intellectual pursuits. So in secret she was minding her exercise too...'

Guilt.

A sticky, clinging sense of sin came crawling up.

'I didn't want to know!'

The Undertaker screamed inside his heart as he watched the Saintess pitch forward in the middle of the difficult pose and plant her head in the sand with a muffled "Pff!"

'I never! Had any intention whatsoever of violating the Saintess's privacy!'

'So why... why is it only me who gets handed trials like this?!'

'Is it an anomaly?! It's an anomaly, obviously. This is the work of an anomaly, no doubt about it. Yes. Of course it is!'

The Saintess brushed the sand off her face.

"Ugh, mm... This still seems too much for me."

And with a deflated blank expression (the Undertaker could tell), she trudged off.

The way she walked was hardly ordinary, either. She moved not forward but backward, crouching low to wipe away, one by one, each footprint she had left in the sand.

'So that's it. Every time she comes to Haeundae she erases her tracks like this...'

What devotion.

As the edge of his heart grew tender in some indefinable way, the Undertaker felt an ominous energy.

'Wha-?'

That energy wasn't coming from the outside.

Just like the internal energy he had cultivated with Sword Marquess moments ago, it was rising up from inside the Undertaker himself.

'A sneeze?'

It was practically a national rule for an inner demon to come calling in the middle of cultivating one's inner arts.

'Now? Really, a sneeze, right now?'

The Undertaker felt his energy channels twist in an instant.

'N-no! Not now!'

Though the Saintess had backed away a bit and grown more distant, she still remained within range of his field of vision.

If he made even the smallest sound here, there was no way the Saintess wouldn't notice.

No. To begin with, whose field of vision the Saintess was sharing right now was a variable the Undertaker dared not guarantee.

Who knew if she might just be sharing the Undertaker's field of vision for fun, bored of erasing footprints?

The Undertaker.

'Hhup... hup hup, hup, hut, hot, oh, oh?'

Held it in.

He held in his fingertips that wanted to tremble and twitch. He had to. Otherwise he was dead.

Who? The Undertaker. And the Saintess.

And? The world would meet its end. The two of them companionably sipping Udumbara on the rocks3.

'S-Saintess. Please. Please, get farther away. Quickly. Argh! Just use aura and wipe out your traces in one fiery sweep! Why do it uselessly, diligently, each footprint by hand one at a time, gck, ohk, n-no...'

And so.

"...Achoo."

It was small, far too small to be the sneeze of an adult man. Quieter than the beat of a dragonfly's wings, the sound slipped into the frozen world.

Whip.

The Saintess, who had been tidying footprints, lifted her head. Reflexively. Automatically. Very, exceedingly fast.

"..."

She stared.

The Saintess looked toward the direction where the Undertaker sat.

The Undertaker was seated in the lotus position. No thought, no idea. Nature was him and he was nature. He was demonstrating, in his own body, the plane of oneness between self and world.

"..."

She stared.

The Saintess still gazed at the Undertaker. Not only gazed, but, expressionless, holding that blank face the whole time,

she walked over.

"..."

She stared. Staaaaared. Stared hard.

Walking to the left. Walking to the right. And yet keeping her gaze fixed perfectly on the Undertaker's face.

She walked over. She approached. She drew near.

"..."

"..."

Whip.

The Saintess brought her hand beneath the Undertaker's nose. Silence followed.

"That's strange."

"..."

"I definitely heard a sound. And I think my field of vision moved a little, too."

The Undertaker screamed inside his heart. So she really had been sharing his field of vision with [Clairvoyance]!

'No. Come to think of it, the Saintess said that the higher her Clairvoyance rose, the more she looked down in third person rather than first person!'

In that case, holding both fields of vision at once, the Saintess's and the Undertaker's, self and other, on the same stretch of sand, would have been pocket change to her.

"Mr. Undertaker?"

No thought.

"Mr. Undertaker."

No idea.

"Don't tell me... you're watching. Or perceiving me. It isn't anything like that, is it? Mr. Undertaker?"

iamnotanundertakeriamastonestatueiamagoblinandanorcandamothercentau

"Hoo..."

Without any warning at all, the Saintess blew a puff of air at the Undertaker's eyeball.

'...!'

The Undertaker nearly blinked and triggered an utter catastrophe. Instead, from sheer shock, his stomach dropped a little.

His eyelids were steel and his heart was glass.

A man with thousands of years as a regressor under his belt was simply in a different class.

The Undertaker, chanting inside his head everything from Buddhist sutras to every Reality Marble activation chant he knew, succeeded in the end at holding his immovable posture.

"..."

After staring at such an Undertaker for a long beat,

The Saintess abruptly cleared her throat, as if embarrassed by her own behavior.

Maybe it was just his imagination, but her cheeks even seemed to flush a little.

"I did a... strange thing. Mm, yes. Suspicion like this is no good. I'm sure I just imagined it."

The Saintess steadied her breath. Then she fetched a step box from the open-air gym right beside them, climbed onto it, and patted the Undertaker's head.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Undertaker. Ah, of course, you won't be able to hear my voice."

"..."

"Because I always believe in you, Mr. Undertaker."

The sense of sin!

"That's why, even though it's a frozen world, I try every single time not to cross the line. Mm, whether I've put as much effort into practice as I've meant to, I can't say for sure either... But still. Thinking of your trust in me, Mr. Undertaker, I want to keep on trying."

The siiiiiin!

"...And yet, seeing that even strange suspicions like this are cropping up, maybe the time to stop this 'game' is slowly drawing near."

For a moment the Undertaker nearly cried out.

'Really?! Hallelujah! Thank you, Saintess! Thank you, Mo Gwang-seo Christ!'

Just as the classical music ringing through his ears was about to switch from the Symphony of Destiny to the Choral Symphony[4],

the Saintess's murmur came stabbing in.

"But if I stop even a game like this, then what will I use to keep my corruption at bay?"

...

"You must not lose your human heart. For that, you need a hobby. That's what you taught me, Mr. Undertaker... but in the end, apart

from study sessions, I never found a hobby that suits me. Haa. Maybe this is my limit."

...

"A hobby. One where you don't lose yourself, yet you let yourself go. An effective hobby, just like the way you spend a vacation cycle, Mr. Undertaker. I wonder where in the world it might be..."

Trudge, trudge.

Spilling out a worry she had never told anyone, this time the Saintess truly grew distant.

And of course, crouching backward to erase her footprints was something she did not forget either.

Watching that forlorn figure.

"..."

The Undertaker made up his mind.

To transmute the material of his heart from glass into steel.

* * *

The next day.

"Mr. Undertaker."

"Oh. Welcome, Saintess. Did you stop by in the middle of your morning walk?"

"Yes. Ah, coffee. Thank you."

"Not at all. I'm the one who's always grateful."

"Mm... So, um. I'm not quite sure how to start."

"Goodness! Please, speak freely, freely. Is something on your mind?"

"...Yes. The truth is, I have a small hobby."

"Oho, oho."

"But even though that hobby never, ever harms other people, there are times it brushes up against my conscience. If that's the case, would it be better to give the hobby up?"

"No, no! What are you saying! Of course you should keep that hobby of yours, Saintess!"

"Ah... Is that so?"

"Yes indeed. The more we're awakeners, the more we have to allow ourselves a little leeway. Otherwise the heart wears thin, wears right out. Just look at me. Calls himself a regressor and goes off taking vacation cycles. Quite the mess, isn't it? Ahaha. Whatever hobby it is, your pastime is bound to be tamer than mine."

"Mm... But, my conscience..."

"As long as you don't get caught. As long as you don't get caught."

"...So it really is that way?"

"It really is."

"Mmm, yes. Mm. Thank you, Mr. Undertaker. Thanks to you, a bit of the weight on my heart feels lifted."

"I'm simply glad if I could be of even a little help. So you intend to keep the hobby going, then?"

"Yes. Now that I've gotten your answer too, Mr. Undertaker, I think I'll try practicing really letting myself loose."

"I'll be cheering you on."

"Thank you."

"Ahaha. It's nothing, nothing."

Today's lesson.

The road to hell is always paved with good intentions.

Footnotes:

1 - "A Man Should Strengthen Himself," also rendered here as "A Man of Determination," is the iconic Cantonese theme song associated with the Wong Fei-hung films, especially Tsui Hark's Once Upon a Time in China series. It is instantly recognizable shorthand for over-the-top kung fu heroics.

2 - A pun in the original: the League Leader can "soar" or "take flight" in elevated literary diction, but he can never "jump" in the flashy manga sense, implying he stays a proper wuxia figure rather than a battle-manga hero.

3 - Udumbara is the flower-like anomaly established earlier in the series. "On the rocks" turns it into a grim joke about the pair drinking the cause of catastrophe like liquor.

4 - Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 (nicknamed the "Symphony of Fate/Destiny" in East Asia for its famous opening motif) and Symphony No. 9 (the "Choral," which culminates in the triumphant "Ode to Joy"); in other words, his mood shifts from doom to jubilation.

Chapter 456

The That Woman J III

Sinnoa

* * *

Double standards.

That fateful streak in human nature, captured in the saying [When I do it it's romance, when others do it it's an affair], summoned challengers who longed to overcome it precisely because it was fate.

'Right. Isn't this just a matter of keeping it simple?'

The challenger of fate. His name was the Undertaker.

'When I go off on vacation, I tune out world annihilation and everything else and just enjoy myself. Seo Gyu dies too. Honestly, Seo Gyu is a victim who's died dozens of times thanks to my deliberate indifference.'

The Undertaker adopted the serene mindset of a high monk who had attained enlightenment.

'Let me take on Seo Gyu's mindset.'

The so-called Seo Gyu Theory.

Just think about it. When Seo Gyu's neck turned into a watermelon on a midsummer beach in some Japanese anime1, did he really resent the Undertaker?

He did not.

Seo Gyu died knowing nothing. That very ignorance was salvation for the Undertaker on vacation.

'I too shall become an ignorant man like Seo Gyu before the

Saintess!'

Starting the very next day after the counseling session ended.

As if she'd shaken off all the worry and torment she'd carried until then, the Saintess cast [Time Stop] more and more diligently, which is to say even more shamelessly.

"Hng, hup."

With far lighter, far more playful movements than before, the Saintess lifted up Sim Ah-ryeon.

For the record, Sim Ah-ryeon had been caught in [Time Stop] while positioned on the Undertaker's lap.

The Undertaker's lap and back had always been semi-public property. Whether the text bothered to describe it or not, one of them, Lee Ha-yul or Sim Ah-ryeon, was forever occupying them.

"Phew. All moved... Sim Ah-ryeon, you weigh a little more than you look."

If Ah-ryeon had heard that, she'd have topped up the red paint for her next painting with the Saintess's blood.

The Undertaker thought it to himself. Strictly to himself.

Viewed objectively, the Undertaker's body was as serene as the principal Buddha statue at Seokguram, a posture worthy of the UNESCO World Heritage list all on its own.

"Hup."

Plop.

The Saintess sat down with the soft give of a castella sponge cake lightly pressed by hand. And the moment she settled on the Undertaker's lap, she was rather surprised.

"...It's, hmm. Wider than I thought. Well, every time I happened to see it, I did think it was big."

"..."

The heart of Seo Gyu!

"And it's incredibly firm. So this is what the legs of people who work out hard are like. It almost feels like a separate living creature, how curious."

"..."

Only the heart of Seo Gyu!

'No. Wait a moment. Doesn't this risk sounding like Seo Gyu and the Saintess are an item?'

It was a problem that might have stirred up endless controversy, yet the Undertaker, true to a seasoned regressor, arrived at a solution at once.

'Right, I wasn't learning the heart of just any Seo Gyu, but the heart of a Seo Gyu whose neck had flown clean off. So it doesn't matter.'

Only the heart of a Seo Gyu whose neck had flown clean off!

That's right. Anyone would have noticed by this point, but the truth was that the Undertaker's level didn't come anywhere close to that of an enlightened high monk.

He was desperately reciting nonsense in his head to steer his mind elsewhere.

No matter how much of an aura genius he was, how could it ever be easy to multitask the feats of 'holding the breath,' 'stopping all movement,' 'halting the heart's pounding,' 'ignoring the sensation coming up from the knee,' and 'erasing all change in emotion'?

"Ah. That's right. I wanted to try this too."

By now it might have been time to stop, but having heard the verdict of 'you're fine' and 'let's keep going just like this' in her one-on-one session with the Undertaker, the Saintess was invincible.

She scurried off somewhere. And thirty minutes later, she scurried back. In her hand was a hairbrush.

Hairbrushes themselves were plentiful here too. Even Sim Ah-ryeon, who had just tasted the Saintess using her authority to teleport her, had one right there.

And yet the Saintess had gone out of her way to ride the Inunaki Tunnel2 and rush all the way home and back. It was very much like the Saintess, who strictly distinguished between her own things and other people's things even when no one could possibly call her out on it.

So why was she doing this to the Undertaker? As stated, his body was generally public property.

If this world's genre had been yuri and the protagonist's gender had been different, she'd have earned a yuri-genius certification mark in a heartbeat (the bad-ending count would have multiplied too).

Anyway.

"Here, umm... Yes. Like this."

The Saintess carefully assembled the joints of the Undertaker's fingers.

The result of the assembly: the hairbrush ended up equipped onto his hand, not hers. The Undertaker thought to himself absently. Probably this was how a game character felt when a player forcibly made it wear a piece of gear.

"Hmm."

Creak, creak. As she worked the Undertaker a little more, even the angle of his arm finally came out just right.

The Saintess put on a deeply satisfied blank face and entered the head-pat-and-brush procedure.

"..."

"Mm. Mm-mm, mmm."

A quick aside here.

As mentioned earlier, the Saintess was perched on the Undertaker's lap.

No matter how painstakingly she'd adjusted the joints of the Undertaker's arm, the Saintess was no Puppeteer.

By the plain facts of the matter, she had no real authority to force the Undertaker into a gentle head-patting motion inside a world frozen by [Time Stop].

And yet, if the Saintess demanded most-favored-nation treatment from the Undertaker, demanding the same patting he gave Sim Ah-ryeon, then an inevitable posture followed.

Hop. Hop, hop.

That's right. The Undertaker's arm and hand, and above all the hairbrush, were fixed in midair.

Only the Saintess raised and lowered her head over and over, jumping and landing on the Undertaker's knee, working the miracle of seizing a head-pat for herself by her own effort.

Had there ever been, in all of history, a great figure who accomplished the head-pat cliché by such a pitiful method? Let alone one who used the overwhelming power of [Time Stop] for nothing more than this?

There had not, he could declare for certain.

'Saintess...'

Facing this momentous historical instant before his very eyes, the Undertaker felt his mind nearly drift away.

'No, no. Saintess? What am I on about? Wasn't I just Seo Gyu, whose head got blown up by the tutorial fairy? The heart of Seo Gyu. I am nothing but a headless corpse.'

The Undertaker grabbed his runaway mind by the scruff and dragged it back into his skull.

He thought about the Saintess's suffering. About a life where her mind wore down and her trust in humanity ground away as she watched over the Korean Peninsula every hour of all 365 days a year.

If her inner demon could be soothed by this kind of 'play,' wasn't that something to be glad about, if anything?

'Use me as you please, like a ride at an amusement park, Saintess. I am nothing but a lump of stone that happened to be set down here. If a ride called me can help your spiritual cultivation even a little, that alone would be my joy.'

"Uh, umm..."

Before long the Saintess's poor stamina seemed to run flat, and she panted. She even broke into a sweat.

"Something. Something, hmm. I get the feeling that this... isn't quite it..."

'Well, naturally.'

"This is an awfully tiring motion. Why do Sim Ah-ryeon and Mr. Undertaker repeat it every day, and why did they react as though it felt good...?"

'Because it's an entirely different motion.'

"It isn't anything special. Perhaps just realizing that fact today means I've earned valuable Experience Points."

'You really had a blast, didn't you, Saintess?'

In any case, under the Undertaker's silence, the Saintess was able to relieve her stress.

And though it was a truth the Undertaker rather hated to admit... he too was secretly enjoying the strange and wondrous situation at

hand.

If you can't avoid it, enjoy it. Wasn't that the old motto of the man called the Undertaker?

"Hello, Mr. Undertaker. Good morning."

"Yes. Good morning, Saintess. Enjoying your dawn walk again today?"

"Yes. Leaving the house, crossing the tunnel, drinking coffee, that whole stretch is my routine these days."

For example, just like now.

Until barely an hour ago, the two of them had pried open a new epoch in the field of head-patting.

But once [Time Stop] was lifted, as if no such history had ever happened, the Saintess visited the café Azit with a perfectly composed face.

"I'll make your coffee right away. Please wait just a moment."

"Yes. Take your time."

The regressor couldn't help admiring the Saintess's composure as she managed her expression without so much as twitching an eyebrow.

'...Now that I look, the Saintess's acting is as splendid as my own.'

Or was it? Was it not acting but the real thing?

The Undertaker nearly mistook the memory of an hour ago for an illusion some anomaly had maliciously implanted.

"Here you are."

"Ah, yes. I'll gladly drin...?"

She froze.

Seeing the coffee the Undertaker had made for her, the Saintess's eyes wavered slightly.

It was only natural. Her favorite menu item was always fixed. A packet of Maxim coffee3. Half a spoon of cinnamon powder.

Thanks to that, the Saintess could enjoy the romance of saying 'barista, the usual' without reciting a separate order.

But the coffee now placed before her was none other than a café mocha. Whipped cream. Loads of thick, gooey chocolate syrup.

It was Sim Ah-ryeon's favorite menu item.

"..."

And a moment ago, the Saintess had a track record of casting [Time Stop] and borrowing the ride Sim Ah-ryeon always favored.

Thump-thump.

The Saintess's heart began to race.

"Um, Mr. Undertaker. This is...?"

"Ah. My apologies. It seems some mouse crept in from somewhere and gnawed open some packets of Maxim coffee."

The Undertaker laughed softly, the answer he'd prepared in advance rolling off smoothly.

"There were some intact ones, but I could hardly serve a flawed ingredient like that to you, now could I, Saintess. I'll bring in a fresh batch tomorrow, so how about enjoying a different menu item just for today?"

"Ah..."

"As it happens, the chocolate syrup came out really well this time. How shall I put it, as if old man Sword Marquess had put a little more care into stomping it than usual? It's not too sweet and the flavor runs deep."

"I... see."

Thump-thump.

The Saintess also had quite a knack for aura control. The instant she realized her heart had strayed outside its normal range, she spread a soundproof barrier around her chest.

Thump-thump.

The same went for the Undertaker. No matter how great an actor he was, heir to Joshua von Arnim, when had he ever tried this kind of prank on a Saintess who was earnest about everything?

Time stopped.

The instant he sensed the black-and-white tone unfold, the Undertaker froze his facial muscles right in that laughter-tinged smile.

She shot up.

The Saintess stood and ran off. Probably she'd gone to check the food storage the Undertaker kept for barista use only.

But it was useless.

'I've already taken countermeasures, Saintess.'

The Undertaker had secretly drawn his aura out long and thin like a snake and damaged the coffee packets so they really looked gnawed by a mouse's front teeth.

He hadn't even left them damaged in the storage. He'd thrown them in the storage trash can.

He'd stayed faithful to the setting of 'given the Undertaker's personality, when ingredients meant for serving guests get ruined, he never leaves them be.'

The devil was in the details. And the Undertaker was a splendid devil.

"..."

Sure enough. Having run to the storage and witnessed all the evidence, the Saintess came trudging back with an expressionless, endlessly expressionless face.

"It's a... coincidence, isn't it?"

She mumbled as she sat back down at the table.

"Yes, it's a coincidence. That's right. It's a coincidence. There's no way Mr. Undertaker remembered what happened this morning and deliberately made me Sim Ah-ryeon's café mocha... no way."

"There's absolutely no way," she mumbled.

"There mustn't be."

"..."

"...Time Stop, release."

Color returned to the world once more. The Undertaker, too. The Saintess, too. Both held the exact same attitude as before time stopped.

The Saintess fought down the tremble that threatened to take her hand and took a sip of the café mocha as though nothing were the matter.

"How is it?"

The Undertaker, too, asked as though nothing were the matter.

"Not bad to enjoy a different menu item like this once in a while, right?"

"...Yes. Just as you said, the chocolate syrup isn't too sweet, so it's delicious."

Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

"I think I finally understand why Sim Ah-ryeon likes it."

"The flavor changes again depending on whether you eat the whipped cream separately or mix it in as you drink. Being able to adjust the intensity however you like is the charm of café mocha type coffees."

"Ah... It really does."

Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

The Saintess looked at the Undertaker. The Undertaker smiled with pure innocence.

The Undertaker looked at the Saintess. The Saintess smiled faintly.

'Mr. Undertaker. You couldn't possibly?'

'I know nothing at all.'

There were depths even within a gaze. And so beneath those depths there could only be a fierce submerged battle being waged.

'It isn't true, is it?'

'Isn't it, though?'

'If it really is that, then why?'

'And what if I'm only having my fun too?'

'I can't be found out. At the very least, if it's my fate to be exposed, then it shouldn't be me but...'

'You're the one who should raise the white flag first.'

Clink.

The Saintess set down her cup.

At the same moment, time stopped.

"..."

This time the Saintess didn't run off somewhere else. Instead she

came closer.

As it happened, the Undertaker was also drinking a café au lait. The Saintess lifted the coffee cup with a grave face.

Gently.

So that it wouldn't show, she took a tiny lick. Really just a tiny bit, she stole a sip of the Undertaker's café au lait.

"...!!"

At that profound martial art, the Undertaker shuddered.

'I see. So if I drink the coffee now as though nothing had happened, it'll be cemented!'

An indirect kiss.

The cliché that would be a letdown if it didn't follow right after the head-pat.

There was a reason a cliché was a cliché. The Undertaker was learning the sternness of that law firsthand.

Gulp. The Undertaker swallowed the spittle of his heart, not down his throat but down the hole in his heart.

'If by any chance I show even the slightest hint of awkwardness here...'

Time resumed. Play.

Without a single trace of awkwardness, without a shred of hesitation, the Undertaker lifted the coffee cup and drank the café au lait.

He didn't even rotate the cup. His lips came in to land on the very spot where the Saintess had deliberately, carefully pressed hers.

"...!!"

Time Stop again. In a frantic rush.

The Saintess quickly snatched the coffee cup from the Undertaker's hand and wiped the rim back and forth with her sleeve.

Whoo, hwah, whoo.

Tense diaphragmatic breaths rippled from the Saintess.

"..."

Once again, she looked at him.

"..."

And of course, he was looking at her too.

'Why? Mr. Undertaker. Why do such a thing?'

'Who are you talking to? Right now?'

'...What the truth is doesn't matter. It might be so, it might not, but I can't be the one to back down first.'

'Same here.'

A battle waged by two acting geniuses.

A miraculous matchup with no victor, only a lesser loser and a greater loser, was established here.

Footnotes:

1 - A nod to suika-wari, the Japanese summertime beach game of smashing a watermelon while blindfolded, a stock scene in anime beach episodes; here Seo Gyu's head being split open is likened to the bursting watermelon.

2 - The Inunaki Tunnel (Fukuoka, Japan) is one of Japan's most notorious 'cursed' / haunted locations in urban legend; the name is used here as a creepy nickname for the teleportation passage.

3 - Maxim is the dominant Korean brand of instant 'mix' coffee, sold in single-serve stick packets and treated as the default everyday coffee in Korea.

Chapter 457

The That Woman J IV

Sinnoa

* * *

The Saintess, Jeong Ye-ji, was suspicious.

Of whom? Of the Undertaker. Of what? Of the doubt over whether she really was the only person who could move inside Time Stop.

Doubt. Doubt. Doubt that never let up.

'Isn't it possible that he already knows?'

Lately the Saintess could not escape this whirlpool of suspicion, no matter how she tried.

Even on ordinary days her head was crammed so full of this one thought that she could barely keep her hands on her work.

'...Mr. Undertaker is a regressor. He pulls off feats that surpass everyone's expectations without batting an eye.'

'In theory, there'd be nothing strange about him having a resistance to Time Stop.'

'So what if he really, truly knows everything, and is only pretending not to...?'

Take two weeks ago, for instance.

The coffee cup the Saintess had secretly pressed her lips to. What if the Undertaker had gone ahead and drunk from it knowing that? What if he hadn't refused? Then that would.

'What would that even mean...?'

"Saintess."

Jeong Ye-ji jolted.

"Oh."

She lifted her head, which she hadn't realized had dropped, only to find that most of the colleagues seated around the table were staring at her as if something was off.

The one who had just called her was Yu Ji-won. That face, so beautiful that admiration welled up in Jeong Ye-ji's heart whenever she looked at it, was watching her without expression.

"Mm. Yes, Ji-won. I'm sorry. I was lost in thought for a moment."

"Not at all. This officer is well aware that you labor day and night for the security of the Korean Peninsula."

"..."

It was a thought that crossed her mind every time they spoke like this, but neither the speech nor the word choice was anything you'd expect from a face like that. "This officer"? It was far too strange.

"In any case, if something troubles you, please confide in this officer, no. In us as well. We may have formed around His Excellency the Undertaker, but are we not one team?"

By "us," she meant Seo Gyu, Jeong Ye-ji, Cheon Yo-hwa, Yu Ji-won, Lee Ha-yul, Sim Ah-ryeon, and Noh Do-hwa.

As they were doing now, the Regression Alliance would gather all its members and share a meal at least once every six months.

By long custom, the distance between hearts is proportional to the distance between bodies.

Whether the Undertaker was present or not, regular gatherings were essential for the colleagues to maintain trust.

No. Quite the opposite. At gatherings like this, the Undertaker

absolutely had to be absent.

"Aaare weee noot ooone teeeam-."

Plop.

Cheon Yo-hwa had flopped face-down onto the table and poked her head out, jeering in a heavily sarcastic tone.

A plastic straw balanced on the bridge of her nose, holding its precarious position like a tightrope clown at the circus. Quite the sense of coordination.

Yu Ji-won tilted her head.

"Student council president. Do you have something to say?"

"Yeah! A whole lot! One team my foot. It's just us schmoozing to the teacher like, 'We don't have any problems at all- running normally-.' All for show!"

"It is precisely the show that matters."

Yu Ji-won answered calmly.

"No one is forcing true friendship upon us. Cooperation. Trust. The deployment of predictable combat strength. If we can build these virtues, is that not enough?"

"Aaah, yes, yes. Fine words, fine words. But before that, can't we do something about the painter leeching onto the teacher over there like a parasite?"

"H, hiik."

Sim Ah-ryeon, seated in the corner, flinched.

For the record, at a table where everyone sat crammed shoulder to shoulder, somehow only the one meter to Sim Ah-ryeon's left and right sat completely empty.

"A, a parasite...? Calling a human. Like that, like a bug..."

"Hey. Fuck, that was you who drew that disgusting pic of the teacher getting strangled to death at 3:23 this morning and dropped it as a surprise upload, wasn't it? Huh?"

"I think a, anonymity has to be guaranteed in community activity..."

"Why does the teacher just leave a freak like that alone?!"

Cheon Yo-hwa slammed the table with a thud. And everyone thought the same thing at once. She's got a point, though.

"Schmoozing or whatever, you know? You need at least a halfway normal human being to build trust or anything! That green-head is just an anomaly, I'm telling you?! An anomaly!"

"Th, that's too... harsh."

Everyone at this gathering, save for a single person, conceded that Cheon Yo-hwa's claim was a proposition that truly could not be denied.

'I'm not sure why, but even I feel oddly restless whenever I look at Sim Ah-ryeon.'

It really was a strange thing.

Jeong Ye-ji didn't particularly judge Sim Ah-ryeon to be a wretched human.

She had a habit of looking inward before criticizing others, and each time she did, she would pick out her own flaws.

For all that it was for the sake of the entire Korean Peninsula's security, wasn't it a fact that she too spied on every move of countless people?

'Compared to that, the chaos Sim Ah-ryeon stirs up on SG Net is child's play, really... So why does it make me this angry?'

That wasn't all.

A glance. Jeong Ye-ji secretly looked at the one person who hadn't

said a single word since the gathering began.

'Noh Do-hwa too.'

Her heart churned.

'Someone I respect. As upright as Mr. Undertaker, perhaps even more upright than Mr. Undertaker, someone I truly respect on a human level...'

For some reason. Something just didn't fit.

'...It's my own lack of virtue.'

Jeong Ye-ji thought.

'I can't protect everyone on my own. Everyone has to carry out their own role from their own position, and they are doing exactly that. And yet here I am, dissatisfied. ...Just what is it that I lack, that makes my heart turn so spiteful?'

"Oh, by the way."

Cheon Yo-hwa slurped at her lemonade and asked listlessly.

"What's the teacher up to today?"

"His Excellency is dining with the Samcheon World Guild Leader."

Zzt.

Just as Jeong Ye-ji had struggled to settle the turmoil in her heart, her chest ached all over again.

"Dining? ...Ah, the. What was it again? That, what, gourmet tour or whatever, that thing that isn't even funny?"

"Yes. Once every half month, His Excellency deliberately makes time to enjoy a hobby with the Samcheon World Guild Leader. Of course, by personally touring the markets together, the two of them attend to the people's livelihood while also reaffirming the citizens' support."

"Touring my foot. It's obvious she's just scheming to score points while she's out on a date with the teacher."

"President Cheon Yo-hwa has a bad habit of analyzing people too simplistically. Human emotion is layered, in its makeup."

"Wow, that's really something I don't want to hear from an actual psychopath..."

Cheon Yo-hwa laughed as if dumbfounded.

"Then want to make a bet? On whether that witch over there is secretly treating us like idiots while she's on her restaurant date with the teacher?"

"I respect the character of the Samcheon World Guild Leader. Though, regarding the analysis that she treats President Cheon Yo-hwa like an idiot, on that point alone I can agree."

"You really want to die?"

"..."

Zzt. Tingle, zzt.

Jeong Ye-ji bowed her head.

Why was it.

All the way until the gathering wrapped up, her heart could not find peace for a single moment.

The one consolation to her conscience was simply that she hadn't used Time Stop even once while all the back-and-forth went on.

* * *

The moment the gathering wrapped up, Jeong Ye-ji slipped out in a hurry.

She did so even when Cheon Yo-hwa linked arms with her and said, "Saintess unni, want to go for a second round and drink with us?"

"I'm sorry. There are some terrorists I have to keep a careful eye on today."

"Ah."

Cheon Yo-hwa grinned, hehe, looking disappointed.

"Then there's no helping it! It's thanks to you, unni, that we can leave our base empty and head out without a care in the world."

The truth was, the only person at this gathering who got along smoothly, if at arm's length, with everyone else was Jeong Ye-ji.

There was good reason for it. The Regression Alliance members were aware that Jeong Ye-ji watched them twenty-four hours a day.

At first they might shudder swallowing this red pill of a truth, but later on they could only come to feel an emotional closeness to her.

A person who 'knew every shameful part of you yet never spilled the secret,' whose 'attitude toward you never changed,' and who 'would listen to your troubles whenever you wished.'

That was what a Saintess was.

So it was only natural that, within the Regression Alliance, Jeong Ye-ji commanded nothing short of absolute respect and reverence.

Even Cheon Yo-hwa, who was damn hard to get close to, showed the Saintess affection without hesitation, and that said it all.

"See you again next time, unni!"

"...Yes. Cheon Yo-hwa."

"Hey. Lee Ha-yul. You're old enough to drink now, right? Let's go."

[This one had been waiting for nothing but those words.]

The Regression Alliance members drifted off in twos and threes.

There was even the astonishing sight of Lee Ha-yul dragging along Noh Do-hwa, who had insisted she absolutely did not want to go

and was scowling like a vengeful demon.

"..."

Jeong Ye-ji, alone and apart, walked off somewhere.

She walked, passed through the Inunaki Tunnel1, returned to her own home in Yongsan, and then stopped time.

Then she retraced the path she had walked, in reverse. She arrived in Busan, loitered for a while, then loitered some more. In front of a certain restaurant.

As though chance itself had guided her, she stepped inside.

A corner of the restaurant. Dang Seo-rin sat at the table by the window, and across from her the Undertaker had frozen like a stone statue.

"..."

Zzt, thump. Zzt.

Watching the two of them seated at the same table, her heart ached all over again.

But there was not only ache.

Thump. Zzt, thump.

A rhythm that was clearly not pain but closer to its opposite hue was slowly spreading out from the edge of her heart.

'Ah.'

The Saintess was clever.

Far too bright to keep pretending she didn't understand her own feelings. Clever enough to shape the reason for that joy into words.

"You stopped... it, didn't you? Mr. Undertaker?"

Wise, she was not.

The feeling she had assembled into words, she could not, in the end, keep locked away inside.

She set herself loose in the world of Time Stop, where every line became a soliloquy.

"With Dang Seo-rin... for years now. The date you've carried out like a ritual ever since you first met her, you're in the middle of it, and yet."

"..."

"You stopped time, didn't you...?"

Soft and low.

"You mustn't stop it, Mr. Undertaker."

Careful, careful.

"Because then I'll get the wrong idea. Do you realize? Mr. Undertaker, you like Dang Seo-rin. And she likes you too. For something like me to barge in between the two of you, that, that's not a good thing."

Right now.

Whom was she speaking to?

"...A human like me is hideous."

What did she want the truth to be?

Did she want the Undertaker to truly be able to move inside Time Stop, to be the one and only spectator of a one-person play, secretly listening in on the soliloquy she now murmured?

Or did she, after all, want Time Stop to be absolute? To still be reflected in the Undertaker's eyes as a flawless human being. Did she want him never to find out that she was a fool getting worked up over this strange, silly game?

She didn't know.

Whether she wanted him to understand, or didn't, Jeong Ye-ji found it hard to tell.

For it was the very first time she had ever felt anything like this.

"Dang Seo-rin is unfair."

And the first time she had ever recited words like these, too.

"I could have expressed my affection any amount I liked. And I held back. Because it isn't the time for that, is it? The world is going to end."

"..."

"Dang Seo-rin is the only one who doesn't know about regression. So without the slightest awareness that moments like this will later remain as wounds for you, Mr. Undertaker, she shows her affection without restraint. That's really..."

Huh?

Speaking without thinking, Jeong Ye-ji gave a start. It was an outrage so absurd even she could scarcely believe it.

"...No. No. Please forget it."

Shake. Shake, shake, shake.

Jeong Ye-ji hurriedly shook her head.

"Dang Seo-rin only sacrificed herself, to the very end, so that you could use her ability at maximum efficiency, Mr. Undertaker."

"..."

"To call such a noble heart unfair. ...The truly cowardly one was me. I'm ashamed."

Right. Let's stop.

For now. For now, even though she had laid bare such a hideous side of herself, she had not crossed the decisive line.

The Saintess could feel it.

That coming here today, of all days, on purpose, to the place where Dang Seo-rin and the Undertaker were spending their time alone together, and pouring out her 'true feelings,' had been the very limit she could just barely manage.

'...This is my rock bottom.'

To think such a sticky marsh lurked within her own heart. The Saintess was on the verge of being utterly disgusted with herself.

Of course, the Undertaker would be disgusted too.

'If Mr. Undertaker was listening, then he won't go along with my game anymore.'

'And if he couldn't hear it, then that's fine in its own way. It just means the conclusion is that this was all a delusion of mine alone.'

'So.'

This was as far as it went.

The Saintess turned her back without lingering, no. She turned her back, leaving her lingering attachment behind in this place. Then she came home and released Time Stop.

'...And from now on I'll have to hold back as much as I can from watching Mr. Undertaker with Clairvoyance, too.'

She brewed chamomile tea and drank it.

She did a round of monitoring the awakeners she had classified as dangerous elements. She fed the fish. She wrote up the notable points in a computer document. She cleaned the fish tank. She remeasured the risk scores according to the scoring chart she herself had made.

Just as she was about to finish her routine that way.

Knock, knock.

"...?"

The Saintess's fingers, drifting over the keyboard, came to a stop.

'A knock?'

She checked the clock without thinking. Since she lived by a different flow of time than other people, a clock was, if anything, an essential item.

One in the morning.

'At this hour...? An anomaly?'

The Saintess lightly used Time Stop.

Hand axe in hand, she opened the front door. Fully intending to split the skull in one stroke of any anomaly that dared do nothing more than knock.

The Undertaker stood in front of the door.

"...?!"

Clunk! The Saintess quickly shut the front door.

"Huh? Eh? Huh?"

Mr. Undertaker? The real Mr. Undertaker? At this hour?

Could it be a doppelgänger? It was a reasonable inference. Leaning her back against the inside of the front door, she quickly activated Clairvoyance.

Sharing the Undertaker's field of vision.

She could see the scenery right outside the very front door she was leaning against. Proof that it was an awakener and not an anomaly.

"Eh."

This time she shared Dang Seo-rin's field of vision.

It was pitch dark. She had probably gone back to the Samcheon World Azit at Busan Station and fallen asleep.

Considering that the Undertaker and Dang Seo-rin usually drank late into the night, it was a somewhat strange situation, but.

"..."

She could understand it. After all, a person wouldn't crave drink every single day. Sometimes they might just eat a meal and part ways cleanly. Only, the problem was.

'Why... at my house?'

Thump.

"By chance, there's something he urgently needs to tell me... Ah. Because I wasn't watching with Clairvoyance today. Mr. Undertaker tried to contact me, but I didn't manage to see it..."

This was it. This had to be the answer.

She had set Clairvoyance aside for a moment out of consideration for the Undertaker, and at that very moment something had happened to him.

With the easy route of contact through Telepathy cut off, the Undertaker had come on foot himself. It was a perfectly reasonable analysis.

'What if.'

And yet.

'What if he heard the things I said earlier today...?'

Thump.

'And so, if he came to answer the words I laid out thinking they

were a soliloquy...?'

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

"..."

Time Stop, released.

"Who is it?"

"Saintess. It's the Undertaker."

Creeeak.

"Ah, Mr. Undertaker."

"My apologies for the late hour."

"Not at all. Sleeping hours have no meaning for me anyway."

Thump.

"Please, come in. So..."

Thump-thump-thump, thump.

"What brings you here?"

Thump.

Footnotes:

1 - The Inunaki Tunnel in Fukuoka Prefecture, Japan, is one of the country's most infamous real-world urban-legend sites, long rumored to be cursed and haunted; its name is shorthand in horror/subculture circles for a forbidden, otherworldly passage.

Chapter 458

The That Woman J V

Sinnoa

* * *

“Wait here a moment, please. I’ll bring some tea.”

“Ah, thank you. I was already sorry to trouble you so late at night...”

“As I’ve said before, sleep time has no meaning for me. Wasn’t it the same for you too, Mr. Undertaker?”

“Ahaha. That’s true.”

“Please sit and wait just a little.”

After guiding the Undertaker to the living room sofa, the Saintess walked to the kitchen with a perfectly calm face and then crouched down.

Both hands completely covered her face.

Of course, she did not forget to click the pause button on time first.

‘Wh, wh, wh, what do I do?’

‘What should I do?’

Even in her thoughts, polite speech got mixed in. Having to flawlessly play the “Constellations” twenty-four hours a day had rubbed their manner of speech onto her in daily life as well.

‘Earlier... there was a faint smell of alcohol.’

The Saintess recalled greeting the Undertaker at the front door just now.

Yes. Definitely. It had been very faint, but there had been a trace of alcohol.

It absolutely had not been unpleasant, and if anything it had been soft, like stepping into some dimly lit bar.

‘After he finished dinner with Dang Seo-rin… he didn’t go to a bar afterward, but he did have a drink? Maybe it was something like that.’

If so, then rather than serving only plain tea, it would be better to prepare snacks too.

‘Chocolate… I’m all out. Sh, shrimp crackers? Uuummm. Isn’t that too old-fashioned? Honestly… I don’t really know what makes a good drinking snack.’

Rustle, rustle.

The Saintess rose onto her toes and rummaged through the ceiling. She had a fair amount of snacks stockpiled up there.

The people around her had arbitrarily decided that the Saintess must have refined, luxurious tastes, but that was a tremendous misunderstanding.

As evidenced by the fact that she used a top-class barista like the Undertaker as little more than a machine for making slightly better instant coffee, the Saintess’s palate was extremely friendly to common folk.

‘Something. Something that would look stylish to serve at a time like this… but still wouldn’t be strange. If only I had a snack like that!’

For a snack like that, fruit or cheese would have been the standard answer, but sadly, neither of those was stored in the ceiling of the Yongsan house at the moment.

Should she quickly bring something from somewhere else, no, but if the hypothesis that Mr. Undertaker could move even inside [Time Stop] was true, then freezing time this long over mere snacks would

be such a disgrace...

“Ah?”

Crinkle.

At that moment, her fingertips caught on supplies stored deep in the ceiling. The wrapper felt metallic, almost aluminum-like, and it was roughly square.

The eternal luxury item of the apocalypse.

It was ramyeon.

“...”

The Saintess’s body froze solid, as if she had been struck by a petrification spell.

Of course, it was not that the ramyeon had suddenly awakened to its identity as an anomaly and gone, ‘Gasp, I was actually Medusa?’ If that had been the case, the Saintess’s heart would not have been racing like mad right now.

‘R, ramyeon...’

Gulp.

Secretly, where no one could hear, yet within that inner space where her own ego and superego could always listen, the Saintess mumbled:

"Would you like some ramyeon before you go, Mr. Undertaker?"[1]

Bang!

Without realizing it, the Saintess slammed the ceiling shut. Had she closed it too hard? Her palm stung.

Strangely, her face was burning too, but that was obviously because of the gust of air from shutting the ceiling. There was no room for doubt.

‘To, too... too old-fashioned. Old-fashioned! That’s not a line a person... a human being can survive saying!’

The Saintess covered her face again.

‘H, how do people say lines like that so casually? Shameless. Incredible... It, it takes unbelievable courage.’

Thump-thump-thump.

Her chest pounded so hard that even the Saintess could not understand it. After all, she was the very person responsible for erasing the concept of “privacy” from this world.

She had seen every kind of sight imaginable. Even while monitoring such things, the Saintess had never particularly been flustered.

It had been like watching educational footage of insect reproduction in biology class, or expressionlessly pressing the skip button.

And yet.

‘Why over something as trivial as this? Wh, why now?’

Cool.

Cool down, Jeong Ye-ji.

Realizing that the state of her mind was not normal, the Saintess immediately summoned the personalities of the Constellations. It was an attempt at objective self-assessment through third parties.

['The Saintess of National Salvation' cheers on your love. Love is a wonderful thing that God has permitted.]

No. Mr. Undertaker already has Dang Seo-rin!

['The Saintess of National Salvation' points out that she is French. That is no concern of hers.]

That doesn’t help at all!?

['The Chancellor of the Red Cape' reminds you that romance is also

a kind of diplomacy. A classic technique may feel dated, but there is a reason it became a classic.]

You're French too, aren't you?

['The Chancellor of the Red Cape' gives a sly little smile, as if to say my, my, have I been found out, and slips into the dark.]

Please stop joking around!

This really isn't helping at all!

['The Conquerer of the Alps' insists that the word impossible does not exist in your dictionary.]

That's Napoleon. Not Hannibal, Napoleon!

['The Monarch of the Crimson Horse' counters, asking whether killing your own father, even killing your own sovereign, isn't a matter of course for the sake of love.]

['The Monarch of the Crimson Horse' scoffs that a comrade's affections aren't even worth considering.]

"..."

Jeong Ye-ji suddenly realized something.

'Huh? Could it be... the Constellations I've been acting out this whole time aren't even the slightest bit helpful when it comes to love advice?'

Objective self-assessment, failed.

'How on earth did Dang Seo-rin manage to ask Mr. Undertaker to go eat with her all this time without trembling even once?!'

'And how did Cheon Yo-hwa manage to run over and cling to Mr. Undertaker's arm every time she saw him?!'

'As for Sim Ah-ryeon... ah, no. There's no need to admire the thought process of someone half human, half anomaly.'

The Saintess stood up.

Firmly. She rose with the solidity of the life-sized Gundam statue in Odaiba.[2]

Then she pulled various snacks down from the ceiling.

Simply handing over unopened snack bags would be too much, so she tore each one open and arranged them neatly in a porcelain bowl, which she had not used in a while and had hurriedly scrubbed clean.

Chocolate mushroom snacks. Spicy shrimp crackers. Potato chips. Chopsticks, because potato chips should be eaten with chopsticks. Digestive biscuits... no. Not the digestives. They overlapped a little too much with the chocolate mushroom snacks. And, and, and.

"..."

Rustle.

Ramyeon. Not boiled ramyeon, but raw ramyeon. In other words, broken into quarter-sized pieces and quietly tucked away between the other snacks... This much, at least, was fine.

'D, decoration.'

The Saintess nodded.

'This is decoration. Raw ramyeon also has an aspect of being a snack. It's a different genre from boiled ramyeon. Therefore... this is absolutely not a drinking snack prepared for some shady or shameless purpose.'

It was perfectly logical.

If Descartes and Kant had seen the Saintess right now, they would surely have leaped from their graves in a standing ovation, moved to tears by the discovery that pure reason had been here all along.

'Tea... tea, green tea? It's late, but yes. Caffeine doesn't really matter to the two of us. Yes. Green tea and matcha. Strong.'

She tore open one green tea bag and two matcha bags and divided them between two large porcelain cups, which she had washed along with the dish earlier.

As she released Time Stop and slowly poured in hot water, the Saintess realized something keenly.

‘Ah. I see. S, so this was exactly why other people invested in cooking skills...’

That was not really the reason. Cooking was simply a lifestyle hobby and a craft.

But the Saintess’s overheated brain had already become rather unsuited for normal reasoning.

‘If I had opened a can of tuna and made canapes, that would have been much more... no, no. Then it really would have turned into a drinking session. Yes. Right. This is exactly appropriate as it is.’

Green tea ready. Stand by.

‘Sh, should I go?’

Stand by.

‘I have to go.’

Ready.

‘...Uuugh!’

With her eyes squeezed shut, she lifted the tray, loaded with drinking snacks and green tea, and finally launched from the kitchen into the living room.

The play began.

“...Have I kept you waiting?”

The voice that flowed from the Saintess’s mouth was extremely calm. Her expression was as blank as ever too.

The same went for the Undertaker. The moment he saw the Saintess, he quickly rose and approached her.

“Ah. Thank you. Please give that to me.”

“No. Please sit. Taking care of a guest is only natural.”

“Wow, there are so many snacks. All these precious things. As expected of you, Saintess. Could it be you knew I’d been drinking...?”

The Undertaker tried to take the serving tray from the Saintess, and the Saintess refused and stubbornly held on to it.

Naturally, the distance between them became awkward. The Undertaker’s hand touched the tray, and it lightly brushed the Saintess’s hand as well.

‘~~~~~!!’

The Saintess felt as if her head would melt.

Or rather, now that they were this close, it became clear. Just as she had suspected from the moment she saw him at the front door, the scent coming from the Undertaker’s body was slightly different from the smell of alcohol. There definitely had been alcohol. But that was not all.

It was perfume. She was not particularly knowledgeable about scent the way Dang Seo-rin or Yu Ji-won were, so she had no talent for commenting in detail about oud wood or anything like that, but it definitely had the feel of a jazz bar.

Subtle. Sweet. Deep.

‘So this wasn’t perfume he wore for Yu Ji-won...?’

Her chest tightened.

‘Why now, of all times?’

It was hard to breathe.

‘N, no. No. It doesn’t mean anything. Yes. Trying to infer someone’s intentions from perfume is the domain of mind-reading!’

The Saintess repeated Descartes in her mind.

‘I doubt, and I doubt the me who doubts, and I keep doubting even that doubting self…’

Apparently, she had forgotten for a moment that Rene Descartes had also been French, but well, all the Saintess needed was some kind of European-made mantra.

“My goodness.”

“Ah?”

Before she knew it, she was already sitting beside the Undertaker on the carpet, leaning her back against the sofa in complete comfort.

When had she sat down? She did not know. When had she placed the tray on the table? She did not know that either.

It was not her fault. The Saintess did not have [Complete Memory].

From across that distance, too vague to call far, yet also too ambiguous to call close, the Undertaker was smiling.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t hear properly. What did you just say, Mr. Undertaker?”

“No, I didn’t say anything. I just smiled. It’s only that bringing chopsticks even in a situation like this feels very much like you, Saintess.”

“…Your hands get dirty if you eat snacks with them.”

Thank goodness. So it had been nothing important.

The Saintess let out a sigh of relief inwardly.

Though even that sigh was no more than turning on a little handheld fan under the summer sun.

It was absurdly insufficient to cool the heat gathered in her heart and her head.

A parasol light enough to hold in one hand. Tree shade to drape over her head. A soft breeze along the riverside.

Even if every such way of escaping the heat had been laid out before her, it would have done little to help the Saintess now.

Her summer was sitting right in front of her.

"..."

The cry of cicadas.

Ever since childhood, Jeong Ye-ji had thought cicada cries were beautiful. That clamor, slicing from nearby into the distance, had always seemed to foretell her life in advance.

"Oh, right."

As her head grew hot and her hearing blurred, only the beating of her heart became astonishingly clear, and that heartbeat sounded exactly like cicada cries.

"Today's gathering ended safely. Cheon Yo-hwa and Lee Ha-yul went off to drink with a few others."

"I'm glad to hear they're doing well."

"Come to think of it, you had plans to meet Dang Seo-rin today too, Mr. Undertaker..."

Sunlight. Deep blue shade. Echoes.

"Ah. Originally, I made plans to meet Dang Seo-rin because I had something to discuss with her privately."

"Privately..."

"Yes. Saintess, so you really didn't eavesdrop on our conversation at all? No wonder."

“…”

His gaze. His speech. His voice. The firmness of the arm visible beneath his slightly loosened sleeve.

The chocolate snack dangling from those fingertips. The crunch as it broke between his teeth.

The chocolate melted and swallowed down with the matcha. The bob of his pale throat. Perfume. Skin scent.

“…”

The Saintess

stopped time.

And then, just a little, really only a little,

she moved.

Squirming, she lifted herself and shifted sideways. Three centimeters, maybe? Or perhaps five. At the speed of a falling cherry blossom petal. Only a little.

She moved her body toward the direction where the Undertaker sat. Narrowed the gap a little.

Time Stop, released.

“That’s right. I thought today was private time for the two of you, Mr. Undertaker and Dang Seo-rin.”

As if it were nothing.

“Today… you say.”

“Yes. Today.”

But unlike her, the Undertaker possessed flawless memory.

So whether it was three centimeters or five, even one centimeter, if the Saintess had suddenly moved closer, he could not possibly fail

to notice.

No, had he noticed?

Had he not noticed?

If he had been drinking a little, then maybe moving about three centimeters closer was the sort of thing he might dismiss as his imagination. Maybe that was possible.

Then, in that case.

Time Stop.

Five centimeters more, again. A slight shift to the side.

Time Stop, released.

“But I feel sorry that my own consideration made you come all the way here, Mr. Undertaker.”

“…”

“If I had kept watching with [Clairvoyance], Mr. Undertaker, you could have requested [Telepathy] at any time. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

“No. Even if you had been watching today, I think I would have come in person.”

“Today, you mean?”

“Yes. Today.”

Still, there was no sign from the Undertaker. No sign at all that he had noticed the Saintess inching closer bit by bit. In that case.

Time Stop.

Five centimeters more, to the side.

Time Stop, released.

“Mm. Certainly. When you really needed to have a serious conversation, you preferred speaking face-to-face, Mr. Undertaker. Same with the study.”

“Yes. After all, there is a kind of atmosphere you can only feel when you’re directly facing the other person, isn’t there?”

“I agree completely.”

Excuse me, Mr. Undertaker?

I’ve already moved fifteen centimeters closer to you, Mr. Undertaker. You have it, don’t you. Complete Memory.

There’s no way you could not... know, right?

The truth is, you’ve already noticed, haven’t you?

‘Time Stop.’

Closer.

‘Time Stop.’

Closer still.

‘Time, stop.’

Closer again.

“...”

“...”

Tap.

The Undertaker’s shoulder and the Saintess’s shoulder touched. The Saintess tilted her shoulder away again, as if a little startled, but it did not mean much anyway.

The two of them were already so close that they could clearly hear each other breathing.

“…”

“…”

Time Stop.

The Saintess stopped time once more. And this time, although it might have looked strange, she moved the cups.

The porcelain cups. The porcelain cups filled with tea steeped from green tea and matcha together.

There was the Saintess’s cup, and there was the Undertaker’s cup. By chance, the two cups looked exactly the same. By chance, the level of green tea inside them was similar too.

The Saintess picked up her own cup and swapped it with the one in front of the Undertaker.

Exchange.

They looked exactly the same, and there was no outward difference. So even after time resumed, there was no possibility that the Undertaker would notice the exchange.

Time Stop, released.

“…”

“…”

They were close.

Suddenly, her throat felt dry.

The Saintess’s, and probably the Undertaker’s too.

So the Undertaker reached out, took hold of a cup, and drank the green tea.

The teacup in the Undertaker’s hand was not the one placed in front of him. It was the one in front of the Saintess, the cup the Saintess had just set there.

“…Ah.”

The Saintess made a sound. Perfectly ordinarily. In the same tone as always.

“Mr. Undertaker. That’s my cup.”

“Oh. Is that so?”

The Undertaker made a sound. Perfectly ordinarily. In the same tone as always.

“I’m sorry. Ah, maybe it’s because I drank a little earlier, but I got mixed up. I’m truly sorry.”

“No. It’s fine. You could make that mistake.”

“Thank you.”

Time Stop.

This time, the Saintess switched the positions of the cups once more. In other words, the teacup now placed in front of the Undertaker was the cup the Saintess had originally been drinking from.

Time Stop, released.

The Undertaker reached out once more. As if determined not to make the same mistake this time, he did not take the porcelain cup in front of the Saintess, but the porcelain cup in front of himself.

And drank. Gulp.

“…”

“…”

Clink.

The sound of the cup being set down.

Clasp.

The sound of a hand taking another hand.

Softly.

The sound of a head leaning against a head.

A kiss.

The sound of breathing.

“…”

In that first kiss,

there was a chocolate fragrance.

Footnotes:

1 - "Would you like some ramyeon before you go?" references a famous Korean euphemism for inviting someone to stay the night, popularized by the 2001 film One Fine Spring Day.

2 - The life-sized Gundam statue in Odaiba is a real landmark in Tokyo.

Chapter 459

The That Woman J VI

Sinnoa

* * *

From that day on, strange things began happening to the Undertaker.

"G, Guild Leader."

"Hm?"

"My hair... could you brush it?"

Take this ordinary slice of everyday life, for instance.

Whenever he sat down on the couch in the guild Azit for a short rest, a head of green hair would come pattering over from somewhere and plop right down onto the Undertaker's lap.

"Sure. All right."

"Ehehe..."

The Undertaker was a master of aura. No matter how thoroughly Sim Ah-ryeon defied the entire hygienic history of human civilization all on her own, he could wield his aura with such precision that it ran the full course of shampoo, conditioner, hair dryer, and scalp massage, every step handled with care.

There was a reason Sim Ah-ryeon scurried over to the Undertaker like a hamster the moment she spotted him. Just sit on his lap and her hairstyling finished itself automatically. How was she supposed to resist that?

If word ever got out that the aura other awakeners coughed up blood to train was being used as a cheap shampoo substitute, more

than a few people would faint dead away, but as far as Sim Ah-ryeon was concerned, that was none of her business.

So Sim Ah-ryeon had to pay a price.

What kind of price? The stern and self-evident truth that if you ignore others, others will ignore you right back.

[Time Stop].

"...Mm."

"..."

While the giddily smiling Sim Ah-ryeon froze like a stone statue, a faint sound of breathing stirred above her. For a good long while.

The Saintess, who had drawn close at some point, was sharing a kiss with the Undertaker.

"Mm, Saintess."

"Yes."

The Saintess laughed softly, as if embarrassed.

"Good morning... Mr. Undertaker."

A short while ago, the two of them had agreed not to tell anyone they'd started seeing each other.

It was mostly because of the Saintess's fervent insistence.

-If the Regression Alliance and our other companions suddenly found out about our relationship, the shock might be too much for them.

-And above all, love. How should I put it, it doesn't need to be that loud. There's no reason to go spreading word of it around.

In any case, the Undertaker would believe the Saintess even if she claimed she'd built the Eiffel Tower out of beans. He nodded readily, fully convinced.

'...But who would have guessed we'd end up carrying on a secret romance like this.'

And it wasn't only when he was with Sim Ah-ryeon.

When he was having a serious talk with Yu Ji-won in the hallway, when he was in a one-on-one meeting with Noh Do-hwa, when he was chatting on the roadside with Cheon Yo-hwa, [Time Stop] came regardless of time or place, and each time the Saintess and the Undertaker indulged in a 'secret romance' no one would ever witness.

'No. Surely not, but... Saintess, surely you aren't just enjoying the thrill...?'

You couldn't say that element was entirely absent, but it was closer to the screws in her head simply coming loose over her first romance.

The Saintess wanted to be with the Undertaker even a little more. And she had both the means and the method to make it happen. What reason was there not to press the [Time Stop] button to her heart's content?

And it was exactly the same for the Undertaker.

The Saintess and the Undertaker alike always looked composed and level-headed to everyone else, but crack open their heads and you'd find nothing but a pink hue spread out inside, plain and simple fools.

'It's fine. If it ever gets truly dangerous, Mr. Undertaker will surely know to stop on his own.'

So the Saintess thought as she kneaded and stroked the Undertaker's leg.

'It's fine. If a line ever truly gets crossed, the Saintess will tell me herself.'

So the Undertaker thought as he shared his twenty-first kiss of the day with the Saintess.

It was a miraculous relationship of trust.

Because each believed in the other's character, the result was a rollercoaster nobody could put the brakes on, and naturally, as time went on, the intensity could only keep climbing higher and higher until, finally, one day.

"Mm...?"

The Tower of Babel meeting room.

Noh Do-hwa, seated at the round table, tilted her head.

"That's a rare sight. You always join the meetings remotely by video, so why have you come in person today...?"

"I happened to be in Busan."

The Saintess answered with an unbothered face, the same blank expression as always.

"It'd be one thing if I were in Seoul, but it didn't feel right to skip when I'm right nearby."

"Hmm. Well. Not that it matters either way..."

Soon the Regression Alliance meeting began.

The Undertaker happened to sit right beside the Saintess, but no one found it the least bit odd. From the start, that seat had always been left empty out of consideration for the usually absent Saintess.

"I'm considering whether to ask the SwordMarquess and put into effect a plan to expand the farmland beyond its current size."

In the middle of Yu Ji-won's report.

"Thanks to His Excellency the Undertaker spending so much time with the SwordMarquess lately, the response is that the National Road Management Corps's request will be reviewed favorably."

And then Yu Ji-won stopped.

Frozen exactly as she stood. Still gripping the scrap-paper documents. Her silver hair turned to black-and-white too.

Over at one side of the round table in the meeting room.

"..., ..."

"..."

The Saintess and the Undertaker had clasped hands tightly under the table and were pressing their lips together.

"Saintess."

"Y, yes."

"So this is why you came to the meeting."

"Mm. No. But I think it's fine."

Why hide it.

The two, having now reached the monumental milestone of a 'first romance,' had realized that the authority of [Time Stop] was an extremely convenient tool.

Want to hug? Just hug. Want to kiss? Just kiss.

The romantic escapades of lovers, who always seem to throw down a gauntlet against the etiquette of public order, posed no problem at all for the Undertaker-Saintess couple.

Since nobody could notice [Time Stop], no one had any reason to frown. And this couple had no need to read the room as they enjoyed their romance.

Of course, it was a luxury for the two of them alone. For someone in the position of always having to dial the filtering to an appropriate level when describing reality, it was quite a bother.

Just between us, this particular manuscript was patched a whopping three times.

And so a meeting that ended in thirty-five minutes for everyone else somehow took, for a certain two people, about three times that long.

"..."

When the meeting ended and everyone was heading back.

As the Undertaker and the Saintess walked side by side, a firm tug. Something caught the Undertaker's collar.

He turned to find Sim Ah-ryeon standing there.

"What is it, Ah-ryeon?"

"Uuung..."

"What's the matter, Ah-ryeon?"

Sim Ah-ryeon stared blankly at the two of them.

"Y, you two. Are you, by any chance, dating?"

"..."

"..."

It had been a foreseeable ending.

* * *

'E, extraaa, extraaaaa! Extraaaaa! The Guild Leader is dating! The Guild Leader is dating the, the Saintess!'

Stopping Sim Ah-ryeon, who was about to bolt out the door and kick up a nationwide-scale ruckus, took a great many promises and bribes.

One way or another, they succeeded in muzzling Sim Ah-ryeon. Muzzling her, at least.

-[Samcheon]WitchJudge: (photo) When it comes to the experience of a meal, maybe the company matters more than the taste of the

food? The food I ate with a friend today was delicious again.

OldManGoryeo: lol1

[Samcheon]WitchJudge: ? Why are you picking a fight again?

-[Baekhwa]NinthGraderInHighSchool: I went to Busan! And I confirmed that Busan does not look down on Sejong! >_<);;

OldManGoryeo: lolololol

[Baekhwa]NinthGraderInHighSchool: ??

Some other people who had no idea what was going on caught a little of the fallout, but as prices for getting a secret romance discovered go, this counted as pretty mild.

"Love really is beautiful."

A beach at sunset.

The Undertaker and the Saintess were savoring a day ten times longer than anyone else's again today, enjoying an evening stroll.

Time was stopped, of course. A black-and-white sea stained with an eternal sunset watched over the two of them without a sound.

"If I'd known I'd be this happy, I should have confessed to you a little sooner, Mr. Undertaker."

"I feel the same way."

The Undertaker smiled.

"A thought I keep having lately is, maybe the Saintess and I ending up together was inevitable. That thought keeps coming back to me."

"Why is that?"

"In the end, I'm living out my own timeline where I can't truly connect with anyone else. And it's the same for the Saintess. We're in similar circumstances."

"...Yes."

The Saintess kissed him. And the Undertaker kissed her back.

The two sat side by side on a bench in the sand and leaned half their weight onto each other.

"I don't want to leave this cycle."

"..."

The Saintess, who had been resting her head against his chest, looked up at him.

"Then..."

"Yes. Even if I can't save the world, I'll make this one my terminal station. No. I'll save the world thoroughly enough that I can say with confidence this one is my final destination."

"..."

"Don't make that face, Saintess. I just want to be with you right here in front of me, that's all."

"Me too."

In that moment the Saintess and the Undertaker were dwelling on a similar thought.

Saving the world might be impossible. But avoiding 'world annihilation' was always possible.

How?

Just engage [Time Stop] and never release it.

"For us, one year could become a hundred years, even a thousand. If we only wished it, we could spend even more years than that together."

"That's right."

"There are still at least ten years before the world is definitively annihilated. In the worst case, we just have to stop the flow of time so the scheduled ten years never arrives."

"..."

Was this right?

It couldn't be. Both she and he knew it. They knew this was, at the end of the day, nothing but a loophole. But.

They couldn't lose the one in front of them.

"I love you, Mr. Undertaker."

"I love you too, Saintess."

Beneath a sunset that would never fade for all eternity.

Stay, moment.

You are so beautiful.[2]

The two were ready, prepared to exchange a vow like that.

"Mm."

After the kiss, the Saintess muttered with a slightly flushed face.

"It's a little hot. I'll go grab some ice cream."

"Ah. I'll come with you."

"No! I'll go by myself. You rest here, Mr. Undertaker."

Pat, pat, pat.

The Saintess hurried off somewhere in a rush, so unlike her usual self. The Undertaker watched her go with a smile.

'Keeping up a secret romance like this is fun, but someday we'll have to tell the kids too.'

Sim Ah-ryeon had already caught on, after all. There was no telling when it might get exposed again.

In that case, it was better to lay the whole situation out cleanly. The Undertaker trusted his companions.

A little while later.

Trudge.

The sound of footsteps in the sand. Since there were only two people who could make a sound in a frozen world, he turned his head toward the other one.

"Ah, Saintess. You're back sooner than I thought...?"

The middle of the sandy beach.

There stood the Saintess. Her face and her clothes were, without question, identical to the Saintess who had run off a moment ago saying she'd buy ice cream.

But.

"..."

The Undertaker shot up from the bench and backed away on his heels. He laid a hand on the hilt of his sword and took a stance ready to draw at any moment.

He glared at her.

"Who are you?"

"Oh my, my."

The lips of the one who looked exactly like the 'Saintess' parted in a wide half-smile.

Crackle. Some noise mixed in, and words came spilling from her mouth in a pronunciation that no longer carried any human tone.

"Impressive. You can tell even in a situation like this? Is it intuition?

Is it instinct? Either way, the power of love is mighty!"

"...I'll ask one more time. Who are you?"

"The Saintess. I'm Jeong Ye-ji."

"Don't lie."

The Undertaker's voice turned cold.

"You aren't the Saintess. I can feel it."

"Yes. But it would only trouble me to tell you my name. My name has already been eaten. By all of you."

"...?"

"And my voice holding up like this won't last long either. At this rate, a week. Hmm, no. Three days and my voice will be eaten too, I suppose. It's a problem. It's really a problem."

Eaten? What did that mean?

The Undertaker couldn't understand, and because he couldn't understand, he furrowed his brow.

It was true that the 'incomprehensible' was the very nature of an anomaly. It was just that the sight of this anomaly appearing as a copy of his love was not the least bit pleasant.

"A doppelgänger."

"Ahaha."

She laughed.

"You really are a hard one to look after."

And then even more incomprehensible words followed.

"Because I attached no penalty to [Time Seal], you went around sealing people all over the world at random. A bad ending. So I hastily attached a condition."

"What?"

"If you monopolize Sim Ah-ryeon's attention, another problem comes up. So this time I made an appropriate hobby for you both. For Sim Ah-ryeon and you, the two of you."

"..."

"So what was the problem this time? No. Actually, I know. I'm the problem. It's nothing but a problem with myself, the self that can't be satisfied with this. And I'm forcing it onto all of you, so all I can do is feel sorry."

"What on earth are you talking about..."

"But I won't give up."

Trudge. She drew closer.

"I'll have to push Jeong Ye-ji a little harder. To still believe you can share your time with someone... Really. Your faith in humanity is far too stubborn, Ye-ji."

"..."

"I didn't want to take it this far either. But I have to plant the terror in you that you can never, no matter what, no matter what happens, intersect with another person."

He realized it then.

It was strange that the Saintess, who'd gone to buy ice cream, still hadn't come back. Even now she should have been sharing the Undertaker's field of vision.

Which meant the Saintess was dead. Or at the very least, incapacitated.

The instant that conclusion formed, the Undertaker attacked her without a word. He gave it everything.

This was an enemy who moved as though it were the most natural

thing even in a frozen world, who had defeated that world's very master. He couldn't let his guard down for even an instant.

"You too."

But he didn't reach her.

After only a few exchanges of blows, the Undertaker's body lay collapsed on the beach. All his limbs pinned.

The one wearing the Saintess's face pressed him down, looking down at him with a beaming smile.

"You're the same."

"..."

"It troubles me if you let me slip away this easily. Then I'd become a monster, wouldn't I. My goodness. Me, having even learned [Time Stop]. If even the traces of having once been human vanish from a me like this, what means will you have left to beat me later?"

Slide.

She drew something from inside her clothes. A glass bottle filled with a red liquid. She popped the stopper out.

"Now. Ahh."

As if a lover were offering cake to her lover on a fork, she pushed it toward the Undertaker's mouth.

The Undertaker refused. So she pried his mouth open by force. He tried to bare his teeth and bite down on her finger, but it didn't work.

"Swallow it."

"..."

"Ah, sorry. I misspoke. You'll end up swallowing it anyway."

And so it happened.

Feeling a scent endlessly similar to human blood fill his mouth and throat, sensing his vision recede at a rapid pace, the Undertaker spoke.

"You... so you're Go Yuri."

"Correct!"

"Why... are you doing this to me?"

"I can't explain it. It can't be understood. But I suppose I can tell you this much."

Beyond his already dimming vision.

A small sensation touched his forehead. The Saintess's face was faintly smiling.

Her index finger pressed playfully against the bridge of his nose.

"Foolish couple. Forbidden."

An incomprehensible remark, as expected.

Still, one single fact served as a comfort to the Undertaker.

That, at the very least, he was glad the last face he saw in this world was the face of the one he loved.

That.

Was the end of the Undertaker, who never reached a certain day of the week.

-That Woman J. Fin.

Footnotes:

1 - The handle is "OldManGoryeo," a folkloric term for the legendary practice of abandoning aged parents in the mountains to die. As a username it reads as a darkly ironic troll persona.

2 - An allusion to Goethe's Faust: "Verweile doch, du bist so schön!" ("Linger a while, thou art so fair!"). Faust wagers his soul on the moment he ever wishes time to stop, fittingly echoed here as the lovers try to freeze time forever.

Chapter 460

The That Woman Y I

Sinnoa

* * *

It was summer.

"..."

A young man.

Go Yuir looked up at the sky without quite meaning to.

The sky was blue. But if the white clouds hadn't cast their shade, how deep could that blue ever have grown?

Everything was shade for the sky's sake.

The cries of the cicadas that had hatched too soon and now wailed somewhere far off. The leaves whose green was being scorched dry by the sunlight. The hazy chime of a wind whose source no one could name.

"Mr. Matiz."

A crisp tap of footsteps.

And a voice that came from behind, riding along with them.

Go Yuir turned around.

"I've finished packing the bicycles. The bike carrier you gave me really did make it easier. The hauling should go smoothly too. With this, every preparation for the trip is complete."

"...Ji-won-ah."

"Yes, Mr. Matiz."

A girl. Yu Ji-won tilted her head.

"There's no strength in your voice. Has something happened?"

"Yeah. Truth is, something came up out of nowhere. That Japan trip we've been planning for a year, looks like our schedule won't let us go. Sorry."

"I see."

Yu Ji-won nodded.

Expressionless.

"That's a lie."

"Tch. How'd you catch on?"

"Because you've teased me forty-one times now with that same brand of lie, so I've gotten used to it. There was never any way the trip was actually canceled to begin with."

"Why's that?"

"It's a trip you literally started planning a year ago. Someone like you would have controlled every variable from the start so the schedule couldn't slip. I believe in your abilities, Mr. Matiz."

Go Yuir lamented.

"Ah. Where did the cute little Ji-won go, the one who used to sulk because she couldn't tell whether my words were lies..."

"It eases my mind that a friend of yours will look after my grandmother. Still, I'd like to meet them in person to give my thanks."

"No. I'd recommend you don't meet her."

"Is there a particular reason?"

"No comment."

The truth was, Go Yuir didn't know the reason either.

'She refused so desperately, said the one thing that absolutely couldn't happen was Ji-won and her meeting. That girl.'

The woman who occupied the bizarre position of being his master, his colleague, and his little sister (?) all at once. Go Yuri was the one keeping her distance from Yu Ji-won.

From Go Yuir's standpoint, it was quite a surprise. It was the first time that girl had ever avoided a single person so badly.

-Beep boop! Absolutely not! If we meet, the variables get distorted!

-No, then at least explain the reason...

-Ugh. Do you have any idea how many times I've broken my back trying to make something resembling a decent person out of you, Go Yuir? The thing about you is, the moment you fall in love, you go blind. If explaining the circumstances were going to make things any better, I'd obviously have explained them by now, wouldn't I?

-...You're being awfully snippy about this.

-Ahahaha. Someday you'll understand too, Go Yuir. Someday.

There had been a strange conversation like that.

"Hmm."

Yu Ji-won clearly wasn't satisfied, but she didn't voice any particular complaint.

A trivial gripe or two didn't matter.

The first overseas trip of her life. And on top of that, the event of touring the Japanese archipelago by bicycle, just the two of them, was right around the corner.

"Then I'll see you early tomorrow morning."

"Sure. Oh, Ji-won-ah."

"Yes?"

"You haven't forgotten airplane manners, right? When kids your age ride a plane for the first time as students, there's always a fuss. If you don't want to embarrass me, get yourself ready properly."

"Of course. Haven't you warned me about it several times already?"

As if she'd predicted this exchange was coming, her face expressionless but her tone brimming with confidence, Yu Ji-won raised her left hand.

Up it went.

A shoe bag hung from it.

"It's proper etiquette to remove your shoes right before boarding the plane. I'm fully aware of it."

"That's my Ji-won. I don't think I've ever seen a kid as smart as you."

"I place a fair amount of trust in my own intelligence as well. Then I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah. Sleep well."

"Yes. Good night, Mr. Matiz."

It was summer.

* * *

"Hff, pfft, hk. Hu-hu-hk-."

"..."

"Pfft. Pbbbt, pp. Pwup."

"..."

"Bwahahahaha! Ah, heh, ahahah!"

"..."

Jab.

Yu Ji-won silently poked Go Yuir.

You shouldn't expect a cute little gesture from her, like a nudge with the elbow.

A ballpoint tip. A metal ballpoint pen, that was what she poked him with. Yu Ji-won always kept up some self-defense art to protect herself.

The unfortunate fact was that Go Yuir did the same.

As if he'd already predicted exactly when and where she'd strike, he skillfully blocked Yu Ji-won's wave of attacks.

Jab. Jab. Jab. Ja-ab, jab.

"D-did you see? You saw, right? The stewardess's face. No. Sorry. You can't do facial recognition, Ji-won, so you can't read her expression. Ah, this. If I were a poet I'd have explained it to you in style. But I just can't, this one."

"Mr. Matiz."

"Ah, um, sir, ma'am. Ah. I'm terribly sorry, but our airline asks that you keep your shoes on inside the cabin-."

"Is this fun?"

"Funny as hell."

"You're telling me you laid down a whole year of buildup just to pull off this gloriously childish stunt?"

"They say a lion gives it everything even when it's catching a rabbit. I've got the heart of a lion."

"Then go catch heartworms and drop dead, please."

"Hahahahahahaha!"

There were various incidents and mishaps, but at any rate the two

of them got through immigration safely.

The purpose of this trip was simple.

'Yu Ji-won's ability is [Mini-Map]. And the condition for triggering the Mini-Map is to set foot in a place like the local convenience store or city hall.'

According to a certain reincarnator's claim, once the apocalypse broke out down the line, it would be wise for the organizations of the Korean Peninsula and those of the Japanese archipelago to forge close cooperation.

'Once the world starts ending, there's no way anyone gets the luxury of leisurely travel. Realistically, now is the last chance to light up the [Mini-Map].'

Of course, there wasn't only this official sort of purpose.

A glance. Go Yuir looked over at Yu Ji-won, who had come into the lodging and even changed into her pajamas.

Even on a trip, Yu Ji-won was using the spare scraps of the night to throw herself into studying Japanese. Scratch, scratch, the sound of her pen shaved a thin layer off the rind of the night.

'...I want to make some room for Ji-won to catch her breath.'

This, more than anything, might be closer to the true purpose, Go Yuir thought.

Yu Ji-won had murdered her birth father and birth mother. She had dismembered the bodies and dumped them. And then, alone, she balanced her studies with modeling work while supporting a grandmother with dementia.

'Ji-won herself acts as if it's nothing, and she really does handle it all skillfully, but...'

For a weight of life that a child had to carry, it was far too heavy.

'You could have a different life, you know, Ji-won-ah. You're a kid

with countless possibilities.'

Honestly.

If Yu Ji-won so much as wanted it... Go Yuir was even prepared to throw away the reincarnator's project at a moment's notice.

'She's a child who suffered her parents' violence her whole life. Just a little girl.'

'She barely escaped that, and now she's being jerked around at the whim of strange people's schedules, reincarnators and regressors and the like... I have no excuse to give her.'

So they had set off on a trip.

If lighting up the Mini-Map had been the only goal, it would have been far simpler to just put Yu Ji-won to sleep and use Go Yuri's [Teleportation]. There was no need anywhere to go to the trouble of flying.

If she wanted to leave, it was fine to leave.

If the thing called 'world annihilation' could only be stopped by deceiving and taming the child in front of him, then a world like that could go ahead and end, for all he cared.

That was what Go Yuir believed.

"..."

A halt.

Yu Ji-won's pen, which had been filling the notebook with dense rows of Chinese characters as she studied, came to a stop.

"...Haa."

A small sigh slipped from Yu Ji-won's lips.

"It's noisy. Far too noisy."

"Hm? I don't hear a thing, though?"

"I'm talking about you, Mr. Matiz."

Yu Ji-won set down her pen and drew her brows together. She was deliberately putting her attitude on display across her face.

"With you gazing at me that intently, how am I supposed to focus on studying?"

"?"

Go Yuir was dumbfounded.

"What, did you learn mind-reading or something? Now you read my heart with your eyes?"

"There's no need to read it. If you've been staring at me without pause for over two minutes, it means one of two things."

"What, what?"

"One. That despite skillfully deceiving me for a whole year, you've actually been moved to lust by my looks, and using the excuse of saving on lodging, you intend to seize the chance of living together to build a romantic relationship with me."

"Are you out of your mind?!"

"Two. That you're sunk in pointlessly serious thoughts, fretting over my future again."

"..."

"I've already chosen my own fate, Mr. Matiz. I'm always grateful that you think things through on my behalf, but if you keep those thoughts to yourself, they carry no meaning at all."

"...I see. That's true too."

"Speak to me. Talk it over with me."

Yu Ji-won looked him straight in the eye.

"Without conversation, I can't understand."

"..."

"I'm aware there's a sort of person who treats the absence of conversation, the silence, as some greater form of understanding instead, but that isn't understanding meant for me."

"...I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

Yu Ji-won rose and sat on the sofa.

This small place, booked through Airbnb, was charmingly well decorated despite its modest floor space, whether that was the owner's character or not.

Tap, tap. Yu Ji-won patted the spot beside her on the sofa. Go Yuir rose without a word and sat there.

"From the day before we left, your mood was different than usual. I'll ask again. What worry are you carrying, Mr. Matiz?"

"...This is a secret between just you and me."

"Is it weightier than the secret that I murdered my birth parents?"

It was her way of saying, what secrets could there possibly be between us at this point. Go Yuir huffed out a laugh.

"The truth is."

"Yes."

"There's a reincarnator named Go Yuri, who was supposedly my little sister in a past life."

"Hmm."

Yu Ji-won nodded.

"Is it a setting? Or a delusion?"

"No. It's astonishing, but it's true."

"That truly is an astonishing fact. I ask just in case, but how many years of buildup does this amount to?"

"Ah! I didn't take the lesson of the boy who cried wolf to heart."

They traded the conversation like this, but in truth Go Yuir knew it well.

That she was already assuming his words were 'truth.'

To Yu Ji-won, Go Yuir's claims were absolute. It wasn't that they were objectively absolute and therefore trustworthy. It was that, because she trusted, she simply granted the other person an absolute value.

"Please go on."

"She's a reincarnator. So she knows everything about what's going to happen in the future. The reason I ever met you came from her too."

"..."

"In the end, I wonder if that person and I forced a fixed fate on you. It's been weighing on my mind for a long while."

"I see."

Yu Ji-won nodded.

"That's a truly pointless worry. But, I finally understand. Why you've always been so desperate to give me what you call 'freedom' every time you look at me, Mr. Matiz."

"Are you disappointed?"

"Not at all. If anything, it's become clear."

Go Yuir's head tilted.

"Become clear, how?"

"The way for me to repay you, Mr. Matiz."

Yu Ji-won rose from the sofa.

"I'll sleep first. You should hurry to bed too, Mr. Matiz. We're set to start riding early at dawn tomorrow, aren't we?"

"Huh? Ah, right. Yeah. I should sleep. Yeah."

"Do have a good night."

With that, Yu Ji-won lay down on the bed off to one side of the room.

Unable to grasp the meaning of the words she'd left behind, Go Yuir tilted his head.

'What's that supposed to mean? A way to repay me.'

But just as Yu Ji-won said, the real bicycle trip began tomorrow, so Go Yuir too tidied up around himself and lay down on the sofa.

Ka-tok.

His smartphone gave a small buzz around the half-hour mark, just as he was drifting off to sleep.

"...?"

Go Yuir checked his phone.

-Little Sister (?): Come outside for a sec!

Footnotes:

Chapter 461

The That Woman Y II

Sinnoa

* * *

The lodging Go Yuir had booked was a budget business hotel, good bang for the buck.

It sat a little outside the city center, but since the plan was to get around by bicycle for the whole month anyway, that hardly mattered.

If anything, there was an upside.

"Ah."

Just a short walk from the hotel led straight into a dim back alley like this, untouched by any streetlight.

"You came out quick," she said.

"And you? Teleportation?"

"Yes!"

Go Yuri.

The mysterious woman who claimed to have been his little sister in a past life stood there, the shade of night draped over her alone like a coat.

"I figured it'd take you longer to slip past Yu Ji-won's eyes, Undertaker."

"She happened to turn in for the night. First trip abroad. She must've worn herself out without even noticing."

"Hmm."

Go Yuri smiled with her eyes.

"Yu Ji-won, you say..."

"What? Something bothering you?"

"No. It's just. I have my doubts that someone who calmly counts even the number and force of each breath she takes could really fail to manage her own condition."

What alien from what planet are you even talking about, Go Yuir was about to fire back, but he stopped.

His attention scattered right then as he caught the drink Go Yuri tossed him.

He saw what kind of drink it was and his brow furrowed.

"...A protein shake?"

"Yes!"

"Hey. Don't you usually go for something with a little romance to it at a moment like this? A warm canned coffee or something?"

"Ah, sorry. Come to think of it, Oraboni, you haven't taken up strength training yet."

"..."

"Still, it's much better for your health than caffeine in the middle of the night, so drink up and don't worry!"

There it was. Again. This kept happening.

Whenever Go Yuir spent time with the woman in front of him, his stomach churned at a feeling that crept up on him again and again.

'...Even while she's dealing with the present me, she's mixing me up with a future me.'

The very way she addressed him shifted from one moment to the next. Sometimes Guild Leader. Sometimes Oraboni. Sometimes Undertaker.

Inside her, far too many versions of 'him' existed.

'Of course, it's only the future me from my perspective. From hers, it'd be the past me.'

Go Yuir had no idea how to put what he was feeling right now into words.

He didn't blame her for it, though. The number of cycles she had 'reincarnated' through was beyond anything he could even imagine.

How many years had she lived? A thousand? Ten thousand? No. Surely even counting was meaningless.

She had lived far too long and been through far too many events. A little confusion in her memory was a natural penalty.

"To get to the point. Now then, Oraboni? There isn't much to share with you today. The situation with the Cheon family's Cult is..."

The night deepened.

In a remote alley of a foreign land where no one was around to eavesdrop, just two people quietly conspired about the future, vowing to stop the world annihilation that would come someday.

If anyone else had known, they'd have been dumbfounded, wondering what kind of crazed lunatics these two were.

"I keep quietly laying the groundwork about you, too, Oraboni. Once this trip is over, you'll naturally step in as my successor..."

"Go Yuri."

"Yes?"

Go Yuri's mouth, which had been chattering away so cheerfully, paused for a moment.

"What is it, Guild Leader?"

"You told me before. To share anything and everything without holding back, no matter how trivial the feeling."

"Yes!"

Go Yuri smiled brightly.

"I rate your 'feelings' extremely highly, Oraboni. When dealing with anomalies, rational judgment alone often isn't enough to solve things."

"Right. About that. From yesterday up until now, something's felt off."

"...Something's felt off?"

Blink.

"How is it off, specifically?"

"I'm not sure."

"..."

"If I had to be specific. It started yesterday afternoon. I was looking up at the sky, the cicadas were chirping, and all of a sudden this world stopped feeling like my world... that kind of feeling?"

Go Yuri's face.

Turned chilling.

"..."

What kind of expression was that, anyway? That one.

Cold. But not cold because it was empty. Rather, cold the way deep water turns cold, the flow of thought running too thick beneath the surface.

Like the sea.

Go Yuir felt as if, for the first time in his life, he was seeing his 'little sister's' true face laid bare.

"Yesterday, huh."

Go Yuri murmured.

It was nothing more than 'something started feeling off,' so she could easily have let it slide, and Go Yuir himself wouldn't have minded in the least.

Yet her tone was as serious as could be.

"Please tell me in a little more detail."

"Hm."

"Right after the feeling set in, what happened? That part might be the most important."

"What happened... Ah. Ji-won."

"Yu Ji-won?"

"Ji-won called for me. Today was departure day, so she said she'd finished packing the bicycles."

"Aha. ..."

Go Yuri propped her chin in her hand.

She didn't drag out the deliberation for long.

"Please close your eyes for a moment. Open them when I tell you to."

"You're going to teleport?"

"Yes."

He did as told.

The instant Go Yuir closed his eyes, the presence that had clearly

been right in front of him suddenly vanished. The sweet apple scent, too.

Only after about a minute did that familiar fragrance drift back into the night air.

"Eyes. Open them, please."

He did as told again.

Go Yuri was there. But her appearance had changed.

She must have used [Teleportation] to go somewhere, and now she held several fairly large picture frames in her arms.

Inside the frames were portraits. Photorealistic paintings so precise you might mistake them for actual photographs.

"Look at this person first. Turn on your flashlight."

"..."

"What do you feel, Oraboni?"

The figure in the portrait.

Curiously, wore a monocle. Draped over them was a white coat like the ones doctors wore. And whether their hair was a touch wavy or just carelessly combed, it sat in disarray.

What caught Go Yuir's eye most of all in the portrait was the figure's eyes. You might say they held shadow. Or that soot had settled into them.

At those pupils, which looked as though every appraisal of this world had already been settled, the tender flesh of Go Yuir's heart was stirred up.

"...My chest is churning."

"Good. Next."

Go Yuri showed him fifteen portraits in all, one after another.

Since the alley was pitch dark without a single light, Go Yuir had to examine each painting with his smartphone flashlight.

"How about this person?"

"I feel nothing at all."

"Even though they're this pretty?"

"I'll grant that they're pretty. But still, no real reaction."

"..."

Among them were portraits that moved Go Yuir's heart, and far more that did not.

When the puzzling test was over.

"...Ms. Noh Do-hwa, Ms. Sim Ah-ryeon, Ms. Jeong Ye-ji. You reacted to exactly three people, right on the nose."

Go Yuri's expression grew even graver.

She kept up a string of meaningless mutterings, hm, hmm, mm-mm, before her lips popped open.

"This is really, truly, tru-ly strange, Oraboni."

"Can you explain it to me too?"

"Normally I'd never go through with a 'spoiler' like this. But yes. Given how extraordinary the situation is, I have no choice but to throw a gamble myself."

Go Yuri said,

"The three people you just reacted to. As it happens, they're all partners you shared love with in your last, second-to-last, and third-to-last lives, Oraboni."

"...What?"

The content was too far over the line, and Go Yuir's mind hit a

momentary stun.

But the other party went on serenely, as if that sort of thing didn't concern her in the least.

"It's not exactly your past life or the one before that. I was just counting the 'meaningful' lives as I saw them. But it's true."

"Uh. Um. Uhh... The, what exactly do you mean by sharing love...?"

"Aack! No sexual harassment! I think the lewd stuff is off-limits!"

"..."

That reaction alone was answer enough.

Go Yuir's mind reeled fast into a haze. Without thinking, he dug back through the portraits Go Yuri had just set down. These people? Me? We become lovers?

"Uh. It's, their looks. Hm. I don't know if I should be the one saying this, but they're so... Everyone's traits are different, their looks are different..."

"Yes. I was startled too, you know? Goodness. To think, no matter how off guard I was, that you'd end up in that sort of relationship with Ms. Sim Ah-ryeon of all people. You really are a monster of possibility, Oraboni."

"What's that supposed to mean??"

"You'll come to understand. Hm, no. Since you've been spoiled, the route may have gotten completely tangled now. You may never come to understand it."

Go Yuri let out a small sigh.

"There's a good interpretation and a worst-case interpretation. Which would you like to hear first?"

"...The bad one."

"The good interpretation is the hypothesis that you're a hopelessly love-crazed sap, a romanticist who instinctively remembers even loves from two lifetimes ago."

"..."

Why, when he'd clearly asked for the bad one first, had she handed back the exact opposite answer?

It made no sense, yet it was perfectly consistent so long as Go Yuri insisted on her little-sister persona. What little sister in the world ever does exactly what her older brother says?

"I don't really seem like a guy that crazy about love, though."

"Should I just kill this man? Seriously."

"Hm?"

"It's nothing."

Go Yuri smiled sweetly.

"Next. The worst possibility is..."

"The possibility is?"

"That without you or me realizing it, we've fallen into some kind of anomalous phenomenon. While we ourselves are even under the illusion that we're cleanly regressing and reincarnating."

"Uh..."

Such a thing.

"It's possible."

Go Yuri snatched the question one step ahead, before Go Yuir had even retched it up from inside.

"At the very simplest, we could assume all of this is a dream, couldn't we? To get a little fancier, we could interpret it as a simulation running, like a brain in a vat[1]."

"...Horrifying."

"Yes. That's what an anomaly is."

Go Yuri nodded, then said,

"So first I'll kill the Cheon Yo-hwa twins and check how this world reacts."

She said it as if it were nothing.

"What?"

"I told you, didn't I? That there's a chance this is a simulated universe. If that's the case, it means Taeguk is at work, so killing the Cheon Yo-hwa twins should provoke a reaction one way or another."

"Wa, wait."

Go Yuir grabbed her shoulder. He felt that if he let go here, she'd hop on a teleport straight to the murder scene any second.

"Yuri. Wait. That conclusion is strange. All I said was that yesterday and today my mood's been off. So why does that lead to killing someone... and not just anyone, but children you raised yourself, playing teacher to them since they were small, without the slightest hesitation?"

"Because I trust your feelings dearly, Guild Leader."

"Are you, are you serious? What if you killed them. Killed them, and your guess was wrong?"

"Please calculate the risk coolly."

Go Yuri's expression didn't waver.

"If I kill the Cheon Yo-hwa twins and nothing at all happens, that's actually for the best. From the next life on, we won't have to worry about whether we're trapped in a simulation or not."

"A person would die!"

"This is the path that saves people. Yes, I know. It'll sound like sophistry. But the moment I went through with spoiling you, this life became a 'discard card' for me. If it's a discard anyway, I should put it to the best possible use..."

That was when it happened.

Tok. Something fell onto the back of Go Yuir's hand where it gripped her shoulder. And onto Go Yuri's cheek.

"...Rain?"

It was a raindrop.

Tok, ta-ta-ta-ta-tat-.

In less than ten seconds, the raindrops grew into streaks, and the streaks into a downpour.

No matter how often East Asia's climate got mistaken for Southeast Asia's these days, this was a downright uncanny shower.

Go Yuir thought, rather, that it had worked out well. Now he had an excuse.

He gripped Go Yuri's hand firmly.

"For now. You're too worked up. Let's at least duck into a convenience store and cool your head for a bit..."

"No."

A murmur.

"Yuri?"

"No. This isn't rain, it's..."

Pak.

Along with an extremely faint tremor, redness mixed into the

rainwater.

Go Yuir's breath stopped at the sight that unfolded before his eyes.

And the same went for the one who had drawn out that redness.

"...Ah?"

Go Yuri looked down at her own chest with a slightly dazed face.

Drip. Drip.

Red rainwater was running down a kitchen knife slick with blood.

"Ah, ha."

Soon the knife twisted at a bizarre angle. With that, even the breath that had been leaking from Go Yuri's lips at a more or less steady pace lost its rhythm.

A dim, pale blue chill clung to the kitchen knife.

"Ora, boni."

A voice thin enough to be washed away by the rain.

Go Yuri pressed more strength into Go Yuir's hand, the one she already held.

She was soaked through, her bangs plastered to her forehead, but her gaze stayed fixed straight on Go Yuir.

"Next time. Again..."

The sound of a person collapsing wasn't erased even by the rain, and a soft thud rang out.

Now there was nothing left to obstruct the rainwater.

Behind where Go Yuri's body had blocked the view, the figure of the one standing there with the kitchen knife also came fully into sight.

Go Yuir looked in turn from his sister's corpse fallen on the ground to the culprit before him.

And with difficulty, he opened his mouth.

"...Ji-won."

"Yes."

Yu Ji-won wore the hood of a raincoat pulled over her head, hiding hair that flowed down not in black but in silver, and spoke with the same expressionless face as always.

"So now Mr. Matiz has become a little freer too."

Footnotes:

1 - A classic thought experiment in philosophy: if a disembodied brain were fed simulated sensory signals, it could not tell its experience from reality, casting doubt on whether anything we perceive is real.

Chapter 462

The That Woman Y III

Sinnoa

* * *

There were two sentences here.

A. Go Yuri had died.

B. Yu Ji-won had committed murder.

Either one was an absurd thing to face on a first trip abroad.

But if you asked which of the two shocked Go Yuir more, the answer was clear.

Go Yuri had died.

Go Yuri could die too.

And this easily, at that.

"..."

Go Yuir stood there blankly, soaking in the rain.

The corpse sprawled on the pavement, the hair scattering strand by strand into the puddle, none of it felt quite real.

Ever since he was a child, she had felt invincible to him.

She was family. She was a teacher.

Whether she was calling him by that odd title, "Guild Leader," or by the even odder one, "Oraboni," or whether she occasionally used his real name, "Go Yuir."

There was always mischief and confidence hovering at the corners

of her mouth.

Ah, with her at his side he could surely keep going right up to the day the world ended. Before he even realized it, that was the kind of thought she inspired.

But now she lay there bleeding. She had made her exit, long before the "world annihilation" she always had on the tip of her tongue ever came.

"Hm."

Another member of the family.

A girl whom Go Yuir, in his heart, felt closer to as a younger sibling than even Go Yuri, though they had never called each other older brother or younger sister.

But objectively she was simply "the kid next door," Yu Ji-won, who crouched down and searched through the corpse's clothes.

"Just as I thought."

Yu Ji-won nodded. Strangely, in the madly pouring rain, only her voice came through clear.

"There's no passport."

"..."

"Now and then I found it strange."

Why did you kill her.

When did you start tailing me. When you decided to follow me, it shouldn't have been raining yet, so why did you bring a raincoat first. Are you in your right mind.

Go Yuir could have asked a great many things. With family murdered right before his eyes, he hardly lacked the right.

"...Strange? What was?"

But the fact that not only the victim but also the perpetrator was as good as family made him automatically cut away those pointless questions.

Swallowing so much without ever asking "why." For better or worse, that too was a property of the bond called family.

"Now and then, I noticed an unidentifiable fragrance in Mr. Matiz's room."

"..."

"There were times Grandmother gave off the same fragrance, faint as it was. Grandmother even mumbled to me on occasion that I had a 'younger sibling.'"

Yu Ji-won set down her backpack.

Zzzip. As the zipper opened, familiar tools came into view. Gloves. A large sheet of vinyl.

In an instant, Go Yuir's mind flashed back to one summer night a year ago. These were none other than the "work tools" he had taught her about.

"Did you know, Mr. Matiz? I installed a small CCTV camera so I could keep an eye on the alley. My parents had 'gone missing,' and Grandmother is a dementia patient on top of that. In any worst-case scenario, I had no shortage of excuses."

"..."

"So even before Mr. Matiz confessed about the 'reincarnator,' I had already confirmed this woman's existence."

In Go Yuir's eyes.

Yu Ji-won's true talent was neither the looks nor the intellect she was born with.

It was her capacity to act.

Imagine, for instance, that you reached out to drink some water.

A glass of water sat on the table right in front of you. Would you often stop your hand halfway?

Almost never.

For the girl Yu Ji-won, every action worked that way.

She decided, "I will drink water." Therefore, "I reach out my hand." It was an utterly natural process, so there was no reason to hesitate. There wasn't even any reason to put the task off.

Murder. Even an act that for most people would be the greatest of events fell, for Yu Ji-won, under that same category of "action."

"With the stepping stones gathered this far, I can now make a bold leap toward a conclusion."

Yu Ji-won wrapped up the corpse and set off.

It was a thoroughly natural movement. Come to think of it, Go Yuir thought, they had shared with the girl before him exactly when and at which lodging they would be staying.

A business hotel out away from the city center. A night road without a single streetlight in sight.

Even if an investigation got underway, surely no detective would imagine that foreigners had abruptly committed murder on "the very first day of their trip."

If you were going to kill, do it the first day.

That was Yu Ji-won's judgment.

"I respect Mr. Matiz's opinion. I respect Grandmother's too, not quite as much, but still. I have no memory of ever having a younger sibling, but if I assume this being is a 'reincarnator,' the two testimonies fit together cleanly."

"..."

"In that case, it's highly likely the reincarnator had gathered an abnormally rich amount of information about me. It also made sense, in a number of ways, that Mr. Matiz intervened so neatly in my parents' 'disappearance.'"

A supplement.

Ordinary people did not listen so closely to others' opinions.

That the world would end. That reincarnators existed. That there had been a younger sibling who didn't exist in one's own memory. There was no way to trust such tall tales, such unrealistic testimony.

Yu Ji-won was different.

To her, "realism" was unimportant. To Yu Ji-won, reality had always been something without any sense of reality to begin with.

The two propositions "humans exist" and "reincarnators exist," Yu Ji-won knew how to weigh equally, without any prejudice.

A conclusion.

"Mr. Matiz and I. The case the two of us thought we alone knew about actually had one more person involved, an instigator and a witness."

Yu Ji-won faced the fact calmly.

"And Mr. Matiz. I don't think there's any need to spell this out, but just as I trust Mr. Matiz, I do not trust this reincarnator."

"...So."

"Yes, so I killed her."

Of course, that isn't the only reason, Yu Ji-won mumbled.

Then she set the corpse down lightly.

"Hm. Heavier than I expected."

"..."

"Would you help me?"

To help family bury family.

That utterly simple summary suddenly felt heavy to Go Yuir. As heavy as the corpse's silent weight.

A heaviness he could explain to no one.

* * *

Compared to the "disappearance" that had unfolded one summer a year ago, the way the corpse was buried this time was rather slipshod.

But Go Yuir sensed it.

Even if the corpse were found, the odds of the two of them ending up in an investigation's net would surely converge on zero.

"...The police won't even be able to confirm the corpse's identity."

"Yes."

Dawn.

As planned, Yu Ji-won and Go Yuir set out on their bicycle ride. Before departing, the two of them stood side by side in front of the lodging, warming up.

"That's why whether there was a passport mattered."

"Did you actually figure out that Go Yuri was a Teleporter too?"

"No. I only guessed that a reincarnator preparing for world annihilation would naturally keep her identity hidden. Even if she had a passport, there was a strong chance it was fake."

"..."

"But, well. So she had the ability of Teleportation."

Every strength came with a weakness.

Teleportation. That ability, which had been Go Yuri's strongest weapon, in a case like this had turned into the very cause of a "perfect crime."

Where did this corpse come from? How did it suddenly appear? Who is it?

From abroad. By teleportation. A reincarnator.

Naturally, no one would arrive at that answer. There was no alibi to speak of.

The investigation was as good as closed before it ever began.

"If the ambush hadn't succeeded, it could have gotten dangerous. I'll have to broaden the scope of my imagination a bit more."

The bicycle wheels rolled briskly along.

For two hours.

By then it had become a time you could call morning, and the two stopped at a restaurant in some town along the way.

"It's sweet for my taste."

The moment she took a bite of the chain restaurant's gyudon1, Yu Ji-won gave her flat verdict.

"I'd heard plenty of rumors that Japanese food is generally sweet. They weren't lies."

"...So the one who spent a year's worth of buildup on this trip wasn't me, it was you."

"Ah, yes. That's right. To be precise, I just repurposed an already scheduled itinerary as buildup."

"She's a cautious sort. Thorough to the core. But she surely never dreamed that a trip planned a year in advance, the first day no less, would be used for your plan. Here, the karaage2."

"Thank you. Mr. Matiz takes out a girl who'd been confined by her household. By anyone's eyes, it would come across as a romantic story. It wouldn't have been easy to spot a planned incident hiding in there. Mm. The karaage is decent."

"Yeah? Isn't the pepper a bit strong?"

"It's surely a franchise trick to keep the taste consistent regardless of the chicken's condition, isn't it. A reasonable enough method."

On the surface it was the picture of an ordinary breakfast, yet the topics passing back and forth across the table were truly bizarre.

Go Yuir sighed.

"...I'd been hoping for something romantic too. For family to meet a fate like that. It's the worst."

"Mmm."

Yu Ji-won let out a low groan. Her expression looked somehow ashamed.

After the meal, they bought Pocari Sweat3, and in front of a convenience store Yu Ji-won picked up the thread again.

"Mr. Matiz."

"What."

"A person who speaks of others' deaths as if they were nothing must also accept a death of their own as if it were nothing."

"..."

"Above all, Mr. Matiz had been living a life half-brainwashed by her."

"Brainwashed..."

"You could call it gaslighting too. Living the way that person planned, building your own character the way that person laid out

for you. It doesn't look like a very healthy relationship."

"..."

Go Yuir fell silent.

The ride again.

Three hours later the conversation resumed, over a simple convenience store bento for lunch.

"She says the world's going to end. And she says she needs me to stop it, so honestly, isn't a little brainwashing worth putting up with?"

"Hmm. That's no concern of mine."

"You psychopath..."

"I couldn't understand why Mr. Matiz was suddenly set to leave, saying he had to go teach some pair of sisters. That too must have been a schedule she had booked in advance, like the 'disappearance' in my household. Am I wrong?"

"You're right."

"Drop it."

"..."

"Mr. Matiz. Has there ever been even a single time you made a plan purely from your own thoughts, with no input from her?"

There had been.

It was this very one.

"Isn't this trip the first time?"

"..."

"Go Yuri, was it? From her standpoint, this trip must have looked like an utter waste of time. Whether you bothered to take a trip or

not, the weight Mr. Matiz holds in my heart wouldn't change in the slightest."

"...That's true."

"But Mr. Matiz went through with the trip all the same. Why did you do that?"

"..."

"If I may presume to tell you the reason."

Yu Ji-won finished her bento and set it down. After wiping her mouth with a napkin, she looked straight at Go Yuir across from her.

"Because Mr. Matiz wanted to make the relationship with me wholly 'a relationship between just the two of us.'"

"..."

"The girl Yu Ji-won will kill her parents. The girl Yu Ji-won can play a crucial role in the world annihilation project. And so, choosing a time while her heart is still soft, win Yu Ji-won over and draw her in as an ally. I'd guess that was Go Yuri's plan. Mr. Matiz was nothing more than a chess piece moving according to it."

"..."

"But Mr. Matiz meant it sincerely."

No, Yu Ji-won shook her head.

"More precisely, the very person who could 'treat me sincerely' was Mr. Matiz. That's surely why you were chosen as the chess piece."

"..."

"Mr. Matiz felt guilty toward me. He blamed himself, wondering if he had deceived me. So, to be sincere with me, and to prove his own sincerity to himself as well, he set off with me on a 'completely useless trip.'"

"..."

"I'm sincere too."

Yu Ji-won pulled out another napkin.

Then she rose, came closer, and with her own hand wiped away the streak that had run down at the corner of Go Yuir's eye.

"She was precious to you."

"...Yeah."

"I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

"Yeah."

Yu Ji-won embraced him.

Burying her head against his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I didn't consult you beforehand."

"Because there's no way I would have agreed."

"I didn't fix murder as a constant either. I listened to the conversation. I judged that killing was the better choice."

"She's a reincarnator. She knows everything about what you did. There's no telling what she might do to you in the next life."

"I'm not afraid. It's no concern of mine."

Yu Ji-won stroked the back of Go Yuir's head.

"Right now you are here before my eyes."

"..."

"Let's set off on a trip, Mr. Matiz. Just the two of us."

Go Yuir thought to himself.

That it would, most likely, be a long trip.

Footnotes:

1 - Gyudon is a Japanese dish of simmered beef and onions served over rice; ubiquitous as cheap fast food at chains like Yoshinoya and Sukiya.

2 - Karaage is Japanese-style deep-fried chicken, marinated and coated in starch; a common side dish and bar/restaurant staple.

3 - Pocari Sweat is a popular Japanese ion-supply sports/electrolyte drink (made by Otsuka Pharmaceutical), widely sold across East Asia.

Chapter 463

The That Woman Y IV

Sinnoa

* * *

Yu Ji-won had known for a long time that she was not a psychopath.

"..."

Soft, even breathing.

The man's face hovered before her eyes. The two of them lay together on a bed in the dim room.

It was not as though romantic desire had grown between them. He had passed out on the sofa, and Yu Ji-won had merely carried him to the bed in secret.

'You cried all through last night, didn't you, Mr. Matiz.'

Yu Ji-won reached out and stroked the other's hair.

She had learned long ago, after sneaking into the house, that his real name was Go Yuir. But what did it matter? To her, he was always nothing more than Mr. Matiz.

'It was my first time seeing Mr. Matiz cry like that. It was fascinating.'

A bed in some lodging where no one was watching.

Yu Ji-won secretly drew up a bluish energy at her fingertips. It resembled water, wriggled about, then gently covered Matiz's face.

On the surface, it looked exactly like someone had washed up and then put on a sheet mask.

So that his breathing would not be obstructed while he slept, the bluish energy wrapped around his entire face except for his nostrils.

"Hm."

Yu Ji-won narrowed her brow as though uncertain.

'As expected. Even like this, I still cannot make out the shape of his face.'

She knew there was a nose there. Eyes as well. But no matter how hard she tried, she could not picture Matiz's appearance in her mind.

'If he is with other people, I think I can somehow tell him apart. Distinguishing him itself seems possible. But if you ask whether I could recognize Mr. Matiz by himself, that is another matter.'

Yu Ji-won shifted a little more and buried her nose beneath Matiz's chin.

Then she slowly drew in a breath.

'...A nice smell.'

The fog in her head calmed down.

'He had prepared it for me alone, so that even if this world faces annihilation and we are separated, we can find each other when we meet again someday.'

'A single fragrance.'

A smile drifted across Yu Ji-won's lips.

It was an intentional smile. A learned expression.

That was why Yu Ji-won's smile looked utterly bizarre on the surface.

Ordinary people calculated not only when to smile, but when to withdraw it as well. How appropriately, how quickly, they should

let that smile fade so as not to be rude to the other person.

Everyone desperately aimed for naturalness.

But Yu Ji-won's smile lacked that sort of calculation. The smile was there, then immediately gone. It was not there, then suddenly it was.

Anything beyond that level of naturalness was still unnecessary for Yu Ji-won.

Her smile was, in any case, an artificial thing made for one person, and that person had never once blamed her for it.

Stroke. Yu Ji-won brushed back his bangs.

"What is love?"

"..."

Flinch. Yu Ji-won's voice must have reached his eardrums, because Matiz stirred, but his eyelids remained shut.

Yu Ji-won thought. Could the relationship she shared with the person before her be defined as the emotion called love?

It was impossible.

To say it again, Yu Ji-won had known for a long time that she was not a psychopath. She could not feel emotion in nearly every respect.

A psychopath was not the same sort as someone like her, someone who could not feel emotion. A psychopath merely had the ability to empathize with others cut away.

'Mr. Matiz. It seems I still feel no emotion toward you either.'

Wriggle, wriggle.

Water droplets bubbled at Yu Ji-won's fingertips. The clear droplets moved as though alive, then burst with a pop.

The world Yu Ji-won saw was always submerged underwater.

The man before her had said the following about the droplet that had just burst.

-Water bug. That's a water bug. A miniature version of the giant sea dragon called Leviathan. The water bugs gather and gather until they form the shape of a dragon.

In truth, that was wrong.

From Yu Ji-won's perspective, these droplets were bubbles. The sort of bubbles that rise when a diver exhales underwater.

For Yu Ji-won, the world had long since been submerged in water. That was why the forms beyond the water-covered veil were always distorted.

Just as the outlines of things waver and blur when one looks up above the surface from underwater.

'I want to touch it.'

Bubble, bubble.

Whenever Yu Ji-won wished for it, the water bugs were born. From her fingertips. From the space around her. The bubbles boiled up and rose toward the eternal surface.

Yes. Up toward the surface.

Matiz seemed to find it terribly fascinating that the water bug rain fell not from above to below, but from below to above.

But was that not perfectly natural? If they were bubbles rather than rain, then of course they would rise upward.

It was a difference in perspective.

'Mr. Matiz. What is emotion?'

She wanted to feel it too.

It was not simply some vague curiosity about what it might be like to feel. It was the will to look at the world the way he looked at it.

'What do you look like?'

'To me, people's voices always sound like signals scattered and refracted through water, dull and wavering. What sort of tone does your voice have out there?'

Wriggle, wriggle. Wriggle, wriggle.

Transparent bubbles kept popping without end.

'A nice smell.'

And yet, even in this underwater world, fragrance alone came through clearly.

"...Ji-won?"

A voice suddenly came from above her head. When she looked up, Matiz was looking down at her with sleep-heavy eyes.

"Yes. Good morning."

"Yeah, good morning... But can I ask why you're biting my nape?"

"The perfume smell was strongest here."

"Are you actually a pervert?!"

"That is rude, Mr. Matiz. This is merely an act of confirming your existence. By that logic, everyone in the world who looks at other people's faces would be a pervert."

"That woke me right up, seriously!"

Matiz grumbled as he got up and started tidying himself. It was midsummer. Since they planned to ride their bicycles for several hours, he could not afford to apply sunscreen sloppily.

From Yu Ji-won's standpoint, sunscreen was a very slight hindrance. It made the carefully applied perfume smell somewhat vague.

But that was merely a matter of getting used to it, and so, wanting to get used to it, she buried her head deep in Matiz's arms before the ride.

"...You don't need sunscreen?"

"Yes. There is no problem."

"Good grief. Don't trust your skin too much just because you're young. You'll still be working as a model for at least a few years before world annihilation arrives."

"As you said, I am fine precisely because I am young. Even if my skin tans a little, it would only add a temporary, season-limited sort of exotic beauty to my charm."

"A psychopath and a narcissist, this is really something else..."

Of course, that was a lie.

'In the first place, I am submerged underwater twenty-four hours a day, so there is no chance for sunlight to reach me.'

Why was she hiding this secret on purpose?

Why, naturally.

'Mr. Matiz did not know that these are bubbles. Which means the reincarnator named Go Yuri does not know either.'

If you wanted to deceive the enemy, you had to deceive your allies first.

'Mr. Matiz seems to trust reincarnators quite a bit. But trust alone cannot make all the affairs of the world go around.'

To trust another was to trust oneself.

Those words might sound beautiful, but they were not enough to make a beautiful world. There was no need to even bring up the JTB problem. Belief and reality were different things.

Therefore, Yu Ji-won's decision to hide that information was perfectly natural.

'If, by some chance, the reincarnator deceives Mr. Matiz, or if the reincarnator deceives herself, then I will be needed as a last resort.'

Today's schedule had also become especially busy.

First, Yu Ji-won contacted the caregiver she had arranged in advance. Now that the reincarnator was dead, someone else was needed to take care of Grandmother.

The caregiver, as if waiting for the call, confirmed the payment and replied that there was no need to worry. It had been a promised arrangement from long before they left for Japan.

"...You, just how thoroughly did you plan this murder?"

"Even if the murder had not taken place, I could not leave Grandmother with an unidentified person like the reincarnator. I needed to create an alibi that would not matter even if it were exposed to a public institution."

"Sometimes you scare me, Ji-won..."

Was that true?

She could infer that the other person had made a joke. But what if it was not a joke? What if the joke contained some sincerity?

To reason that out, she needed the other person's voice and expression. If she had those, it would be quite simple.

But both offered Yu Ji-won only pitifully meager data.

So then, did Mr. Matiz truly find her frightening?

'That is possible.'

Yu Ji-won thought it through.

'I killed someone who may have been Mr. Matiz's family, teacher,

perhaps even a lover.'

'Of course, Mr. Matiz accepted me. He forgave me. But that is Mr. Matiz's resolve and action, not his emotion.'

'I have heard that emotion is something humans cannot help. Even if Mr. Matiz's emotions fear me, there is nothing to be done about that.'

What was emotion?

'I want to know.'

How did he feel about her?

'I want to touch it.'

So she reached out her hand.

"...? Ji-won?"

"..."

Press. She took hold of Matiz's hand.

And from hand to hand, she sent a transparent water droplet over, no. A bubble.

"?"

Apparently, Matiz could not see the bubble.

That was not strange. Sometimes he could see this, and sometimes he could not.

That was why Yu Ji-won freely controlled the bubbles without worry.

'Skin.'

The bubbles wriggled as they crawled up Matiz's forearm. In an instant, they seeped beneath the skin.

'Muscle. Bone.'

A little deeper.

'Heart.'

Thump.

The bubbles wrapped around Matiz's heart. They clung to it.

And so, in those deep waters invisible to the eye, thump.

Every vibration he felt came through to her as well, clear and distinct.

And then.

'This speed.'

Yu Ji-won splashed bubbles onto herself as well. She adjusted them, tuned them. How?

'This tone.'

By copying the direction and speed of the other person's heartbeat exactly. She made hers the same.

Thump, thump.

When Matiz's heart beat, Yu Ji-won's heart beat as well. The rhythm his heart held, Yu Ji-won's heart also came to hold.

"Mr. Matiz."

"Hm?"

"Are you afraid of me?"

"Yeah. Seriously, scared as hell. Ji-won. I prophesy that you're going to become a Korean model who succeeds a German art student and a Georgian poet."

"..."

Thump, thump.

'At peace.'

Thump, thump.

'So it was a joke.'

Yu Ji-won nodded.

'This is Mr. Matiz's emotion when he jokes.'

A smile hung at the corner of her mouth.

"I, too, deeply respect those two as my seniors. Over the next few years, I plan to devote myself to studying art and the craft of poetry."

"Is that for real..."

The two of them ate lunch and set off again.

"Hrk, huff. Hrk. What kind of damn uphill road is this. Why won't it ever end..."

Thump. Thump.

'This is the emotion called hardship.'

'Mr. Matiz's hardship.'

Yu Ji-won was not tired at all.

No matter how steep and long the uphill climb was, she merely judged how much muscle fatigue had built up, then attached the label hardship to that judgment.

The label was always a blank pale beige. It never became dyed in the hue of emotions like "I want to give up" or "I do not want to ride a bicycle."

"Wow."

Not anymore.

"Ji-won, stop for a second."

"Yes? We still have to pedal for another twenty minutes before we reach our destination."

"No. Look at that sunset over there."

Screech. They stopped their bicycles for a moment in the middle of the uphill road, and Yu Ji-won turned her head after Go Yuir.

'Red. Orange. A faint wine color.'

Yu Ji-won looked up at the surface expressionlessly.

'One side of the sky is already night. Given the time, in ten more minutes the twilight will rapidly lose its colors. We must arrive at our destination before night falls.'

'The wind is cool. If we remain stopped like this, our sweat may cool and our body heat may rapidly drain away.'

Yu Ji-won turned her gaze expressionlessly. Go Yuir's face was there in profile, his lips slightly parted.

"It's beautiful..."

"..."

Bubbles.

Skin. Muscle. Bone. Heart.

Thump.

'Beautiful.'

Thump.

'This is the emotion called beauty.'

Thump. Thump.

'Mr. Matiz's beauty.'

Once more, Yu Ji-won looked up at the sunset.

The world was dyed red. The clouds had dissolved bath salts into the sky. Along the fine cracks drawn across the heavens, the cry of cicadas trickled down.

"..."

Yu Ji-won smiled.

"Yes."

Resting her head against Go Yuir, intertwining their fingers tightly, she said,

"It is beautiful."

Long ago.

Yu Ji-won had already known that she was not a psychopath.

She was merely empty. Sunlight rarely reached down into this deep sea, and even when it did, it came only as the shadow of light, so Yu Ji-won could do no more than grope at the outlines of the world beyond the surface as shadows.

She still could not know the world.

The only smile she knew was his smile.

The only pain she knew was his pain.

The only beauty she knew was his beauty.

"Truly, it's beautiful."

And for her, that was enough.

Because there was someone by her side who breathed the breath her heart needed to beat, in her place.

She considered herself happy to have been born in this abyss beneath the sea.

-That Woman Y. End.

Footnotes:

1 - A reference to philosopher Edmund Gettier's challenge to the classical definition of knowledge as "justified true belief." The point here is that belief and reality are not the same.

Chapter 464

The That Woman C I

Sinnoa

* * *

Click.

"Ji-won, stop for a second."

"Yes? We still have twenty more minutes of pedaling before we reach our destination."

"No. Look at the sunset over there."

...

"It's beautiful..."

"Yes. It is beautiful."

...

"Truly... beautiful."

"..."

[1. Now that the reincarnator has been killed, world annihilation is inevitable. From here on, live out your remaining days for the girl in front of you alone.]

[2. You struggle alongside them. To the very end.]

Click.

[2. You struggle alongside them. To the very end.] ◀

Click.

[ERROR.]

[That selection is impossible.]

Click.

[ERROR.]

[That selection is impossible.]

Click.

[ERROR.]

[That selection is impossible.]

[That selection constitutes a clear alteration of the past and gravely violates causality.]

[Even if the player chooses this option at this point, no meaningful ending can be derived.]

[Please choose a different option.]

"Ji-won."

"Yes, Mr. Matiz."

"I don't think this route is wrong. No. I won't let this route be judged as the wrong one."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand what you mean."

"You killed Go Yuri for my sake. Maybe Go Yuri's death wasn't right, but the heart behind it, the part of you that thought of me, that can't have been wrong."

"..."

[ERROR.]

[Please choose a different option.]

"In the end, it's our actions that decide whether a heart is right or wrong. I want to prove that you weren't mistaken."

"..."

"We'll probably fail. Fail miserably, even. The reincarnator's project has run aground, so I'll never awaken as a regressor. Most of the strategy intel I got from Go Yuri has probably gone useless too."

"Yes. I imagine that's true."

"Even so, will you live alongside me?"

"..."

[ERROR.]

[Please choose a different option.]

"Spend one single life, one that will linger in no reincarnator's memory and in no regressor's record, just struggling pointlessly at my side."

[ERROR.]

[Please choose a different option.]

"Your hand."

[ERROR.]

[Please choose a different option.]

"Will you take my hand, Mr. Matiz?"

[ERROR.]

[Please choose a different option.]

"...Yes, I can feel it. So clearly. So vividly."

[ERROR.]

[Please choose a different option.]

"Fear. Worry. Tenderness. Despair. Trust. Ice that looks ready to melt at any moment under a summer sun. Ice as transparent as crystal."

"..."

"I see. So this is the future you picture for the two of us, Mr. Matiz."

[ERROR.]

[Please choose a different option.]

"I think it's beautiful."

...

"As long as I'm with you, Mr. Matiz."

...

"Even the most meaningless world and the most useless life will always be the most beautiful music to me."

[You struggle alongside them.]

[To the very end.]

* * *

There were no land-owning nobles on the Korean Peninsula.

There were, of course, a number of factions you might call local magnates or men of influence. But set them next to the genuine magnates of the Japanese archipelago right next door, and the reaction you'd get was more along the lines of "oh my, how adorable."

This did not mean the noble class of the Korean Peninsula had fallen, though. If anything, it was the exact opposite.

They had simply escaped the supremely "material" condition of land

and achieved a loftier, more "spiritual" ascension instead.

A few disloyal ruffians called this noble collective, with their attained state of spiritual transcendence, a "pseudo-religious cult," but that was nothing to fret over.

After all, how could it suit a noble's dignity to answer the rudeness of every last lowborn?

"Young lady."

"Hm?"

"Allow me to report on the search operation you ordered last time."

The heiress of a family that reigned in Sejong, the spiritual capital of the Republic of Korea, as nobles even more spiritual than the rest, the lady Cheon Yo-hwa, did not particularly lend an ear to the opinions of lowborn folk either.

"Order? Ah. You mean Teacher Go Yuri?"

"Yes. We secured the cooperation of the police and conducted a search centered on her residence, but we couldn't pick up her trail at all."

"At all?"

"That's right. We confirmed she entered her residence on a specific date, and it was even cross-verified, but after that her whereabouts go completely cold."

Cheon Yo-hwa let out a hum and propped her chin in her hand.

"She went into her house and vanished. Then, simply put, there's just a secret passage in the house, isn't there? Our house has plenty of them too. Underground secret passages."

"That's just it..."

The Cult official let his words trail off.

"I cleared out the police and searched the house from top to bottom. The yard too. But I really couldn't find a single trace."

"Anyone else come or go?"

"No one."

"What? Then you're telling me she really evaporated into thin air?"

"I have no excuse..."

The back seat of the limousine. By order of her father, the cult leader, all manner of listening devices had been installed here, but that didn't matter.

Anything she truly couldn't let her father find out, she wouldn't have discussed with her subordinates here in the first place.

In any case, "Teacher Go Yuri" was a benefactor among benefactors, the one who taught her and her younger sister how to win their freedom.

Above all, the teacher's disappearance was a great source of worry not just for the twin sisters but for her father as well.

If word spread that she, the heiress and his daughter, was working this hard, running around like this, then at worst it would earn her points with her father, never a minus mark.

'Or maybe not? Maybe it's too blatant, like I'm leaning on the listening devices too hard, and that's a minus?'

After carefully gauging her father's twisted temperament, Cheon Yo-hwa's lips curved smoothly.

"Honestly. Please try a little harder, Uncle. Teacher Go Yuri isn't just some ordinary tutor, you know? Haven't you heard the rumors?"

"Erm. Young lady, if you mean the rumors..."

"My father's, you know. This. This one."

Cheon Yo-hwa smirked.

"No."

The official's expression turned to panic.

"Th-that's a baseless rumor, isn't it, young lady. It wasn't long ago that we dealt with the servant who leaked talk about that..."

"Come on. I don't know what the truth is either. But considering how foully the rumor spread and yet Teacher Go Yuri came away without a single hair harmed, she'd clearly secured my father's favor at the very least, wouldn't she?"

"I, I'll pretend I didn't hear that just now."

The official cleared his throat.

"The Reverend is extremely wary of street gossip of that kind. As you well know, young lady... Isn't it the single greatest obstacle to bringing ordinary young people into the Cult's operations?"

"Ordinary people? Ah, the Oechul lot[1]? Why would I care? Whether or not some clots of flesh who weren't even chosen by Taeguk[2] come in."

"Young lady. The Reverend will be furious if he hears that..."

"Yes, yes. Nagging again."

Cheon Yo-hwa swallowed a smile far more sinister than the one showing on her face.

This was about right.

Through this exchange, she had implied that she knew nothing at all about "the fact that listening devices were installed in the limousine."

And going further, that she had a "marked tendency to blindly separate pure-blooded believers from new converts."

'Just about the flavor my super control freak father likes. Well, whatever.'

The heiress Cheon Yo-hwa's range of movement and way of thinking remained under the control of her father, the cult leader...

The so-called "Yo-hwa is still a pure little papa's girl >_<)!!" operation.

It would be hard to put an end to her father's pathological suspicion with a single secret chat, but as the saying goes, dust piles into mountains. The preservative that extended the shelf life of his trust would grow a touch stronger, bit by bit.

That was when the limousine came to a somewhat abrupt stop.

"Eugh."

Cheon Yo-hwa, seated in the back, lurched slightly. As for the official across from her, he toppled outright and briefly did a bit of knee-cleaning on the limousine floor.

"You bastards... Hey, what's going on!"

The official shouted, his face going red.

Bang! Apparently eager to bury the fact that he'd embarrassed himself as fast as possible, he kicked the door open with a roar and stormed outside.

"Don't you know the young lady's aboard right now? Huh?"

"S-sorry. Some madman suddenly threw himself into the road..."

"What?"

"It's true. There, that guy."

A great commotion.

Cheon Yo-hwa quietly lowered her window, to see what all the fuss was about.

She was, by nature, a romantic who chased the extraordinary over the everyday, war over peace, dopamine over enlightenment.

The lowborn might counter with "isn't it just that she likes stirring up trouble?", but the noble eardrums of Cheon Yo-hwa, the puppet-master heiress, would never lose to such low-grade slander.

'A person cut in? Is it someone with a screw loose? Or some fool who handed over his entire fortune to our dear father? Which scenario is it?'

What she saw through the lowered window was not someone with a screw loose.

'Oh.'

The face attached to that head was somewhat out of the ordinary, though.

'Bit good-looking?'

A bit of a look about him.

But Cheon Yo-hwa had never once thought of herself as weak to a pretty face.

Especially when the man in question had blocked her vehicle's path, nearly caused an accident, and was, as a result, being subdued by her bodyguards in real time, it became all the harder to judge a person by their face alone.

"Lady Cheon Yo-hwa! Lady Cheon Yo-hwa, please hear me out!"

"What are you doing, you idiot! Subdue him! I said subdue him!"

"No, this guy, he looks scrawny, but where's he getting this strength..."

"All of you, pile on at once! Pile on! Now!"

A crashing, banging tumble.

The man, who looked like a college freshman at the oldest, was, surprisingly, putting up quite a fight even while ringed in by four bodyguards.

It was a losing battle, of course.

They were no ordinary bodyguards but elites selected to protect the heiress. Every one of them a Naechul believer, able to wield at least a little divine power.

"Young lady! Lady Cheon Yo-hwa!"

'Hmm.'

Cheon Yo-hwa rested her elbow on the window frame and propped her chin. A grinning smile hung on her lips.

'The blow-his-whole-fortune scenario after all? He knows my name and where I'm headed, so he's no total stranger to all this. If he's risking his life to report something in person, then, well, "please clear my name," that sort of thing.'

Cheon Yo-hwa's eyes narrowed.

'And he's got a nice build too.'

'No idea how much he donated to my father, but if it's under three hundred million, should I just take him for myself?'

Not bad.

Watching him finally get pinned from behind by the bodyguards and flung onto the concrete, watching the sorry sight of him squirming like a worm to wriggle free somehow, it started to feel more and more "not bad."

"Lady Cheon Yo-hwa!"

'Heh. Nice voice too.'

She wasn't exactly a sadist obsessed with torture.

To begin with, torture carried out from a position of "overwhelming superiority" over "an already captured opponent" was far removed from the puppet-master heiress's refined tastes.

She had only mastered its techniques.

Cheon Yo-hwa had done so in a thoroughly professional manner. To prove her qualifications and rigor as the heiress. To harvest recognition and respect in front of her father and the believers.

In short, she had learned the arts of torture in the spirit of a diligent farmer.

'That man, somehow... I want to torment him. Yeah.'

That was the strange part.

She'd met him for the first time today. She had never felt anything like this before, and yet, oddly... no. Wait.

A man she'd met for the first time?

Cheon Yo-hwa's brow furrowed faintly. Was he really a man she was seeing for the first time?

'Strange. There's this, this nagging feeling like I've definitely seen him somewhere...'

"My name is Go Yuir!"

Blink.

Cheon Yo-hwa blinked.

"I'm Go Yuir, Go Yuri's younger brother! The one who aced the college entrance exam and got into a prestigious university, whose religion is Taoism! The interview! The one who was supposed to be hired as your tutor, taking over after my sister!"

'...Ah.'

Only then did her mind light up bright. So much so that she clapped

her hands together without thinking.

Right. That was it! He was "that" successor Teacher Go Yuri had sung the praises of every single day, every chance she got!

'The high schooler ID photo guy!'

What this meant was that when Teacher Go Yuri bragged about how handsome her little brother was, the photo she pulled out happened to be a "national ID card photo."

Naturally there was no retouching to speak of, and the pose was as stiff as could be. The hairstyle was plain itself.

And yet it was a face that made it roughly clear why Teacher Go Yuri doted on him so foolishly, so the impression had been filed away, gathering dust, in a corner of the study in Cheon Yo-hwa's mind.

'Whoa. The real thing was way better, huh?'

"Lady Cheon Yo-hwa! Young lady!"

'No. Hmm, maybe he's the type who blossomed after entering university...'

"Please, even just for a moment, talk with me!"

'Right, college really is nature's plastic surgeon, nature's dermatologist...'

"Young laaaaaadyyyy!"

Oh.

Cheon Yo-hwa realized she'd gotten too absorbed in the show. The man named Go Yuir was already being beaten to a pulp by the believers.

Cheon Yo-hwa lightly opened the back door.

"Uncle. Stop hitting him."

"A-young lady?"

"He says he has a clue about Teacher Go Yuri's disappearance. We were just talking about that anyway, so this worked out well."

"Still, a man of unknown identity like this...!"

"Ah, how tiresome. Enough. Uncle, you ride in another car. Bring our guest over here."

The Cult official shut his mouth.

When it came to Cheon Yo-hwa, the word "tiresome" was a kind of warning. A line being drawn. That if he kicked up any more noise here, it wouldn't end well for him.

The official did not want his innards "harvested," so he had no choice but to bow his head.

"...Understood. Hey. Bring the guest."

"Ah. Yes."

A short while later.

The limousine began running down the asphalt road again. Inside it, Cheon Yo-hwa and the man sat facing each other.

The man's appearance was, to put it kindly, a complete mess.

Scraped along the road, crumpled by fists. Covered in scratches. His lip too had been grazed against the asphalt and was bleeding.

"Hmm."

Cheon Yo-hwa crossed her legs.

"You're bleeding, you know. I don't know what you wanted to talk about so badly that you'd pull a crazy stunt like this, but how about wiping your mouth first?"

"Ah."

The man lightly wiped his lip with the back of his hand. Spots of blood came away, and he glanced at it from beneath his eyelids before losing interest.

"It's fine. I've already lost all my manners in how I treat you, young lady."

The man looked at her straight on. Blood still smeared a little at his mouth. With a gaze the wounds could neither cover nor trample down.

"In that case, the least I can do is show you my sincerity."

Thump.

"..."

Huh?

'Hm?'

'Hmmm...? Hm-hm? Hmmmm?'

Cheon Yo-hwa's smile wavered slightly.

What the.

Don't tell me... am I a sucker for a pretty face?

Footnotes:

1 - Oechul, literally "outsider," is the Cult's coined term for non-believers; it is paired with "Naechul," the term for insiders and believers.

2 - Taeguk is the established name of the anomaly invoked by the Cult here.

Chapter 465

The That Woman C II

Sinnoa

* * *

Cheon Yo-hwa, in all honesty, had never once thought of herself as a chosen human being.

She was simply a bit smarter than most, prettier, blessed with abundant wealth, gifted with a silver tongue, brimming with charisma, and, the deciding factor, favored by a god.

She was not truly special. That was how she regarded herself.

If the commoners outside the manor had heard her, they would have switched their citizenship to French on the spot and put in an order for a guillotine. That was the level of nonsense it was.

'My life's going to get burned up as god-nim's Sacrifice Number One anyway if I can't deal with Father somehow. What's so special about that?'

Cheon Yo-hwa had her own logic, her own circumstances.

'If I'm special, it's the way two-plus hanwoo[2] is special. Are Yo-hwa or I even human?'

That was right.

In this silver-spoon young lady's estimation, she herself was not yet human.

Could a human ruled and bred like livestock by aliens be called human? That was just a monkey that had shed a little of its fur.

Whether one seized freedom for oneself or not, that alone was, for Cheon Yo-hwa, the measure of whether humanity was present or

absent.

"Ahahahahat! Aha, ahahahaha!"

In that sense, the man before her, the one who had thrown himself into the road and brazenly demanded a one-on-one meeting, had at least succeeded in drawing Cheon Yo-hwa's interest.

"G, Go Yuri is a, a reincarnator?"

"Yes."

"R, reincarnation, that's, you know? Like Gung Ye?[1] Hmmmm. I know all about it, too. Our father used to use the Maitreya Buddha title now and then in the old days. And on top of that, Teleportation... pfft. Ahahat! Th, the setup is way too over the top!"

"I'm aware it sounds preposterous."

A reception room set off in one corner of the great manor.

Not Reception Room A but Reception Room B, a place built for somewhat less important guests. It was also one of the few spaces inside the manor free from her father's eavesdropping.

On the reception room wall, the certificates and trophies the twin sisters had accumulated over the years glinted with a golden sheen inside their glass display case.

"But I believe even you, young lady, have sensed in some subtle way that my sister Go Yuri was special."

"Yep. But that doesn't prove she was a reincarnator."

"An outsider, no more than a mere Oechul, won the Cult Leader's favor in the span of only a few years. She even monopolized the heirs' education from when they were very young."

"..."

"And there was no serious backlash or grumbling about it inside the Cult either. It defies common sense, and if so, that means she was a

being beyond common sense."

Hmm. Cheon Yo-hwa let her gaze slide downward.

'That much is true.'

It had already been forty minutes since she had brought him to the manor.

Cheon Yo-hwa had launched a barrage of questions from every angle.

The point of attack was a single one. 'Is this man really, definitely Go Yuri's younger sibling?'

Cheon Yo-hwa's verdict on that was...

'Ninety percent. No, almost a hundred?'

She had already had her sister run a background check. The message that had just arrived on her smartphone was the result.

[Pet Sis♡: Sis, I got into the newspaper articles from a few years back and that school's records and checked.]

[Pet Sis♡: It's the same person the teacher said was her younger sibling. He went on a trip to Japan a little while ago, then rushed back home.]

Tap tap. Cheon Yo-hwa moved only her fingers beneath the tablecloth to send a message.

It was a dedicated messenger that ran only inside the Cult, impossible to hack by ordinary means. It was, after all, an object that borrowed 'god-nim's' authority.

[Heaven-and-Earth-Unique-One: The murder case said to have happened near Fukuoka?]

[Pet Sis♡: Checked through three separate channels via local Japanese Cult members.]

Blink. She must have already drawn up a list of the questions her twin sister was likely to ask, because the answers came back as if she had been waiting for them.

[Pet Sis♡: It's a dismemberment murder.]

[Pet Sis♡: A dumped corpse was found at the location you gave me. Identity unknown. I couldn't make out the body's features exactly. But the clothing it had on is definitely the teacher's.]

[Pet Sis♡: I'll send photos.]

A stream of them came through.

Photos that should still have been shared only inside the local investigation headquarters were uploaded as if it were nothing. Looking at them, Cheon Yo-hwa's brow stiffened.

'Teacher... it's her, yeah.'

A corner of her heart went cold.

'And she'd been such a self-contained person.'

'Once even the teacher is dead, she's just a corpse.'

She closed her smartphone.

At that, the man, who had been watching her with a serious gaze the entire time, gave a slight nod.

"You've confirmed it, it seems."

"..."

"To secure the data in barely thirty minutes. The Cult's power really is formidable. No, perhaps it's the power of you young ladies, who can pull the Cult's resources this far."

How much does this man know?

The corner of Cheon Yo-hwa's lips curved up of its own accord.

"All right. Let's set aside the whole reincarnator business and just look at the facts on the table for now. So Go Yuri was killed by none other than you."

"That's right."

"Then why should I lend an ear to a scoundrel who got rid of the teacher I served with affection deeper than I gave my own parents, no, deeper than my parents? No matter how I look at it, revenge seems like the right answer."

"..."

"I could distort the facts and claim my sister and I caught the culprit by our own strength alone. I'd earn some points with Father. I could also slice you up alive in front of the congregation and hand you out as salted fish paste[3]."

Cheon Yo-hwa propped her chin on her hand.

The truth was, she had no real intention of reclassifying that man's biological category into ground meat.

Well, she might at most work him like a slave under the pretext of 'granting you a suffering in life worse than death.'

'His voice was pretty when I heard it earlier. Even just locking him in the basement and playing his cries on loop would relieve some stress.'

Even now, just looking at the man, dozens of torture methods popped, pa-ba-bat, into her head.

Unlike the usual indifference with which she handled her 'Sacrifices,' today alone her creativity surged up like fireworks, bursting again and again.

'Justification, profit, and a hobby, all satisfied. A triple crown!'

A chance like this would not come around day in, day out. Today, for the first time, Cheon Yo-hwa realized her heart could water with greed too.

"I beg your pardon, but you, young lady, have more than enough reason to build a cooperative relationship with me."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because I killed your tutor, a person 'whose death you couldn't even imagine,' without a soul being the wiser."

"?"

Cheon Yo-hwa tilted her head.

"And why is that a reason to cooperate?"

"Because in your world, the people 'whose deaths you couldn't even imagine' number not one, but two."

"..."

In that instant, Cheon Yo-hwa's mind bristled as if jolted by static electricity.

Her heart began to pound, in an entirely different sense from a moment before. Her lips parted, and her eyes went wide.

The man simply looked her dead in the eye, calm.

"Doesn't it tempt you?"

"..."

"If it's me, I can take care of it for certain."

Who?

There was no need to ask.

'Father.'

The very apex of the Cult clan that had laid its foundations on this land and spread its religious power in every direction.

The great enemy that she and her younger sister had to annihilate

without fail in order to breathe, in order to live as human beings.

Freedom.

"..."

After a long while passed, Cheon Yo-hwa parted her lips.

"How?"

"There's someone I'd like to introduce to you."

The man, Go Yuir, smiled.

"My family."

* * *

Not long after.

Cheon Yo-hwa came face to face with the secret of how a tutor who had seemed so perfect could have been wiped out in an instant without even putting up a proper fight.

Kwarrrrrr.

"..."

In the distance, a four-story derelict building collapsed in on itself. Watching it, Cheon Yo-hwa could only gape.

Huh? Could that building have been made of tofu instead of concrete?

No way. That was one our Cult used in the old days and then threw away.

"This child is called Yu Ji-won. As you can see, she possesses an ability that can destroy and cut through anything."

While a cloud of dust billowed up behind her, the girl bent at the waist in a bow.

"I'm Yu Ji-won. Young lady. You may regard and treat me as Mr. Matiz's tool."

"Ah. U, uh-huh..."

Cheon Yo-hwa's voice dropped in volume without her realizing it.

To be honest, she was rattled.

It was not solely because the child introduced as 'Yu Ji-won' was extremely pretty.

If you put a power-user who could turn a building into a 'build/ing'[4] from a full three hundred meters away right under your nose, anyone would be a little rattled.

"Uh. The devout believers in our Cult, and I myself, can play around in various ways, but your side is a little, how should I put it. A touch on the violent side...?"

"You flatter me. Young lady."

That wasn't a compliment, though.

Cheon Yo-hwa found it impossible to settle her pounding heart.

'It's simple. A really simple, efficient, easy-to-understand ability...!'

Violence about as intuitive as it got.

There was no need to laboriously cook up bizarre, intricate schemes. She just had to seize the chance and slice-and-dice her father away, and that was that.

'Good heavens! God-nim! If only you'd bestowed an authority this simple on us instead of data analysis and all that garbage!'

Cheon Yo-hwa found herself resenting the heavens all over again.

'What's the point of making talismans and offering Sacrifices a hundred days running! It's worse than the cutting power that girl swings around!'

It was only an emotional matter, of course.

If she had truly had an ability like Yu Ji-won's, there was no way her father would have meekly acknowledged her position as heir. The gaslighting would have come first, far more brutal than it was now.

'A, anyway, the enslavement plan is scrapped!'

'If I carelessly mistreat the man a crazy monster like that calls her comrade, who knows what calamity would come crashing down on us sisters?!'

Cheon Yo-hwa felt as if she had aged ten years. Rarely had her habit of not rashly showing her inner thoughts felt as much a blessing as it did this day.

"O, kay, um. All right."

Ahem. Cheon Yo-hwa cleared her throat.

"So Go Yuir and Yu Ji-won..."

"Please feel free to address me however you like. Young lady. I am no more than Mr. Matiz's tool, so there's no need at all to mind your words."

"...Yu Ji-won."

Only then did the girl give a nod of her chin.

'Scary!'

Not so much as a single spoonful of emotion came through in her eyes or her face, so Cheon Yo-hwa's delicate heart shrank back even further.

"...I'll admit now that you can wreck my father all you want."

Color came to Go Yuir's face.

"Then you'll cooperate with us? Young lady?"

"Yes, of course. Roughly, I'll use my authority to register Go Yuir and Yu Ji-won as Oechul, then when the angle presents itself, we kill Father. We'll designate the specific time and place from our side."

"Thank you! Young lady!"

Go Yuir threw himself down in a bow.

Yu Ji-won, who had been plastered right up against Go Yuir's side, knelt down on the bare earth without hesitation. Cheon Yo-hwa was horrified.

"No no no, uh. Ah, c, comrades! We're cooperating comrades now! There's no need for you to use such formal honorifics!"

Go Yuir didn't budge an inch.

"We'll keep relying on your help, young lady, to accomplish the great undertaking ahead, so how could I dare hold my head up stiff? I only ask that you look kindly on us."

'Why is a duo that could assassinate the President of the United States just by getting close so abjectly humble?!'

Cheon Yo-hwa was going out of her mind.

'She can assassinate a target hundreds of meters away with no presence, no stance! If she can attack, she could surely be used for defense too!'

'Since there's no telling when that blank-faced girl might slice us sisters apart...! I absolutely have to keep them happy. Absolutely!'

After a whole round of fuss, she finally managed to get the pair back on their feet.

A sigh of relief slowly slipped out of her.

'Father. ...I really can kill him.'

A feeling hard to put into words.

While they made their way down, leaving the 'build/ing' behind, Cheon Yo-hwa glanced back at Yu Ji-won.

"Oh, right."

"...?"

"I forgot to ask. What reason did you have for killing the teacher?"

"You mean Go Yuri."

Yu Ji-won answered, blank-faced.

"Go Yuri seized Mr. Matiz's life and wouldn't let it go."

That the bizarre title 'Mr. Matiz' pointed to the man, she had already guessed.

The part that pulled at Cheon Yo-hwa's interest lay elsewhere.

"Seized his life and wouldn't let it go?"

"Yes. Go Yuri was a reincarnator. To stop the danger of the world annihilation that was going to come blowing in, she chose Mr. Matiz as a chess piece."

"Hehh..."

"And to keep the chess piece from moving as it pleased, she went and turned the whole world around Mr. Matiz into a chessboard."

Yu Ji-won reached out and took Go Yuir's hand.

"But the world is not a chessboard."

"..."

"At the very least, I cannot permit Mr. Matiz's world being treated that way. So I removed her."

It was clear language.

'Freedom.'

Cheon Yo-hwa could recognize that transparency.

It was not because she herself was as transparent as the girl before her. It was the very opposite.

Because she was murky from head to toe, she could, by contrast, recognize the transparency she lacked.

'The condition for a human to be human.'

Just then a remarkable thing happened. Trivial, in a way, but to Cheon Yo-hwa's eyes an astonishing event unfolded.

A smile had come to the lips of the girl who had seemed as if she would stay blank-faced forever and ever.

That smile was looking up at the man whose hand she was holding.

The man, too, with a faint smile of his own, stroked Yu Ji-won's head.

'Ah...'

Not a single word had passed between them, but Cheon Yo-hwa's keen mind understood everything.

Respect, regard, love, trust, affection, tolerance, understanding. Whatever the word.

In the 'bond' set before her now there existed something different from the relationship she had formed with Go Yuri, or the one she shared with her younger sister, some texture in the very air.

And that she might, perhaps, never for all eternity have any part to play in that bond.

A sharp pang.

"..."

Cheon Yo-hwa pressed a hand to her chest without thinking.

A wound she didn't even know she had was already waiting there, a

little ahead of her.

Footnotes:

1 - Gung Ye (c. 869-918) was a real Korean warlord and founder of the kingdom of Taebong who proclaimed himself the incarnate Maitreya Buddha and claimed to possess the supernatural power to read people's minds. He is a byword in Korea for a megalomaniac who believes himself divine.

2 - A reference to hanwoo (premium native Korean cattle) graded '1 + +' (read 'two-plus'), the top quality tier; the joke is that the sisters are 'prime livestock' bred by their god rather than people.

3 - Jeotgal, Korean salted and fermented seafood, traditionally chopped fine and distributed in jars; she is threatening to mince him up and share him out among the congregation.

4 - Wordplay in the original: the Korean word for building, romanized as 'geonmul,' is split into 'geon/mul' to evoke being sliced clean in two by the girl's cutting ability.

Chapter 466

The That Woman C III

Sinnoa

* * *

Time slipped by fast. When people threw themselves into something they loved, the hours just deleted themselves.

In that sense, Cheon Yo-hwa had discovered a new hobby. Filial piety.

She racked her brains day and night over how to serve her father as devotedly as humanly possible, and, well, goodness. A few years had simply flowed past, hadn't they?

With the big day approaching, Cheon Yo-hwa launched into a final inspection alongside her beloved younger sister.

"How many of the executives have crossed over to our side?"

"Forty percent. But most of them are from HR and finance, so the losses are basically nothing. If anything, this makes the organization healthier."

"Don't get cocky! Keep checking the police and prosecution sections all the way to the end."

"It's fine, unni. We routed sixty billion won through Japan and fed it to them, so do you really think they'd betray us? If the bribery scandal blows up, they'll be the ones ruined first. I'm actually more suspicious of those people over there, what was it, Yu Ji-won, Go Yuir, whatever their names are. Can we really trust them?"

"Now of all times? And if we can't trust them, then what? Without the materials they handed over, forget forty percent, we'd be lucky to scrape twenty."

"Hmm..."

Her sister tilted her head.

'Ugh.'

At moments like this, Cheon Yo-hwa felt a little stifled.

'Whether or not we trust them, the hilt of the knife is in their hands anyway, so what's the point of debating this, little sister.'

But she didn't bother letting any of it show on her face.

Hadn't she known since they were children that her twin's intelligence lagged a step behind her own?

And besides, her sister sometimes flashed an intuition that surpassed her. Well, everyone had their own specialty.

"But unni."

"What?"

"We've ended up in a relationship that shares a secret this enormous. Even if he's Go Yuri's brother and all, you can't just hand out trust to anyone."

No, it isn't a matter of trust, it's a matter of power, she was about to answer, when her sister's lips moved first.

"I really think it's better to bind them through marriage. Unni."

...?

"Huh?"

The voice that leaked out after a brief silence sounded, even to Cheon Yo-hwa's own ears, thoroughly stupefied.

Her sister stared at that face of hers like it was strange.

"Why are you making that face? We're allies, but the collateral is uncertain so we're uneasy. In a case like that, there's no method

more orthodox and efficient than marriage."

"...Uh, uh-huh?"

"You said he's a university student. Hasn't done his military service. So compared to those decrepit old men they tried to set up marriage talks with when we were little, he's way better. Oh, is his face just really ugly?"

"That, no, it's not. But still."

"Huh? Then what's actually the problem?"

"..."

Wee-woo wee-woo wee-woo wee-woo.

Cheon Yo-hwa's head, which only moments ago had been ice cold while discussing the power structure inside the Cult, was instantly thrown into an uproar of red sirens.

But say what you would, she was the puppet master daughter of the Cult. When had she never had an experience of panicking like this?

Cheon Yo-hwa held on to extreme composure and, to all outward appearances, kept talking to her sister without a hitch.

"Eh... come on! Marriage is a bit much. Yo-hwa. Think about what kind of house our family is. Ahaha, that guy's dirt poor. Total dirt spoon1! The standing of his household just doesn't match, not at all."

"Hm? What's the problem? Bring him in as a live-in son-in-law."

Wee-woo wee-woo wee-woo.

"Family standing and all that nonsense, the only ones who ever cared about it were father and the elders. We're going to lop off all the old men's necks with this very opportunity, aren't we. Unni's going to seize complete power over the Cult. So the more humble our marriage partner's household, the better, no? If the partner's family had high standing, in this case it'd just mean more

meddling."

"..."

"Huh?! Or unni, don't tell me, do you actually have a man you've got your heart set on? S-sorry. I just could never picture you dating in a normal, human kind of way, so I went and assumed...!"

Her sister put on a solemn expression.

"It can't be helped, then. In that case I'll get engaged to him in your place, so that..."

"That is absolutely not allowed!!"

Her sister Yo-hwa jumped at the sudden shout.

"Why are you yelling all of a sudden?"

"T-that's, that. That's..."

"If you don't want to get married, unni, then I'll just marry him. Of course, it's a little odd since he's someone you've never once introduced to me, but."

Her sister smiled, as if to reassure her.

"You don't have to worry about me, unni. A political marriage is something I've been prepared for since I was seven, so it doesn't bother me."

"..."

That wasn't the problem!

The truth was... exactly as she'd just said, Cheon Yo-hwa had never once let her sister meet Go Yuir face to face. Deliberately!

"Why are you hiding him away so tightly," "Aren't we comrades who planned the big day together," "Shouldn't we at least see each other's faces and have a self-introduction time," and so on, no matter how reasonable the opinions her sister put forward, she'd

kept ignoring them all.

There was an extremely rational reason for this.

'It's a guarantee! My taste in men and Yo-hwa's taste are guaranteed to overlap...!'

Cold sweat trickled down the back of her neck.

It was broth wrung out not by the body but by the DNA itself.

Why else would Go Yuri have gone out of her way to choose Go Yuir as her successor in the first place?

Wasn't it a scheme to hook and devour both twin sisters, noble daughters of the Korean Peninsula, all the way down to the marrow?

Was it even possible to escape a honey trap plotted by a reincarnator?

'And this is purely my hunch, but...'

Cheon Yo-hwa shot her sister a glance.

"?"

Her sister was tilting her head with an utterly innocent face.

'That girl is the type who's terrifying when it comes to love!'

Cheon Yo-hwa, who knew exactly what kind of violence hid behind her sister's purity, could only shudder.

'There's a goalkeeper, so she'll cleanly give up? No way, no way, absolutely no way.'

'She'll murder the goalkeeper and then say, "Oh, it's stained red with blood, so this is a human red card, right? Hurry up and process the sending-off"!'

'This coin's already crashed as it is, and I can't let you, Yo-hwa, get trapped holding the bag too...!'

Having reached her judgment at light speed, Cheon Yo-hwa began reciting her lines like a robot.

"That guy already has a girlfriend."

"Eh? Really?"

"Yeah. And she's seven years younger."

"What?!"

"Apparently he's been seeing her since she was a middle schooler."

"That's insane. He's a complete psycho, isn't he?!"

Her sister was horrified. Just as expected.

Of course, she herself knew perfectly well that the relationship between Go Yuir and Yu Ji-won wasn't "a dating thing." Well. Even rating it as generously as possible, it was platonic love at most.

But for the sake of her beloved sister... Cheon Yo-hwa was happy to sacrifice a thing like Go Yuir's reputation (she'd never exactly sought his consent).

"On top of that, before he started dating his current girlfriend, he and Go Yuri were in that kind of relationship."

"Eek?! Uh, uh-huh. Wait. Hold on, unni. That guy named Go Yuir. Didn't you clearly say he and Go Yuri were siblings...?"

"That's right."

Cheon Yo-hwa's expression turned exceedingly dark.

"In other words, this man named Go Yuir enjoyed the depravity of incest from a young age, and then after murdering Go Yuri, he gaslit the girl seven years his junior who'd taken part in the killing with him and made her his new lover."

"He's a total full-blown psycho, isn't he?!"

"Right?"

"At that level he's the trash of all trash, more questionable as a human being than even our father?!"

"No, that's... right. Yeah, yeah."

Cheon Yo-hwa barely managed to compose the emotion that nearly burst up out of her chest.

Composure. Composure and nothing else.

"And even though he already has a girlfriend, the way he looks at me is clearly suggestive."

Cheon Yo-hwa's gaze went wistful.

"I think he's probably coveting my exceptional looks. And my young age and status."

"Eeeeek..."

"But trash though he is, he's competent. No. Maybe it's precisely because he's trash that he's competent. Little sister. There's a saying, fight poison with poison, isn't there? For us to defeat the great evil that is our father... we have no choice but to join hands with the devil that is Go Yuir too."

Cheon Yo-hwa smiled.

"Even so, I don't want to watch my lovely little sister tie herself to a devil like that."

"Ah..."

"Even if a marriage does happen, it's right that I, the elder sister and the official heir, take responsibility for it. You, Yo-hwa, go live a happy life unbound by anything."

"Unni..."

Her sister's eyes went wistful too.

The two sisters laced their fingers together tightly. Performing all

sorts of rituals together in the Cult had made them used to a posture like this. Through their cool body heat, the sisters' warm affection passed between them.

Then, right in front of her, her sister grinned brightly.

"Hey, Cheon Yo-hwa. I'm just asking in case, but you're not pulling some dirty trick to keep that guy named Go Yuir all for yourself, are you?"

Sharp as hell. Scary little thing.

The elder sister grinned right back, perfectly unfazed.

"Aw, Cheon Yo-hwa. As if that could ever happen. You don't trust me? Trusting yourself is trusting me, and trusting me is trusting you. Because the two of us together are Cheon Yo-hwa..."

"If I catch you lying, I'll kill you. Unni?"

"I swear it. On your life and mine."

"Hmm."

Her sister gave a smiling-eyed look and released her grip. The brief squeeze had left Cheon Yo-hwa's fingers tingling.

"Well, fine. I'll trust you."

Cheon Yo-hwa felt like she'd shaved ten years off her life.

The next day, the big day finally went ahead. They raided the executive meeting and harvested the executives of their father's faction as easily as popping the heads off Lego figures.

They didn't pop off their father's neck. They made a special request to Yu Ji-won and had only his limbs trimmed up nice and pretty.

"Yo-hwa, how dare you... To forget the grace of raising you, the grace of bringing you up! How dare you!"

Their father resisted to the very end, summoning his divine power,

but it was useless.

The moment they ambushed him, they'd already cut off both his arms, sealing away most of his rituals. On top of that, the favor of "god-nim" had long since shifted from their father to the two sisters.

In less than three minutes the cult leader was completely subdued. Hearts pounding like mad, the twin sisters personally escorted their father to the underground torture chamber.

Flame Filial Piety. ON.

Since providing audiovisual material would violate moral restrictions on several fronts, only noise-cleaned audio will be attached here.

"Wait, unni! Ah! Ah, come on! How can you stab father like that! Have a conscience and leave somewhere for me to stab too!"

"Oops. Sorry, sorry. Whoa, looking at it like this, I think I get why humans are born with two eyes and two kidneys. God-nim must have arranged it all so that close sisters like us could split everything fifty-fifty and tear him apart. Yeah, yeah."

"Whoaaa. Look at how pitch-black the bone is. How much offering did he give god-nim to boast a 100 percent pure black like this?"

"Now then, father. I'll trim off the bits that are sticking out. Don't worry! They say when parents get old, the children clip their fingernails and toenails and all that for them."

"Snip-snip, snip-snip."

"Snippity-snip, snippity-snip♪"

"Wow, father's diet was a success!"

"That's our father. A middle-aged man of willpower! I never once doubted that father could shed the flab any time he set his mind to it!"

"My goodness. What kind of child runs the diet automatically on

their father's behalf? We really are dutiful daughters, unni."

"Of course. If we put up a memorial gate for dutiful daughters, we'd have to put up a thousand of them, like the torii at the Fushimi Inari Shrine over in Kyoto2."

"Wow! A human tourism and culture festival!"

"Do you understand, little sister? In the modern age, filial piety has become a truly intricate problem. Beyond serving father in life, ensuring that even in death he enjoys eternal, immortal fame. This, truly, is what we can call the true pinnacle of filial devotion..."

Over a full two hours, the twin sisters dissolved a lifetime of grudges.

"Hwaaah."

It had been a deeply rewarding stretch of time.

A slight post-high comedown. Feeling a deep satisfaction, Cheon Yo-hwa stretched out wiiide.

Ah. What would have become of her if she'd never had a time like this?

She probably would have grown into the kind of person who, forever unable to embrace her childhood trauma, dragged it around behind her like a shadow with every step...

Wasn't it truly fortunate? Finally able to be reborn as a normal person, Cheon Yo-hwa felt very proud of herself...

"Hm?"

The Lego heads still lay strewn about the scene. As Cheon Yo-hwa looked around to check she hadn't slipped up anywhere, something caught her eye.

Someone's right hand. The wrist that had run away from her father's arm of its own accord a little while ago.

"..."

She whipped her head around.

Cheon Yo-hwa glanced around. There was no one. Naturally, since for the sake of this day she had manipulated the followers' schedules and movement routes several times over.

Worried someone might be peeking, Cheon Yo-hwa quickly snatched up her father's severed hand.

Just as one prefers the drumstick when eating chicken, the part that monopolized her interest was limited to only a portion even of that severed hand.

'Fingerprint seal...'

Cheon Yo-hwa looked down at the fingers bearing her father's prints and gulped.

'With this, hmm. I can smoothly alter or draw up all sorts of documents.'

'For example, an engagement document... or a prenuptial agreement?'

Kyaaaaaaaaaa!

Cheon Yo-hwa's face turned red and she squirmed.

To someone, it might have been a cute little motion.

But given that a severed hand gushing blood currently sat in her arms, to most people of sound common sense it could only be a somewhat terrifying scene.

'I'm insane, insane, insane!'

'But my sister's suggestion to bring him in as a live-in son-in-law is rather reasonable. Even judging by my cool, clear-headed brain, it's a very scientific proposal.'

'Live-in son-in-law... Wouldn't it also look good to have one upstanding man standing beside me, now that I'm about to ascend as head of the house?'

'Oh, wait. Why not change his surname while we're at it? Legally he'd keep the name Go Yuir, but we all have separate names that we go by inside the Cult anyway.'

'Then...'

Cheon Yo-hwa muttered under her breath.

"Cheo... Cheon Yuir?"[3]

Kyaaaaaaaaaaa!

Cheon Yo-hwa couldn't take it anymore and threw herself face down on the floor, rolling around and around.

Her clothes got dirty from the various byproducts that had burst out of the corpse, but since she'd just finished showering in her father's flesh scraps anyway, it didn't matter.

'Insane. Insane, insane, insane!'

'Cheon Yuir... Cheon Yuir! My goodness! It's so destined! I'm Cheon Yo-hwa! And my husband is Cheon Yuir!'

'If this isn't a couple the heavens ordained, then what is it? Like, seriously, what?'

'The real trend isn't Yuir-Yuri or Yuir-Ji-won, it's Yuir-Yo-hwa. I mean, just from how it sounds it's an absolute curb-stomp...'

'Cheon Yuir. Yuir oppa? Yuir Oraboni? Yuir-ah.'

Tap.

In the middle of rolling all over the floor, Cheon Yo-hwa's shoulder bumped into something. Thinking it might be a chair leg, she looked up, and it was a leg, all right, but not a chair's.

It was Yu Ji-won.

The expressionless girl was staring down at her flatly.

"..."

"..."

Cheon Yo-hwa slowly got to her feet.

"Ahem, ahem."

She forced a cough into her own throat, all while keeping up, to the very end, the dignity of a cold, lofty, supremely confident puppet master daughter.

"Ah, you worked hard today, Miss Yu Ji-won."

"Not at all. The honor's yours, my lady."

"Thanks to you, Miss Ji-won, we don't even need to go to the trouble of disposing of the corpses, which is such a relief. I'll have you know I'm a person who remembers a kindness. I'll make sure you never have to worry about money for the rest of your life."

"I am most humbled, my lady."

Thump. Thump.

Behind the facial mask Cheon Yo-hwa had built through years of practice, a small heart was pattering away.

Cheon Yo-hwa anxiously wondered whether she had been heard. She had whispered it so quietly that there was no way, surely.

"Just in case, leave all the right and left wrists here and dispose of everything else, please. Oh, and the Cult has a method for making human-skin masks, so I'll ask you for the facial skin too."

"But of course."

The other girl's face still didn't waver in the slightest.

Only then could Cheon Yo-hwa let out a sigh of relief in her heart. Right. Thank goodness. She didn't hear.

"By the way, my lady."

"Yes?"

"Mr. Matiz's real name is not Cheon Yuir but Go Yuir. In case you'd misunderstood..."

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaak!!"

Puppet master daughter.

Dark history, deposited.

Footnotes:

1 - From Korean "spoon class" internet slang, which ranks people by inherited wealth: a "dirt spoon" is someone born poor, the opposite of a "gold spoon" born into riches.

2 - Fushimi Inari is a major Shinto shrine in Kyoto, Japan, famous for the Senbon Torii, thousands of densely packed vermilion torii gates forming long tunnels up the mountain.

3 - The Korean names Cheon Yo-hwa and Cheon Yuir share the surname Cheon and rhyme, making them sound like a neatly matched couple.

Chapter 467

The That Woman C IV

Sinnoa

* * *

Being honest with herself.

In Cheon Yo-hwa's own estimation, this kind of honesty was her very nature, for better or worse.

After all, just because the desire to kill one's father had coiled itself around your heart, how many people could look that blackish viper dead in the eye?

Cheon Yo-hwa could never bring herself to commit the one sin of self-deception. She simply couldn't.

So she had no choice but to admit it.

The girl seated across from her now, beautiful beyond words. Yu Ji-won.

She hated her. No question about it.

"Ji-won."

Cheon Yo-hwa smiled brightly.

"Is anything troubling you these days? Anything at all?"

"Nothing at all. It's all thanks to you, Reverend, for looking after Mr. Matiz and me."

Yu Ji-won bowed her head, courteous to the very end.

"I'm especially grateful that you've gone so far as to care for my grandmother. Truly, I can only offer my thanks."

"Aw, come now, it's nothing! Between us, this much is only natural!"

Two months had already passed since the special event [Your Father Is in the Middle of Succeeding to the Throne] had occurred.

In that time, Cheon Yo-hwa had been frantically busy updating the Cult's content.

First, as the new Administrator, she shored up popular sentiment by declaring that their game would keep sailing smoothly from here on. The traitors who raised objections got turned into seasoned meat patties along the way.

At long last, formidable power and wealth had been placed in Cheon Yo-hwa's hands. This was what winning at life looked like.

Influential figures from home and abroad came swarming in, claiming they wished to pay their respects to this little Reverend, and thanks to them Cheon Yo-hwa's threshold gleamed and shone, polished bright by all their socks.

She had seized the freedom she had craved so badly. Surely it was about time she let herself feel satisfied.

But... why was it?

An ache and a tingle she couldn't wipe away still lingered. A tiny current of static crackled somewhere around Cheon Yo-hwa's heart.

Especially while she was looking at the girl in front of her.

"I might not look it, but I'm a generous sort, you know. Ehehe. If a top contributor like our Ji-won wants it, I'd happily make you an officer in the Cult, as senior a post as you'd like, and hand it right over."

"No."

Yu Ji-won shook her head. Firmly.

So firmly that, for a moment, Cheon Yo-hwa wondered whether the power she'd grasped was really that shabby.

"I'm truly grateful that you would extend such an offer to someone like me. But there isn't much time left now."

"There isn't much time left...?"

"World annihilation, Reverend."

Yu Ji-won laid out a point she had already raised several times, calm as ever, as though she never tired of it.

"This world will soon fail to escape annihilation. The power you've taken into your hands, Reverend. My grandmother's whole life. Mr. Matiz. Every memory I hold."

"..."

"From the moment Go Yuri was killed, Mr. Matiz and I have been thinking, all along. We've been trying. This very moment, our existence as we struggle endlessly. How we might carry it across the forgetting and the void, and pass even a sliver of it on to the 'future.'"

"Hmmm."

Cheon Yo-hwa fanned herself.

The fingers riding the folding fan brimmed with a Reverend's ease. Yet the impatience nesting in her heart grew hotter and hotter.

"When the world is annihilated, even the trace that we existed right now vanishes. How exactly do you plan to pass that on to the next cycle... to some other future? To turn Mr. Go Yuir into a regressor you need Teacher Go Yuri, and you killed her. You did."

"There's a flaw in the phrase 'next cycle.'"

Yu Ji-won rested her chin on her hand. Expressionless.

All at once Cheon Yo-hwa wanted to scratch a mark into that blank face. It wasn't a desire she felt for the first time.

It was also a desire she'd failed at every single time.

"To put it more precisely, what we're after isn't simply the [next cycle], but the [cycle of the happy ending] in which Mr. Matiz finally manages to stop the world's annihilation."

"Aha...?"

"Even if we deliver the record of our existence to the next cycle, it means nothing if the world's annihilation isn't actually stopped. Our record would just be lost together with that cycle's annihilation."

Yu Ji-won spoke crisply. Not once did her pronunciation stumble, not once did her breathing fall out of step, to the point that it felt almost inhuman.

"And so, the 'time capsule' holding our record must, no matter what happens, be delivered to the world that comes after the happy ending."

"..."

The gist was simple.

Go Yuir and Yu Ji-won. For whatever reason, these two believed this world's annihilation could absolutely never be avoided.

There was no hope of any kind.

In that case they might as well hurry up and kill themselves to spare the pain. But they didn't do that either.

Having accepted annihilation, the two of them resolved to deliver a kind of record toward the future that would arrive someday, toward themselves in the 'cycle that saved the world.'

That was the so-called 'time capsule.'

'Seriously, they're insane. Both of them.'

To Cheon Yo-hwa it was absurd.

"Well. It's interesting, though. How?"

For starters, believing without a shred of doubt in the world's annihilation was already off its rocker. Maybe it was abnormal for the leader of a sham cult to think that way, too.

But what was even more absurd was the part where, after accepting such a ridiculous premise, they went looking for a 'practical breakthrough.'

Any deranged cultist could believe in an apocalyptic end. But preparing 'practical countermeasures' to avoid the end?

Usually in cases like this, a cultist's answer came down to heartfelt 'prayer' or sincere 'donations.'

But the conclusion Go Yuir and Yu Ji-won had reached was neither.

"First, we were able to learn that the reincarnator's plan unfolds largely centered on the Korean Peninsula. No, rather, the reincarnator set the board up from the start so it would unfold centered on the Korean Peninsula."

Yu Ji-won unfolded a map.

Strangely, this girl always kept maps stowed in her bag. The one laid out on the table now was a world map.

"However, the odds that Mr. Matiz, who will one day evolve into a regressor, stays only on the Korean Peninsula are exceedingly low. Once each nation's government collapses, the regressor can roam the Eurasian continent relatively freely, going wherever he likes."

Yu Ji-won's eyes.

They seemed to gaze down at destinations and waypoints not yet visible on the map, as if they were the most obvious things in the world.

"Therefore, for the 'time capsule' not to be discovered by failed regressors, we must bury it not merely far from the Korean Peninsula, but in a place a regressor would hardly ever reach."

"...And where is that?"

"Across the Pacific. The American continent."

"..."

"And it can't be a famous place, even there. Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, the Uyuni Salt Flats, and so on. Tourist attractions risk a regressor dropping by to kill time."

"..."

"If a regressor were to find the time capsule there, even by accident. If they were to open it even once. And if that regressor reached a [bad ending] and lost themselves. Then our record, too, would stay buried in the soil and be lost forever."

This child.

Where on earth was she looking?

The memories and the bond she had shared with Mr. Matiz, with the man named Go Yuir. Why was she so desperate to pass them on to the future?

Why did eternity dwell only in the breath those two exhaled?

'Ah.'

A flinch. Cheon Yo-hwa's gaze had been snagged on Yu Ji-won's face the whole time, and she hurried to school her expression.

Luckily it didn't seem her dazed face had been caught. Yu Ji-won was still focused on pointing here and there across the map as she explained.

"...Hmm. But it's not exactly a famous place. And there's hardly a good way to deliver a hint about where the time capsule is buried to the [happy ending] regressor alone. It looks way too hard, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

Yu Ji-won nodded.

"That's why Mr. Matiz and I deliberated for a long, very long time about where to bury the time capsule. It was a long deliberation."

Condition 1. The place is far from the Korean Peninsula, and reaching it requires crossing the Pacific.

Condition 2. The place can never be found by a bad ending regressor, and only a regressor who reaches the happy ending can find it.

Condition 3. Leaving a concrete hint about the place is difficult. The moment a hint is left, it's exposed to the [bad ending] regressors as well, and the risk of discovery by the reincarnator Go Yuri rises too.

"And so."

Yu Ji-won said.

"The place must be one that Mr. Matiz 'absolutely' never visits until he has saved the world, but that he 'will certainly' visit naturally once he has saved it. It has to be that kind of place."

"And where is that?"

Just then.

For the first time, that is, for the first time as far as Cheon Yo-hwa was concerned, she found herself witnessing the girl before her wear a smile.

"..."

This time even Cheon Yo-hwa had no choice but to stare blankly at Yu Ji-won.

She had heard from Go Yuir that the girl's emotions had been cut away. That she was a little different from a psychopath, too.

And yet that smile held a feeling so vivid it was impossible to imagine it on the lips of someone who could feel no emotion at all.

Was it because that startled her so much?

"I will major in Latin and Ancient Greek."

Cheon Yo-hwa reacted a touch late to the words that spilled from Yu Ji-won's lips.

"Uh. Yes, yes?"

"Latin and Ancient Greek. They're the majors Mr. Matiz recommended. We plan to pool our funds, go study abroad, and learn them."

"Ah. Then the Cult will support-!"

"No."

Yu Ji-won shook her head.

Not as firmly as before.

She couldn't quite say how to put it, but to Cheon Yo-hwa it felt as though a faint hope and flutter had melted into the tilt of her head.

"After Mr. Matiz saves the world, I'll go to the United States to study. Depending on the timing, I might even go as an exchange student."

"..."

"Among the universities along the Pacific coast there's Stanford University. It has a classics department that systematically teaches Latin, Ancient Greek, and the like. The philosophy encyclopedia treated as the philosophy department's wiki[1] is managed by that university too. We plan to plant the time capsule on its campus grounds."

Yu Ji-won was still smiling.

"If the world's annihilation is stopped, I'll surely go there. And Mr. Matiz will certainly come with me, no doubt about it. So. No matter what happens, we will find the time capsule at the end of the happy ending."

A trust close to infinite.

Happiness. She could feel it.

"..."

Cheon Yo-hwa's lips parted.

And a mutter slipped out before she knew it.

"What if you fail?"

Yu Ji-won tilted her head.

"Pardon?"

"What if you fail. You said this cycle has no hope at all, didn't you? World annihilation. Then even if you try hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of times, your odds don't exactly just shoot up, do they?"

"..."

"One percent if you're being generous. No, honestly it's under 0.01 percent, right? So why do you, Yu Ji-won, bet your whole life and your future on those odds? Why does Mr. Go Yuir do it too? If there's no chance anyway, then either try to stop the world's annihilation in this cycle, or... rather than waste time on pointless effort, wouldn't it be a lot more reasonable to flex and live it up as hard as you can?"

For a moment silence settled over the parlor.

Feeling the chill of that silence, Cheon Yo-hwa regretted it, thinking, ah, I went and did it.

'I didn't want to say something like that.'

She hadn't wanted to reveal herself to this person.

Because, well, there was no chance of winning at all, was there.

Yu Ji-won had met Go Yuir far earlier than she had. Not merely met

him, but formed a bond so deep it was hard for her even to imagine.

She was late. She was tardy. At the decisive moment she had been shoved back in the order of time.

So, what Cheon Yo-hwa had really wanted to say was this.

'You're just... you're just lucky, that's all.'

What she had wanted to swallow back down was this.

'If I'd been born into a flimsy family like yours, forget middle school, I'd have killed my parents back in elementary school already.'

'Then the event would've been moved up by that much, and the timeline where Teacher Go Yuri assigned Mr. Go Yuir to me would've come sooner, wouldn't it?'

'Ahaha.'

'...You got lucky being born into a home like that, you got lucky meeting that person early, and yet.'

'Why... am I the one who has to give up?'

Cheon Yo-hwa bit her lip.

Her heart churned. Without either of them noticing, foul water resembling a taegeuk yin-yang pattern2 was pooling inside her chest.

'What? You'll live not for this cycle but for the cycle that reaches the happy ending? Then what, you're going to keep Mr. Go Yuir all to yourself forever, is that it?'

'Why? Why, why? Why? Why does it have to be her?'

'If I had met him sooner.'

'For a heartless machine like you, when I like him this much. When

this is the first time I've ever felt anything like this. Why-.'

"I don't understand the question."

Right before the foul water could stain her soul.

Yu Ji-won spoke up. Only then did Cheon Yo-hwa come back to herself.

The girl's words went on.

"I believe in Mr. Matiz."

"...No, believe in him or not. I'm telling you it's going to fail."

"It doesn't matter."

"What?"

"If Mr. Matiz fails, there will surely be a reason that failure was unavoidable. It will be a reason neither Mr. Matiz nor I can do anything about, and so there's no use in my worrying over it now."

"..."

"What matters is the simple fact that I believe in Mr. Matiz."

Cheon Yo-hwa.

"Mr. Matiz's failure, his success, his giving up, his hope, his resignation, his smile. I will accept all of it as the finest beauty."

She could say for certain she had never once thought of herself as a chosen human, because.

She was simply smarter and more beautiful and more abundant and more excellent and more favored by the gods than others, that was all, so.

She didn't think she was a truly special person, but even so she had never cursed her own lot while looking at someone else, so.

Now that she had killed her father and ascended to the throne, all

the more there should have been no reason to curse anyone.

"That is the life I have chosen for myself."

"..."

For the first time in her life.

Cheon Yo-hwa felt inferior to another person.

'There's no way.'

There was no way she could win.

Footnotes:

1 - A reference to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP), a free, peer-reviewed online reference work on philosophy maintained by Stanford University and widely used as a go-to resource by students and academics.

2 - The taegeuk is the red-and-blue swirling yin-yang symbol at the center of the South Korean flag, representing the balance of opposing cosmic forces.

Chapter 468

The That Woman C V

Sinnoa

* * *

"Unni? What's with that face?"

"Wait. Unni... are you crying right now?"

"Ah. Um, no. At least tell me why you're crying."

"It's okay. It's okay, unni. Don't cry. Why are you crying, you idiot. Don't cry."

"...Unni."

That night.

Cheon Yo-hwa had her heart broken.

* * *

The word "one-sided love"[1] was a deeply inaccurate one.

Say "sided," and it sounded as if there were a matching partner, a counterpart cut to fit you.

A best buddy, a seatmate.

It carried the nuance that, even if not now, there might be a chance someday.

Reality was different.

Rather than "one-sided love," maybe "loving alone," or a love broken into pieces, a "shard love," would be more fitting.

"Ah, Go Yuir!"

"Oh. Welcome, Reverend."

This feeling of a heart split clean in two.

"Wow. Rising to such a high position really does the trick, doesn't it? These days your face just glows."

"Ahaha. It's all thanks to you, Go Yuir!"

This feeling where smiling didn't feel like smiling, and thinking didn't feel like thinking.

The words "one-sided love" simply couldn't hold all of it.

"Ji-won told me everything. You're going to be running something interesting over at Stanford?"

"Ah. Yes, that's right."

"Look at you, Yuir oppa. Now I see. I kept wondering why you went and propped up a young lady like me, and it turns out you were planning to use the Cult's assets all along, weren't you-?"

"Yes, I won't deny it. I desperately need your help, Reverend. Someone fresh out into society like me could never pull off work like this alone."

"Aigoo. It'll be a teensy bit hard for us too, having to go all the way out to California and set up shop. But I owe you so much I couldn't very well refuse. Honestly, I feel like I've been led around by the nose with my eyes wide open!"

"Haha..."

"Ah. We sort of glossed over it, but in private I can just call you oppa, right? Yuir oppa?"

"Mm, yes. Of course. Please call me however is comfortable for you, Reverend."

"Aw. You're being too polite. You can just drop the formalities and talk casually, oppa!"

"No. That's a bit..."

She wanted to die.

Every time she met Go Yuir, Cheon Yo-hwa got giddy. But "giddy" didn't necessarily mean anything good.

Her heart pounded abnormally even when she didn't want it to, her face grew hot, and somehow she dressed up "ordinary" with the mask she'd spent her whole life building. She was capable enough to keep up that disguise, but now and then her feelings leapt out, jamming the hammer of her sentences and words like a misfire.

The hinge of her heart creaked. No one had come through the door.

In the room where she was left alone, Cheon Yo-hwa alone gripped the door handle, opened it, closed it, opened and closed it again and again, greeting and seeing off nothing but the air of someone who would never come here.

After they smiled and turned and parted, what stayed in Cheon Yo-hwa's memory were her own words and sentences, the ones that had jutted out crooked in the middle of their conversation.

"...Unni."

No. The truth was, she wasn't entirely alone.

In front of her little sister, Cheon Yo-hwa could choose not to smile. She didn't even need to.

"If that's how it was, you should have just said something."

Her sister seemed to have already guessed everything, even though Cheon Yo-hwa hadn't laid out a word of her own circumstances.

It had been so long. And yet, lately, often, her sister stroked her head.

"You can't give him up?"

"..."

"Should I... get rid of him for you?"

"No!"

Her voice tore. Before she even realized it, Cheon Yo-hwa shrieked as if screaming.

"No. Absolutely not. Don't you dare."

"Why...?"

Her sister's voice was calm.

"You can feel it too, can't you, unni. Ever since Father died, our god-nim's authority has been growing stronger and stronger. We could do it now. If you and I set our minds to it, we could definitely kill that girl..."

"No! I said no!"

Who was she even shouting at?

Cheon Yo-hwa felt as though her heart were being seared in a scalding marsh, drowning in it.

"Those people are different! It's not like that. It's not like that. They're... they're human beings, different from something like me."

"..."

"I'm sorry. I thought my feelings would go away too. In a few years. I don't know why they won't disappear either. Sorry. Father's dead now. That man's gone too, so all that's left is to be happy. So why?"

She wanted to die.

Why did she put on airs in front of Go Yuir every time she met him? Why could she only stay in the kind of air she could smooth over with laughter and smiles?

Why was it that the moment she stood before that person, no, after she'd stood before him and then turned to look back, it felt this

embarrassing, this shameful, this agonizing?

"Please, I'm begging you. Yo-hwa-ya. Her... Yu Ji-won. Don't touch her. Just, don't touch her. You can't do that. You're not allowed to do that."

"What if I disguise it as an accidental death?"

"No. I know it, Cheon Yo-hwa. We both know it."

"..."

"She's a really, really beautiful person. Different from something like me. Sorry. I didn't want to say this. I'm sorry."

The sister embraced her unni. And with the same face, the same hair, the same eyes, she murmured.

"So unni was a person who could only love one. From the very start."

"..."

"That must be exactly why Teacher Go Yuri chose someone like that for you. Out of countless options and candidates. ...Yeah. That's vicious. Truly."

Time was dying.

Yet only the time inside Cheon Yo-hwa kept dying. Outwardly, the Reverend who had newly seized power was handling business with peerless competence.

Her talent burst into full bloom.

As if she'd been born with an instinctive nose for organizational management and resource allocation, she pulled off not only the Cult's existing enterprises but also the "time capsule" quest Go Yuir had commissioned, step by step.

"I've rounded up all the personnel the operation needs. So, Yuir oppa, how exactly do we make a time capsule?"

"Mm. I have an ability called time seal, and we'll be using it. Reverend, the Outer God's authority has gotten stronger by now, hasn't it?"

"Ah, yes!"

Go Yuir called the "god-nim" dwelling within the sisters an Outer God.

Strangely enough, Go Yuir held more detailed and precise information about the "god-nim" than the sisters did. It was probably information he'd heard from a reincarnator.

"Reverend. By any chance, have you been having strange dreams lately?"

"Eek!"

"Dreams oddly overflowing with realness, almost impossible to tell apart from reality, and even after you wake the memory stays nearly whole, like lucid dreams. Isn't that so?"

"Eeek...!"

Cheon Yo-hwa reacted with exaggeration. Because that exaggeration would be etched into him as "Cheon Yo-hwa's natural self."

"H-how did you know?! I've been agonizing so much over that lately!"

"That too is an authority arranged for you, Reverend. Think of it as a kind of simulation ability."

"Simulation..."

"Yes. As long as you're given enough data, you can run a simulation of any scenario, Reverend. Ah. Of course, what's flat-out impossible won't work. Only feasible scenarios."

"...Heeh."

Then was kissing your lips in last night's dream also something that could have happened, originally?

That retort nearly burst out of her, and Cheon Yo-hwa held it in by a hair.

It wasn't all that difficult. She'd grown quite used to holding things back in front of Go Yuir anyway.

"You're saying we'll use my simulation ability to make the time capsule? Hmm. I still can't quite picture it."

"My time seal. Your simulation, Reverend. And your sister has to create an anomaly called a Baku2. Only then is it possible."

"My sister too?"

"Yes. This part's fairly complicated... Anyway, for now please focus on growing the authority. Ah. Even when I say grow, of course I'm not asking you to reach the point where the Outer God devours you."

"Hmm. So what's my role?"

Go Yuir smiled awkwardly.

"I'd like you to 'simulate' the things that happened between Ji-won and me, Reverend."

A pause.

Cheon Yo-hwa set down her coffee cup, putting on an air of being perfectly natural about it.

A cafe run by a member of the Cult.

They'd reserved the whole place, so there were only the two of them for customers. Still, being like this felt good, as if she'd set down the title of Reverend and was enjoying an "ordinary" date out in the world.

Of course, behaving this way couldn't help but spread rumors.

The members of the Cult were always smashing the "subscribe" and "like" buttons on the Reverend's every move in the YouTube of their hearts.

Within the Cult, Go Yuir was already passed around as something like the Reverend's kept man. There was no denying Cheon Yo-hwa had, knowing this, let the rumors run.

Even though the truth was nothing of the sort.

Even though it was obvious this kind of scheming would do nothing for the relationship between "those two."

"Uh, um. I'm sorry, Yuir oppa. What... what does it mean to run a simulation of things between you and Ji-won...? I'm not sure I understand."

"The baku. The anomaly that will later be altered into the tutorial fairy can store other people's dreams. Naturally, it's also possible to input the contents of the dreams you've had, Reverend."

"Yes. I can understand up to there."

"To raise the resolution of this dream, that is, to store a truth that isn't some mere dream but is endlessly close to reality. You'll run the dream's contents through your simulation, Reverend."

"..."

"After that, I bind the fairy that now holds this dream of truth with my [time seal]. On the grounds of Stanford University."

"Ah."

"This way, someday in the future, the regressor who comes to unseal the sealed time will, through the baku, inherit this cycle's dream."

"..."

"This is the time capsule."

Go Yuir smiled.

"The one Ji-won and I thought up so desperately... the shabbiest, the tiniest Ark in the world."

"..."

Cheon Yo-hwa realized it.

Looking now, the direction and intensity of the smile the girl named Yu Ji-won had worn resembled the man in front of her exactly.

It was a fact she'd barely managed to grasp precisely because she had watched the two of them harder than anyone.

"Now that you've heard this far, you'll have guessed, but... it's also the reason we approached you in the first place, Reverend."

The traces of the one she loved, because she loved him, she could find in someone she could never love.

"An operation that's impossible without your cooperation, Reverend. Because in this world, you're the only one we can ask for this plan."

"...Ah."

"Will you help us?"

It was miserable.

"Mm, well. Yes!"

It was cruel.

"It's your request, oppa, so of course I have to grant it! Eheheh. But are you really sure you're okay with this?"

"Yes?"

"This means I'll end up knowing everything that happened between the two of you. Things like this- and things like that. Kyaa! How embarrassing!"

"Ugh. Well, it is a little embarrassing. But it's fine. I'll trust you, Reverend."

"..."

The corner of her mouth trembled faintly.

'What are you doing, Cheon Yo-hwa?'

Smile.

"Ahaha. Hon-estly, oppa. If you trust people that easily, you might find a knife in your back later, you know?"

Right. Smile. I said smile.

It's the thing you're best at, isn't it. Smiling.

"Ah! But... um. Never mind, never mind."

"Yes? What is it?"

"It's nothing! Let's drop it. It's fine to just let it go."

"No. Please speak freely, Reverend. For what it's worth, didn't we accomplish the hardest thing together?"

Huh? Or did we not?

Was there one more thing you're even better at than smiling?

"Mmm. So the thing is..., haa. The truth is, the number of people inside the Cult making weird guesses about your and my relationship has gone up a bit, oppa."

"What?"

"It seems, the. Ah. Don't get the wrong idea, okay? Because I absolutely don't think that way! It's just, cult members who have no- idea about our circumstances. These good-for-nothing nobodies, this riffraff- saying isn't this a little strange. Saying aren't we giving too much special treatment to an outsider like you, oppa."

"..."

"Talk like that goes around once in a while. Honestly, I don't get how these cockroach-like things just never end no matter how many you squash. Right?"

"Even so, killing them is..."

"No. You have to be firm on a problem like this, oppa. When the Reverend, me, says drop it, they should drop it. The nerve of these lowborn things crawling up to butt in, telling you and me what to do?"

"..."

Acting. Scheming.

When it comes to deceiving and controlling people, you'd be better than anyone, wouldn't you? Right? You even deceived Father.

You're definitely far, far more capable than Yu Ji-won at that one thing at least. How enviable!

"Haven't you seen blood enough? I think there's probably a gentler way."

"Hmm? A gentler way..."

Lift a finger, prop it under your chin, yes. As if it's nothing. With no ulterior motive at all. Just act like you're thinking.

Look at that. This man. He's watching with such an incredibly serious expression.

While firmly believing the world is going to end, he frets about the lives of cult members who have nothing to do with him? Why?

What an idiot.

"...Mm, well. There's a little bit of talk going around saying maybe you and I are actually dating..., saying wouldn't it all make sense then, but..."

What an idiot.

"Ah, don't worry about it! Our elders are always going on and on about my social life anyway."

"Ah..."

What an idiot.

"I know perfectly well how devoted and pure you and Ji-won are to each other. I do!"

"Ji-won and I aren't that kind of..."

"Ihihi. Forget it, forget it. When you go to California, I'll book your first-class tickets and hotel, so take it easy and enjoy your trip!"

"..."

"And so there's no chance of that kind of noise after the trip, I'll clean it all up nice and tidy. So don't you worry!"

"..."

What an idiot.

"Reverend."

"Yes?"

"Maybe that method... might actually work."

"What method?"

"A betrothal."

"Eh."

What an idiot. What an idiot. What an idiot.

"Think about it. Not actually getting married, but holding a betrothal to disguise our relationship. Then no one will make a sound when we use the Cult's resources."

"Uh, uhhh... That's true, but. I personally don't mind, but are you sure you're okay with it? Oppa?"

"Yes. Either way, if we push the wedding date far enough back, the world will end before that day comes. If a betrothal, words and nothing more, is enough to win over the Cult's goodwill..."

"No, no! Not that. Ji-won. You have Yu Ji-won, oppa. So you're really fine getting betrothed to me?"

"Ah."

Go Yuir smiled.

He understood the intent of the question belatedly, but a faint yet warm smile, as if the question itself held no meaning at all.

Endless trust hung there.

"It's fine. If it's Ji-won."

"..."

"Because I believe in that girl."

Half a year later.

A betrothal was formed between Cheon Yo-hwa and Go Yuir.

Some members of the Cult voiced dissatisfaction at the low status of the live-in son-in-law, but his academic background wasn't one they couldn't accept, and at least the dissatisfaction was never openly expressed.

"..."

Crinkle.

The engagement document, written out so carefully, character by character, the paper with Cheon Yo-hwa's and Go Yuir's names lined up side by side, crumpled in her hand.

"Ahaha."

She wanted to die.

Footnotes:

1 - The Korean word for one-sided love, jjaksarang, literally means "pair-love" or "partner-love," which is why Cheon Yo-hwa rejects it: the "pair" implies a matching counterpart. She prefers pyeollyeon, literally "fragment/shard love," rendered here as "shard love."

2 - A baku (Korean: mongma) is a creature from East Asian folklore said to devour dreams and nightmares; here it is repurposed as an anomaly able to store and replay people's dreams.

Chapter 469

The That Woman C VI

Sinnoa

* * *

The truth was, Cheon Yo-hwa already knew.

To put it as a metaphor, the Cult she reigned over was a demonic cult. And she was its Heavenly Demon.

A proper Heavenly Demon ought to strike down her own father and then seize her position purely by her own strength.

She, too, had done nothing more than faithfully follow the traditions of a demonic cult.

And so a trial that no high-ranking cultist of the demonic path could ever avoid had been handed to her as well.

The inner demon.

-The fact that I like someone now could end up wounding that person, couldn't it.

-So you wound them.

"...No, what the hell."

When had it started?

There was a voice inside her heart, whispering in an imitation of her own.

At first she truly believed it was her own innermost thoughts. But no matter how she looked at it, she would never act that filthy.

Probably. No, without a doubt.

This inner demon had to be the influence of the 'Outer God.'

-Really? You sneak glances at his lips every single day while talking with Go Yuir and fantasize about kissing him, and you're really not filthy?

"Eeeeeek!"

-Actually, Go Yuir might already have noticed. Mm, a hundred percent he noticed. Remember last time? How he suddenly switched the lip gloss he always used to Vaseline. Since you stare at his lips so much, he probably figured something was wrong with the product and switched to a different one...

"Eeeeeeeeeek! Die! Die! Please, die! Just drop dead, would you!"

The crash and clatter from the Reverend's chamber sent the door flying open, and her sister rushed in.

"Unni?! What happened? Don't tell me it's an assassin?!"

"No, it's... it's nothing..."

Sprawled across the floor, Cheon Yo-hwa groaned.

"M, more to the point. Yo-hwa, do you ever get a cunning demon whispering inside your heart these days too?"

"Ugh."

Her sister took a step back.

"Unni, even so, chuunibyou1 at your age is kind of... I always thought you had a bit of an otaku streak from way back, but failing to keep your dignity even after becoming Reverend, I think that's a real problem."

-Are you an idiot?

The inner demon sneered again.

-This is an inner demon, Cheon Yo-hwa. Your heart for the Way

warped and a gap opened up. It's like an asphalt road crumbling and weeds growing in the cracks. Do you think an inner demon could find room to slip into a girl who walks her own path as straight as your sister?

"..."

Cheon Yo-hwa dismissed her sister, who kept staring at her with a worried face, and was alone again.

But alone, she was not alone.

Cheon Yo-hwa muttered inwardly.

'I've given up on Go Yuir. At the very least I'm trying to give up. It hasn't gotten so bad you could call my heart broken.'

-Ahahaha.

A laugh she couldn't stand rang against her eardrum. It was a noise that vibrated not outside the eardrum but inside it.

-Want to open the second drawer over there and say that again? After you smoothed out that engagement document you'd crumpled into a ball, pressed it flat with your own hands, and enshrined it like some holy relic. Given up?

"..."

-You know what, Cheon Yo-hwa? I'm not the one deceiving you. You're deceiving yourself. I only speak on your behalf, and that's why you can't kill me. Because I'm honest.

'Shut up.'

-You shut up. I'm not some separate split personality. I'm you. I exist because you can't let go.

Cheon Yo-hwa's hair came undone.

The hair her attendants had so carefully styled at dawn each day fell into ruin, and from beneath it a groan leaked out.

"...Then what do you want me to do."

-Just honestly admit your heart.

The voice turned gentle.

-Whether you call it god-nim or Outer God, the one thing you can't deny is that it is one body and one heart with you. Which means the more upright and strong your heart grows, the stronger the god's authority grows too.

'Aha.'

Cheon Yo-hwa scoffed.

'So in the end all this bullshit was a scheme to seduce me and offer me up as god-nim's living Sacrifice? How cliche.'

-What's cliche is your interpretation.

-Seduction. Sacrifice. Plunder. Those words are nothing but the hopelessly one-dimensional readings of third parties who have never experienced the relationship between a god and a priestess for themselves.

-It isn't like that, Cheon Yo-hwa. It isn't like that.

-A god has no intention, no purpose. There isn't a speck of any aim to toy with you. As a priestess, surely you can feel it?

-The god simply wants to set you free.

"..."

Cheon Yo-hwa was silent, and also not silent.

-The 'time capsule' project Go Yuir asked for lately, the progress is a little sluggish, isn't it?

-That's all because your authority hasn't ripened enough. You still haven't reached the level where you can run simulations as freely as you'd like.

-As long as you treat me as an inner demon, you'll keep walking in place forever.

And then?

-Admit your own heart. Don't run away behind the word "given up," face it head-on.

-Will you repeat after me?

Repeat what?

-I love Go Yuir.

"..."

-Just repeat it once. Even murmuring it in your heart is enough. Repeat it just once, and tonight you'll feel your authority suddenly grow.

-And this isn't only for your own sake, it's for Go Yuir too.

For Go Yuir's sake?

-Of course. You have to grow your authority to finish the time capsule sooner, don't you? World annihilation is creeping closer by the moment, and you mean to lounge around obsessing over your own purity?

"..."

-Repeat it.

-Come on. Hurry.

Cheon Yo-hwa's lips pressed hard together.

'...I love Go Yuir.'

And?

'I probably... won't be able to give him up. Ever.'

Well done. Well done, Cheon Yo-hwa.

-Now I'll prove that my words aren't some bewitching lie.

That night.

Cheon Yo-hwa had a lucid dream.

Lucid dreams had always been thoroughly familiar to her. As the Outer God's authority grew stronger, 'simulations' had begun to manifest in the form of dreams.

But the sleepwalking dream she had this night was somewhat... no. Far, far higher in resolution than usual.

「People are dying!」

「This is the path to saving them. Yes, I know. It must sound like sophistry. But the moment I dared to spoil things for you, Oraboni, this life became a 'discard card' for me.」

A back alley where rain had started to fall.

On the dark, gloomy roadside, Go Yuir and Go Yuri were having an argument. The scene played out from a distance.

Cheon Yo-hwa felt exactly as if she had become a ghost.

She could see those two, but they couldn't sense her at all.

'This is?'

The inner demon whispered.

-The night Go Yuri died. The simulation has restored the scene of the murder. Yes, look there. See the kid hidden under a raincoat?

'Ah.'

-That's Yu Ji-won.

The girl, masked by the sound of the rain, ambushed Go Yuri. A kitchen knife. The blade, sheathed in aura, drove precisely between

bone and bone and pierced through her chest.

-The moment everything changed. The fork in the route, if you want to call it that.

"..."

-Rewind it a little further into the past.

"Is that... possible?"

-Right now it is. You've heard the whole thing from Go Yuir dozens of times anyway, and you know every major character's face. Try it.

She turned back time.

How such a feat was even possible was a mystery, but with that brilliant mind of hers, Cheon Yo-hwa grasped the method at once.

'This isn't reality, it's a human's dream. A simulation. Which means I'm contemplating the world in a form [I can understand.]'

'In that case, a format that's a little easier to understand and easier to manipulate... For instance, what if I think of it as a [video?]'

Bzzzt-.

The world's image quality degraded somewhat. But in exchange, Cheon Yo-hwa could now press a 'fast-forward' button on the scenery before her, just like skipping a video back and forth.

-Heh.

The inner demon marveled.

-You grasped the principle of your authority without anyone teaching you? That's right. You have to weave the world into a form that's easy for you to control.

-The more cumbersome the form, the weaker the authority. But the easier it is to use. The less form there is, the stronger the authority. But the harder it is to use.

-You have to strike a good balance between the two, little priestess.

-Remember. You have to figure out for yourself which form suits you best. Free of shape or place.

Time rewound.

What spread before Cheon Yo-hwa's eyes was no longer the alley. A budget business hotel. The lodging where Go Yuir and Yu Ji-won were staying.

-This is the situation right before the route diverges.

Cheon Yo-hwa knit her brows.

'This? Nothing about it looks special.'

-Soon, Go Yuir is going to reveal a secret to Yu Ji-won. He's going to open up the information about the reincarnator.

-Foolish, foolish, foolish. At this point in time Yu Ji-won is the strongest priestess, who has climbed to the level of being one body and one heart with the Outer God by her own power.

-From the girl Yu Ji-won's standpoint. From the Outer God's standpoint. There's no way they'd let a prime chance to kill the reincarnator slip by.

-You have to stop it, Cheon Yo-hwa.

How?

-Simple. Just keep Go Yuir from staring at Yu Ji-won, deal with nothing but his gaze.

'Huh?'

For a moment Cheon Yo-hwa was dumbfounded.

'Turn his gaze away? ...You're saying that alone changes the route?'

-Don't ask me back.

The inner demon's voice sank low.

-I'm not delivering information you don't have. You just grasped how to use your authority entirely on your own.

-I only restated and repeated the fact you realized. I didn't create something out of nothing.

-You know it already, so don't ask back.

-Block Go Yuir's gaze as it falls on Yu Ji-won. It's dangerous.

"..."

Crash!

A glass tumbled off the table.

「Oh.」

Go Yuir was flustered. At that, Yu Ji-won, who had been sitting at the desk, quickly rose too.

「I'll fetch a towel and gloves, Mr. Matiz. Do not pick up the glass.」

「Uh, uh-huh. And socks too!」

「Yes.」

Yu Ji-won and Go Yuir, perfectly in sync, cleared away the glass in no time.

The subtle air that had been flowing between the two of them moments earlier had vanished somewhere too.

Just then Go Yuir's smartphone buzzed, and after confirming it was a text from Go Yuri, Go Yuir hurried out of the lodging.

-Follow him.

She followed.

「Anyway, congratulations on your overseas trip, Oraboni. It's a trip you planned a whole year in advance, isn't it?」

「Well. Yeah.」

「I'm only saying this out of a worrywart's caution, just in case, but you have to keep my existence a secret from Miss Yu Ji-won, all right?」

「...Y, yeah. Of course.」

A warm, friendly conversation between siblings.

Unlike the 'past' where they had argued fiercely, in the newly diverged 'route this time,' Go Yuir and Go Yuri talked together in nothing but an ordinary way.

What's more.

'...Yu Ji-won's tailing is gone.'

-Mm.

The inner demon chimed in.

-If the glass hadn't dropped just now, Go Yuir would have kept looking at Yu Ji-won, and they'd have had some important conversation.

'And that conversation... triggered Teacher Go Yuri's death?'

Cheon Yo-hwa swallowed hard.

'The teacher's life or death was decided by whether or not one single conversation happened?'

-Every necessity is chance. Chance is necessity. Necessity is the world. Now fast-forward and check what's changed.

She checked.

In the worldline where the reincarnator didn't die, Go Yuir soon appeared before the Cheon Yo-hwa twins as the successor tutor.

And.

There was no Yu Ji-won at his side.

-He moved to Sejong to teach us sisters.

'Yu Ji-won...?'

-He left her behind in Seoul.

The inner demon analyzed calmly.

-They still contact each other by phone now and then, but they don't cling together like rice cakes the way they do now. Of course. In the worldline where Go Yuri is alive, the goal of saving the world hasn't been given up yet.

-Yu Ji-won's route is over. Now it's our sisters' turn. So with Yu Ji-won out of the picture, for a whole 'few years,' we sisters build a bond with Go Yuir.

"..."

Before her eyes.

The relationship Cheon Yo-hwa came to share with Go Yuir was quite different from the reality she originally knew.

-Sunbae!

She no longer called Go Yuir by the stiff title of 'Mr. Go.'

Under the pretext that they'd be attending the same university anyway, she used the word 'sunbae.'

-Yeah, yeah. Don't go scoring a zero on purpose on this exam. What face am I supposed to face your father with?

-Ehehe.

Go Yuir, too... did not treat her with distant, formal speech as 'young lady' or 'Reverend.'

He spoke casually, just like someone truly close to her.

In the eyes that looked at Cheon Yo-hwa, though it wasn't a lover's affection, there remained the warmth of someone looking at a disciple and friend held endlessly dear.

-My father needs a jolt of tension whenever he goes slack. Only then does your value go up right along with it, you know?

-You're overflowing with nonsense today, disciple.

-Woof woof?

-Grrrrr.

-Huh. You caught on that I was imitating a Shih Tzu and immediately possessed a bulldog...?! As expected of you, sunbae. Tremendous reflexes... I can't beat your sheer dog-bastard power either.

-Why you little.

She casually slipped her arm through his, and he casually patted her head.

Right before her.

A conversation so completely different. An air so completely different. A smile so completely different.

"..."

Cheon Yo-hwa could only watch that scene blankly, for a long, long time.

Until she woke from the dream.

"..."

The ceiling came into view.

The ceiling blurred.

Cheon Yo-hwa covered her eyes with her forearm.

-Well? Your authority got stronger, didn't it?

-This is the simulation 'sunbae' mentioned. The true substance of the Outer God's authority. The more information you have. The more transparent your heart. The higher the simulation's resolution.

-Naturally... you can run as many simulations as you like of scenes completely different from the 'reality' you live in now.

-But.

The inner demon whispered.

-The further and further you stray from reality, the higher the level of authority demanded of you climbs too. Of course, the computation a simulation consumes is different.

-Just admitting that you love sunbae is, sadly, only enough to take you this far.

-To run more varied, longer simulations, you'll have to push yourself a little harder. Mm.

Silence fell. Dawn. Outside the window it was still dark.

Beneath the face hidden by her forearm, Cheon Yo-hwa's lips slowly parted.

'...More. To strengthen the authority further, what do I have to do?'

The inner demon answered in a low voice.

-When you speak with me, make a sound out loud, not in your heart.

-The human heart is like an object submerged in water, refracted into vagueness.

-Refine your heart into language. Speak your heart into the open. Surrender your heart to the keen-edged air.

Cheon Yo-hwa's lips parted again.

"...To strengthen the authority further, what do I have to do?"

The inner demon answered in a low voice.

-Use honorifics. Your heart is an altar for yourself. Your tongue is the ritual implement placed upon the altar. Your language will itself become a rite for you.

Cheon Yo-hwa's lips parted once more.

"To strengthen the authority further from here... what do I have to do?"

The inner demon answered in a low voice.

-A rite isn't an everyday occurrence, it's a ceremony always held at a set time, in a set place.

-Time and space. The very attempt to grasp the space and time that humans cannot truly catch with their fingers is the essence of a rite. This is sik, the form.

-When you speak with me, hold to proper decorum. Just as you refined your heart with language, refine my rite with objects. This is gyeok, the rank.

-Hold to a proper gyeoksik, a formality of form and rank, in dealing with me.

-In your room, in a place where no one, not even your sister, can interfere, prepare a single mirror. The heart is, in the end, a mirror and an abyss no one can approach.

She did so.

The Reverend's bedchamber. In the deepest place, where neither her sister nor her attendants could set a foot without permission, Cheon Yo-hwa stood up a single vanity mirror.

-Well done, Cheon Yo-hwa.

Within the mirror.

-Now I will become a god for you and you alone.

The corners of Cheon Yo-hwa's mouth were twisted.

Footnotes:

1 - Chuunibyou (Japanese: "eighth-grader syndrome") is otaku slang for an adolescent who acts out grandiose, edgy delusions, such as believing they harbor secret powers or a dark alter ego. Here the sister teases Cheon Yo-hwa for talking about a demon whispering inside her.

Chapter 470

The That Woman C VII

Sinnoa

* * *

“Excuse me.”

“Hm?”

The Cult's main headquarters.

Go Yuir was strolling down the corridor when he turned to look back. Standing there was the absolute authority and supreme dignity of this place, the Reverend... no, not quite.

It was someone who looked exactly like the Reverend.

“Ah. Sister-in-law! Good morning!”

“Yes.”

The Reverend's younger sister. Her name was Cheon Yo-hwa.

In other words, the one person whose name was pronounced exactly the same as the Reverend's, leaving him at a loss for what to call her.

But now that they were tied together as the Reverend and her betrothed, the convenient title of “sister-in-law” had become available.

The person on the receiving end of that title from Go Yuir, however, made a subtle face.

“What can I do for you?”

“No, it's nothing major... More to the point, brother-in-law. You can

tell my sister and me apart really well, can't you? Even the servants who've worked at the house for years sometimes mix us up."

"Ah. The atmosphere is different."

"What? The atmosphere?"

"If you're like the sun, sister-in-law, then the Reverend is like the moon, I'd say. Whether that's the principle of yin and yang or whatever, I wouldn't know since I'm an Oechul, but even your way of walking is different, so I can't help but feel it. Haha."

"..."

The younger of the twin sisters, the girl the Cult called the Grand Protector, made an even stranger face.

"...I think I'm starting to understand why my sister slapped a restraining order on you, so let's get straight to the point."

"?"

"Brother-in-law. Lately my sister's been shut up in her room."

Go Yuir blinked.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. You don't get involved in running the Cult, brother-in-law, so you probably didn't notice, but she's been a recluse for over a week now."

"Uh... A week or so, can't we just treat that like the occasional vacation? It's summer, after all. The Reverend must be worn out too."

"Without a word? My sister?"

Go Yuir's sister-in-law scoffed.

"Sure, I can keep impersonating my sister and putting on a show in front of the believers for a few more days. But go in there and ask

her why she's suddenly so into this hikikomori act[1] she never used to pull."

"Is that all right?"

"Is what all right?"

"I'd think the Reverend would be much more at ease if you went, sister-in-law, instead of an outsider like me..."

"Ughhh."

For some reason, the sigh ran deep.

"I told you. I'm busy playing my sister. Can't you just go in place of your overworked sister-in-law, brother-in-law? We're family, you know, believe it or not."

"Ah. My apologies. I failed to consider your situation, sister-in-law. Of course, I'll pop in right away."

"No. You don't have to make it that quick..."

"?"

"Ah. Forget it, forget it. Seriously. Any longer and my own head's going to go funny too."

Jingle. She handed him something. A key.

"It's the key to my sister's bedroom."

"Uh. Is it really okay for me to just take something like this..."

"It's not 'just' anything. What's strange about a betrothed man carrying his betrothed's key? I've got a spare, so use that one, brother-in-law."

"Mm... Understood. Thank you. I'd love for the two of us to get coffee sometime and grow closer."

"Are you out of your mind?"

“Sorry?”

“Ah. No, I, it's nothing. Just talking to myself! I talk to myself a lot, see. I'm a total otaku! A complete weeb! If you knew what I watch on a normal day, brother-in-law, you'd be totally turned off. I've got a rotten personality too, always going around talking trash about people.”

“Ah. Uh, I, I see...”

That was TMI he had absolutely no desire to know.

Go Yuir walked off with a dazed look. He hadn't gone far when a voice came from behind him.

“Brother-in-law.”

“Yes?”

“My sister. On the surface she always seems smug and perfect and capable, but deep down she's someone who keeps a really tender soft spot in her heart.”

“...”

“Think about how many people my sister is actually close to. Me. And you, brother-in-law. That's it. Why a person like her would pull you into a relationship like a betrothal in the first place... just think about it once, even once, for me.”

It was a strange thing to say.

Before he could ask what it meant, she vanished off somewhere in a flash. The Cult's mansion had corridors tangled like a maze, and tracing the path of sisters who had lived here since birth was no easy feat.

‘Think about why she got betrothed to me?’

Go Yuir cocked his head and headed for the Reverend's inner chamber.

‘Isn't it because, as accomplices who murdered the previous generation together, we arranged a family bond so neither of us could betray the other?’

As Go Yuir approached, the servants waiting outside the bedroom all bowed their heads at once.

Every one of them had their tongues cut out and could not speak. They were close attendants who had served Cheon Yo-hwa since the previous generation. In the Cult they were called the Eight Trigrams.

Thin veils covered the faces of the Eight Trigrams, making it hard to tell one from another.

They seemed very old yet also quite young, and facing them left you with a thoroughly strange feeling.

To be honest, Go Yuir found these servants a burden. The way they treated him was always far too reverent.

“No, no. You may straighten your backs. The thing is, I came at my sister-in-law's request to check on the Reverend.”

“...”

“I even brought the key, see.”

Jingle, and when Go Yuir drew out the key, the servants' heads snapped sharply toward it.

“...”

“Everyone. May I go inside for a moment to see the Reverend?”

The servants exchanged glances without a word.

Then, bowing at an even lower angle than before, they scurried off down the corridor without so much as a footstep. Would you believe it?

In an instant, Go Yuir was left alone in the corridor. The key

dangled forlornly from his hand.

“Uh. I didn't mean to ask you to clear out entirely... though.”

No reply came from anywhere.

Go Yuir shrugged, then rapped on the door. But when there was no response at all, he reluctantly used the key.

“Pardon the intrusion, Reverend. I'm coming in.”

Creeeak.

The door rang out so loudly it almost seemed excessive, leaving the back of Go Yuir's neck cold. No. Maybe it was the chill that seeped in like a crosswind from inside the room.

“Reverend?”

The room was wide. Sliding paper doors lined both sides. It was called a bedroom, but this single room seemed to be a detached residence all on its own.

Completely cut off from the outside.

‘...Where is she?’

Gulp. Swallowing at the inexplicable tension, Go Yuir opened the sliding doors one by one in search of Cheon Yo-hwa.

“Ah.”

She was lying in the very last room.

This place was the true ‘bedroom’ in every sense. A bed large enough that four people, never mind two, could lie down with room to spare.

On a bed where black timber and white sheets formed a stark contrast, Cheon Yo-hwa lay quietly, without even the sound of breathing.

“...”

No matter that they were officially betrothed, peeking at another person's sleeping form like this should have been rude, and yet, unexpectedly, it wasn't.

Because even in sleep, Cheon Yo-hwa's face and the set of her clothes were immaculate. Exactly the same as always.

‘No way. Does the Reverend wear makeup even when she sleeps...?’

Thanks to that, Go Yuir, though her betrothed, was able to study Cheon Yo-hwa's face closely, probably for the first time since they had met.

‘Wait. Don't tell me... this is her bare face?’

It couldn't be.

It wasn't just a matter of her face. There were hardly any wrinkles in her clothes, and a faint fragrance drifted from her lips.

She was at a level where she could step straight into the day's schedule just like this, without any makeup, without even brushing her teeth.

‘Insane... For real? Is she always like this? Wow. So there was a reason the sister-in-law had no qualms about giving me permission to walk into the bedroom.’

Just then.

Right before his eyes, Cheon Yo-hwa opened her eyes.

“Ah.”

“...”

He was reflected in those deep red pupils.

Go Yuir flinched. Part of it was the closeness, but even so, her eyes were too transparent, far too transparent.

Like someone startled at their own reflection in a mirror that was

too clear, Go Yuir was momentarily turned to stone.

Blink.

It was only when Cheon Yo-hwa's eyelids opened and shut once that the petrification finally broke.

He drew in the breath whose reservation had backed up because he'd forgotten about it for a moment, and.

“Ah, pardon me...”

Letting the breath out got pushed back a little further.

Because his lips were blocked.

“...”

Go Yuir's mind came to a complete stop.

His brain stuttered as it tried to interpret what was happening before his eyes.

‘Huh?’

Time was not passing. The future was not coming. Because of that, all Go Yuir could do was replay what had just happened, that is, the past.

‘Huh?’ ‘Huh?’ ‘Huh?’

Right. A moment ago he had drawn in a breath.

As he inhaled, a little of the orange fragrance steeped into the bedroom got drawn in too. But for some reason, the orange fragrance had now gone beyond a smell, standing out in outline like fruit juice, filling the inside of his mouth.

‘Is this’ ‘right now?’ ‘what's happening’ ‘I mean?’

Her eyes were close. He could feel her breath. It wasn't his own breath or his own scent, so Go Yuir couldn't tell whether he was breathing or having his breath stolen.

‘So...’

Stutter. Like an AI that hadn't been paid for, Go Yuir's sluggish brain struggled to deliver an answer to the user's question.

‘A kiss?’

There was a reason the answer was late. For that one beat he was "Go Yuri," and Go Yuri's database contained no entry for the term. [4]

In the language of the humanities, it was also called a ‘first kiss.’

“~~~~~~?!”

A beat too late, Go Yuir began to thrash. His breathing turned ragged. His pupils widened to their limit.

And Go Yuir realized just how flimsy a being his self had become in a worldline where he'd given up being a regressor.

No matter how he struggled, he couldn't escape, not in the slightest, from the grip of Cheon Yo-hwa's hand cupping the back of his head.

“Mn, mmnn... Sun, baeee...♪”

When their lips parted, a trace of laughter slipped through, and then Cheon Yo-hwa pressed her lips to his again.

This time pulling Go Yuir right onto the bed.

“~~~~~~~~~!?!?”

When Cheon Yo-hwa's fragrance invaded even the boundary line one must not cross carelessly, Go Yuir's thrashing grew fiercer still.

Of course, it amounted to no more than the desperate flailing of the German army holed up in Berlin with the Allied forces right at the door2.

The more Go Yuir flailed, the deeper into the quagmire he sank.

The blanket coiled around him, and something that clearly wasn't

the feel of a blanket coiled around him too, and the scent of Cheon Yo-hwa soaked into the blanket stabbed at the tip of his nose from all directions, and his two hands... huh. When had their fingers gotten laced together?

Something slid down his spine with a smooth glide, brushing it like piano keys.

“!?!?!?!?!?!?!?”

Go Yuir never could have imagined it in his wildest dreams, but.

At present Cheon Yo-hwa had sharply strengthened the authority of the Outer God, and day in and day out she was enjoying dates with Go Yuir in her dreams.

As a result, an exclusive skill called [Read Go Yuir's Weakness] had leveled up like crazy, and then leveled up some more.

In short, the present Go Yuir was a Pidgey living in the wilds of the Beginning Village3. And then some Pokémon trainer approached and abruptly whipped out a level 80 Pikachu, would you believe it.

The type matchup was bad on top of that. From Pikachu's standpoint, even a light little nuzzle of the cheek could be a fatal jolt of electrocution for a Pidgey.

A hellish five minutes passed.

“Ehehe... Mn, sunbaeee...”

The Pokémon champion seemed satisfied at last, and released the Pidgey from her arms. Then she drifted off to dreamland again, breath whistling softly in and out.

“...”

Without a word, Go Yuir carefully peeled Cheon Yo-hwa's two arms and two legs off of himself, one limb at a time, as they clung to him.

It was no easy task. Ten minutes per limb. Forty minutes in total

before he finally managed to separate them.

At long last, Pidgey-yuir escaped.

Rattle, he closed the sliding door. Thud. He closed the main door.

Just as he had about an hour earlier, Go Yuir was once again left alone in the corridor.

It was a great mercy. If the Eight Trigrams servants had still been standing by, low-level-yuir might have killed himself out of shame.

"..."

Straightening his disheveled clothes, catching his breath, groaning at the orange fragrance smeared all over his dress shirt, vowing that before going home he absolutely had to shower and send these clothes to the cleaners.

Go Yuir squeezed his eyes shut.

'Nothing... happened!'

It was a firm resolve.

'Until I die. Uh, until the world ends, more or less! Right, Yuir. Just a few more years, that's all! Let's carry it to the grave as a secret...!'

Go Yuir's back as he staggered away down the corridor.

"..."

There were eight pairs of eyes quietly watching it from the corner of the corridor.

A sidelong glance. Sixteen pupils in all looked at one another. A nod. They nodded up and down, too.

Then they scurried off somewhere.

* * *

"Yo-hwa."

“What is it, sister?”

“Lately it feels like Go Yuir has been avoiding me. Is it just my imagination?”

“Ahh. Yeah, it's your imagination. Just your imagination.”

“Is that so...?”

“Yeah. These days I'm playing the Reverend in your place a lot, you know. So brother-in-law strikes up all sorts of conversation with me, thinking I'm you. Oh, don't worry! There is absolutely no way I'll ever come to like brother-in-law!”

“Mm...”

“More importantly, rest a bit more, sister. Rest up properly. You ran yourself ragged after being such a dutiful daughter to Father.”

“But I worry it'll be a burden on you...”

“Aw, I'm just gaining some experience this time around too! Anyway, sister. You're taking your sleeping pills properly, right?”

“Ah. Yeah. The ones you gave me last time work really well on me. Thanks to them I keep training even in my dreams.”

“It's not just in your dreams you're doing that, though.”

“Hm?”

“No, no, it's nothing. Anyway, you've got to rest properly while you rest, or there's no point to the vacation. Let's keep at it for just two more weeks, sister!”

“...Do you really need to keep at it just to rest?”

“Yeah. The way I see it, absolutely.”

“?”

“Ugh. Honestly... You work so hard, so hard. There's nobody in this world who looks out for family as much as I do.”

“??”

Footnotes:

1 - Hikikomori is a Japanese term for people who withdraw into total social isolation, shutting themselves in their homes (or a single room) for extended periods.

2 - A reference to the Battle of Berlin (1945), the final major offensive of World War II in Europe, in which the encircled German forces fought a hopeless, last-ditch defense before surrendering.

3 - Pokémon references. Pidgey is the weak, first-route bird Pokémon; the "Beginning Village" is a riff on Pallet Town, the starting town in the games. The joke casts Go Yuir as a low-level wild Pokémon ambushed by a vastly overpowered, type-advantaged opponent.

4 - The Korean deliberately switches from Go Yuir to Go Yuri here for the joke, as if his brain crossed wires in the middle of the kiss.

Chapter 471

The That Woman C VIII

Sinnoa

* * *

Everything in this world had its pros and its cons.

But you had to be careful about the order when you read that sentence.

The original meaning was, "If there's an upside, then a downside comes after it."

Flip it around, reading it as, "Since there's a downside, surely an upside is coming next?" and you could land yourself in serious trouble.

Example: a writer who diligently keeps to a posting schedule will, someday, absolutely hit burnout.

If each day's update is a small battle, then burnout is the inevitable downside, the thing you might compare to one enormous war.

Winning the battles meant nothing if you lost the war.

So you weren't supposed to grow smug over the upside right in front of you. You had to brace for the downside.

On the flip side... what happens when a slump arrives for a writer who never posted anything to begin with?

What kind of upside could possibly come from that? Before you even get to wars or whatever, haven't you already lost the very first battle? Isn't it nothing but downside?

In the same vein.

"Reverend."

"Oh, yes! Miss Yu Ji-won. What can I do for you?"

"It's nothing complicated. I came to ask that you stop summoning Mr. Matiz every morning to indulge in kisses under the pretense of talking in your sleep."

"..."

One-sided love had no upsides either.

* * *

Cheon Yo-hwa, the absolute authority of the Cult, was by no means stupid.

Blaming sleepwalking and pretending she couldn't tell dream from waking had only worked for a day or two.

Her own little sister and the attendants were scheming together every single day to quietly use her betrothed as a living, breathing alarm clock, and there was no way she hadn't caught on.

'Huk. Wait, have I really been kissing sunbae, no, Mr. Go Yuir, in reality this whole time and not just in dreams?!'

To say it again, Cheon Yo-hwa was not stupid. Which was exactly why she made the wisest decision possible.

'Wow! Jackpot! Let's keep playing dumb!'

A run-of-the-mill romcom character would have launched into embarrassment, self-denial, scolding everyone involved in the scheme, and so on, but Cheon Yo-hwa didn't waste her time on such unproductive processes.

Obviously. The moment she let on that she "knew" anything, this sweet secret rendezvous would be over, so why on earth would she lend an ear to the voice of her conscience?

'This time I'll drag him under the covers, play totally clueless, and

feel out Teacher's ribs...'

'Hmm. Surprisingly, he does have abs. Is his body fat percentage just naturally low?'

'Sunbae always wears the same perfume, and honestly it's so strangely nice. What product is it? Should I have the kids look into it?'

'Tomorrow, in secret, really, really in secret... ihihi.'

Thanks to all that, Cheon Yo-hwa had been savoring her Go Yuir tasting course in full swing, like a chef relishing premium beef cut by cut.

She had been enjoying it. Until.

"Uh..."

A faint tremble.

Across from her sat the rival who had abruptly requested an audience. Facing Yu Ji-won, Cheon Yo-hwa fought to keep her expression in check.

"Kisses in my sleep...? Hmmm. I'm sorry. What might this be about, Miss Ji-won? I can't think of a single thing it could be referring to."

"Is that so?"

Yu Ji-won, on the other hand, had always stuck to being a blank-faced character, so she had no need to manage her expression at all.

A mere tilt of her head was enough to set the other person's heart pounding, no different from the realm of the heart-sword[1].

"Lately, every dawn, Mr. Matiz goes off somewhere and comes back. When he returns there's always a deep scent of orange clinging to him."

'Is your nose's species, like, a puppy or something?'

"Wondering whether he might be meeting with your younger sister, Reverend, I deliberately scheduled things with her yesterday morning. Even so, the orange scent didn't change."

'Insane. You pinned down the culprit on top of that?'

"The orange scent was concentrated over Mr. Matiz's whole body, his lips in particular. In other words, the reasonable conclusion is that you, Reverend, exchanged kisses with Mr. Matiz."

'No. By what method did you even figure out that his body scent pooled on his lips??'

"Yet from Mr. Matiz's heart I detected nothing but bewilderment and tension. Which means it was not a voluntary kiss but one forced upon him by another's will."

"..."

"Therefore, I humbly make this request of you, Reverend. Please do not force unwanted physical contact upon Mr. Matiz."

Silence fell.

Beyond the blank face, there was one more thing about Yu Ji-won that had to be addressed, and that was her gaze.

Yu Ji-won rarely looked away.

Always perfect posture. From a head that never wavered in the slightest, her two eyes stayed fixed on the other person as if they knew nothing but moving straight ahead.

Combined with this girl's particular looks, it gave off an aura that made her hard to treat lightly.

It felt as though, the instant you let a word slip, every word and every sentence was laid bare in mirrors on all four sides, which made her unpleasant to deal with.

But.

"... Really?"

Today, Cheon Yo-hwa looked Yu Ji-won straight in the eye too.

A shadow resembling a smile hung at the corner of her mouth, as if it were the one trace of decorum she had left.

"I wouldn't really know. But let's just suppose my sleepwalking or whatever flared up and somehow I ended up kissing sunbae, no, Mr. Go Yuir. At that moment, in Mr. Go Yuir's heart... would there really be only 'bewilderment' and 'tension,' like you said, Miss Ji-won?"

"..."

"I think there'd be more. A bit more."

Cheon Yo-hwa propped her chin on her hand.

"Believe it or not, I've never once gone through life without being told I'm pretty. And besides... I'm sorry to put it this way, but it's not like I'm just a face, right? Don't I have rather more going for me elsewhere?"

"..."

"Ahaha, please don't tense up so much, Miss Ji-won. It's all hypothetical. Yep, yep. Just talk of an IF!"

"Mm."

And yet, even though it was the first time since they'd met that Cheon Yo-hwa had bared anything that could be called real hostility.

"Pardon my intrusion."

For some reason.

Not a single shadow fell across Yu Ji-won's face.

It was as if the thorns Cheon Yo-hwa had loosed left no wound, no

scratch on her at all.

"I only wished for you, Reverend, to think of Mr. Matiz first and foremost."

"...What?"

"I had guessed that you, Reverend, might hold a heart similar to mine. It seems my judgment was mistaken. My apologies."

"..."

"You're already absorbed in building the time capsule, and here I am holding you up to tack on pointless words. I'll take my leave now."

"Oh."

Yu Ji-won bowed at an angle as upright as her gaze, then left the audience chamber.

"..."

For some reason, Cheon Yo-hwa couldn't bring herself to stop her.

* * *

Everything in this world has its pros and cons.

Of course, this proposition was, at the end of the day, a maxim meant for life's winners, the ones who had succeeded in claiming the upside.

As Holden Caulfield, the senior of all cool-type light novel protagonists[2], put it, "if it's nothing but losers gathered together from the start," you couldn't even come up with the idea of trading pros against cons one for one. This was a point the genius linguist Master Kumagawa Misogi[3] agreed with too.

Even so.

'...I.'

'I didn't put sunbae Go Yuir... first?'

Even when the downside had been handed over first.

A single alchemy, like a miracle, that interlocked with that downside to wring out an upside in spite of everything.

A blade for the loser had been permitted to human beings.

'...Really?'

Self-awareness. Reflection. Introspection.

'Even in front of sunbae Go Yuir, I was thinking only of myself first, not of sunbae...? Me?'

The first mirror every human being is born carrying inside their heart.

"..."

Cheon Yo-hwa thought.

In the depths of her private bedroom, where no one was allowed near. Seated before the mirror she had set up at the Outer God's request.

She spoke alone.

"Why? I thought sunbae, and even Yu Ji-won, were beautiful. I'm not lying. I truly, genuinely thought them beautiful. So why am I the selfish one?"

"Because you didn't know. Because you weren't used to it."

A monologue before a mirror always came in two layers, so from the reflected face Cheon Yo-hwa's echo answered back.

"From the moment you were born, a life for your own sake was never permitted to you, Cheon Yo-hwa. A Sacrifice. A living altar. That was the role you were assigned, and your father was the pressure piled on top of it."

The Cheon Yo-hwa inside the mirror murmured without expression.

"You always felt that your life had been stripped away from you, and that feeling was no illusion."

"...But. I, I killed my father. I took every bit of the Cult's power into my own hands. I became an adult, an adult stronger than any adult. Then... shouldn't things be different now?"

"Time cannot be turned back."

Cheon Yo-hwa shook her head.

"The childhood your father stripped from you can never be restored. You know that. And it isn't only you who knows, everyone does."

"..."

"So no matter how much you whisper, [now things have to be different], what good is it? You are fated to forever crave a substitute father and take your revenge on the world, all to be compensated for a past that can never be restored."

The time capsule project progressed smoothly.

The sleepwalking trait Cheon Yo-hwa had come to possess. The signs of self-division she suffered because of the mirror. All of it was proof that her authority for handling the Outer God had reached its peak.

In other words, a trivial 'side effect.' Nothing more than a 'downside' she'd been saddled with as the price for an overwhelming upside.

Cheon Yo-hwa's wits for telling dream from reality grew thinner and thinner. It was because the resolution of the reality she could manipulate within her dreams had risen sharply.

"Then am I... even if I do end up together with sunbae Go Yuir. Even if we come to share love, will it always be like this?"

This very conversation, too.

Cheon Yo-hwa carried it on in her bedroom not only in reality but identically inside her dreams.

The Cheon Yo-hwa reflected in the mirror was sometimes the same as now, sometimes far younger, and at times wore the Baekwha Girls' High uniform dyed pitch black.

"Can I not love sunbae the way Yu Ji-won does? Can I not think of the other person before myself? Can I not accept the other person, purely, just as they are?"

"No."

"Why? I... I was a 'vessel' from the moment I was born. A child destined to be an empty vessel that receives my father's will, the god-nim's will. So why is it that I can't even put first the one person I love?"

"Because that person is not a god but a human being."

"..."

"He isn't perfect. He isn't complete either. Accepting the person you love doesn't mean cutting out your brain and physically taking them in."

Cheon Yo-hwa murmured.

"Success is easy. When there's an upside, it's all you can see. The problem is what comes after. Can you admit your own failure? Can you find an upside in his downsides? Can you become his mirror, and he yours?"

"..."

"Life is not a story. Are you prepared to face him and walk beside him, knowing that all of this is an eternal epilogue that will never end? You?"

Cheon Yo-hwa could not answer.

A hasty answer was like front teeth. The only things they could bite

into were tiny problems.

So before she answered, she watched.

「Please don't make that face, Saintess. I only want to be with the you in front of me.」

「Me too.」

The epilogues of others, not herself.

Examples. Precedents. Answer sheets.

「Okay, let's... do it... Guild Leader...」

Or wrong-answer sheets.

「I think I shouldn't regress anymore.」

「Why...?」

「I don't have the confidence to meet you again once you've lost your memories of now. I might even end up killing you.」

「Oh dear...」

One by one, even as tears flowed, even as blood leaked from her lips, she clenched her teeth and watched all of it.

Simulation. Imagining.

Long ago, Go Yuir had obtained various pieces of information from Go Yuri. That information had flowed in turn through Go Yuir to Cheon Yo-hwa.

Cheon Yo-hwa mobilized the Cult's full strength to secure the personal data of the 'Regression Alliance' candidates.

With only that information, at the height Cheon Yo-hwa had now reached, she could run as many 'simulations' inside her dreams as she liked.

"Ahaha."

Cheon Yo-hwa laughed. A dry smile.

"Sunbae, really. You have so many rivals..."

"Even if every last one of them ends in a bad ending."

Cheon Yo-hwa laughed. A twisted smile.

"No matter the love, ruin is destined in the end. No. It means that man called Go Yuir is the kind of human who only loves someone once ruin has already been confirmed."

"..."

"He tries to save people. He tries to resist a fate where ruin is settled. That's the path he chose. Can you be as earnest about his path as he is?"

"...I can't."

"Right. Cheon Yo-hwa. You can't deny it. In this entire world you're a human who only cares about yourself, plus your little sister and Go Yuir, more or less. The rest, the countless faceless nobodies, you regard as no different from bugs. You have no grievance with bugs simply existing, but the moment they crawl into your room and show themselves, you kill them without caring whether they're useful insects or pests. That's your nature."

"..."

"That's the kind of human you are, so how could you ever love a man like Go Yuir? Locking that man in a basement, brainwashing him, steeping him in carnal desire, this cycle. The next cycle. The one after that too. No. Making him your own possession across hundreds, thousands, millions of simulations. Isn't that the only way of love available to you?"

"..."

To say it again.

Cheon Yo-hwa was a human stained with countless flaws, yet she

had a few virtues.

"...No."

She was not stupid.

"It is not the only way of love."

"What?"

"Maybe there's another way. Yeah. After running other people's epilogues as simulations, it's become even clearer."

She was honest with herself.

"I'll believe that sunbae will break through all these bad endings and someday reach a happy ending."

"...What are you saying? Belief? Ahaha. Does blindly believing carry some kind of transcendent power? You really are an idiot."

"Mm-mm."

She couldn't be stupid enough to deceive herself, and she was honest enough to acknowledge herself.

"It's not blind belief."

"Then?"

"For sunbae to reach a happy ending, I just have to prove that I, that Cheon Yo-hwa, am 'absolutely' necessary."

"..."

A path.

A narrow, narrow path.

She could make out the single path that, in this world, was permitted to her alone.

"Sunbae ran aground at a bad ending every single time. But I was

never at his side."

"..."

"To put it the exact opposite way, if I support sunbae... And so, really, truly, if the path sunbae chose reaches its terminus."

Cheon Yo-hwa clenched her fist tight.

"If I can just prove that I cannot be absent from his happy ending."

"..."

"Then I won't need to blame myself anymore. By then, even in front of Yu Ji-won, I'll be able to speak of my love with my head held high."

"Because."

"Because, Yu Ji-won, you may be able to share a bad ending with sunbae, but his happy ending absolutely requires me."

"I'm a human who can never love the faceless masses."

"But if sunbae's path of trying to save those faceless masses is a summit that can't be reached without someone like me."

"Then my love for him is also the path to saving other people."

"My love is in no way something to be ashamed of."

"Not to him. Not to her. Not to me."

"The cynic, the mental patient, the one who longs for death, the psychopath, the sociopath, at the end of that path they're all justified."

"So."

Cheon Yo-hwa's smiles overlapped.

"Let's save this world, and prove my love."

From the very beginning,

she had been fated to love only one thing.

And that one thing, it seemed, had been the world to her.

Footnotes:

1 - Heart-sword: a concept in murim/wuxia martial-arts fiction for the highest tier of swordsmanship, where intent or will alone wounds an opponent without a physical blade.

2 - Holden Caulfield is the cynical teenage narrator of J. D. Salinger's novel The Catcher in the Rye (1951), here jokingly framed as the forerunner of detached, jaded light-novel heroes.

3 - Kumagawa Misogi is a character from the manga Medaka Box; the joke is attributing a profound linguistic observation to a fictional character rather than a real scholar.

Chapter 472

The That Woman C IX

Sinnoa

* * *

There were people, here and there, whose only road to loving themselves wound the long way around.

"Unni! I, I really did it, I summoned a Baku1! Whoa. Collect enough data and an anomaly really does come into being that works just like an AI..."

"Right. A few years from now, 'holes' are going to start tearing open all over the world at once. We turn that to our advantage, defining as much of the void as possible as a 'tutorial dungeon.' That's the duty we'll be handed later on."

"Y, yeah. I heard. That's how we speed up the rate people adapt to the new age, right?"

Not once since the day she was born.

Cheon Yo-hwa had never loved herself.

"So then... anyway, this is the very first Baku ever summoned. What should we name it, unni? Something like Succubus Queen, maybe, or Fairy No. 1?"

"No."

A defect.

And no wonder, since not one lovable scrap could be found anywhere in her.

A deficiency.

A family decent enough to make her crave affection, sadly and by rotten luck, simply did not exist.

A loss.

A little sister who looked exactly like her. Even she registered to Cheon Yo-hwa as little more than a cute pet.

"This Baku will be sealed away by Go Yuir and his [time seal]. It'll vanish from the world for a while. And only in the happy-ending cycle that's bound to arrive someday, only at the very, very last, will it be opened."

"Yeah. And?"

"This is an extremely difficult incantation. So we have to be careful in the extreme, starting from the very work of naming it."

She was lacking in humanity.

For her, unlike all those other people lucky enough to be born otherwise, no shortcut to loving herself had ever existed.

Such a fate. To a person flung onto a long, winding route like Cheon Yo-hwa, a few choices were given.

"By number, it's not No. 1 but No. 404."

"...Oh, like when the internet's down?"

"Yeah. The Baku came from the authority of the god-nim we serve anyway, and that authority is the use of data. It couldn't be more fitting."

One. Inheritance.

Just as she had inherited hatred from her father, she too would pass her lack of self-love down to her children.

This route was the «Broad Road,» and the people walking it were many, so very many.

Two. Denial.

You refuse to acknowledge self-love at all. It is a concept that was false from the start, or else a wildly useless emotion.

This route was a very steep cliff path. People climbed it and fell to their deaths all the time, yet the road was not narrow for it, so anyone could stake their life on the ascent.

And last, the third route.

"Just slapping the number 404 on it isn't enough."

"Then?"

"Pandora's box."

Proof.

"In the original it was a jar, not a box, they say... But in a case like this, symbolic weight matters far more than fidelity to the source. Yeah. The No. 404 Baku, I'll shape it in the form of a 'box,' not a fairy."

"A box... Ah. Could it be?"

"That's right. A box. Just like a 'time capsule.'"

You acknowledge your own defect.

It had been a life handed nothing but flaws from the start.

But no one had done anything wrong.

To call the world wrong is mistaken, and since I, born into a world that is not wrong, am also not wrong, I too could surely reach your side.

"Into this time capsule that a failed regressor resolved to pass on to the next world... into the Pandora's box we shaped, I'll pack every last bit of hope."

"Hope..."

"Yeah. Hope."

This route was the «Narrow Road.»

It was fine if the person had been born riddled with defects. It was fine if she was a miko[2] designed from birth to be an altar.

No, it was precisely because of that that a method of love possible only for her existed.

"But, Yo-hwa. For this plan to work, the two of us sisters have to make a little, a tiny, sacrifice."

"...What kind of sacrifice?"

"We're going to be apart for just a little while."

"And exactly how little is 'a little while'?"

"Hmm. Roughly tens of thousands of years, give or take?"

"..."

Cheon Yo-hwa smiled.

"You trust me, don't you, unni?"

* * *

World annihilation drew near.

The press and the public had yet to sense it, but the cult, already warned of the future by a regressor, was receiving reports moment by moment through the feelers it had stretched across the world.

Strange disappearances. Mass hallucinations. Sightings of unidentified life forms. Abnormal contamination of records in reality and on the internet...

These were the aftershocks that had descended in advance, before the great main force could lift its head.

"If it's a cycle's world that's doomed to perish anyway, then it's

better that I be the one to destroy it first."

And so the Reverend, Cheon Yo-hwa, resolved to become the earthquake herself.

"Uh..."

Across from her, Go Yuir blinked.

"My apologies, Reverend Cheon Yo-hwa. Have you, perhaps, been completely contaminated by the Outer God?"

"No, Go Yuir. It's the other way around. To hit MAX 100 percent contamination, I have to destroy the world."

"What?"

"The more my heart is dyed by god-nim, the more freely I can use god-nim's authority. In short, to raise the time capsule's completeness to its absolute maximum, the only possible conclusion is that I have to raise my own contamination as high as it'll go too."

"..."

Go Yuir pressed his lips together and looked to the seat beside him, to Yu Ji-won. He was asking her opinion with his eyes.

There had been a time when that kind of glance between the two of them used to hurt, leaving only Cheon Yo-hwa feeling shut out. But not anymore.

Yu Ji-won's clear gaze, looking straight at her.

Even in this very moment, meeting it, Cheon Yo-hwa's heart did not waver in the slightest.

Yu Ji-won opened her lips.

"What exactly do you mean by destroying the world, Reverend?"

"First, I'll become one in body and spirit with god-nim. Right after that, I'll tear down the boundary between reality and dream, bring

god-nim down to earth, and harvest all of humanity."

"A harvest for what?"

"Data collection. And securing the 'brains' to process that data."

"..."

"I'll run simulations no different from reality, then load that information into 'Pandora's box.' Of course, the lovey-dovey love story of Go Yuir and Yu Ji-won will go into the box too."

At that, Go Yuir seemed a touch embarrassed, but Yu Ji-won was unfazed.

"The digitization of humanity's entire brain mass. It does follow logically. But since the time capsule will hold only Mr. Matiz's information and my own, do you really need data on such a vast scale?"

"Ah. No, I don't."

Cheon Yo-hwa smiled brightly.

"But I... I'm going to cram a whole lot of other people's stories into Pandora's box too, you see."

"Other people, meaning?"

"Noh Do-hwa."

"..."

"Sim Ah-ryeon, Jeong Ye-ji, Dang Seo-rin, and so on. Just like you, Yu Ji-won. And just like this world of ours."

Cheon Yo-hwa brought her two hands together.

As if in prayer.

"Every last apocalypse that ended in a bad ending and so was remembered by no one, all of them, I'll pack into Pandora's box."

"The worlds that fell away..."

"Yes. The beings who became defects."

To capture the perished spans of time.

"Each and every one of them is an apocalypse in its own right. A despair. So a time capsule that gathers every despair in the world is bound, inevitably, to become Pandora's box."

"..."

"But it's in that very place, where every despair has been collected, that the something you and I long for will be born."

"Hope, is it."

"Yes."

Cheon Yo-hwa smiled.

To flip a weakness into a strength.

That was her road.

"Someday Go Yuir will..., mm. All of us will reach a happy ending. The hope that we'll reach such a route. To pass that hope on, paradoxically, every despair has to be collected."

"..."

"But as you know, my power still isn't enough to run the despairs that happened in other cycles as simulations."

"Which is why you need to be devoured by the Outer God..."

Yu Ji-won closed her eyes for a moment.

Soon a murmur leaked from her lips.

"A rational conclusion."

"Thank you for understanding, Ji-won. No. Pandora, who will

someday open the time capsule."

"..."

"She who opens the box of despair and hope shall, as is only fitting, be the most beautiful woman in this world. You too are part of the plan I've spun."

"Is that so."

Yu Ji-won.

The girl already slated, in the far distant future, to play the role of Pandora gave a small nod.

"I see. According to the myth, the opening of Pandora's box brought a great deluge that drowned the earth, did it not? Did the Reverend account for even that far?"

"Of course!"

"A splendid scheme."

Yu Ji-won held out her hand.

As they shook lightly, she asked.

"Reverend. When do you intend to begin the world annihilation?"

"A week from now."

That day was April 4th3.

By the Reverend's command, the cultists gathered at the headquarters. Even as the sun set and the hour came when daily life winds down, the cultists kneeling on the floor did not stir.

Because for them, now was the very promised moment.

"It's strange, isn't it, unni."

"Hm? What is?"

The dead center of the headquarters.

There the twin sisters, one dressed in white miko robes and the other in black, sat facing each other.

The white miko, the younger of the twins, scratched her cheek awkwardly.

"Well. From the very start we were sacrifices, weren't we, born with the fate of offering this world up to god-nim? And yet, going round and round... it really did turn out that way, so it felt kind of uncanny to me."

"Ahaha. I know, right."

The sisters formed the innermost core of the headquarters.

Around them sat dozens of elders, drawing a circle. And then a larger circle again, a larger one still, a larger one beyond that...

Thousands of Naechul formed layer upon layer of rings. Among the Oechul, those of the deepest faith became, especially, the final rampart at the very edge.

"But the sacrifice Father planned in the first place and the sacrifice we've resolved on now are different things."

"Are they?"

"Yeah. Before, it was a sacrifice meant to throw us away... But now, we're offering ourselves up to ourselves, so that we can be left behind. So that we can come back to ourselves."

"..."

"Yo-hwa."

Squeeze.

Cheon Yo-hwa laced her fingers through her sister's.

Around the two of them, the entire crimson sunset chirped with the

prayers ceaselessly chanted by the elders, the Naechul, the Oechul.

"My beloved sister."

"..."

"But the word love in 'beloved sister,' which I've said so many times until now, it was probably a little different from the love you hoped for from me."

"...Unni."

"I'm sorry I could only give you that kind of love. And, even knowing it, thank you for staying by my side all this time."

"..."

"Unni, starting today, I'll try."

Cheon Yo-hwa smiled.

"To be an unni my sister doesn't have to be ashamed of."

"...There's never once been a thing about you I had to be ashamed of, unni."

"Aw, that's an exaggeration. When you teamed up behind my back with the Eight Trigrams to slip Go Yuir in, weren't you a little ashamed then?"

"Hwaaaaaaa-."

The younger sister thrashed. Enjoying that thrashing through their laced fingers, Cheon Yo-hwa beamed.

"Also... mm. Sorry for never properly introducing Go Yuir to you! Truth is, I was already swamped just dealing with Yu Ji-won, and if you got tangled up in it too I felt like I'd lose my mind, so I left it alone."

"Ah. So that's it?"

"Honestly, I even imagined bringing him in as a live-in husband for

both of us sisters. But no matter how I turned it over, Go Yuir seemed like he'd love you more than me."

"Ehh. Brother-in-law would?"

The younger sister laughed.

"No way, no way! Brother-in-law has never once looked at me like that. Aren't you blowing it out of proportion, unni?"

"Haaaa..."

"?"

"Honestly, this is exactly why there's no talking to a scrub of an ordinary person with no multiverse-simulation ability..."

"??"

"What can you do. Capable, pretty me will just have to understand and let it slide, sheesh."

"???"

The apology that lingered to the very end. The gratitude.

Words that would never again be shared in this life, and that maybe, even next time, and the time after that, would be shared again only once a near-eternal instant had passed.

"Ah."

And then the sun went down.

It was the last twilight this world would be granted.

"Unni."

Taking that twilight against the side of her face, the younger sister wore an expression with not a trace of the earlier lightness left in it, grave and serious, and.

"Mm."

Cheon Yo-hwa nodded too.

"Let's pray."

Her words rang as clear as a bell even within the evening glow.

The elders, already chanting the prayer, were the first to hear the Reverend's solemn toll, and they rang it through their own bodies and spread it far and wide.

"Formed of a swirling chaos, born before heaven and earth..."

"I do not know its name..."

"Silent, and vast, and empty, it stands alone and never changes..."

The Cult's Head Temple, designed and built from the very beginning for this day's rite, blended into the sunset and the night sky, the death of the sun and the birth of the moon, the crossing of yang and yin.

'A Spirit Bomb4... no. A burial of the living, maybe.'

Gripping their laced fingers tighter, Cheon Yo-hwa, together with her sister, intoned in a voice as clear as the night sky.

"To live is to die. If annihilation was decreed from the very beginning, then is not every human a living corpse?"

"Just as closing one's eyes does not stop life, so dreaming does not bring reality to an end."

"In each instant, dream and waking are held together, so the annihilation of the beginning is but an instant's dream, and the beginning of annihilation no different from a waking instant."

"So even if we are confined to nothing but the instant of here and now, how could we fail to behold annihilation and beginning directly?"

"Our great, great instant."

"Our small, small eternity."

The two Cheon Yo-hwas closed their eyes.

Up to here it was a prayer their father had taught them since childhood, one that recited itself on its own.

Now the highlight. Only the final prayer remained.

But...

"Please die together with me."

The order was switched.

The prayer the elder sister was meant to recite at the very end, the younger sister said first, and.

"Please live together with me."

The prayer the younger sister was meant to recite first, the elder sister said last.

And.

The god answered their prayer.

Footnotes:

1 - The baku is a creature of Japanese folklore (originally from Chinese myth) said to devour nightmares and bad dreams; here it refers to a dream-devouring spirit.

2 - A miko is a shrine maiden in Japanese Shinto tradition, an unmarried woman who serves at a shrine and performs ritual duties.

3 - In Korea (and across East Asia) the number 4 is considered unlucky because it sounds like the word for "death." April 4th thus doubles the omen, an apt date for an apocalypse ritual.

4 - The Spirit Bomb (Genki-dama) is the signature attack from the manga/anime Dragon Ball, in which Goku gathers energy donated from all living things into a massive sphere. This fits the ritual's gathering of energy from the assembled cultists.

Chapter 473

The That Woman C X

Sinnoa

* * *

The Cult was a band of Outer God followers who, unlike the usual frauds, never even put a name on their sign. Among its believers it went only by "the Cult," "Head Temple," or "Big House."

When they raised their prayers as one heart and one will, centered on the Cheon Yo-hwa twins, I'll record what happened across the whole of the earth.

"What's wrong? Tired?"

"Mmmm, sorry. I'm suddenly sleepy."

The report on that bad ending went as follows.

First, thirty seconds.

"Haaaaaaah. Ah, me too."

"Right? Is it the weather...? ..."

No matter the time zone, a severe sleeping sickness fell over all of humanity in every region.

"Huh? Hey! Look at that!"

"Wooooooooaaah!"

The soccer player showing off a brilliant dribble across the grass was thrown into total confusion when the three defenders blocking him all collapsed at once, one after another.

But the player was a pro. The striker slipped past all three in an

instant and struck the ball, and when even the goalkeeper crumpled in some random spot, the net rippled.

"Wuaaaah!"

The soccer player who'd scored a goal for the ages sprinted off to celebrate.

It was a derby match, too. A performance more than worthy of hero treatment from the fans.

But something was wrong.

The roar of the crowd that should have welcomed his charge, the cheers of the fans, somehow grew quieter the closer he got.

"...?"

The soccer player turned around, bewildered.

Pft. Pft. His own teammates, who'd been chasing after him to join the celebration, were dropping one by one.

They had all fallen asleep.

"Huh?"

Slump.

Soon the one who'd scored collapsed in the corner of the pitch like a puppet with its strings cut.

The stadium packed with tens of thousands fell silent in an instant.

"What the... What is this? What?"

A home-team spectator who'd been filming the whole thing on his smartphone let his mouth fall open.

He couldn't believe what was happening before his eyes.

In barely a minute, the entire stadium, so frenzied moments ago, had stopped breathing.

"Crazy, crazy, crazy! Hey! Wake up!"

"..."

"Is it, is it terrorism? Poison gas? Damn it, what is this?"

And then a minute passed.

On the last spectator's recording smartphone screen, a jet of red sprayed up with a pshhk.

Pop, pop, pop.

The humans who'd fallen asleep soon sank into eternal rest. No one had touched them, yet their heads burst like watermelons, scattering bright red pulp in every direction.

It wasn't only the stands. The green grass, too, was stained here and there with red paint.

Heads blown clean off, only the away-team and home-team uniforms flapped limply, pressed flat under the red.

"...!"

The last spectator ran like a madman. He couldn't even scream.

He had no idea what was happening. He just had to escape, somehow.

Pop, pop! Shoving through the human heads bursting in real time, the blood soaking his whole body, he swallowed his screams and broke desperately out of the stadium.

"God! God!"

The smartphone screen he was clutching shook without pause.

His gasping breath, his groans, the red explosions, all of it was being recorded.

But even after he left the stadium, his despair didn't end.

The streets were already plastered all over in red, and at the sight he could only stop dead.

"No way... A, a dream?"

"Hey! Hey there!"

Far off, a survivor seemed to have spotted him and came running, shouting.

But there was no time even to feel relief. Before he could finish crossing the intersection, pop! The survivor collapsed onto the asphalt and his head went flying.

"Y, yeah. There's no way this is real. There's no way this is reality. It's a dream. Damn it, it's a dream!"

That was the last audio recorded on the smartphone.

At last the phone fell to the ground, the screen lurching wildly. Then a deep, deep red liquid washed over the camera lens, and nothing more could be recorded.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

At a crossroads with no pedestrians crossing and no cars passing through, the traffic light flashed red.

The Cult's prayer went on.

"..."

"..."

The Cheon Yo-hwa twins only pressed their foreheads together, gripping each other's hands tight.

In this very moment.

There was no denying it. The center of the earth lay between the twins' touching foreheads.

'I can feel it.'

Cheon Yo-hwa trembled at the overwhelming sense of omnipotence.

'My power is growing absurdly strong.'

'If before I could only borrow the believers' brains to run simulations... now it's tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of times more.'

It was nothing short of gorging.

'This is the god-nim's authority... no.'

'It's my authority.'

Drip.

From the heads of the people who had died at the same instant all across the world, a single drop, then another, of greasy blood began to rise.

Each drop held that person's scream, their cry, their lament. Some moved at nearly the speed of light, others crept along sluggishly like snails, and all of them flowed somewhere.

Into Cheon Yo-hwa's grasp.

A storm of blood rose across the entire earth. The current the single drops made, the whirlpool, surged into Cheon Yo-hwa's hands, clasped tight in prayer.

The Cult's believers who witnessed this strange miracle fell into ecstasy. It was true. Truly, the Reverend was one chosen by heaven!

'...I can't get drunk on this power.'

The Reverend herself, Cheon Yo-hwa, kept her thoughts endlessly cold even as her heart pounded like mad.

'Not all of humanity has died yet. The Cult is still intact. Right now, while the god-nim hasn't fully devoured me, while there's still humanity left in [me], this is the only chance.'

'One at a time. One at a time. Calmly...'

'Run the simulation.'

Squirm, squirm.

The blood drops gathered together and began to take form. A small box.

The younger sister shaped the Baku[1] not as a fairy but in the form of a box.

The older sister was cramming blood drops, one after another, into the box her younger sister had shaped.

"..."

"..."

The two sisters' breathing locked together.

An exceedingly intricate task.

If even one of them got drunk on the god's authority and refused to cooperate with the other, she would instantly be reborn as the world's one and only absolute god.

But Cheon Yo-hwa did not betray Cheon Yo-hwa.

It was a moment when only a single step, no, barely half a step, remained to become the one true god.

In that half-step they did not take, the two sisters had entrusted their own humanity.

'Hold it. Preserve it. Record it. Remember it.'

Cheon Yo-hwa kept her eyes closed.

But what unfolded behind her eyelids was not darkness. Full-color simulations were running endlessly.

Dream was reality, and reality was dream.

Before she knew it, Cheon Yo-hwa was walking freely through the illusions.

Suppressing the god's authority as it raged out of control, putting her own will and purpose above all, Cheon Yo-hwa ran only the simulations she desired.

Blink.

"...Hm?"

Before her eyes, Noh Do-hwa, in a wedding dress, was frowning.

"Who are you...?"

Blink.

"Eh?"

Before her eyes, Sim Ah-ryeon, smeared with paint, gave a start.

"Uh, uh-uh? S... student council president? Why are you suddenly in my room? A, at least knock first."

Blink.

"...?"

Before her eyes, Jeong Ye-ji, who'd been pulling raw ramyeon and the like from the ceiling to prepare drinking snacks, tilted her head.

"Cheon Yo-hwa? No. That's strange. Right now I'm clearly stopping time."

Blink. Blink. Blink.

A kaleidoscope unfolded behind Cheon Yo-hwa's eyelids. In each mirrored facet that made up the kaleidoscope, the protagonist of a bad ending was reflected.

And 'outside' Cheon Yo-hwa's eyelids, meaning on the layer that until just now had formed this world's reality, more and more people's heads were bursting.

Pop!

The Cult was no longer a safe zone either. The outermost ring, formed by the Oechul, began to collapse first.

"There isn't much time," Cheon Yo-hwa said calmly to all those bad endings.

"Right now I've pushed the authority of the Endless and the puppet master to its peak, and I'm running your reality as a simulation."

The Endless. The puppet master. These were unfamiliar names to Cheon Yo-hwa too, yet she used them now as if it were nothing.

Cheon Yo-hwa was already crossing the boundary.

"In other words, your reality has already passed into my hands. What you feel. What you live. All of it is now nothing more than a fleeting spring dream spread out by my authority."

"..."

"..."

"..."

The bad endings fell silent.

Even so, the facets the kaleidoscope reflected kept multiplying, and the rings formed by the Cult's believers kept bursting and bursting.

"Let me put it bluntly. From the moment I interfered, the bad endings you met were already reduced to mere playthings."

"..."

"..."

"..."

In that instant, countless retorts poured out from many facets. Cheon Yo-hwa felt herself overloading, just slightly.

But she bit down hard on her lip. Without missing a single facet, a single bad ending, Cheon Yo-hwa split herself into countless pieces and answered every one.

"It's useless to voice your complaints to me. The fact that I could pull off something like this means the same thing can be repeated at any time. You understand, don't you?"

"..." "..." "..."

"If anything, I'd like you to thank me. At least I'm standing here not to make your reality a lie, but the exact opposite. To deliver all of your epilogues into reality. Hwaaaah. Really, my problem is that I'm just too kind."

A storm of blood rose.

At last the Cult's Naechul had their heads explode too. Like dominoes toppling, from the outer ring to the inner, the believers offered up their souls one by one.

There weren't many dominoes left.

"Please pray," Cheon Yo-hwa said, clasping her two hands together.

"Toward the final cycle that we, together with Mr. Go Yuir and the others, may someday reach. Earnestly recall the feelings, the memories, the love you want to leave there."

Shatter.

"Place it in Pandora's box."

Shatter. Shatter. Shatter.

The facets spread out like a kaleidoscope broke. Every broken facet was stained the red of blood.

When all the simulations shattered.

"Unni."

One last facet remained.

It was the facet once called 'reality.' But by now it was no different from the other simulation universes, reduced to a playground Cheon Yo-hwa could stir as she pleased.

There stood her younger sister.

"I saw it too. ...The Teacher and me."

"Yeah."

Blood gushed up behind her sister's shoulders.

The ring-shaped fortress wall formed by the Naechul caved in. Now even the ring of the Cult's elders, barely a few dozen surrounding them, was collapsing.

The storm of blood that explosion raised looked just like an evening glow, and her sister seemed to stand with a twilight made of flesh and blood at her back.

"I'm going to forget you, unni."

"Yeah."

"But once we open the time capsule, today's events too. And the things that happened in other places too. They'll all come flooding back, so we'll be able to play together like today again. Right?"

"...Yeah."

"I love you, unni."

Her sister smiled.

"Even in a world like this. Being born family with you, unni, made me so, so happy..."

And then her sister, too, was dyed by the glow.

"..."

Humanity had perished.

Every kaleidoscope she had spread out was broken, and there wasn't one facet that wasn't drowned in blood.

A world drowned in the twilight of a blood storm, worlds, and Cheon Yo-hwa walked through them as the last human left.

"...I'm sleepy."

She was tired.

She felt she might collapse at any second.

"I can't sleep. No, falling asleep here. Then everything would be for nothing."

But Cheon Yo-hwa didn't yield to the drowsiness and kept walking. She had a destination to reach.

It wasn't all that hard. By leaping from facet to facet, she could cross several regions in an instant.

Blink.

Still, even mid-walk, she couldn't stop her eyelids from opening and closing. Blink, blink. Utter exhaustion and helplessness wrung at her brows.

"Not sleepy-. Not sleeeepy-."

Every time she blinked, the scenery shifted in strange ways.

Now that all life had perished and belonged to Cheon Yo-hwa, the world could no longer hold its original form.

Just as she had once manipulated the dream scenery like a 'video' when she first learned how to use her authority.

Now the world took shape exactly as she gazed, exactly as she thought.

And the scenery that changed in this way was.

"Ahaha."

A vast laboratory.

Every human brain floated bobbing inside a glass jar. One brain ran one simulation, one bad ending.

"What is this... Bobbing brains. A lab where nothing but bad endings recording humanity's extinction keep running."

Cheon Yo-hwa let out a smile.

"Really. Someone who didn't know better would think it was a vision of hell itself..."

But it was a hell she had chosen.

Blink.

Cheon Yo-hwa connected herself to those countless simulation universes.

Carrying 'Pandora's box' carefully in both hands, to the same place each time.

Just as she'd arranged in advance with Go Yuir, she arrived at the campus of Stanford University.

"Hng, hng-hng-♪"

Humming. To keep herself awake.

There was no one around. Naturally. She had collected only perished worlds.

In worlds where even Go Yuir had died, Go Yuri was absent too. She could tell that Go Yuri had always taken her own life immediately after his death.

"Heave-ho. Now then, let's see-."

Cheon Yo-hwa set the box down for a moment and began digging the soil at the appointed spot.

She used both hands to dig. A shovel would have been far easier, but the feel of the earth crumbling at her fingertips worked better at chasing off the drowsiness.

"Well. This deep should keep it from washing away in the rain!"

Her fingernails were all broken. Along with grains of soil, blood ran down from her fingertips.

Beaming, Cheon Yo-hwa laid Pandora's box inside the pit, shallow but unmistakably the deepest hole in the universe.

She buried it. Carefully.

She covered it. A few tears fell.

"Sunbae."

"If you do all this and still don't come back here later to dig up the time capsule... I'll be angry, you know?"

"Ji-won too. If you suddenly give up your studies abroad and insist on staying by sunbae's side, throwing a tantrum like that, even gentle me would get angry."

A small burial mound rose.

Come to think of it, a grave might have been the very first structure humans built to leap across time.

"...Ah."

Right after.

Cheon Yo-hwa realized she'd made a mistake.

"Before burying it I should have asked sunbae to lay a [time seal] over the box. I forgot."

Such a ridiculous mistake.

But it couldn't be helped. No matter how perfect the plan, once it goes live the operation is bound to tangle.

She had been desperate, after all, not to be devoured by the god-nim, never to fall asleep until Pandora's box was buried.

"Ahaha... Oops, oops♪"

Wriggle, wriggle.

Around the grave where the heart of despair was buried, water drops were moving. The Outer God who'd lost the Miko named Yu Ji-won2. The trace of Leviathan.

"Mm. Well, if I'd kept sunbae alive, Go Yuri might have caught on. So for security's sake this is actually better."

-...

"Okay. There's no helping it! Leviathan! I'll bestow on you the honorable role of grave keeper."

-...

"Go Yuri of course, but also sunbae, or anyone connected to sunbae, the moment it seems they're crossing the Pacific, trigger the Great Deluge without fail. When they don't come near, stay quiet. Understand?"

-...

"Then I'll let you wound me in return."

-...

Cheon Yo-hwa touched a water drop with her fingertip. At that, a blood drop blended into the clear water.

"Contract sealed, then."

Cheon Yo-hwa felt a little relieved.

With a guard stationed like this, even the formidable Go Yuri wouldn't go meddling beyond the Pacific without good reason.

A matter of matchups. Thanks to an SSS-rank Miko who could

assassinate a pro reincarnator without batting an eye.

"Yeah."

Thud.

Cheon Yo-hwa sat down hard.

"It's over..."

Her head went suddenly blank.

She was sleepy.

She was really, truly sleepy.

"...Maybe this is my limit."

Cheon Yo-hwa knew, of course, that this was no ordinary drowsiness.

It was a sign that the Outer God of Taeguk3 and the puppet master's Outer God would no longer permit her any 'self-awareness.'

If she closed her eyes like this. If she sank into that sweetest of unconscious states, that was when she'd truly become one body and one self with the puppet master.

"..."

In this vision of hell, set a hand's breadth apart from all realities, all worldlines.

Endlessly repeating simulations forever.

Until someone came looking for her.

"..."

That, too, wasn't so bad.

After all, she was a villain of the worst kind.

'A world that would have been destroyed by other anomalies anyway if left alone,' 'better this way, devouring humanity's souls first,' 'better to send a time capsule to a happy ending,' 'and while we're at it, collect the other worldlines' bad endings too.'

No matter what cause or excuse she put forward, the fact that Cheon Yo-hwa herself had destroyed the world did not change.

The even worse fact was that, despite exterminating humanity, Cheon Yo-hwa felt no guilt at all.

"Ahaha..."

The worst kind of human.

Blink.

Without even noticing it herself, Cheon Yo-hwa let her eyelids fall closed.

When she opened her eyes again, she couldn't gauge how long she'd dozed.

'...Hm?'

But strangely, what spread before her was not the bleak laboratory of hell.

It was a playground.

A somewhat old playground, or one left to neglect.

The sun was just setting, so the children who'd been on the swings until moments ago all seemed to have gone home.

In the middle of that playground, a very small girl and a middle-school boy crouched, building a sandcastle.

There was no failing to recognize their faces.

Cheon Yo-hwa as a child.

Go Yuir in his middle-school days.

'...Huh?'

What on earth was this.

Cheon Yo-hwa, already eaten away by drowsiness, could only stare blankly at the playhouse going on in the playground. Her thoughts weren't turning well.

Only.

"I'm super super rich, you know!"

"Sure, sure. You're rich."

From a playground that felt so impossibly far away, only the conversation passing between the girl and the boy reached her faintly, mingled into the red glow.

"It's true! I've even got servants and everything!"

"Wow. Then I can't figure out why a rich young lady like that is sitting alone in our neighborhood playground."

"They say this is the neighborhood the Teacher lives in... So I lied to my father and snuck out here!"

...

Had she had a past like this?

'Five years old? Or four? Back then I... I'd met Go Yuir?'

Cheon Yo-hwa searched her memory hard.

But she failed.

'...It won't come back.'

The Outer God's authority no longer obeyed her will.

'More than that, so that's how I talked when I was a little kid.'

Cheon Yo-hwa gazed on and on at the sunlit playground.

Maybe the scene before her was a lie, an illusion the Outer God's authority had thrown together on its own in response to the Miko's desire, right before she closed her eyes for good.

Maybe it was the projection of the inferiority complex she'd secretly held toward Yu Ji-won, the greed to have met 'sunbae' even a little earlier, to have had a bond before Yu Ji-won did.

Maybe.

"Big brother, why are you playing with me?"

"A kid I've obviously never seen in our neighborhood is sitting on the swings alone in the playground. Of course I'd worry."

"Worry? You're worried about me?"

"Yep."

"Big brother, you're a pushover!"

"..."

Maybe a coincidence like this really had happened in the past.

'...Aah.'

A brief meeting, about an hour. A crossing.

Her four- or five-year-old self naturally didn't remember the face of the boy who'd played with her that day, and the boy, too, didn't remember the girl he'd looked after for that hour.

'Sunbae.'

The girl and the boy were building a sandcastle.

But neither had much talent for construction. The sandcastle the two made actually looked just like a sand grave.

'Sunbae...'

A tiny sand grave.

'It seems I'm the kind of person who can only prove her sincerity by offering something up.'

'A flaw. A lack.'

'I don't know how to love myself.'

Above that sand grave, the children's laughter rang out in bright peals.

'To love you...'

To become someone who could love wholly.

'I think I threw everything away.'

She had staked everything.

Even her humanity.

'...So, when that day comes.'

When everything has succeeded.

'When I get to confess my feelings to sunbae.'

When you come to dig up that smallest sand grave in all the world.

'I think I'll be able to... love myself a little, with confidence.'

It had been a life born riddled with flaws.

A world destined for a bad ending.

Even someone like her, even a world whose destruction was reserved, if they could become something at all.

'Sunbae.'

The glow was sinking.

Her eyes were closing.

Someone came to the playground, a servant who seemed to have come to fetch the girl, and seeing it, the girl shot up and ran over.

The girl seemed to wave, saying bye-bye. She couldn't hear what the boy answered, but surely he answered her properly.

'...I like you.'

And then.

Her eyelids closed.

An eternal instant of darkness took her in.

The girl who had lost her name decided to place her farewell in the sand grave.

'Please, let it reach.'

Pandora's box.

A time capsule.

Today's glow.

A single love letter.

-That Woman C. Fin.

Footnotes:

1 - The baku, here meaning a dream demon, is a creature of folklore said to devour nightmares and dreams, fitting Cheon Yo-hwa's dream-and-simulation powers.

2 - A miko is a shrine maiden or priestess who serves a deity; here it denotes the human vessel bound to an Outer God.

3 - The name Taeguk evokes the Korean yin-yang symbol, but here it refers to the anomaly worshiped by the Cult.

Chapter 474

The That Woman D I

Sinnoa

* * *

Dang Seo-rin was happy.

"So like, some Outer God spent more than millions of years pretending to be 'me,' and across tens of thousands of cycles it burned through its Lifespan and died every single day, but in the end those memories only stuck around as faint afterimages and we still reached the happy ending, so it's all gooood...!"

That was right.

Imagine, if you would, that you were Dang Seo-rin, specifically the eldest daughter of Busan's Dang Flower Garden who had finally reached the happy ending route.

All she had done was cooperate for a few weeks with LiteraryGirl, who claimed, "I've played this game before!"

And yet by the time she came to her senses, insane leveling and stat growth had come bundled with it.

Just listing the skills she had acquired gave you this: 'The mental strength to overcome the trauma of losing her family,' 'But since they were actually alive and well, family bonds that had become even deeper,' 'Political connections built through the mayor of Busan,' 'Business channels gained by exporting flowers all over the world,' 'A voluntary slave who came asking to please let her work part-time, saying it was fine to use her for free,' 'The nerve to face world annihilation without even blinking,' 'Reliable comrades who shared that nerve,' 'Lee Ha-yul's cuteness,' 'The courage to snort even if an anomaly appeared in the middle of the night'...

Every single one was an overwhelming life experience.

They were nourishment for life itself, and connections she could never obtain again even for a mountain of gold. In fact, it would be a bit of a problem if it ever became possible to get them again.

Most of all.

"Un-der-taaaker♪"

She had found love.

"What're you doing, what're you doing? You got time today?"

"My apologies. Wait just a little."

"Eeh, why? What're you doing?"

"I was making you an affogato."

"Kyaa!"

Love.

Dang Seo-rin could truly feel that love was the noblest miracle permitted in life, no, in the universe.

Love's greatest enemy was time. No one knew whether this love would last one year, ten years, or fifty years. Life was the real thing.

But Dang Seo-rin had beta-tested it for not fifty years, but for tens of thousands of years and more.

At this point, the game deserved to be called god-tier just because it had finally gotten an official release.

'This is fate. This is romance!'

Dang Seo-rin wanted to stomp and clap for her past self, the self from the fourth cycle who now existed only as the vaguest feeling.

Because back then, when the Undertaker had lost all his companions and was starring in the bleakest misery story imaginable, it had been Dang Seo-rin who took him in.

Thanks to that, Dang Seo-rin had succeeded in buying low on a premium stock that was about to ascend like mad.

Maybe some riffraff like What's-her-name Do-hwa or Who-even Yo-hwa would call her a coward, but.

'If you're mad, you should've gone and [saved] him yourselves, no?'

Ah...

Dang Seo-rin could look up to Hecate without a speck of shame.

In dating sims too, the most orthodox way to clear a route was to aim for the moment when the other person was at their lowest and then start flirting.

No one was allowed to call her trash for that. Dang Seo-rin did not have even the slightest intention of ending this romance with flirting alone.

"Undertaker. This is so good!"

"Hm. You still call me Undertaker quite often."

"Ah, yeah. It still doesn't quite stick in my mouth somehow."

It was half true and half false.

The current Dang Seo-rin was Super Account Dang Seo-rin, who had inherited only the choicest Experience Points built up over the previous cycles.

Where would the veteran chops of someone who had once built Busan's biggest guild from nothing, then commanded power across the entire Korean Peninsula, possibly go?

Awakeners were all crazy. Every last one of them. The very person who had gathered those lunatics, organized them into a single army, and commanded them with perfect discipline was none other than this tactical genius, Dang Seo-rin.

'Here, the title [Undertaker] works way better on me than [Go

Yuir].'

Flash.

The strategic mind of the greatest witch in history, one who blasphemed even the gods, gave off a sinister gleam.

'There are... surprisingly a lot of people of interest who came into contact with this man while he still had the real name Go Yuir.'

To borrow the dating-sim metaphor again, how strong your bond with the target was came down to seniority.

In other words, how long ago you had met.

The earlier the point at which you met, the more frighteningly solid that bond became.

Did anyone really think those childhood-friend archetype characters who were always teased as the "losing heroine"[1] were actually destined to lose?

On the contrary, they were the strongest contenders, which was exactly why they got hit with concentrated fire and all sorts of sabotage.

In that sense, Dang Seo-rin had as many as three rivals she absolutely could not relax around.

Cheon Yo-hwa: "Huh? How long have we known each other? Ah, we started taking lessons from teacher around high school."

Yu Ji-won: "We lived in the same neighborhood from childhood. We formed a direct connection around middle school."

Go Yuri: "A bond from a past life. Siblings. Since birth."

...There did seem to be one pink-haired anomaly using a shameless cheat key, but anyway.

'No matter what anyone says, the person who saved [the Undertaker] from the pit of despair and raised him into a proper

regressor was me, Dang Seo-rin.'

That was truly the case.

Go Yuir's university years? She did not know them. His childhood? She did not know that either. Siblings from a past life... What even is that, you otaku?

But if it was [the Undertaker] instead of [Go Yuir], the story flipped one hundred and eighty degrees.

'[The Undertaker] was the first president of my fan club, he opened a radio channel for me, and I taught him how to choose clothes, how to trim his hair and eyebrows, how to spray perfume, how not to give up even before absolute despair and defend human affection, how to manage an organization, and how to seize a city's public sentiment. You all should respect me...'

Literally.

Dang Seo-rin had turned the Undertaker into a person.

The reverse was also true. The Undertaker had turned Dang Seo-rin into a person as well.

So who would dare deny it?

'The two of us are tied together by a red thread2!'

The unmistakable route conqueror. The protagonist.

That was why Dang Seo-rin, confident and yet not careless, prepared the final strike to put an end to this long battle.

"Oh right. Undertaker. Shouldn't you start making good on that promise you made me soon?"

"Promise?"

"The trip around the world!"

"Ah."

"You're not telling me you forgot, right?"

"As if I would. It's just... Well."

The Undertaker smiled in a way that was hard to read.

"It suddenly feels new again, that I can really keep the promise I made with you."

"..."

Her heart pounded.

Whenever Dang Seo-rin saw that man's smile, which seemed to hold not decades but tens of thousands of years of wistfulness, she felt like she was going a little crazy.

If there were a world championship for men who looked best with that kind of smile, the Undertaker would win seventeen straight times, make the competition itself boring, and then retire in leisure...

There was no real need to hide it now, but Dang Seo-rin was looking at him through some rather thick rose-colored glasses.

If something as thick as battleship armor plating could still be expressed with a cute little phrase like rose-colored glasses.

'This isn't just a world tour.'

'This is a journey blessed with the most romantic name in the world, a honeymoon.'

The AI installed in Dang Seo-rin's brain spun up magnificently.

The question of whether she had ever actually gotten engaged to the man in front of her, or even officially started dating him, was cleanly filtered out by DangGPT.

AI always cared more about the user's star rating than about logical facts.

No, to put it bluntly, what did it matter that there had been no official engagement and no official relationship yet?

'Yeah. There will be from now on.'

A world tour. A world tour.

For at least the next two years, probably, days of the two of them traveling around together would unfold.

Time solved many things. Two years was more than enough time for the relationship-plus-engagement package, plus one extra product on top.

'Nobody can object to this world tour. Of course not. It's the most foundational promise of all, one that was planned all the way back in the fourth cycle.'

She would gently push aside the annoying Go Yuir family and go on a romantic, literally romantic, trip.

It was a truly perfect operation.

'Hehehehe.'

Dang Seo-rin was wearing a Great Witch-grade smile when the Undertaker casually checked his notebook.

"Ah. But before we properly set out on the world tour, there's somewhere we need to stop by first."

"Hm? Where?"

"America. Ji-won is planning to go study abroad at Stanford University."

"...?"

Yu Ji-won? Stanford? All of a sudden?

"Stanford... You mean that prison anomaly?"

"It certainly was an experiment that appeared as an anomaly in the

past. That's right. It happened there."

The Undertaker gave a wry smile.

"But it's also a school that's fairly famous for classics related to ancient Greece. Yu Ji-won has been preparing to study abroad for a long time."

"Heeeh..."

Dang Seo-rin let it pass by like she was hearing about some foreign country, which, well, she literally was.

In truth, Dang Seo-rin had never had much interest in academics. Since childhood, she had only ever planned to inherit the family flower shop and expand it further.

She had once been interested in politics too, but not anymore, now that she had inherited the memories of regression, even if imperfectly.

Maybe it was because once she had actually tried it, she lost interest. She wanted to enjoy her private life more freely.

"But wouldn't studying in America cost a lot?"

"Yo-hwa said she'd help."

"Ah. Then there really won't be any problem."

"For reference, I hear Yo-hwa's family has been rolling their money lately as if they entrusted a fund to the Saintess herself."

"Eek..."

A fund manager? The Saintess, meaning Ye-ji?

When Dang Seo-rin pictured the Saintess, always shut up in a room operating a computer, her expression turned strange.

'Does that... fit her?'

But as soon as the Undertaker told her about the Saintess's fund-

manager-level returns, Dang Seo-rin immediately decided to entrust her retirement planning to that person too.

'Ah, I've met a benefactor...!'

Returns like that without any regressor cheats like Bitcoin or the lottery?

The Saintess was a god, and she was invincible.

"Ji-won said she'd just go on her own. But even so, I think it would be right to go to California together and stay with her until the various little odds and ends are taken care of."

"Hmm."

Dang Seo-rin thought it over.

The AI started spinning furiously again.

Demon Seo-rin: "What are you thinking so hard about? One of the trickiest ones is volunteering to leave on her own."

Angel Seo-rin: "Still, if you're worried, go along when the Undertaker goes. There should be a lot of good restaurants there too. It'd be a nice chance to test how well you and the Undertaker travel together."

Demon Seo-rin: "Let's butt into the precious settling-in period of their study abroad life. Kihihi!"

Angel Seo-rin: "Ihihi!"

Hm.

The opinions from both sides were so logical that she had no choice but to take an integrated course of action...

"Then I'll go too!"

"You too?"

The Undertaker blinked.

"It probably won't be very fun, since there'll be a lot to deal with related to studying abroad..."

"Mhm. I'll just think of it as a personal vacation. And if it's California, aren't Los Angeles and Las Vegas nearby too? I'll look around all of them while I'm at it."

"Hm."

"What? Do you not want me coming along?"

"No. Not at all."

The Undertaker answered instantly.

In the end, Dang Seo-rin succeeded in squeezing herself into the party.

The Undertaker even handled the annoying ticketing for her, so Dang Seo-rin packed her suitcase all pretty, humming away without a care in the world.

And so, on the day of the trip, at Incheon Airport.

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

This was absolutely not some cheap trick to pad the page count,

like the 'Level Up! Level Up!' parade technique from rental-shop-era fantasy novels.

From the top down, they were Yu Ji-won, Jeong Ye-ji, Sim Ah-ryeon, Cheon Yo-hwa, Cheon Yo-hwa, Oh Dok-seo, Lee Ha-yul, Noh Do-hwa, and Dang Seo-rin.

Where had the Undertaker gone, you asked? He had run off saying he would buy coffee.

"What the hell."

That was Dang Seo-rin.

"Why are you all here?!"

"Th-then what about you, Guild Leader of Samcheon World?"

"There's no Samcheon World, and I'm not the Guild Leader!"

"Hoah. B-by that logic, you're not the Undertaker anymore either..."

Damn it. Dang Seo-rin swallowed the curse. To think that, as someone born human, she had tried to mix words with that villain OldManGoryeo. She had been foolish.

At that moment, one of the two Cheon Yo-hwas raised a hand. Unlike the Undertaker, Dang Seo-rin had no mystical power to tell from appearances alone which one was older and which one was younger.

"Ah. Wait. I paid for all the plane tickets and hotel costs for this trip."

"..."

"They're all first class flights. And the hotels are all five-star, with really big rooms. I actually considered taking a private jet, but that felt like it'd stand out too much."

Damn it. Dang Seo-rin swallowed the curse. To think that, as an ordinary commoner, she had picked a fight with that titanium-

spoon brat from a creepy cult. This lowly being had been foolish.

[I'm obviously going.]

Lee Ha-yul raised her sketchbook. There was a wildly overbearing confidence hanging around her chin that said no explanation should even be necessary.

Lee Ha-yul was acceptable.

"B-but if all of you are going... sniff. Then who's going to do my laundry and my meals and my cleaning...?"

Sim Ah-ryeon prattled on. A thoroughly filthy aura radiated from her whole body, the sort that made you not want to know any more.

Could you please just disappear?

No. Dang Seo-rin could understand everyone else. They had probably joined the trip for roughly the same reason she had.

"But Noh Do-hwa. Why are you..."

"Fuck. That bastard kept saying if everybody's going and I'm the only one left behind, isn't that just ostracizing me, and then he snatched my passport and booked the ticket anyway. I told him I don't give a shit about being ostracized, so I don't know what his problem is. Isn't this illegal...?"

Aha. So it was the Undertaker's meddlesome streak.

'Well. If it's a group trip like this, maybe it's not so bad after all?'

Come to think of it, the people gathered at the airport right now really were the hero party that had saved the world. They were comrades bound by ties spanning three lifetimes, thicker than blood.

They were fated to keep living together for the rest of their lives anyway, so what was one little group trip?

It absolutely was not because this was her first time enjoying the grandeur of first class for free.

'Right. Since it's come to this, let's enjoy it! As long as I'm not seated next to Sim Ah-ryeon, I don't care!'

Right after boarding, Dang Seo-rin saw, to her surprise, that the seats near Sim Ah-ryeon had been deliberately left empty, and she once again praised Cheon Yo-hwa's foresight.

Feeling utterly comfortable, she drifted off to sleep.

'Well. With this many people watching, what could possibly happen?'

But.

She should have thought a little harder.

About the final piece of foreshadowing.

About the prophecy that had still not been fully resolved even now, when the protagonists had reached the epilogue after the epilogue.

About the Prophets, who in every cycle died first of all, heads exploding, leaving dying messages behind for later generations, all the way until the happy ending was reached.

About the meaning of the dying message they wrote.

S U

The Prophets were wise.

The moment the Prophet sensed that there would not be much information left behind anyway, the Prophet left a message loaded with layered interpretations.

SU also meant the original name the reincarnator had first possessed. It was also the key that would later uncover the decisive Strategy Guide on SG Net.

Whether it also meant "beware Seo Gyu" was hard to say.

But above all.

Stanford University

Stanford University

It was also the destination of the journey they were currently heading toward, and the place where a girl who once held a one-sided love had buried a time capsule by sacrificing an entire world.

And finally.

S U R A J A N G

Surajang, a scene of carnage.

That was the word that would prove to be an eerily exact prophecy of the future that was about to unfold.

With only two letters of the alphabet, they had created a clue with this many layers of meaning, so how could anyone say the Prophets had not fully carried out the dignity and duty of their office?

But Dang Seo-rin knew absolutely none of that.

Not only Dang Seo-rin, but the vast majority of the people on that plane had no idea either, and simply enjoyed the excitement and flutter of travel.

Sadly...

Since ancient times, prophecy had never been all that useful in preventing future tragedies.

'This trip's gonna be fun!'

Surajang. Standby.

Only 25 hours remained.

Footnotes:

1 - "Losing heroine," or "make heroine," is anime, manga, and dating-sim fandom slang for a love-interest character, often the childhood friend, who is destined not to win the protagonist's affection.

2 - The red thread of fate is an East Asian belief that destined lovers are connected by an invisible red string no matter the distance or circumstances.

3 - The Prophets' dying message is layered wordplay. "S U" begins both "Stanford University," the trip's destination, and "S U R A J A N G," Surajang, meaning a scene of carnage or bloody chaos.

Chapter 475

The That Woman D II

Sinnoa

* * *

A rowdy clamor.

"Ohh. A splendid hotel."

"Yep. This place lets you book everything at once and connect the suites together. We've got way too many people, right? Nowhere else could handle us."

"B-bourgeois. Even during the apocalypse we stayed at pretty high-end places, you know. Hwaaa. The luxury of real civilization really is something else."

[It's like comparing the bedchamber of the most powerful great noble in the Middle Ages to the life of a modern middle-class family.]

"Then, as the financier who booked this place, I hereby declare the bed next to Ha-yul as mine."

"Ah, unni! No fair!"

Chatter, chatter.

"But unni. Why didn't you book separate lodgings for Sim Ah-ryeon? Doesn't she need to be quarantined?"

"Tr-treating a person like nuclear waste. That's really rude."

"Mm. But isn't the rudeness Ah-ryeon is committing against the very concept of humanity more criminal than the rudeness we've committed?"

"Hoo. Little sister. This great unni has a plan for everything."

"A plan? What kind of plan?"

"The person who shares a room with Sim Ah-ryeon and gets assigned the bed beside her will be decided, as of now, by drawing lots!"

"Kyaaaaaaaa!"

"...Th-this really is not a rudeness of this world."

"I see. A penalty contest no one can afford to lose. Allow me to remind you all: I cannot distinguish faces by sight, and I possess a highly developed sense of smell. Should my nose ever become paralyzed, I hereby give notice that there exists a risk you may, at any moment, be mistaken not for yourselves but for Sim Ah-ryeon."

"Shit, I hate to admit it, but that's a damn persuasive threat."

"Wasn't there something like that among the potions Uehara left behind? A drug that brings someone back to their senses. Or at least a drug that makes your whole body itch if you don't wash at least once a day."

[Not easy.]

Lee Ha-yul turned her head.

The head turn of Lee Ha-yul, reborn as the daughter of an undisputed presidential frontrunner, was captured beautifully by the camera lens.

The top-of-the-line camcorder bought just for this day was rolling.

Lee Ha-yul scribbled letters across her sketchbook.

Then she lifted the question sheet toward the "director of photography."

[What've you been doing since the flight out?]

[You're usually the one making the biggest fuss at times like this, so why so quiet?]

"Ahh."

At that the camcorder wobbled a little. The director of photography had waved a hand.

"You don't have to mind me! Don't mind, don't mind!"

[It's not "don't mind," "never mind" is more natural. You really are an otaku.]

"Aw, c'mon."

The voluntary director of photography for this trip.

Director Oh Dok-seo, who was also saving the camcorder footage to a "laptop" whenever she got the chance.

Behind the screen reflected in the lens, her bright, lively laughter was recorded.

"This group outing. It's the first trip where we've all gathered to enjoy ourselves without a care in the world, right? Who knows when an event like this'll come around again. I just want to record the precious memory of this moment, that's all!"

[Highly suspicious.]

"How do I put it. The calm within the typhoon? The eve of the storm? Like the last peace before hell. The peace of our era."

[?]

"Anyway, this is a moment of historical value. Right now. Believe it or not, as a lowly scribbler who worships culture, I can't let a single second slip away in vain."

[Honestly no idea what you're babbling about.]

"Ah, you don't know? 'That.' Never mind. It's too early to tell you

what 'that' is. But, I see. So that's how it is."

Lee Ha-yul's expression in the camcorder soured. Beautiful characters appeared across her sketchbook too. A character completed in five strokes. It was the convex character, the throwing-up-a-middle-finger one[1].

[Besides, if it's "all" of us gathered, isn't Mister Seo Gyu not even here?]

"Ah. I sent Mister Seo Gyu a private message and gave him the wrong itinerary on purpose."

[?]

[Wait, the reason Mister Seo Gyu kept spamming that crying bogeyman-grandpa emoticon in the group chat was because of that??]

[You're actually insane?]

"Yeah. I'll admit it. Right about now Mister Seo Gyu is watching travel photos pour into the group chat one after another, realizing he got ditched. But, Ha-yul. Do you know? Just one more day, and Mister Seo Gyu will come to feel grateful to me. It'd be no exaggeration to call me the savior of his life."

[What are you actually scheming??]

"Me, author. Spoiler. No can do."

Just then Cheon Yo-hwa shouted.

"Ding! By forfeit in the draw, the bed next to Sim Ah-ryeon goes to Oh Dok-seo!"

"Hwuooooooork?! Heavens above!!"

"...Until every single person here has been assigned the spot beside her, one by one. I. I absolutely will not go to the pool or take a bath."

It was lively in every way.

The outcast group (Noh Do-hwa and Jeong Ye-ji), who proudly held a 0% share of the dialogue above, was, against all expectations, enjoying the trip too.

Hidden behind this was Cheon Yo-hwa's contribution.

To make this trip a success, she had brought out a "you don't have to lift a finger" concept from the very start.

The Eight Trigrams handmaidens and various attendants trailed everyone around, tending to the alliance members' comfort.

And not only that. The cultists living near San Francisco, and even those over in Los Angeles, were all mobilized.

The travel difficulty was, quite literally, zero.

Restaurant reservations? Already booked out in full. Communication? No problem at all, even speaking only Korean.

The alliance members didn't even need to drag their own luggage around.

They simply moved their bodies, and oh my, how remarkable, the contents of their suitcases had all been delivered to the rooms of the signature suite and laid out prettily on display.

There were even cosmetics and clothes added that they were certain they had no memory of packing.

The alliance members tasted, for the first time in their lives, the true face of power and wealth.

Until now they'd been laboring under the misconception that those two things were just for protecting humanity from annihilation.

Of course, from Cheon Yo-hwa's standpoint, she'd recently been enjoying a "left some money with an acquaintance and somehow the family fortune doubled" event, so luxury on this scale was nothing to her.

'Fun!'

Dang Seo-rin, too, was savoring the trip to rave reviews.

'Delicious!'

Nom. As she sat eating, one bite at a time, a dessert said to have been made at some famous shop and spirited to the hotel room all on its own, happiness recharged itself within her.

'What's this, what's this. I thought these girls were intruders butting into my trip, but, surprisingly, we get along?'

That sentiment had a few errors in it.

First, this was not "my trip," it was "Yu Ji-won's trip." Strictly speaking, the intruder was Dang Seo-rin.

Yu Ji-won had promised this trip to the Undertaker, just the two of them, ever since she was a middle schooler. That day had even been the very moment Yu Ji-won decided to give up on suicide.

Into this kind of first experience, intruders barged in en masse, and "juniors" at that, who had met the Undertaker far later than she had.

And yet, the fact that Yu Ji-won had brushed it off without so much as a blink, saying, "Ah, it doesn't particularly matter to me," made her an abnormally magnanimous person, the holder of a transcendent spirit. She really was not human.

But as for the rest.

On the point that the alliance members "meshed" better than expected, Dang Seo-rin's insight was correct.

'Hmm. ...But it's strange. Wasn't most of my memory of us getting together just fighting and bristling at each other?'

In truth, it wasn't strange at all.

It wasn't only Dang Seo-rin. The Cheon Yo-hwas, Jeong Ye-ji, and

the rest who sat chatting around the tables and sofas happened to be harboring a similar impression at that very moment.

The impression of 'Huh? Aren't we closer than I thought?'

You might wonder how a gathering of humanity's strongest mental patients could be so cheerful and warm, but think it through and the reason wasn't hard to guess.

Because... the era was fucked!

Among the maxims floating around the internet, there's one that says if you want to learn someone's true character, put them through extreme hardship.

It was another case proving the truth that internet maxims are utterly useless. Just swap "hardship" for "battlefield" and anyone can feel that something's off.

Before reaching the happy ending, the world the Regression Alliance members had to live through was, quite literally, a battlefield every single day.

Not one of the people now sitting around the hotel, laughing and chattering away, had failed to stand on the front line of that battlefield.

The anomalies came at all hours, chased you even into your dreams as you slept, and the moment you let your guard down even a little, they grew lush within your heart and gave you a lesson in what "corruption" meant.

By any common sense, no sane mind could possibly survive it.

Wrapped in that much stress, a human's head explodes the instant their lover so much as brushes their forearm. So what of the frontline warriors of the anomaly apocalypse?

The one who, even in such circumstances, steadfastly took in their comrades' complaints and counseling sessions, calmly smiling and saying, "I see," "that must have been hard," "I have a coffee I researched and customized just for you over hundreds and

thousands of years, and it's truly delicious," "want to drink it and ease your heart?", that certain regressor was the strange one. He really was not human.

In short, the alliance members' "mental illness" was exaggerated to a degree. No, to a large degree.

Anyone dropped into an era like that had no choice but to go mad. And when mad people jostle against mad people, friction is bound to arise.

And so, in the present day, you no longer had to suspect "an anomaly?" when a knock came at the door, nor wonder "an anomaly?" when dessert was delivered to your room all on its own.

"Then I will head to the university with Mr. Matiz. Thanks to the consideration of Her Excellency, Cheon Yo-hwa, the supreme young lady, I've been granted the honor of touring the campus freely."

"Ah! Me too, me too!"

Surprisingly, Dang Seo-rin raised her hand high... not out of any sense of duty along the lines of 'I can't leave Yu Ji-won and the Undertaker alone together,'

but simply from the thought, 'The hotel's comfy too, but it's boring,' and 'It'd be fun to move around with these guys, hehe.'

"Do-hwa unni, you come too!"

This line was Dang Seo-rin's as well. Yes, just now Dang Seo-rin had addressed "Noh Do-hwa," the "former Management Captain," as "unni."

It was a feat accomplished before even 24 hours had passed since the American trip began.

"Insane, fucking hell. If you're going, go among yourselves. Why do you keep trying to drag me in?"

"Aww. If not now, when are you ever gonna come here and see Stanford? They say the campus is super pretty!"

"I, I want to go too. Heh. Now that all the people have been cleared out, even if I tag graffiti on the school building's outer wall, I won't get caught, right?"

"No. Ah-ryeon. No matter how much money our Cult has thrown around, that crosses the line, so please spare us."

"Hieeng..."

The alliance members had, every one of them, broken through the hellish age of the latter law.

They were also among the very few who shared an understanding, the precious handful who got that the reality of 'this world where the laws of physics apply as though it were obvious' was by no means obvious.

"Let's all just go together. I called a limousine."

"Waaaaaa-!"

Comrades-in-arms.

"What? You're saying you made a YouTube channel, Ah-ryeon?!"

"Y-yes. The money I left with Ye-ji is enough to live off for a lifetime, but I do want to exhibit my work now and then. And yet I hate getting tangled up with real-world people. So I'll debut as a super-beautiful genius painter and rake in all the attention."

[Non-member comment: Sim Ah-ryeon < I heard this girl actually doesn't even wash her hair or bathe, is that true?]

"Goodness. L-look. The video isn't even up yet and there are already hate comments. Scary. As expected of the super-pretty genius painter who shakes the world."

[Big trouble. The damage isn't landing. She's even started calling herself not a beauty but a pretty little girl.]

"Ah, please don't release the anomaly pictures as videos or anything! Our Cult will just buy them at a high price."

Beautiful comradeship.

Slowly, in Dang Seo-rin's head, the deranged notions of 'Hmm, isn't traveling the world together with these guys way more fun than just playing alone with the Undertaker?', 'Let's ask for an ultra-luxury yacht! From Cheon Yo-hwa, obviously!', 'We'll travel by yacht!' were gradually gaining persuasive power.

"Hmm?"

"What is it, Ji-won?"

"That lawn over there. If it wasn't a trick of my eyes just now, a bubble... one of Leviathan's water bugs flickered for a moment, like a mirage."

"Huh?"

"I'll go closer and check. Everyone. It might be dangerous, so please wait behind me."

An ultra-luxury yacht world tour.

"...For now, there's nothing. Aside from the fact that this one spot is oddly damp and soaked with water, I detect no anomalous phenomena anywhere."

[How about digging it up?]

"A fine suggestion, Lady Lee Ha-yul, Your Excellency. Truly the insight befitting the real master of the presidential office that will rule the Korean Peninsula's power going forward."

"Hold on. I'll have one of our cultists go fetch a shovel! It'd be a shame if your clothes got dirty."

For reference, a yacht was a ship.

"Hm?"

"This is..."

"A box?"

"I-it's a box."

"Looks like there's nothing for it but to open it."

"No, are you insane? There's no regression or anything anymore, and you're going to just open something that so obviously reeks of bad omen? Do these people still think they're awakeners...?"

"That is precisely why we must open it, Noh Do-hwa. The fact that our awakenings have been neutralized means the Outer Gods have vanished too. Therefore, in the current situation, no anomaly capable of threatening us can exist."

"Wow. I'm a supreme-dignity young lady Excellency and Ha-yul's a young lady Excellency too, but with the National Road Management Corps gone and the era changed a little, over there it's just plain Noh Do-hwa now."

[Not easy.]

"Then, everyone, I will open the box."

And a ship was also a boat.

"...?"

"Eh?"

"Ah?"

"Eh?"

"Huh?"

"..."

"..."

"Ah...?"

That is.

"..." "..." "..." "..." "..." "..." "..." "..." "..."

Nice Boat2.

Footnotes:

1 - The character is the five-stroke "convex" character (read cheol in Korean), widely used in East Asian internet culture as an emoticon depicting a hand with the middle finger raised; drawing it is a silent "flipping the bird."

2 - "Nice Boat" is an anime-fandom meme from the 2007 broadcast of the visual-novel adaptation School Days, whose graphically violent finale was replaced by footage of a boat; fans now post it to mock-cheerfully defuse a sudden ominous or shocking reveal.

Chapter 476

The That Woman D III

Sinnoa

* * *

At the very moment everyone was gathered together, all chummy, taking part in the grand unboxing ceremony of Pandora's box.

The Undertaker, surprisingly, was not on the scene. It was a truly terrifying piece of evasive maneuvering.

Thanks to the sixth-sense instinct that had saved his life more times than he could count over his long career as a regressor... well, no. That wasn't it.

Honestly, even for the great Undertaker, dodging this particular bit of cosmic rigging would have been more than a little difficult.

After all, in a worldline from some other cycle, the completed body of the Endless-puppet master had gone "Hwahha, die" and fired off its ultimate technique.

The reason the Undertaker happened to skip the box-opening ceremony of all things was this.

"Aah. All of a sudden my throat is just so, so dry."

This, too, was a blessing courtesy of cinematographer Oh Dok-seo.

The Undertaker tilted his head at Oh Dok-seo, who was holding a camcorder and grumbling that her HP had run out.

"Hm? If you're thirsty, you can just ask Yo-hwa's secretaries over there anytime. The cooler's got every kind of drink and ice cream you could want."

"Haaa... My, my. Mister, you really are clueless. What my parched

throat craves right now is not some cheap mass-produced junk. To be precise, very specifically, I want the coffee you make for me."

"Huh. Here?"

"Yep."

"No, I don't even have the tools, so how am I supposed to..."

"I saw earlier there's a cafe inside the campus, right? Go make some there and bring it back."

"You..."

"Ah, dunno, don't care! Coffee made by Mister! I want coffee with ice cubes bobbing in it, all nice and cold! I've been filming our trip on the camcorder all day, so you can grant me at least this much of a wish!"

There was no diva quite as diva as this.

But Oh Dok-seo knew.

No matter how much of a diva she played, in the end the Undertaker, even while heaving sigh after sigh, even while lamenting his fate and his whole life, would still indulge little Oh-doks-brat's whims.

In the Regression Alliance, exactly three people were granted that privilege. Lee Ha-yul, Sim Ah-ryeon, and Oh Dok-seo were the only ones allowed it.

Yet the privilege those three enjoyed only looked the same on the outside. Look closely, and the essence of it was quite different.

At least, that was how Oh Dok-seo saw it.

'The reason Ah-ryeon-unni and Ha-yul get all their unreasonable demands granted is... Well. In the end it's closer to Mister indulging them and being generous, isn't it?'

In short, charity.

By her reckoning, "Undertaker-Sim Ah-ryeon" or "Undertaker-Lee Ha-yul" could hardly be called equal relationships.

There was such a thing as power, even in the heart and the emotions. Weigh up the distribution of that power, and the relationship chart between those parties was, at the most generous estimate, maybe 7 to 3.

Whereas.

'Hmm. Mister and I are exactly 5 to 5.'

Neither of them had anything to be cowed about.

If the Undertaker had never existed, the savior LiteraryGirl could not have existed either, and the happy ending would have been impossible.

If Oh Dok-seo had never existed, the Go Yuir of today could not have existed either, and likewise the happy ending would have been impossible.

Therefore.

'I have no need to dress up an inequality with titles like 'Dad' or 'Guild Leader' just to define my relationship with Mister.'

Just, 'Mister.'

Some people might take it as rude, but it didn't matter. The Undertaker treated Oh Dok-seo just as rudely.

The two of them, even while treating each other rudely, harbored a respect that would never melt away, and because neither of them was an ice that would melt first, their fondness and gentleness had no need for the sunlight.

Carnal desire? From Oh Dok-seo's standpoint it was a feeling she could take or leave. Literally a "why bother" sort of sentiment.

'Aren't we already in a state of platonic love??'

Writers, by nature, tended to like ancient Greece a fair bit. And in ancient Greece, it had been a virtue for the elder to become the 'spiritual' pillar of the younger, embracing and nurturing them.

By Oh Dok-seo's reckoning, the only person who breathed at roughly the same level as herself was, at best, Yu Ji-won.

'But Ji-won-unni's relationship chart isn't 5 to 5 either. Mm-hm. More like 6 to 4?'

Dok-seo-chan, total victory!

What we can gather from this is that Oh Dok-seo was not merely a brat who thought of physical love and spiritual love in dichotomous terms, but also someone who, having declared victory in her own mind entirely on her own terms, then completed the whole process of self-justification and self-satisfaction as well. In a certain sense, a person with an astonishingly healthy way of thinking.

There were more than one or two things one could point out about this way of thinking.

Just imagine the case where the Undertaker came to favor someone other than her.

Oh Dok-seo's mental state would instantly be reexamined as a textbook case of shoddy construction, right alongside the Collapsed Apartments[1].

But what could you do? Treating other people like fools was a chronic affliction Oh Dok-seo had been born with.

The true endpoint of a connoisseur of misery porn. It was to walk the road of regret, obsession, and ruin onto oneself...

But however the future might flow, for now Oh Dok-seo had entered "the one who enjoys" mode, and.

"Oh right, while you're making mine, get the others' coffees too, pretty please!"

"I never imagined I'd come all this way to end up playing barista..."

Right before the box-opening ceremony began, they had succeeded in safely whisking away the single most important VIP, the Undertaker.

Thanks to that, Oh Dok-seo no longer needed to bustle the camcorder back and forth.

Had the Undertaker been present, she would surely have whirled the camera frantically in the order of alliance member, Undertaker, alliance member, Undertaker, all to capture his expression.

Thanks to that, she was able to catch the moment Pandora's box quietly opened, fully and completely on her lens.

Steam rose up curling like mist. The steam, in every color imaginable, crackled with static, a fuzz of noise.

Before the alliance members could even react, the mist split off into separate strands and seeped, whoosh, into their mouths and noses.

And so.

"Ahaha,"

The first masterpiece shot captured on the secret-weapon camcorder bought for this very day was.

"Ahahaha! Aha-ha, ha- ahahahaha!"

A burst of laughter.

It was Cheon Yo-hwa's laughter.

* * *

"U-unni?"

"Aah. Hngk, urk, haaaa... ahahat! Ahahaha, hng, hueaa... Haaa. Hm, mm-mm. Mm!"

Cheon Yo-hwa wiped away her tears.

A smile of the utmost refreshment hung on her lips.

"As expected, it's me. Cheon Yo-hwa. You really are a genius!"

"..."

"Mm-hm. This unni never gives up, not even on a world whose destruction is a foregone conclusion, not even on a love whose defeat is a foregone conclusion. The world's going to end? Then I just send a Spirit Bomb2 over to a worldline that hasn't ended, right? Love's doomed to fail? Ah, then if it's going down, I just make everyone sign the love letter so we all go down together, right? Hyaaa. What a woman I am, how can I be so perfect! At this rate I have no choice but to love myself...!"

"..."

Silence followed.

It was only natural, since aside from the older-sister Cheon Yo-hwa, the eyelids of everyone seated here on the lawn were trembling faintly.

A moment ago they had opened a recollection room for "memories that could not possibly exist," that is to say, the so-called bad endings, ones that had not only met destruction but should have had their save files deleted for all eternity.

Among them, naturally, were heaps of bad endings that had never been observed in the main text. Of course the cycles in which the regressor had failed and then forgotten could hardly amount to a mere five or six.

For instance... the number of bad endings in which Saintess Jeong Ye-ji and the Undertaker had ended up together was absolutely not "just one."

There was even an ending where he'd ended up with the Cheon Yo-hwas and married into the family outright as the live-in son-in-law of the twin sisters.

Memories like that had all been downloaded directly into the alliance members' minds, "vividly," all at once.

The conversations shared with the Undertaker in the isolated bad-ending cycles, the whispers, fingers laced tightly together, believing without a shred of doubt that they were soulmates, in a world where only the two of them remained, doing this..., and that, and anyway every last one of those scenes! All of them!

All of them!

With this, their heads went momentarily paralyzed, stuttering as if infected by a virus, no way around it!

"..."

In the midst of a silence colder than death, only the deliberate culprit, Cheon Yo-hwa, was cheerfully laughing.

Barely a minute or so passed, perhaps.

"Th-that..."

Saintess Jeong Ye-ji parted her lips.

To be the first to gather her wits even in a situation like this. Truly fitting of the Yongsan control tower, who had observed every awakener's best and ugliest sides throughout the apocalypse.

"This is..., um. There's no guarantee this is all true, is there...?"

The Saintess, as the avatar of reason and rationality (BUT, who serves crushed raw ramyeon as drinking snacks), led off with a fact-check first.

"This box is a cursed object forged by the authority of the Endless and the puppet master... that is, the Outer God 'Taeguk.' There's a possibility... that the Outer God ran a false simulation and set a trap, is what I think."

"Ohh."

Cheon Yo-hwa laughed brightly.

"A trap! A trap, you say. Nice~. So, Ye-ji-unni. The Dang family's

proud asset manager. What good would springing a trap like this do an Outer God?"

"Um... To sow discord between us, maybe...?"

"Heee. The Infinite Metagame has been reduced to nothing but a measly laptop, and this Outer God has nothing left but the box, and even that box just opened and will fulfill its purpose and soon vanish, so what radiant blessing does it hope to gain by going out of its way to drive us apart?"

"Revenge... or something."

"Well, revenge. That's possible. Though I do wonder whether an Outer God even has emotional motives like that."

The corners of Cheon Yo-hwa's mouth curled up.

"If you're that worried, then, Ye-ji-unni. Why don't you put the memory you just received back into the box?"

"..."

"Hurry. I can feel it. Just a little longer and this time capsule will melt and disappear. But right now there's still a chance! You can stow them away before they vanish completely."

Cheon Yo-hwa looked around at the others.

"Everyone else too! Don't hold back, by all means!"

"..."

"Come on, hurry, hurry! If you miss the last train now, you'll have to live your whole life carrying these memories, you know? Swept up in a filthy Outer God's scheme, tied to the ending of a cycle you didn't particularly want, with no choice but to live out a life where bad endings and happy endings are all mixed together, forever? Now then. Ten seconds. Nine seconds. Eight."

Even as Cheon Yo-hwa taunted in a tone that was plainly mocking and toying, the surroundings stayed silent.

It was all too obvious.

There was no way they could throw it away. This memory.

"Three seconds, two seconds... One! Ding! Ding-ding-ding!"

Tak.

Cheon Yo-hwa snatched the box from Yu Ji-won's hand and clapped the lid shut.

Wondrously, the moment the lid closed, "Pandora's box" slipped away, vanishing without form or trace.

"Oh my~?"

Cheon Yo-hwa smirked.

"Nobody put their memories back, did they, everyone~?"

"..."

"To decide what is true and what is false, that is precisely the right of a person. A moment ago, all of you decided to accept these memories as the truth... That's how I interpret it! Bang-bang! Verdict rendered!"

"..."

"So then, everyone! I can now look up at the heavens and honestly love even myself, and on top of that I've come to love Teacher too, so I'll be off to go propose to Teacher..."

Grab.

Someone seized Cheon Yo-hwa's shoulder.

The very party who had been raising rational objections just moments ago. Jeong Ye-ji.

"...So you were after this."

"Yeah?"

"This is all foreign soil, where none of us have a base. But you alone, Cheon Yo-hwa, summoned your congregants by your own power and even booked the hotel. In other words, Cheon Yo-hwa, the moment you decide to, you can confess to Go Yuir anytime in a 100% prepared situation."

"Ah- huh? Aha, does the story really come out that way~? How strange."

The bright, beaming smile never left Cheon Yo-hwa's face.

"I really, truly did not intend any of it! Maybe it's because I usually live such a virtuous life? It's like the heavens are helping me! Ahem. But, well, I'm not such a pushover that I'd turn down good fortune. Yep. I'll gladly take it."

"As of today, I resign from my post as your asset manager."

"Let's have a calm little chat, Ye-ji-unni."

The Saintess subdued the older-sister Cheon Yo-hwa, who was one step from running wild, in a single move. The younger sister thrown in as a bonus.

As a result.

While the Undertaker borrowed the campus cafe and worked hard at making coffee for everyone, a secret pact was forged in this place.

The contents of the agreement went roughly like this.

◇ For the time being, the fact that they had inherited the memories of bad endings through the time capsule shall be kept a 'secret' from Go Yuir.

◇ Should anyone break the secret, all the rest shall join forces to root out the traitor.

◇ Each person shall be granted a level of opportunity and freedom that is reasonable by common sense. However, this common-sense line of opportunity and freedom shall be decided only through the

agreement of all.

◇ Should Go Yuir come to love someone while the 'secret' remains undisclosed, all shall accept it cleanly and bow out.

There were many objections regarding the final clause, but it somehow managed to pass.

The truth was, the overwhelming majority of the people gathered here had no confidence.

The 'confidence to lose,' that is.

In the memories injected into the alliance members, each of them was a victor.

Just how devotedly the Undertaker had whispered of love, ultra-high-definition video files of it were playing back in their heads.

That the Undertaker would fall for anyone other than oneself. Such a future could not exist.

There were even those who, on the inside, clenched their fists in resolve.

'It's genuinely bewildering, but now that it's come out that Sim Ah-ryeon holds the same kind of memories as me, she can no longer cling to Lee Ha-yul or Oh Dok-seo and push that trap clause demanding that she be accommodated too...!'

'Heavens! Thank you! Thank you, unni! Thank you, Taeguk! At last I can dodge the Sim-Ah-ryeon-cohabitation-clause!'

'This is actually better.'

'Th-the Guild Leader likes me so, so much, after all. So it doesn't really m-matter.'

An exchange of glances.

As each of them desperately prepared for battle, there was one figure whose expression was uniquely dazed.

"..."

It was Dang Seo-rin.

'Uh...'

Having absorbed every last memory down to the Utopia cycle, the Great Witch's pupils were trembling, at present, exactly as if an earthquake had struck.

'My world tour?'

She sensed a crisis of her very existence.

'Could it be, surely not...'

'If I lose here, does that mean I can never go off on a world tour, just the two of us, alone with the Undertaker forever??'

A battle that absolutely could not be lost.

Begin.

Footnotes:

1 - "Collapsed Apartments" is a Korean internet meme for shoddily built apartments that collapse at the slightest provocation, used as shorthand for anything flimsy and prone to total breakdown.

2 - The Spirit Bomb, or Genki-dama, is a signature attack from the manga/anime Dragon Ball, formed by gathering energy contributed from all living things. The joke is that she would gather power across worldlines.

Chapter 477

The That Woman D IV

Sinnoa

Whether you're delivering pizza or delivering coffee, when is the scariest moment for someone whose job is to deliver something?

"Yeees. Coffee delivery's here..."

It's the moment you get back from a run and find that the friends who were perfectly fine a little while ago have somehow ended up like this: one shot full of holes, another with his skull cracked open, blood pooling across the floor, and the whole scene even catching fire and blazing away.

"...here?"

Silence.

Nobody answered the Undertaker.

"?"

The Undertaker tilted his head, both hands clutching coffee carriers stacked one on top of another.

Of course, nothing was literally on fire. It was only a mental landscape.

'What was that?'

The Undertaker blinked.

And the scene in front of him snapped back to normal. The lawn wasn't burning. The slaughterhouse where people stabbed each other and blood sprayed everywhere had, naturally, never existed in the first place.

'Did I just hallucinate that?'

If the world were still in the middle of an anomaly-apocalypse, the Undertaker would have reacted at once: 'An anomaly?'

But these days were squarely an age of peace.

The era was so well-governed that even a reborn Cao Mengde would write "capable minister"[1] in the box for future aspirations, so no matter how professional a connoisseur of anomalies the Undertaker was, he couldn't help wavering, uncertain.

"Uh..., so. I made the coffee."

"Ah. Um, thanks. Mister."

Oh Dok-seo reacted first.

"Oh, yeah. Dok-seo. Here's your espresso."

"Mm..."

This part itself wasn't strange. The very person who'd pawned the coffee-delivery chore off onto the Undertaker was none other than Oh Dok-seo.

"Eep!"

"?"

But when their fingers brushed for just a second as she took the espresso, she gave a live demonstration of what the onomatopoeia 'flinch!' looks like as a physical action, and then her cheeks flushed faintly, which by any common sense was utterly impossible to understand.

The Undertaker barely managed to keep the coffee from spilling.

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"U-uhm..."

Oh Dok-seo twisted bashfully in place.

Forced to witness the whole display up close, the Undertaker had a single thought flash across his mind: 'What fresh nonsense is this?'

"Um. So, I really never knew this until now. The non-member reader who always left the first comment every time I uploaded a chapter... It, it was you, Mister."

"?!"

The Undertaker was startled.

'H-how did she figure it out?!'

The truth was, the Undertaker had felt sorry that LiteraryGirl was constantly getting beaten like a dog on SG Net over the hiatus issue.

But showing that pity directly would lead to an obvious future. Oh Dok-seo, already a mental wreck, would only end up leaning on him even harder.

So the Undertaker... had always been strict with Oh Dok-seo to her face, while on SG Net he operated as a mysterious legion of non-members, forever fighting for the honor of 'LiteraryGirl'!

To list out, from a vibes-based recollection, some of the comments the masked man Undertaker had secretly dropped:

-Anonymous: But honestly LiteraryGirl < there's just no author who whips up such a tasty whump-fest like this person does...lol...

-Anonymous: The upload schedule's wrecked, sure, but nobody can talk trash about the writing skill, yep yep

-Anonymous: A superstar who drives both haters and stans insane? Upvote, lolololol

-Anonymous: LiteraryGirl is like a legendary three-Michelin-star fine dining place. The chef only opens up when they feel like it, which makes it rarer.

And so on.

For the record, every comment was posted with the IP swapped using Administrator privileges. The phrasing and tone were subtly different each time.

What was there to hide?

The grumbling that occasionally went up on the board, that is, 'wait, why is this LiteraryGirl bastard, a vicious habitual hiatus-fiend, so damn popular?', that recurring SG Net mystery, was in large part...! down to this very masked-clone technique of the Undertaker's...!

The reason the Undertaker steadily seeded Romance of the Three Kingdoms bait under his real handle may well have been thanks to advice (feat. Infinite Metagame): that, while putting on these anonymous masked performances, the single act of not talking about the Three Kingdoms let him melt into the shadows of the crowd.

Of course, whether that advice had ever truly existed remained shrouded in a veil.

Just what did the Three Kingdoms mean to this man? A mystery the whole world wondered about.

Whether a grand foreshadowing built up across a full 476 chapters had finally been paid off, or whether a character setup stacked up over a long stretch had simply collapsed for the sake of convenience, also remained shrouded in a veil.

Either way, the veil, the anonymous mask the Undertaker so loved to wear, had shattered completely in that very moment.

'No, no. This can't be! I worked this out with Infinite Metagame too, made absolutely sure Dok-seo would never catch on?!'

The Undertaker was a master of imagination. To beat back anomalies, he had to wring out the very limits of imagination.

But even an Undertaker like that surely could not have imagined this one thing.

That in some bad-ending cycle he didn't remember, Yu Ji-won had cut down Go Yuri, and as a result the bond level between the Undertaker and Yu Ji-won had broken past 15, and seeing that, Cheon Yo-hwa had felt defeat and inferiority, but rather than despairing she had sent her own romantic feelings, despair, and hope into a time capsule, and the abbreviation for that time capsule's location was SU, meaning Stanford University, and this was that place, and fifteen minutes before the Undertaker arrived the time capsule had been dug up, and as Pandora's box opened every member of the alliance had been irradiated with the 'despair' of the bad endings, and among them, astonishingly, there even existed the bad ending of Madam LiteraryGirl, who'd been so cocky going 'I'll definitely be safe', and the condition for that ending was 'the Undertaker's masked-play act will be exposed', so the freshly despair-infected Oh Dok-seo had even come to realize that the Undertaker was her nameless devoted reader.

Truly, not even in his dreams could he have imagined it...!

"Mister, I. You know."

"Uh, uhh?"

"The truth is, for a long time now, Mister..."

KAWHUMP!

A human flew. Whoosh, just like that. That is, if there's a biologist generous enough to classify Oh Dok-seo as a subspecies of human.

Watching a person sail away like a sorghum stalk right in front of him, the Undertaker could not suppress his shock.

"My apologies."

The culprit was even more shocking. The one who'd sent Oh Dok-seo flying was Yu Ji-won.

True, by now the Outer God's authority had gone flat like a watermelon with the sweetness sucked out, but from the start Yu Ji-won had steadily trained her body in preparation for the apocalypse.

Her physical durability was on a wholly different level from an author with scoliosis whose birthplace and grave were both reserved at the spot in front of a computer keyboard. She could treat someone like Oh Dok-seo as a baseball anytime she felt like it.

That 'felt like it' part was exactly the source of the shock. Yu Ji-won was famous for a way of handling people that rarely made enemies. Why her, of all people? Why would she suddenly use Oh Dok-seo for home-run practice?

"I don't particularly care who Mr. Matiz shares love with."

"What?"

"Whether it's Jeong Ye-ji, the most-revered Cheon Yo-hwa twins, Her Excellency Lee Ha-yul, Noh Do-hwa, Dang Seo-rin, or even Sim Ah-ryeon, I don't care. Even if you build a household with all of them, it stirs no particular feeling in me."

"What??"

"But Oh Dok-seo is not allowed."

Yu Ji-won was expressionless.

"Even so, I believe Mr. Matiz is human, and humans ought to be joined with humans."

"What on earth are you talking about, Ji-won??"

"I am offering counsel that the tragedy must be avoided."

Yu Ji-won took the Undertaker's hand. The Undertaker, proving he was every bit the reader to match that author, likewise gave a 'flinch!' of surprise.

"J-Ji-won?"

The Undertaker's voice went timid.

Ji-won reaching out for skin contact like this was common enough in itself. Since she couldn't make out faces by sight, she often tried

to recognize him by touch.

But like this, out in the open? Maybe back in middle school, when she hadn't yet gotten used to the perfume identification method, but now? Why?

"Ji-won. Sorry, but right now I'm extremely, intensely, tremendously confused, you understand? Couldn't you give me a reasonable explanation for what in the world is going on?"

"It's a very simple matter."

Yu Ji-won nodded.

"Tell me that you love me."

"???"

"That Mr. Matiz cherishes me, that he would not flinch even from throwing his life away for my sake, that he loves the human being that is me, beyond mere lust, is something I already know well. The process Mr. Matiz needs right now is simply to reconfirm an obvious truth as an obvious truth. Please."

"Ji-won, have you been drinking?"

"Or perhaps, do you not love me?"

"No. No, no. That, of course..."

KAWHUMP!

A human flew. Whoosh, just like that. That is, if there's a Confucian scholar generous enough to gladly classify as human a murder prodigy who, born with her emotions castrated, killed her parents and dumped them in a wooded hill.

"Teacher!"

"Sunbae! Run!"

The culprits were the Cheon Yo-hwa twins. If Yu Ji-won had trained

her body since middle school, the two young ladies had simply leveled up their physical stats from the moment they were born.

If the two joined forces, sending someone like Yu Ji-won flying was no trouble at all.

Of course, it was an extremely rare sight, with the minor problem that the Undertaker's sanity, having witnessed the scene, flew off right along with her.

"Run, you say, but why..."

"Something like an anomaly phenomenon has gone off!"

"What."

"Just understand it roughly as a Valentine anomaly or something like that! These people aren't normal! Undertaker!"

"They're all trying to confess to Teacher! What was it, what was it, there was that Savior anomaly, right! It's similar to that!"

"If you accept these people's confessions, the Valentine anomaly gets locked in and the world will turn into eternal lovey-dovey chocolate!"

The sanity that had run away from the Undertaker's skull became a ghost, and even in ghost form it realized it could still reason.

'Valentine anomaly? But it's not even February? And what's lovey-dovey chocolate?'

Grab. Grab.

Both his hands were seized by the Cheon Yo-hwas.

And not just seized. The Cheon Yo-hwas ran with perfectly identical timing, like a seasoned ballet troupe, hauling the Undertaker along.

"So!"

"Right now you have to trust us sisters, the only, no, the two who

escaped the Valentine anomaly! Sunbae!"

"We'll have the congregants hold those people back. We'll take the chance to flee to the hotel and figure out a plan for how to exterminate the anomaly..."

That was when it happened.

"Guild Leeeeaderrr! Th-these people! They got their memories of the old cycles baaaack!!"

A Lion's Roar erupted[2].

A jolt. Everyone stiffened all at once.

Eyes converged.

There stood the green-haired former Saintess, the one no expert, be they biologist, Confucian scholar, sociologist, jurist, or mathematician, could come and confidently swear was 'human', the one whose very existence threw down a gauntlet to humanity's scholarship and civilization, who in three syllables was, well, Sim Ah-ryeon.

Boldly letting loose a Lion's Roar.

"Uh... Ah-ryeon? Memories, you say..."

"Don't, Sunbae!"

"Teacher! Don't listen to her! That thing's an anomaly! You'll be bewitched!"

The Cheon Yo-hwa twins frantically covered the Undertaker's left ear and right ear. But, you know? Human hearing is unexpectedly well developed.

A shoddy little blockade like that couldn't possibly stop the Lion's Roar let loose by the plain-as-day 'enemy of humanity'.

"Bad endings! Th-the endings even you don't remember, Guild Leader! The ones caught in Udumbara[3] and wiped clean away! The

memories of those endings were here, in this box, alllll of theeem!"

As expected of Sim Ah-ryeon. A summary worthy of the OldManGoryeo4 villain.

It wasn't for nothing that she'd reigned as the most popular author on the novel-serialization board on SG Net, slapping LiteraryGirl across the face the whole time.

"Wh-what are you doing..."

"Stop her! Stop her, you commoners!"

At the Cheon Yo-hwa twins' command, the congregants who'd been standing by all around rushed in en masse, but Sim Ah-ryeon dodged this way and that.

It wasn't that Sim Ah-ryeon's lightness-skill had reached its peak. Line up the alliance members by physical ability and she'd put up a nice bottom-rung contest against Oh Dok-seo, so it couldn't possibly be that.

It was simply that her clothes and body were so slick with grease that no matter how the congregants tried to grab her, she slipped through like a loach, sliiide sliiide sliiide.

"N-no. That thing...!"

"Gross! So freaking gross!"

Whether those around her were horrified or not, Sim Ah-ryeon kept her Lion's Roar going.

"But in the bad endings, all of them, every single one! They say they got all lovey-dovey with you, Guild Leader! So now they all think you're theirs!"

"Kyaaaaaaah!"

Cheon Yo-hwa screamed.

"A-are you insane? You? Are you actually insane?! It's only been ten

minutes since we promised to keep each other's secret! No matter how shameless you are, breaking the promise in literally ten minutes!"

"Hm? But I didn't break the promise, though?"

"Huh?"

"We spelled it out in the agreement..."

◇ If, in a situation where the 'secret' has not been disclosed, Go Yuir comes to love someone, all of us shall cleanly accept defeat.

"Th-that is. If the secret does get disclosed..."

Sim Ah-ryeon said.

"It means the exact same thing as: there's no need to cleanly accept defeat, doesn't it...?"

"..."

That's right.

Sim Ah-ryeon had run the thought experiment with all-too-honest rigor. The Cheon Yo-hwa twins trying to kidnap the Undertaker had caught her eye, and she'd judged that at this rate her physical odds were shrinking.

So... 'Then even if the Guild Leader accepts the Cheon Yo-hwas' confession, if I crack the secret open in advance right here and now, doesn't that mean I won't have to accept defeat later?', she'd derived this miracle of a conclusion.

"Insane."

Cheon Yo-hwa groaned. She'd known for ages that her opponent wasn't human, but who'd have thought it ran this deep.

That's right.

From the very start, Sim Ah-ryeon had not the slightest, not the

truly tiniest speck of intention to accept her own defeat...!

There was a limit to cliché-breaking, too.

Normally, when this kind of chaotic free-for-all broke out in a romantic comedy, the gentlewomen's agreement struck among the parties was, by and large, thoroughly upheld.

It would pass through scenes roughly like 'so even if you end up with someone else, you'll understand, right?' 'Yeah! Because apart from love, we're friends!'.

No matter how agonizing the pain of heartbreak, no matter how hard it was to truly let that person go, even so, recalling the gentlewomen's agreement they'd pledged in the past, they would, with great difficulty, send their love off..., that sort of thing.

A truly beautiful tradition and culture (which can give the loser-faction supporters cancer) existed in the romantic comedy genre.

But Sim Ah-ryeon knew no such thing.

Earth's traditions, its culture, its romantic comedies were all still a bit too immature to take in an existence like Sim Ah-ryeon.

Gentlewomen's agreement, my foot. If it looks like things are turning against me, I'd better dump it faster than King Seonjo abandoned Hanyang[5].

The result. The pact had broken less than fifteen minutes after it was struck, setting a Guinness record that would forever live on in the annals of romantic comedy.

The Cheon Yo-hwa twins ground their teeth.

"Tch. Despicable!"

"If I'd known it'd come to this, I'd have kidnapped Teacher from the start, even at the cost of losing Ye-ji..."

'What the.'

The Undertaker's hair stood on end!

Footnotes:

1 - Cao Mengde is the courtesy name of Cao Cao, the warlord of Romance of the Three Kingdoms. The line alludes to a famous prophecy told to him: that he would be "a capable minister in an age of peace, a treacherous hero in an age of chaos"; here, with the world at peace, even Cao Cao would aspire to be a loyal minister rather than a usurper.

2 - Lion's Roar (sajahu) is a term from Buddhism (the Buddha's authoritative teaching, Sanskrit simhanada) widely repurposed in wuxia and Korean martial-arts fiction as a devastating sonic shout that overwhelms or stuns those who hear it.

3 - The udumbara is a legendary Buddhist flower said to bloom only once every 3,000 years, a symbol of supremely rare events. Here it names a memory-erasing power/anomaly that wiped the cast's recollection of certain endings.

4 - Refers to goryeojang, the (apocryphal) Korean legend of abandoning elderly parents in the mountains to die once they became a burden. The handle casts Sim Ah-ryeon as a callously pragmatic "villain."

5 - An allusion to King Seonjo fleeing the capital Hanyang (old Seoul) when Japanese forces invaded during the 1592 Imjin War, a byword in Korea for a leader hastily abandoning his post to save himself.

Chapter 478

The That Woman D V

Sinnoa

They say a person summons superhuman strength when faced with the threat of death.

"Hwooooooough!"

The Undertaker was no exception.

The moment it came to light that the beloved disciples he had trusted with all his heart were in fact drift specialists[1] scheming to reshape this world's genre into kidnapping-confinement-conditioning fetish material, the Undertaker wrenched himself free from the two sisters' grip with everything he had.

"Ah."

"Teacher, we lost him."

He'd escaped the little devils, sure. And yet.

Cold sweat ran down the Undertaker's face as his head whipped this way and that, scanning his surroundings.

Gulp.

'Run away... w-where do I run?'

Normally, the most reliable refuge in a situation like this was, without a doubt, Noh Do-hwa. Noh Do-hwa and no one else.

Even in the cycle when Salvation Narrative Syndrome had broken out, hadn't Noh Do-hwa held onto a firm, unshakable will to the very end?

But.

"..."

Right now, Noh Do-hwa was staring at the Undertaker with eyes that promised to kill him.

There was no mistaking that glare. It was pure, undeniable killing intent.

As someone who'd racked up a +1 to his death count every single time he caught a look like that, he found it extremely hard to misread its meaning.

「Why?」

He hadn't done anything, so why the bloodlust? He looked at Noh Do-hwa with that question in his eyes, and Noh Do-hwa fired right back, wordlessly, with nothing but her own gaze.

「Don't get the wrong idea. Right now, I'm cutting you some slack.」

「Sorry, but how exactly is this cutting me slack?」

「I could kill you on the spot and die right after, and yet here I am holding back.」

「Why? Should I? Die?」

「You wouldn't know, but I just inherited some really shitty memories. In those memories I swore my love, and the instant you pick anyone here who isn't me, that vow is void.」

「Because you tried to keep your vow, but if I remember nothing and break the promise of love, that means I'm no longer the 'me' you made that promise with?」

「You catch on quick, you bastard.」

「I see... So the very fact that you're not killing me yet, that you're watching how I act instead, is, from your standpoint, a kind of mercy and a reprieve, and I should be grateful there isn't already a kitchen knife buried in me. That the gist of it?」

「Just get ready to croak.」

The Undertaker shuddered. What miracle of logic was this?

But the real miracle lay elsewhere.

The true miracle was that, just now, Noh Do-hwa and the Undertaker had gleaned every last detail of each other's circumstances without leaning on telepathy or any such occult sorcery, on nothing but a one-on-one exchange of glances.

This was on the level of listening to a piece of classical music and from it sensing the babble of a brook, the slickness of stone, the wriggle of an earthworm perched on that stone floor, and within that wriggle the greatness of life stirring into being. What was this if not the true height of a kindred spirit who understands the music of another's soul2?

In truth, such glance exchanges between the two of them happened all the time.

And they were alike in another way too: neither of them ever stopped to calculate how that wordless understanding looked to the people around them.

Naturally, the rest of the group, who weren't connected to the Undertaker through the Khala, got a little pissed off every time they had to watch that eyeball nonsense.

Most of them figured Noh Do-hwa was showing off the special bond she shared with the Undertaker in some sneaky, underhanded way, and thought it was kind of obnoxious.

So now you can objectively understand why Management Captain Noh Do-hwa didn't have a single drinking buddy in the entire Regression Alliance besides Lee Ha-yul.

As for why this objective fact had stayed beneath the surface all this time... well, obviously, because everyone had only ever been lit up through the regressor's first-person point of view. What would the Undertaker have known?

[Looks like I've got no choice but to step in here.]

Creak.

Lee Ha-yul rolled in, pushing her wheelchair.

[If I can't make everyone into a mom, then I'd rather not take in even a single mom.]

At that, Jeong Ye-ji, ever the devotee of reason and good sense, pointed something out.

"Um. Ha-yul. I've always gone back and forth on whether to bring this up, but isn't your birth mother, Lee So-yoon, alive and perfectly well right now?"

[Can't be helped. As the daughter, I'm the only one who can support my no-good Dad...]

Reason and good sense were brushed aside as lightly as ever. Then again, you shouldn't expect ordinary filial piety from Lee Ha-yul, a father slayer, in the first place.

'Th-that's it. I just have to live with Ha-yul.'

The Undertaker's eyes flashed with desperation.

'I just kick out Dok-seo and Ah-ryeon. No, if I try to kick them far away, those two will try to kill me. So roughly the house two doors down... If I declare I'll live with Ha-yul and only Ha-yul, who could possibly object...'

"No. Don't fall for it. Mister."

Someone shouted.

He turned his head, and it was Oh Dok-seo, sprawled out on the lawn with her arm trembling all over.

It was a sorry sight, more than worthy of the title of hack author, but the cry that burst from her mouth was impossible to ignore.

"Lee Ha-yul over there owns a bad ending too."

"What?"

The Undertaker was aghast. Had she lost her mind?

"Are you telling me I shared love with Ha-yul?"

If that were true, the Undertaker was prepared to take his own life right this instant. There were rules in this world that had to be upheld.

He ended up with Sim Ah-ryeon? That, he could understand. There are real people who marry animals or marry a 2D slab, so ending up with a bug, or Sim Ah-ryeon, was within reason. Oh Dok-seo? That, too, was statistically possible.

But Lee Ha-yul was a no. He could declare with certainty that his affection for Lee Ha-yul, boundless as it was, ran along the lines of parent and friend, with not one shred of romance beyond that.

"Uh, well. It's less love in that sense and more like possessiveness..."

Faced with the Undertaker's horror, Oh Dok-seo's voice shrank a little too.

"So, in a worldline where both Management Captain Noh Do-hwa and Sim Ah-ryeon were out of the picture, there was a cycle where Mister lost his limbs. But Ha-yul was around then. With all four limbs out of commission, Mister had Ha-yul supporting him like a sort of senior, and the two of them lived together, I guess... Anyway, she's a little off too. There's no way her heart was pure."

[This is slander.]

Lee Ha-yul didn't so much as twitch an eyelid.

[When a parent's mobility fails, personally tending to their care is, by any measure, orthodox filial piety. I simply fulfilled my role as a dutiful daughter.]

"Mister couldn't move on his own, so you operated his entire body

with your puppetry from the puppet room and controlled his every movement. And after Mister died, you turned him into a puppet and casually played daddy-and-daughter dollhouse, moving his tongue and vocal cords and mouth yourself, delivering his lines for him, and you lived another two hundred years."

This time it wasn't just the Undertaker; every last person was aghast. Had she truly lost her mind?

Oh Dok-seo shrieked at the top of her lungs.

"I, huh? I just didn't write it up as a side story for the sake of your honor, Lee Ha-yul. Huh? You even puppeted the corpses of the other comrades, churning out lines like 'Ha-yul, you and Mr. Undertaker really are a perfect match,' and you turned a whole city into a Puppet State to play dollhouse... Damn. Aren't you even ashamed?"

[Hmm.]

"If I'd really wanted to, I could've sent your reputation straight to hell too. Be grateful to me. This effort of mine, protecting a friend's reputation to the very end. This kindness. This gentleness. Recognize it."

[I ask you this: what is death?]

Lee Ha-yul still hadn't blinked even once.

[If one lingers in memory even after death, then that soul carries on. Though my Dad's flesh died, in my memory he never died, so I never granted that death my permission.]

"..."

The Undertaker quietly took a few steps back from Lee Ha-yul, careful that no one would notice. His daughter's filial devotion was far too heavy.

He faced reality.

'Not a single person... to lean on?'

He'd felt wronged from the start.

'I've never even been in a relationship.'

Where dating begins is a matter experts would disagree on, and at the extreme there are types who'd insist holding hands once counts as dating, but at the very least it was clear the Undertaker had never reached any proper relationship stage.

'Why do I have to get dragged into this mess because of stuff pulled by other-cycle Undertakers I don't even remember... Huh. Is this how the people around me felt watching me, the regressor?'

He realized it.

'So there was a reason Management Captain Noh Do-hwa found me so insufferable.'

Of course, it was a realization that did nothing whatsoever to improve the present situation.

'Ugh. If only Seo Gyu were here.'

'I could've dumped it all on him and asked what he thought, so why, of all the crucial moments, is he off with a bodybuilding competition for an excuse? You bastard, you bastard, you bastard...'

Ah. For the record, the bodybuilding competition business was a pretext Oh Dok-seo had fabricated.

'Mister Seo Gyu says traveling will be tough since he's prepping for a competition. Trips make it hard to stick to your diet and keep up your workouts,' was the excuse Oh Dok-seo had prepared in advance.

On the off chance the lie got exposed, Oh Dok-seo had gone so far as to actually register Seo Gyu's name as an entrant in a real bodybuilding competition.

Every holiday from now on, Seo Gyu ought to perform the three-bows-and-nine-kowtows ritual[3] in Oh Dok-seo's direction. The holiday gift, naturally, was fixed at a premium Korean beef set

worth no less than five hundred thousand won.

Crash.

That was when it happened. Everyone turned their heads toward the source of the shattering glass, and there stood Dang Seo-rin, gripping something in her trembling hands.

A kitchen knife.

"Seo-rin?"

Jeong Ye-ji, who back in the day had sliced up a person or two with an axe, asked in a bewildered tone.

"Where did the kitchen knife come from...?"

"E-everyone. Don't move."

It was very Jeong Ye-ji of her to lead with 'where' the kitchen knife came from rather than 'why' she'd grabbed it, but regardless of all that, Dang Seo-rin shouted.

"I, I just. Wanted. To travel the world happily with the Undertaker, that's all."

Sniff. Tears welled in Dang Seo-rin's eyes.

They weren't false tears. Dang Seo-rin truly felt aggrieved. Eighty percent of that grievance stemmed from the desperation that she might lose, just like this, the soulmate she'd already staked her claim to.

The remaining twenty percent came from something else.

"I got cl-close with all of you too. The truth is, I was wondering whether to suggest we all travel the world together."

"..."

"This is too cruel. I never wanted to abandon anyone. D-Do-hwa unni too. I was so thrilled that I finally got to call her unni today..."

"..."

"W-we can't hate each other. It's supposed to be a happy ending. It's supposed to be the route we barely managed to reach. And just because a little memory came back, we're fighting again. This is the Outer God's scheme..."

Her face brimming over with tears, Dang Seo-rin turned to look at the Undertaker.

"So."

She murmured.

"Let's cut it off, Undertaker..."

"?"

A dazed question slipped out from between the Undertaker's lips.

"Uh, uh. Sorry, Seo-rin. What was that?"

"Hrk."

Dang Seo-rin only wiped at her tears. Her emotions were surging violently.

"Just shut your eyes tight and... let's just cut it off."

"??"

"I, I can give it up. Yeah. Even if we, we cut that off. We can still kiss, right? A kiss is enough. Love can be expressed just fine through a kiss too..."

"???"

"You see, if you just get rid of the physical lust, even polyamory becomes possible. Yeah... It's completely normal. That's the root of all evil, the starting point of every problem... If we cut it off, everything gets solved, right?"

Dang Seo-rin's eyes blazed.

And so did the kitchen knife.

"I, I... liked the female Undertaker too."

Dang Seo-rin stepped closer.

"It's okay. We... can definitely find happiness."

The Undertaker.

Sensed he was screwed.

Footnotes:

1 - "Drift" is Korean web-novel/fandom slang, borrowed from racing terminology, for forcibly veering a story off its expected course into a wildly different genre or direction.

2 - An allusion to the Chinese idiom zhiyin, literally "one who knows the tone," from the legend of musician Bo Ya and woodcutter Zhong Ziqi: a bosom friend who understands one completely, the way Ziqi alone grasped the scenes Bo Ya played on his zither.

3 - The three-bows-and-nine-kowtows ritual, the Qing court's ritual of submission requiring three kneelings and nine head-knocks to the ground; in Korea it evokes the 1637 Samjeondo surrender of King Injo to the Qing emperor, so it connotes abject, humiliating obeisance.

Chapter 479

The That Woman D VI

Sinnoa

* * *

The Undertaker's parts down there had been severed.

Who could ever have predicted that, at the very end of the very end, after piling up nearly 500 chapters' worth of material, a physical gender swap would be the thing to cap it all off...

Mercifully, that didn't happen.

Nobody had seen a development like that coming. Not even Oh Dok-seo.

So the Undertaker had, at the very least, dodged the danger of going down in the history books as the byword for the worst drift of all time...

That said, it wasn't as if he'd broken through his current situation with any real flair, either.

"N-no! Seo-rin unni!"

"Let go of me...! I said let go!"

A crashing, banging uproar broke out.

"This, this is the one and only answer that leads to a happy ending!"

"Calm yourself, Dang Seo-rin. I, too, dote upon Mr. Matiz regardless of gender, but performing surgery outdoors without proper equipment is simply not the right way to go about it."

"Th-that's right. Stripping the Guild Leader of that... I mean, he's so good at it. Hehe. It'd be such a waste..."

"?"

"?"

As is usually the case whenever an uproar breaks out in the Regression Alliance, OldManGoryeo the villain drew all the aggro this time too, and thanks to a teammate's insane tanking ability, the support character Undertaker barely managed to flee.

The trouble was that where he'd fled, there was no paradise waiting, only a hotel.

The reserved rooms were different, that was all. The Undertaker's lodging was in the very same hotel as the rest of the party.

'Dangerous. This is genuinely dangerous...!'

Being the lone splash of male on this trip, the Undertaker had a suite all to himself, and for that exact same reason, there was no one he could consult.

Who in the world could he call up to this room to ask, 'What should I do?'

Really, who?

He ran a quick mental simulation.

He might not match Cheon Yo-hwa, but the Undertaker had personally lived through tens of thousands of life simulations himself, so he could picture it well enough.

The first consultation candidate the Undertaker thought of was, naturally, a comrade of tradition and trust.

1. The Management Captain.

「Noh Do-hwa. What should I do? At this rate everything's going to fall apart. You're the only person I can trust!」

「Hmm. Well. I'm not really sure what it is you're so worried about...」

「Pardon?」

「Does it really matter if it all falls apart...?」

「...」

「...」

They just stared at each other in silence for about six seconds, and yet somehow a suffocating mood welled up, and all at once Noh Do-hwa grabbed the Undertaker's necktie and twisted the corner of her mouth...

'Absolutely not!'

The Undertaker recoiled in horror. No matter how he tried to steer the conversation, the only future he could see was the two of them plunging straight down into hell together and reenacting Made in Abyss[1].

'This is a person who, far from solving the problem, would just pour gasoline on the fire!'

In that case, the Undertaker thought, moving on to the next candidate.

In truth, aside from Noh Do-hwa, there was one more consultant the Undertaker had traditionally relied on.

A comrade who, anytime, anywhere, could mimic any character at all, and was therefore, surprisingly, an SSS-rank conversation partner!

2. LiteraryGirl

「Dok-seo. From the way you were talking earlier, it sounded like you were scheming something! Explain just what the situation is, would you! Huh? I'm asking you what I should do here!」

「U-uh-huh. Sorry, Mister. The truth is, I just thought it'd be sad if you and the others were that heartbroken and then remembered nothing at all. A true happy ending has to be an autumn you greet

after harvesting every last thing, leaving nothing behind. That's the only reason I wanted the time capsule to open... B-boy. Turned out the memories Cheon Yo-hwa stored away were a bit more than I expected! 」

「 You knew and left it alone! You little...! 」

「 No! I'm a victim here too! How was I supposed to know you were the angel reader who'd been cheering me on, front to back, every single day! And, and, on top of that, even something like...! 」

「 Like what? 」

「 ... 」

「 ... 」

「 I, I can't say it. More to the point, the one thing I do realize now is that I'd been misunderstanding something about you, Mister. 」

「 Misunderstanding? Misunderstanding what? 」

「 Mister... Your, your affection toward me was higher than I thought? So... like... that. 」

「 ... 」

「 ... 」

They just avoided each other's gaze in silence for about twelve seconds, and yet astonishingly Oh Dok-seo, flinching, brushed the Undertaker's hand and looked at him with eyes clouded by unease...

"Let's die."

The Undertaker muttered it. Perched on the edge of the bed, head buried in both hands, he soliloquized with utterly genuine feeling.

"Yeah. Rather than witness that spectacle with my own naked eyes, I'd just, I'd sooner die."

Yu Ji-won's earnest advice had been right this time too. Oh Dok-

seo? Ohhhhhhh Dok-seo? Oh Dok-seo, seriously?

Even if the whole world were wiped out and only two humans remained, the Undertaker firmly refused to be Adam and Eve. Only now could he truly understand the final line of the Evangelion theatrical cut[2]. It made him sick!

Who on earth would benefit if an Oh Dok-seo-Undertaker route actually came true? And who could possibly depict that situation? The Undertaker? No chance. Oh Dok-seo? Out of the question. Infinite Metagame? Even Infinite Metagame would balk at this one.

In the end, the last consultation partner left to the Undertaker was already decided.

"Seo Gyu. It's your hyung..."

-Huh? Hyung-nim? What's with a call at this hour of the morning? Oh, right. You're in the States. It must be afternoon over there by now.

"Yeah. Did you eat breakfast? Your hyung's got a little something on his mind and wants your opinion. That okay?"

-Uh... Me, hyung-nim? You're asking me? Uh, sure. Of course it's fine. I ate breakfast. But this is making me kind of nervous. What kind of worry could it be that you'd consult me about it?

Explanation skipped.

In dating-sim terms, [CTRL][3].

-Hmm.

On the other end of the phone, Seo Gyu took in the whole explanation and swallowed a deep groan.

It was the most peculiarly icky siren of silence.

"What should I do, Seo Gyu?"

-Hmmmmm...

As the silence stretched on, the Undertaker grew more impatient, but in truth Seo Gyu was simply offering up deep thanks in his heart.

The object of his gratitude was, of course, Oh Dok-seo.

Seo Gyu resolved that the moment Oh Dok-seo returned home, he'd hand her a lifetime free PT membership on the spot.

Considering that these days Seo Gyu was sweeping competitions and pulling in at least 200,000 won an hour, it was an enormous privilege. At least Seo Gyu himself thought so.

(Oh Dok-seo's opinion didn't matter.)

"Still, you spent your life as an SG Net Administrator dealing with all kinds of crazies and crazy situations. I'm begging you on the strength of your experience as an Administrator here."

-No, uh. The three troublemakers I had the hardest time with are all in your party right now, all three of them, so I'm not sure I'll be much help...

"Three? One's Ah-ryeon and another would be Dok-seo. Was there one more here who'd qualify as a troublemaker?"

-It's nothing.

Seo Gyu's tone turned oddly hurried.

-M-more importantly, hyung-nim. The most important thing at times like this is the heart, one on one. The hearts between two people, right?

"Mm."

-I really never thought the day would come when I'd be asking you something like this. So... hyung-nim, what kind of person do you like?

A blunt question.

And the Undertaker was neither lazy nor dull when it came to gauging his own heart. Naturally it was a question he'd thrown at himself plenty of times, so the answer flowed smoothly from his lips.

"I like them all! Obviously!"

-Sorry, but that statement just now was real garbage, hyung-nim.

"No. There's a part you need to understand and get past. My 'liking' is a little different from other people's. I'm just, you know, ready to accept all of them no matter how they live and pull them forward into the future? I like you too, Seo Gyu!"

It was an extraordinarily perilous statement.

Just looking at today alone, the Undertaker had come within a hair of swerving into drift twice already, but fortunately Seo Gyu understood perfectly well what he meant.

-Then is there someone you, uh... want to marry, say. Someone you wouldn't even glance at anyone else for, and would only want to share your body with. Isn't there a person like that?

"As if there would be."

-No, why not? It's a natural feeling.

"Think about it, Seo Gyu. Say there were someone I wanted to monopolize, and wanted to be monopolized by. Then would my life as a regressor have run normally? I'd have spent every day just laughing and playing around with that one person, living however I pleased whether the world ended or not."

-Ah.

"Mine wasn't a life where I could play favorites with any one person. Like them all, love them all, accepting as love only the love that means loving everyone. I had to insure my heart in as many ways as possible like that, so that no matter how hard the unfair garbage rained down, I wouldn't go bankrupt and could keep going as a regressor."

-That part I think I can understand. Hm? Uh, hold on. Hyung-nim.

"Yeah."

-There's some text coming in... Oh no.

The Undertaker sensed something ominous in the uneasy reaction.

"Why? What is it?"

-...No, it's nothing. Mm, no. Actually. Hyung-nim. It looks like they've found out you're on the phone with me right now.

"What?! H-how?!"

-Well, when someone calls your smartphone it shows up as busy, and if none of the members over there is on a call, then the person you're talking to is, at most, either me or Go Yuri noona. They must have figured out it isn't Go Yuri noona.

"..."

The Undertaker grew afraid.

He glanced around without meaning to, but all four sides were just walls. What sort of schemes were being spun right now, beyond the reach of his sight?

-They're basically texting me asking me to slip in some words to you in their favor, that kind of thing. Forget it. Whatever I pull from in the middle, would that really steer your heart?

"Seo Gyu..."

-If anything, this works out better. The way I see it, hyung-nim, you're, uh, kind of waiting around figuring that once a little more time passes the members will stop being attached to you, breeze off, and meet better people...

"Yeah! I just genuinely hope those kids become happy! And if, on top of happiness, their own abilities blossom and they build careers, all the better."

-The way I see it, that's the problem.

"What?"

-First of all, finding a better person than you is hard. Insanely hard.

Seo Gyu's voice came out evenly.

-Let's suppose I hit it off with one of the members and made it all the way to dating and even marriage. That'll never, ever happen, but let's just suppose.

"Uh-huh. And?"

-Then I'd... probably go crazy someday because of a being like you, hyung-nim.

"No, why's that?"

-Because from the member's standpoint, the moment one little thing goes wrong, they'd compare me to you.

"Compare?"

-Yes. 'Hyung-nim did it like this.' 'Hyung-nim never did it like that.' That kind of thinking happens all the time in life, so that much I could let slide... but your 'did it like this' is a bit much.

A low murmur of a voice.

-I mean, you 'saved my life,' you 'gave everything you had to pull me out of a failure ending,' you 'treated me, who was originally an anomaly boss, like a human being and let me fight alongside you on humanity's front line,' you 'pressed forward to victory together even in fights that looked hopeless.'

"Uh..."

-Damn, the standard for comparison is too brutal. The bar's set absurdly high. Specs and everything aside, this is just plain impossible, I'm telling you.

"..."

-No matter how hard you push us to go meet someone who fits better and live a happy life, it's impossible! Sure, you could force a meeting. But forcing it just makes it worse, I'm telling you. It's not only our member who ends up miserable. The person they meet ends up miserable too. Damn! What crime did the poor kid who suddenly gets compared to you commit in a past life? It's a nightmare for them!

Seo Gyu's cry.

Astonishingly... it reached the Undertaker's heart.

'I, I guess so.'

It was a perspective he'd never once considered.

'You mean I was on the verge of harming a total stranger too?!'

Even as the shock washed back and forth, Seo Gyu's words went on.

-Hyung-nim. Think it over carefully. The people around you. Our members... Are they people who'll live ordinary lives, meet ordinary people, and love in ordinary ways?

"..."

-They're not, are they. If they were that kind of person they'd never have awakened in the first place, or fallen into corruption. You wouldn't have had to help them to that extent either. The only lives you brought along were ones that were originally just unhappy or tangled up, lives on the verge of dying somewhere, right?

"...Right."

-The world going back to ordinary doesn't mean those people went back to ordinary too. And, uh... what was I trying to say? Ah. Right.

Maybe it was because he'd watched the Regression Alliance's circus up close, longer than anyone.

Seo Gyu seemed to have a lot to say.

-I know your heart's training is at a level the likes of me can't even imagine, hyung-nim. For you, clinging to someone or trying to monopolize them, even having a heart like that at all, must be something from the distant past.

"..."

-Be obsessed.

"What did you say?"

-I'm telling you to be obsessed. With the members, you know. Don't treat them like some enlightened sage, no, of course it's a fact that we leaned on you in our hearts a lot thanks to that. But in a case like this, in a case like right now, just be obsessed as hell.

Seo Gyu's voice was dead serious.

-Then they'll probably all love it, you know?

"...I really don't get it at all."

-A hundred percent, I'm telling you, a hundred percent. Show them you being obsessed and they'll buy it without question, every one of them. Hm. Or not? Is Ji-won somehow different again? I can never figure out what that one feels.

"..."

-Everyone's a child deep down. You'll surely be able to find a child inside your own heart too. Good luck, hyung-nim.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait! Don't hang up!"

-I'm hanging up. If I get any more tangled up in this I'm genuinely screwed. Bow your head and apologize like a man. Oh, right. I figure you probably know this already, but I've been rooting for the Saintess noona since way back.

Click.

The call ended.

"..."

It was already the top-grade suite of a five-star hotel. With the phone gone silent too, it turned deathly quiet in an instant.

'Be obsessed?'

In the middle of a room that had gone utterly silent, the advice Seo Gyu had just handed him spun round and round inside the Undertaker's head.

'Obsession. Obsession? Show them me being obsessed, and they'll all love it and buy it...?'

That was when it happened.

Ding-dong.

The Undertaker jolted in surprise.

You could call the reaction oversensitive, but a person tends to get a bit on edge after living through a crisis where his genitals were nearly cut off.

Going over to the front door, the Undertaker quietly spoke into the door speaker.

"Wh-who is it?"

-Me.

The moment he heard the voice, the Undertaker's complexion drained pale and his pupils contracted.

-It's me. Dang Seo-rin. Let's talk for a bit.

The master of the boat had graced him with her arrival.

Footnotes:

1 - Made in Abyss is a manga/anime by Akihito Tsukushi about explorers descending into a vast, beautiful, and horrifying chasm where the depths inflict escalating bodily curses; the deeper one goes, the worse the suffering. Hence the image of falling "straight down into hell."

2 - Refers to The End of Evangelion (1997), whose closing scene leaves Shinji and Asuka as the apparent last two humans; its famous final line, Asuka's "kimochi warui" ("I feel sick / how disgusting"), is the source of the Undertaker rejecting the "Adam and Eve" framing and feeling sick.

3 - In Korean dating-sim slang, "miyeonsi" abbreviates "beautiful-girl simulation"; holding CTRL in such games fast-forwards or skips dialogue, so the explanation is being skipped over.

Chapter 480

The That Woman D VII

Sinnoa

* * *

The back-alley surgery rampage that had nearly turned the Undertaker into a female Undertaker had happened only a few hours ago.

It would have been more than enough to add a new entry, [Phobia: Dang Seo-rin], to the Undertaker's character sheet, and yet he opened his door without a word of complaint.

The reason? Simple.

"Hey... I'm sorry, Undertaker. I got way too worked up earlier..."

Because, tens of thousands of years ago, [Precious Bond: Dang Seo-rin] had already been engraved on his sheet in red letters.

To put it bluntly, even if Dang Seo-rin had actually castrated him, it wouldn't have made the slightest dent in the Undertaker's affection.

This was a man prepared to accept even world annihilation for Dang Seo-rin's sake. Next to a whole world, that particular part of himself was worth precisely nothing.

"It's fine. I understand. When memories you couldn't even recall come flooding in like a tidal wave, keeping your composure isn't easy."

"Y-yeah. Now that I think about it, you went through something similar to us a long, long time ago, didn't you..."

The earlier experience Dang Seo-rin meant was, of course, the reincarnator, the incident with Go Yuri.

Recalling that, Dang Seo-rin let out a quiet sigh of relief inside.

'...So he's not just saying it's fine to be nice.'

People could afford to be generous with others about mistakes they'd lived through or committed themselves.

Astonishingly, the Undertaker had even taken in 'memories that never existed,' and beyond that had once been a person of a different gender from his own.

There were precious few situations on present-day Earth that the Undertaker couldn't understand. To genuinely surprise him, you had to be on Sim Ah-ryeon's level.

"...Mm. It's too quiet in here, so, um. Want to take a walk around the hotel and talk, just the two of us?"

"Sure."

The Undertaker instantly pulled up the layout of the area around the hotel in his head.

Thanks to having mapped it out in advance, on the off chance a walk like this might come up somewhere on the trip.

"There's the sea, if we walk a bit."

"Oh, the sea. Is it pretty?"

"Well. The water's so-so. It's not a beach, just a stretch of docks lined up one after another."

"Hmmm..."

"Still, you can watch the people wandering around. You'll be able to hear the waves too, so it's not a bad spot for a walk, is it?"

"Yeah! Let's go, let's go!"

Dang Seo-rin perked up at once. As if she'd never once paced anxiously outside the Undertaker's door, her mood lifted clean up,

strangely enough.

Like a tiny bit of magic.

In truth, this whole process came very naturally to the Undertaker.

Scouting the area around wherever they were happened to be a habit of his, and on top of that, whenever he was out with Dang Seo-rin he always looked up good restaurants and the like to visit together with her.

Stepping out of the hotel and walking down the street...

Dang Seo-rin, too, suddenly...

"..."

Came to realize that very thing.

'It's always fun being with the Undertaker.'

It wasn't as though some grand event had taken place.

Dang Seo-rin loved the sea. She loved walking. She loved watching the streets where people came and went.

If she could duck into a café along the way and have a tasty coffee or dessert, that would be perfect, but even without it, even just getting to sit on some old bench now and then was enough.

'While he was prepping for the trip... in case he might end up walking with me.'

Quietly.

Strolling side by side down the harbor street, Dang Seo-rin stole a glance at her companion's profile.

'Wondering whether there might be a walking route I'd like... and just. Giving the map one more quick once-over, I bet.'

Just.

'It's not like he even needed to check the map, since Cheon Yo-hwa said she'd plan the whole itinerary and to leave it to her.'

Just.

"..."

Her heart was pounding.

Dang Seo-rin just, plain liked his profile.

She knew it well. In love, the word 'just' was not what you reached for when there truly was no reason at all.

A love that brushed past for a moment and then parted at an intersection, maybe. But not this.

A love that insisted on overlapping its path, that stopped together when the light blinked, that crossed together when a crosswalk came, that promised to sit on a bench together and gaze at the sea once they reached some shore where the road went no further.

'Just.'

If you came to have a love like that, then while walking the road, people had to step on a great many 'justs,' one by one by one.

And as you walked, stepping on them like that, the answer you'd so readily given, 'I just live,' to the question of why you were born and went on living, changed at some point without your even noticing.

'I live for you.'

In love, the blank painted over with the word [just] always had the word [you] hidden inside it.

'For your sake, I think I just... wouldn't mind getting up early.'

The sound of the waves passed by, brushing water across this man's profile.

'I'd even be glad to just go for a walk whenever it suits you.'

'I'll just stay up at night until you come back.'

'Even if everything I have now disappears. Even if it all falls apart. The truth is, as long as I can be with you, I can get back up anytime.'

'I just... feel like I could.'

Dang Seo-rin...

'You feel that way too, don't you?'

A firm squeeze.

Without thinking, she reached out and took the Undertaker's right hand.

"..."

At that, the Undertaker turned his head and looked at her. A little surprised, maybe. His eyes had widened slightly.

"..."

But before long, his gaze softened and settled gently.

And the touch with which Dang Seo-rin had caught only the tips of his fingers, the Undertaker answered with a larger motion, wrapping her whole hand in his.

"..."

"..."

Dang Seo-rin's face grew a little warm. So she walked with her head bowed a touch.

The words went quiet between them, and only the thickness of the fingers clasped tight and the warmth of his palm filled up her head.

The silence wasn't oppressive. It just felt like nothing at all. So she worked up a bit more courage and lifted her head, and her eyes met the Undertaker's.

Dang Seo-rin couldn't help laughing.

"Idiot."

"Why?"

"Dummy."

"That's an unforgivable slander."

"Want me to tell you one scary fact?"

"If it's a scarier story than the one where a certain body part nearly got cut off, sure."

"Sim Ah-ryeon, that girl, the second she got into the hotel she showered and took a bath..."

"That's insane."

"And she says that when you head off to play in the hotel pool, she's going to put on a swimsuit and go too..."

"That really is scary. I've got goosebumps..."

When it came to topics worth chatting about at a moment like this, nothing beat trash-talking Sim Ah-ryeon.

Isn't trash-talking a comrade going a bit far, you ask? Uh... you heartless elder-abandoner[1].

"Ugh. Forget it, forget it."

"Forget what?"

"Just forget all of it."

How to put it. Dang Seo-rin meant to stamp an official seal on this, just like this.

'Hide nothing from me. Treat me as the most precious thing of all. Whenever I want, go on a trip with me anytime.'

If those were the conditions, then the way Dang Seo-rin saw it, she could honestly accept being in 'a relationship that looks utterly bizarre to others.'

Of course, a person's heart isn't something even the person in question can know from the start, so once this side-splittingly absurd relationship raised anchor and set sail, her heart would probably shift here and there.

If it changed, she could just talk it out again when the time came, was what she figured.

'Sim Ah-ryeon, that girl... I don't get her either. Let's just decide she's not a person, but an alien wearing human skin.'

It was a superhuman tolerance only possible because she herself had once been devoured by an Outer God.

And so, the moment Dang Seo-rin opened her mouth to share her resolve...

"Wait a second."

"Hm?"

"Hold on."

Thunk.

The Undertaker cornered Dang Seo-rin. Saying he cornered her sounds like an odd way to put it, but to be more blunt, it was the so-called 'wall-slam' pose.

'Eh?'

Dang Seo-rin looked up at the Undertaker's face as it cast a shadow over her. Her back was against the wall of a big harbor building standing by the road.

An utterly serious expression was looking down at her at an angle.

"Wh... what is it?"

It was so sudden that, without meaning to, Dang Seo-rin's tongue tripped over itself.

But she couldn't help it.

Sure, she'd been the one to signal the hand-hold first, but the Undertaker had never initiated physical contact this intensely.

With Pandora's box opening today, the events from 'Utopia' had come back to her vividly, but even in that cycle he'd never pressed his face in this boldly, had he? Had he?

"Dang Seo-rin. I have some idea of what it is you're about to say."

"Eh, uh, uhm...?"

"But I'm not so foolish a man as to let you be the one to say it first. So, won't you wait just a few more days? I got some personal advice, and I'd like to test it out a little."

"Wait...? Wh-what for?"

"Whatever it may be."

And then came something jaw-dropping.

The shadow drew closer. Deepened. It came near enough for her to make out the other person's eyelids, and then something soft brushed Dang Seo-rin's left cheek.

'Huh? Huh? Huh? Huh?'

In short, once Dang Seo-rin's brain, fumbling belatedly, tried to make sense of it...

A moment ago the Undertaker had pinned her to the wall, bent at the waist, and lightly kissed her on the cheek.

'???'

It was moving way too fast.

Faced with the reality that, before she'd even officially declared

anything one way or another, the Undertaker had fired off a cheek-kiss first, Dang Seo-rin could only spiral into chaos! Because, well, because...!

'Y-you. You fire off flirting like breathing, but you absolutely, absolutely never made this kind of physical contact first, did you?!'

The truth was, there had never been a man as walled-off as the Undertaker.

Trying to hold hands, it was always her first. Stretching out a foot under the café table to tangle them up playfully, her first too. First, first, first.

He'd handle everything else so easily and take care of it first, like planning the walking route today, and yet, uniquely! When it came to physical contact, absolutely never!

A case of him sending the first signal had never once existed in all of history.

Thanks to that, Dang Seo-rin had learned just how comfortable and easy to mess around with a 'man with no sex drive' was... and just how damnably frustrating!

Only after meeting the Undertaker had she been able to learn it.

A madman among madmen who truly believed in platonic love and practiced it.

That was the Undertaker for you.

For someone who, now and then, harbored the desire to hold hands and do this and that, it sometimes made her feel needlessly like the greedy one, and wondering whether she was the only one feeling this way, honestly she'd felt a little, no, a lot hurt.

"Will you wait for me?"

"Uh, uh, uh..."

For the first time in her life, the Undertaker had stepped forward

and made the appeal himself, and Dang Seo-rin's head spun. She'd been caught in an unexpected ambush.

Maybe that was why.

"...Mm. I'll wait."

The Dang Seo-rin who answered like that was flushed with all the embarrassment in the world.

A little later.

The walk over, they came back, and she sent the Undertaker up, and sitting alone in the hotel lobby, Dang Seo-rin blankly looked up at the chandelier.

She thought, dazed.

'Wh-what on earth is happening?'

How could Dang Seo-rin ever have guessed.

That the puppet master behind this whole turn of events was Seo Gyu.

* * *

Obsession.

To the Undertaker, it was an utterly unfamiliar hwadu[3].

But he was a man who knew nothing of giving up, and above all, a person who knew how to take another's advice seriously.

The Undertaker resolved to 'try' and 'make an effort' so that he 'could obsess over other people.'

Considering that, statistically, his effort tended to flow in the exact opposite direction, it was a truly strange thing.

In any case, as the first step of that effort...

"Yo-hwa."

"Ah, Teacher!"

The Undertaker sought out Cheon Yo-hwa.

"You called me out by myself. My goodness! To think you'd approach me first, before I even got the chance to make a move on you. Of course I'm okay with it! There, there. Shall we head to the room I reserved just for us, then?"

"That's not it. There's something I need to ask of you."

"Hm? What is it? If it's a request from you, Teacher, I could even track down One Piece for you2."

"The time capsule. Pandora's box."

The Undertaker said.

"That thing didn't actually disappear, did it?"

"..."

"It's an authority that was passed to you, so you can probably control it however you like, to some degree."

Taking advantage of everyone falling into confusion, Cheon Yo-hwa had haphazardly called a timeout, but in reality no such time limit existed.

The Undertaker, more versed in the Outer Gods' cursed objects than anyone, saw through Cheon Yo-hwa's lie in no time.

"Give it to me."

"Wh-what?"

"The memories held in Pandora's box. Open it right here, right now, so I can have them injected into me too."

"Mem... ories, you mean. Um, whose memories? You can pick and choose however you like, Teacher."

"All of them."

"..."

That's right.

The solution the Undertaker's effort had arrived at was simple.

"Hand over every single one of the memories that 'I' went through across every bad ending, without leaving even one out."

Can't manage obsession?

Then he just had to summon every last one of the 'selves' who had each obsessed over someone, one by one.

□□Super Giga Undertaker, combination complete.

Footnotes:

1 - The handle alludes to a legendary (likely apocryphal) old Korean custom of abandoning elderly parents in the mountains to die; the term is used colloquially for casting aside or disposing of someone who has become a burden.

2 - One Piece is the long-running Japanese manga/anime by Eiichiro Oda, whose central plot revolves around the search for a legendary treasure also called the "One Piece." The joke is that she would hunt down that fabled, never-found prize for him.

3 - Hwadu refers to a Korean Seon Buddhist meditation phrase or question used as the focus of contemplation.

Chapter 481

The That Woman D VIII

Sinnoa

* * *

All at once, memories beyond the capacity allotted to a human came surging in like the sea, and the Undertaker's head exploded.

That sort of thing did not happen.

An explosion ending, in this day and age. What else could you call that but the worst.

"Kraaaaaaagh!"

Still, even if it was not the worst, what the Undertaker was tasting right now was the runner-up, one infinitely close to the worst.

"Hhuuugh! Hhaaaaaagh!"

"T, Teacher! Are you all right?! Why do you suddenly sound exactly like someone screaming while a torture awl gets jammed between their bones and scrapes the nerves between their joints?!"

"Si..."

"Si?"

"Sim Ah-ryeeeeon...!"

The Undertaker was pouring out the bloodless half of tears of blood. The missing blood, incidentally, was spraying out of his mouth-hole.

"To Ah-ryeon! That I! Th-that I loved her!"

"..."

"Memories of whispering that I loved her! Memories of the two of us running away together to protect our love! Hhuuugh! Khaaaaaaagh!"

Looking down at the Undertaker as he lay face-first on the floor and thrashed about, Cheon Yo-hwa was impressed. With whom? None other than herself.

A display ugly enough to cool even a thousand-year love.

Even after witnessing that desperate bug-wriggling from point-blank range, the thought that rose in Cheon Yo-hwa's heart was simple.

Cute.

Maybe it was just arithmetic. A thousand years? Her own love had already blown past that shelf life by tens of thousands of years.

Beaming, she crouched down.

She rested her elbows on her knees, propped her chin in both hands, looked down at the Undertaker like a sunflower, and said:

"Wow! Sim Ah-ryeon's boyfriend!"

"Khuuuuugh!"

"Guy with the OldManGoryeo villain!"

"Hhuuuuuuuugh!"

"Wait, so that means...! Wow, that is basically hearing, 'There goes Sim Ah-ryeon's husband'...!?"

"Wha! Whaat! Whaaaaaaat...!"

"To still go on loving such a pathetic man..."

"..."

"Teacher. Um."

The mood sank in an instant.

Cheon Yo-hwa was fully prepared to use the occasion to ram in a confession too.

It might seem strange that, after going to all the trouble of showing off a lunatic design, she was setting up a proposal in such an utterly moodless spot, but Cheon Yo-hwa's nose thought otherwise.

Life was all about timing.

As Cheon Yo-hwa saw it, this world was made out of a dating sim. At the very least, there was clearly some kind of barrier like that spread around the Undertaker.

Otherwise, why would she ever have lost to Yu Ji-won?

Power? Wealth? Cheon Yo-hwa held an overwhelming advantage in both.

And yet that dirt-poor domestic-abuse victim, serial-killer girl breadwinner had ended the spar with a single click.

"So, did you meet Mr. Matiz before you met me?"

It was proof that, in this world, victory and defeat were decided solely by how early you had formed a connection with the Undertaker.

Cheon Yo-hwa had absolutely no intention of ignoring a life lesson like that.

Especially when it was a lesson her past self had literally fired at her like a Spirit Bomb while destroying the universe. Even if she had wanted to ignore it, that would have been harder.

'Right now, Teacher... he just got injected with the memories of the bad endings. He's basically the same as having his personality updated.'

'In other words, the affection he builds from now on matters more than the affection the members have piled up so far!'

This was the full truth behind the scheme genius strategist Cheon

Yo-hwa had been plotting since her previous life.

She was late. So she would forcibly line everyone back up on the same starting line.

What mattered here was the fact that the authority to manipulate Pandora's box rested with her.

Because if the Undertaker wanted to regain his memories, he absolutely had to stay near Cheon Yo-hwa, the owner of the time capsule.

Just like now.

Ah, farewell to the days of being nothing but a cackling cheetah.

At last, Cheon Yo-hwa smiled the smile of a racing hound. There was no one around. If she dropped the confession and pushed straight on to the next step, who would dare stop her?

Well, plenty of people would try. But this time, they were the ones due to taste the cheetah's humiliation.

"For a long time now, Teacher, I..."

And so Cheon Yo-hwa tried to cast the Imperius-class finishing spell called 'I've loved you.'

But her ambitious incantation failed halfway through.

The reason was simple. At some point, the other party had already stretched out a hand and covered her lips with his palm.

"...?"

Cheon Yo-hwa blinked.

She now understood exactly how a combining robot or a magical girl felt when interrupted in the middle of a transformation scene. It was deeply bewildering.

"Yo-hwa."

What was even more bewildering was what the Undertaker did next.

"I know what you are trying to say."

"..."

"Those memories I just recalled, maybe they are reality, and maybe they are illusions created by the simulation."

"..."

"Either way, I think it is too soon for the me of now to accept your feelings."

Cheon Yo-hwa felt as if her heart had dropped.

'N, no way.'

The truth was, all this time she had only been consciously running her happy circuits.

Strictly speaking, even if Cheon Yo-hwa had escaped the cheetah position, there was no guarantee that meant automatic victory.

There was another possibility.

'Am I... getting rejected?'

Yes.

Even after inheriting all the bad endings, there was still the possibility that the Undertaker would pass over her and choose one single person instead.

That possibility definitely existed too.

'N, no. No!'

'After I, after I gave up being human and dragged this fight all the way here!'

Cheon Yo-hwa's pupils shook wildly.

She wanted to scream, but she could not, because his palm was blocking her mouth.

"If I only said, wait for me, that would be me blurting things out without thinking about you. Yo-hwa, you are smart. You always have the habit of considering the worst possibility first."

"..."

"So that you will not doubt my words."

The Undertaker's face drew near.

Naturally, so did his lips.

His lips came closer and closer, then stopped with a faint sound. They had caught on the back of his own hand, the very hand that was covering the corner of Cheon Yo-hwa's mouth.

'Ah.'

She could not feel the touch of his lips.

Only the vibration.

An endlessly gentle knock passed through his hand from his lips.

"..."

Cheon Yo-hwa closed her eyes without realizing it.

Among the bad endings the time capsule had passed down, there were routes where the Undertaker ended up with Cheon Yo-hwa. Naturally, there had also been countless kisses.

Those memories went fumbling after the lips hidden beyond the palm.

If she cracked her eyes open just a little, she could feel his breath right in front of her.

When the hand-kiss, brief if brief and eternal if long, finally ended,

the Undertaker moved away.

"I am sorry. We finally came on this trip together, but this teacher needs to shut himself in his room for a while and take some time to sort out these memories. Will that be all right?"

"...Yes."

Cheon Yo-hwa answered.

Of course, if one wanted to describe things as close to the truth as possible, that sentence above needed revision. Cheon Yo-hwa had by no means performed the act of answering of her own free and independent will.

The answer had simply flowed out on its own.

And while answering, Cheon Yo-hwa stared up at the Undertaker with her mouth half open, like someone who had sat in a hot bath too long and melted half to pieces.

"Um... I'm actually really, really good at waiting."

Had there ever been a time when the tongue inside your mouth felt too hot? Cheon Yo-hwa felt exactly like that.

Seeing her face, the Undertaker smiled faintly.

"I haven't sorted it all out yet. But the things you put in the time capsule and showed me, every one of them is a precious memory and treasured recollection to me."

"Ah..."

"The things we failed to gather and left behind, you picked them up and brought them back. Thank you very much, Yo-hwa."

"No... that was my own greed too."

"Even helping someone out of goodwill is difficult, and yet you help me even through greed. Meeting you was one of the blessings of my life."

"..."

Cheon Yo-hwa's face turned red. The springs of the brain that usually hummed along so energetically were, for now, on strike.

They seemed to exchange a few more words after that, but she could not remember them well.

Only after a long time had passed since the Undertaker left the room did Cheon Yo-hwa feel as if her internal cooling system had started working again.

Blaaank...

She stared up at the ceiling for ages, then suddenly muttered, dear god.

'...What kind of monster did I just wake up?'

That monster possessed the experience of staying together until death with the owners of especially twisted and warped hearts on this planet, Yu Ji-won, Jeong Ye-ji, Sim Ah-ryeon, Oh Dok-seo, Noh Do-hwa, and the rest.

It was the arrival of the most terrifying experienced rookie.

* * *

"A, ah! Guild Leader!"

They ran into each other in the hotel hallway.

"I just finished washing up! And a second ago I swear I heard somebody calling out for me from somewhere, and th, that was you too, Guild Leader, right? In my room... huh?"

"I'm glad you're alive, Ah-ryeon."

"Huh?"

A hug.

"When this trip is over and we go back, let us raise a puppy."

"Huh..."

Pat, pat.

"Did it hurt?"

"No! N, not at all!"

"I'm sorry."

"Hheh heh... if anything, I liked it. I've experienced real death now, right? There was even somebody who cut off an ear just to experience something sort of like that. And getting strangled by you felt surprisingly nice too..."

"You would get along well with Noh Do-hwa."

"Huh? N, Noh Do-hwa was not the one getting strangled, she was the one doing the strangling, was she not?"

"If you want to observe the abyss, you have to accept being observed by the abyss as well. That is the way of the world."

"Hhuuugh...! Inspiration is suddenly flooding me! I need to hurry up and write an adults-only short about a character named Ye Do-hwa who looks suspiciously like Management Captain Noh Do-hwa and post it on SG Net... Ah. Right. It is gone now."

"Sometimes I wonder whether Do-hwa wasn't the ruler who tolerated freedom of speech most generously in all of human history."

Noisy chatter.

"Right. This Guild Leader is going to shut himself in his room for a few days and sort through some memories. Will you wait for me?"

"Yes! I will hold back!"

Leaping over the iron wall called Sim Ah-ryeon, who had just come back from bathing and was even wearing a swimsuit, with absurd ease,

the Undertaker sat alone on the floor of the guest room.

That lofty cross-legged figure looked exactly like a supreme master entering Closed Retreat.

"Obsession."

He muttered to himself from time to time.

There was no one around to hear anyway, and he wanted to focus calmly and wholly on the hwadu.

"What is obsession?"

At present, countless streams of inner demon were mingling inside his heart.

If one judged by memory alone:

Just now, he had exchanged the proposal of a lifetime with Noh Do-hwa in a wedding dress.

Just now, he had personally strangled Sim Ah-ryeon to death while she stood on the verge of being annihilated by Go Yuri.

Just now, the Saintess who had said she would stop time and go buy some ice cream for a moment never came back, and he was killed by Go Yuri.

Just now, just now, just now, just now...

'Which one of those is me?'

His memories had twisted and clouded together. If the heart were compared to a stream, then his heart right now was undoubtedly closer to muddy water.

'All of this is me.'

If someone had a status window ability and looked into the Undertaker's heart right now, they would recoil in horror.

[affection - Noh Do-hwa: MAX], [affection - Sim Ah-ryeon: MAX],

[affection - Jeong Ye-ji: MAX], [affection - Oh Dok-seo: MAX], and so on. The affection he held for every member had broken through its limit one after another.

Normally, something like this was impossible.

No matter how much a person talked about equal love with their whole body, how could there possibly be no tilt in the heart depending on time and place?

And yet that bizarre event had happened.

The Undertaker was a romantic madman. Whenever he loved, he loved with complete sincerity, and in every bad ending, flawlessly, he lived only for the one before his eyes.

When those separately divided bad endings were gathered together...

the result was that his love for the leads of every ending had reached a perfect apex.

"What is obsession?"

He reversed the direction of the hwadu and chose to swim through the raging torrent of murk.

In other words.

"When would I become obsessed?"

He imagined it.

Imagination and memory were, in essence, the same.

Therefore, the Undertaker was as outstanding at imagining as he was at remembering, and the things he imagined had a texture almost equal to reality.

'What if Ye-ji dated someone other than me?'

Until just a day ago,

even if he had heard the news that the other person was dating someone else, not the slightest dark shadow would have fallen over the Undertaker's heart.

What darkness? On the contrary, the Undertaker would have been happier than anyone and supported and blessed them in every possible way, thinking that the comrade he treasured had finally found a partner.

But now?

"..."

Now that he had absorbed all those memories, of Ye-ji rejoicing and blushing by herself because she thought Time Stop had worked, of struggling to bring over drinking snacks she had never once made before in her life, of the two of them pressing their lips together alone on the beach?

'I can't...'

The Undertaker of now,

'I don't think I can allow it.'

Squirm, squirm.

Inside his heart, something.

'I'm to be excluded from Ye-ji's life?'

'Instead of seeing her every day whenever I want, I'll only see her sometimes. Or maybe not even sometimes, maybe I won't get to see her at all?'

'There will come a moment when I no longer know what food Ye-ji likes, what movies she likes, or where she wants to travel?'

Squirm, squirm, squirm.

Something swirled violently inside his heart.

'No.'

Darkness.

It was overwhelming darkness.

'No. I hate it. I would hate it even if I died. No, truly. I would rather die.'

'My life needs her. Her life needs me too. Is there any need for doubt there?'

'And even if someone raised a doubt, it would not be my mouth saying it, nor Ye-ji's. So what possible difference would it make?'

The dark inner demon raged wildly.

'There is none. And even if there is, I will make it so there is not.'

'Even if the world is destroyed, it is not more important than Ye-ji alone.'

And it was hardly just the Saintess.

In his cross-legged posture, the Undertaker carefully immersed himself in imagining the members with whom he had shared love in the bad endings promising their whole lives to other people.

If this method of Closed Retreat needed a name, it could be called the so-called Adoption Mind Art. Or perhaps the NTR Mind Art.

Immersed in the Adoption Mind Art, he ran through every member's case one after another.

'No.' 'Absolutely not.' 'No matter what happens.' 'I can never allow it.'

Only then

was the Undertaker able to face the darkness lurking inside his heart.

"...I see."

Only after an entire night had passed did he open his eyes and mutter:

"As expected, Seo Gyu was right. Love is accompanied by obsession. I am the same. I acted lofty, as if I had become some transcendent immortal, but was there not such deep obsession within me all along?"

It was such a distorted enlightenment that if Seo Gyu heard it from across the Pacific, he would have blurted out, Me?

But sadly, Seo Gyu was not in America. That was how puppet masters were. Their plans sounded grand enough, but in the end they always failed.

"I can never give up...!"

The Undertaker rose.

Usually, for a one-to-many relationship to exist, it was normal for the many to cling to the one.

Otherwise, there was no way a one-to-many relationship could have formed in the first place.

But here, now, perhaps for the first time in history, a miracle had been born.

"Not a single one!"

A reversal of obsession, or obsession flowing both ways.

In the formula of 1:many, the 1 also obsessed over the many, and what was more, obsessed over every single one of them so equally that it made no difference at all...

A truly insane equation had been born.

Responsibility for creating such a monster could probably be laid at the feet of Oh Dok-seo, Infinite Metagame, Cheon Yo-hwa, big-sis version, and Go Yuri, but it would not help much.

They would probably just keep repeating the same answer.

"I didn't know it would turn out like this..."

Alas.

People often described a male character obsessed with love as an obsessive man.

But if one called the monster born here and now an obsessive man, it would be an insult to obsessive men across the country, across all dimensions.

Therefore.

'From now on, I will live for all of you.'

Not an obsessive psycho-top, but just a plain crazy obsessive man.

And off he went.

Footnotes:

Chapter 482

The That Woman D IX

Sinnoa

* * *

If you asked who in the Regression Alliance could really hold their liquor, about two names came to mind.

First, Dang Seo-rin.

She'd always been a good drinker. No, she enjoyed anything at all, as long as there was something to eat or something to drink.

One reason Busan's food scene managed to flourish even amid the ruin of the world was that the city's ruler, Her Excellency the Great Witch, was forever smacking her lips and going, "Isn't there some new place worth eating at around here?"

After her came... Noh Do-hwa.

Anyone in the know knew it well. Noh Do-hwa loved wine to an absurd degree. She'd dug out a separate wine cellar in the underground bunker just to safeguard her collection, which said it all.

If Dang Seo-rin's drinking style was broad, savoring not just the liquor but the whole boisterous mood of drinking and chattering with others, then Noh Do-hwa was the exact opposite.

The only drink she cared for was wine.

She was even the truest loner of the age, insisting on eating alone and drinking alone.

Of course, now and then Lee Ha-yul got summoned as Noh Do-hwa's drinking partner.

But considering that Lee Ha-yul herself was, by her very nature, physically incapable of being anywhere near "boisterous," you could guess just how much Noh Do-hwa loved quiet.

The food industry of end-of-the-century Busan had developed to suit the palates of these two power-holders.

Yet the two of them rarely crossed paths, thanks to that "difference in taste."

And so.

"Care for a drink...?"

When Noh Do-hwa abruptly made that offer in the middle of the trip, Dang Seo-rin was completely caught off guard.

"Huh? Uh, uhh... Huh?"

The first "huh" was for glancing around. Naturally, Dang Seo-rin assumed she'd been inviting Lee Ha-yul, not her.

The final "huh" came after confirming there was nobody around, let alone Lee Ha-yul.

"Me?"

Having proven the strange truth that most communication in Korean gets handled with a single "huh," Dang Seo-rin pointed at herself with her index finger.

"Is there anyone here besides you...?"

Noh Do-hwa replied with the exact same face as always. Which was to say, the expression that everything in the world was a bother and humanity was contemptible and detestable.

"Or what, you don't want to, by any chance? If you don't want to, I really don't mind being turned down..."

"No! I'd love to! Totally love to! Let's drink together, Do-hwa unni!"

"I'd be so happy if you'd toss that 'Do-hwa unni' title into a recycling bin somewhere..."

And so.

Dang Seo-rin found herself going through with the event known as "drinking alone with Noh Do-hwa," a penalty game for every human alive except the Undertaker and Lee Ha-yul.

The venue was a nighttime swimming pool. Cheon Yo-hwa had rented this out in its entirety too, and a dedicated bartender had even been stationed at the bar set up along one side of the pool.

'Whoa. Now I'm getting nervous for no reason.'

Noh Do-hwa, meanwhile, was calmly chatting with the bartender like an android that hadn't had tension built into its blueprints in the first place.

"A sweet martini, please..."

"Yes. A sweet martini. Coming right up."

"Ah," Dang Seo-rin quickly added her own order.

"I'll have a Manhattan!"

"A Manhattan. Coming right up."

To come to a cocktail bar and order a Manhattan for her very first glass meant, for Dang Seo-rin, that she needed to get a little drunk tonight.

Honestly, even though she'd managed to call the woman "Do-hwa unni," it was still awkward to drink face to face with her stone sober...!

"..."

"..."

A silence like death flowed between them. Maybe she really should

have dragged Lee Ha-yul along after all, Dang Seo-rin regretted a little.

The bartender didn't toss any fuel onto the conversation either. He'd probably been told beforehand by his employer Cheon Yo-hwa not to disturb the two of them.

Normally, right around now, Dang Seo-rin would have skillfully loaded up the insider-exclusive unique skill [Small Talk], but...

'Ugh. No matter how I look at it, Do-hwa unni's the type who really hates small talk.'

A true insider read the other person before using their skills.

So Dang Seo-rin waited quietly for the host who had summoned her to this deadly drinking session to speak first.

Before long the cocktails arrived.

'Ah. Delicious.'

At the faint, barely-there hint of sweetness in the cocktail's aroma, Dang Seo-rin's happiness recharged at once.

While alcohol slowly seeped into her heart, distilling out her true feelings, a voice came from beside her.

"Have you heard the news...?"

"Hm? News? What news?"

"That Undertaker fellow. Apparently he opened the time capsule yesterday and absorbed all his memories. Just like us."

"Huh?"

The tipsiness rushed straight up to her face.

"H-how? Wasn't Pandora's box closed forever?"

"That was a lie, apparently. Word is unni can basically play with it however she pleases..."

'Cheon Yo-hwa, that little...?!'

Dang Seo-rin was stunned. Don't tell me she'd squeezed out a lie at the very moment they'd all opened the box together on the lawn?

'You really can't let your guard down around this one! Right to the very end!'

Truly the cunning, the dankness of a strategist who deceives friend and foe alike. Fitting for the Miko who handled the yin within Taeguk[1].

"I had originally intended to say screw it and not care whatever choice that human made, but..."

Noh Do-hwa tilted her cocktail glass.

"The memories of me. What was it called, a bad ending? Whatever. If he's regained those memories, that's a different story..."

"U-uhh?"

"That man is mine."

"..."

The air went as still as the surface of the pool, which no one but the two of them was allowed to enter anymore.

Dang Seo-rin looked at the woman across from her.

A few strands had slipped loose from her tied-up hair, draping over the side of Noh Do-hwa's face like wisteria blossoms.

She'd thrown a light white cardigan over her shoulders, on top of her swimsuit, and it resembled the doctor's coat that was Noh Do-hwa's symbol so closely that it suited her oddly well.

She was a pretty person.

"I married him."

"..."

"If it's a marriage and a vow that only my side remembers, one-sided, I have no intention of forcing it. There's nothing wrong with burying it in memory and living on forever. Well, you could say he's practically a different person, couldn't you?"

"..."

"But if he's remembered, yes. If he's remembering, that's a different story. From now on, no matter what happens, I will not let that man go..."

That this pretty person.

Had gouged out the eyes of the one she loved and demanded that he look at no one but her, that much was beyond any way for Dang Seo-rin to know.

Even so, that this woman's love would be terrifying, she could grasp in full without ever having lived through it.

"And so."

"..."

"Would you kindly piss off?"

"Don't want to."

It was an immediate answer.

Only then did Noh Do-hwa turn to look at her. The corner of her mouth was twisted strangely. Her gaze was like glaring at a corpse already dead.

Even so, Dang Seo-rin looked straight back at her without so much as a flinch.

"I am never going to give up."

"Even if that man and I enjoyed some seriously deranged days together...?"

"Yeah. It's a different cycle anyway. A bad ending story, right? And on top of that, a half-baked memory you took in by converting an imagined scenario Cheon Yo-hwa ran in a simulation into memory."

"..."

"Is it even certain that really happened? Me, on the other hand, I'm certain. Was it the 40th cycle, or whatever cycle it was. Anyway, the first time the Undertaker subjugated the Meteor Shower. I heard he kissed me. My first kiss."

Dang Seo-rin gladly took the bait.

She'd also calculated in an instant how the other woman would fire back about this. As if one glass of liquor would turn her into an idiot.

A laugh slipped out between Noh Do-hwa's lips, a soft "heh."

That was ominous. Before that breath could even shape itself into words, it felt to Dang Seo-rin as though a burn had already been seared into her chest in advance.

"That would be Hecate, not you."

"..."

"Because that man treats you as both Dang Seo-rin and Hecate, do you reckon you've actually become that yourself? Is the standard that man? Then like I said, since both of us have regained our memories, the same goes for me, doesn't it...?"

"..."

"Well. Or is it that, drenched in memories that crawled up from your subconscious after subjugating the reincarnator, you reckon you've inherited Hecate? Hmm. But if you put it that way, this memory of mine and that memory of yours seem to be equally half-baked."

"..."

"Which is it?"

Oh. To think such a person.

A person who could drive a knife this casually, this deep, into another's heart.

The Undertaker had been able to love her.

So it was something even a person like this could do.

This thing called love.

"You..."

"From unni to you. The way you address me keeps flipping around. Well, personally I prefer this one."

"...You. You really are vicious. So what is it you want? To chase everyone else off and live alone with the Undertaker? Don't tell me you mean to do that to Ha-yul too?"

"Yes. Obviously."

"My goodness. They're father and daughter! Both of them turn miserable if they're apart! You say you love him, and you don't even wish for the Undertaker's happiness?"

"Yes."

"..."

"In case you misunderstand, let me say this. It's not as if I particularly wish for that man's unhappiness."

Noh Do-hwa's eyes smiled.

"I only wish for both his unhappiness and his happiness to originate entirely from me. The oath of marriage, isn't that what it's about?"

"You're insane..."

Dang Seo-rin groaned.

She had no choice but to groan.

"...Until now I thought Sim Ah-ryeon was the craziest of all our members. Guess not. Sim Ah-ryeon, at least... at least, she wouldn't regard the Undertaker as her possession."

Sim Ah-ryeon merely loved beautiful things.

The name "Undertaker" had been inscribed at the very pinnacle of that beauty; it wasn't that she'd drawn the concept of beauty out of the Undertaker himself.

A matter of order.

The former Management Captain before her, by contrast, was saying she would draw every valuable thing in this world out of the Undertaker and the Undertaker alone.

Dang Seo-rin could grasp it intuitively.

"...Now I see why you're the only one among us who never fell to corruption. You were already crazy. You're a crazy person. Which is exactly why there wasn't even a gap for an anomaly to seep into."

It was a strange thing.

In a world stained with anomalies, Noh Do-hwa should have been the most human of humans.

And yet, in this present world where humans had returned as masters... Noh Do-hwa was the closest thing to a monster.

Just how absurd were the people the man she'd come to love had gathered as companions, she felt it cut to the bone all over again.

"...Whether you love the Undertaker or not, that's not my problem."

"Hmm."

"Honestly. When I went on a date with the Undertaker along the sea road yesterday, I was going to confess."

Yes.

While strolling the wharf, Dang Seo-rin had been prepared to accept a life spent forever with the other members, so long as just a promise along the lines of "he'd like me best" got engraved into her heart.

It wasn't as if she had some grand plan. More like, the Undertaker can handle it however he likes, and if handling it however he likes doesn't work out, she'd figure it out then.

But.

"...If I leave someone like you alone, everything's going to end up a mess again before I know it. The chaos you'd cause is on a level Sim Ah-ryeon can't even compare to."

"That one just now stung a little..."

"And hand the reins over to Cheon Yo-hwa instead? No way. The unni's far too untrustworthy, and the younger sister's far too emotional. Ye-ji? She's got way too much sentiment, and she's far too kind. Leaving it to Dok-seo or Ha-yul would be insane."

"So you'll be the Captain, then?"

"Yeah. Originally I figured I'd try to work something out with you, but I can't trust you."

Dang Seo-rin felt a sense of duty.

And whether it was when she'd first tried to take over the flower shop from her family, or when the Korean Peninsula had collapsed completely and only Busan remained, Dang Seo-rin was the type who sublimated a sense of duty into her reason for being and her purpose in life.

That instinct, which had gone off a couple of times before, sounded its siren alarm without reservation this time too.

'It has to be me! Everything's doomed otherwise!'

At Dang Seo-rin, exuding a tragic heroism about standing in the heavens herself, Noh Do-hwa scoffed.

"Will it work out...?"

"Will what."

"Everyone living it up, laughing ha-ha and ho-ho. Well, I can't imagine the human heart being so soft and round."

"Wow."

"Go ahead, do as you please. But a catastrophe is bound to happen, plain as day, and when it does I'll kick back and amuse myself."

"Wooow."

Dang Seo-rin was genuinely impressed.

"You, don't tell me right now... you're going to believe we'll fail, and wait for the aftermath of that failure? Again? Aaagain? After pulling that crap, waiting all the way until the Undertaker dropped into a bad ending?"

"There's a fallacy in the word 'wait.' Whatever you do or don't do, I'll enjoy what there is to enjoy with that man. So rather than wait, 'look forward to' would be the correct expression..."

"Seriously. Wow, seriously. You're cold-blooded. You. How about you just go ahead and admit you lost the bet you made with the Undertaker?"

"I admitted it. A while ago. But somehow, the scenario where the bad ending succeeded has now entered my head too... In that case, even tallying wins and losses, it's one win, one loss. Practically a draw, isn't it?"

"..."

"A draw means a rematch. It'll be a fun rematch. Try running things well. See if you can."

Dang Seo-rin clicked her tongue.

"Forget it. If I keep talking with you... with Do-hwa unni, my own head's going to go strange too. I'm leaving."

There was a sarcastic remark at the address that had flipped yet again, but Dang Seo-rin paid it no mind.

Because she stood up at once. To head back to her room.

'Seriously, seriously, seriously, seriously!'

Treading over the hallway carpet, Dang Seo-rin fumed all on her own.

'Please, Undertaker! Couldn't you have hung out with some normal kids?!'

'...If they'd been normal kids, they wouldn't have been so powerful as awakeners, I guess.'

'Couldn't you have just gone all lovey-dovey, all in love with me and me alone?! I saved you, didn't I!'

'...But wait, I was an Outer God. If you'd only hung out with me, the universe would've ended.'

'Do-hwa unni isn't even a particularly strong awakener! So why drag in human trash like that too?!'

'...She's similar to Ha-yul, I guess. Ha-yul would be sad living apart from the Undertaker too. And Do-hwa unni, life would have no meaning for her now without the Undertaker either.'

'Why are there seriously no normal people around at all?!'

'...Well, that's because the Undertaker himself is abnormal.'

This was the problem with being a rational person.

Even when she tried to vent her anger outward, her head had already produced counterarguments against herself, completing a

miraculous self-sufficiency system.

"...Haah."

At a repeat sign too large to swallow down alone, Dang Seo-rin sighed and sighed.

'I give up. I left the drinking half-finished too. I'll just go to the Undertaker, have a drink, and talk a bit.'

That was when it happened.

"Dang Seo-rin."

"Hm?"

A familiar voice rang out in air stripped of noise the way only hotels manage. She raised her head, and the Undertaker was walking toward her, step by step.

"Ah, Undertaker!"

The moment she saw his face, her stomach, which had been groaning and aching, loosened right up, ahh. A handsome face came with a built-in defrost function.

Maybe it was because she was so happy to see him.

"Perfect timing! I was just drinking and stuff, but it got cut off halfway and it was really no fun. Let's drink together in your room, you and I..."

"Drink?"

Dang Seo-rin didn't immediately catch that his expression and tone carried a shadow unlike his usual.

"Who did you drink with?"

"...Hm?"

"True enough, a trip abroad. An ultra-luxury trip at that, so of course you could go meeting other people. But it was only for a

single day."

"...Hm hm? Hm?"

Step.

The Undertaker came right up to her face. The whole time, nothing but question marks kept firing off from Dang Seo-rin's expression.

'Hmm? Something, something... isn't the mood a little different?'

When she looked closely. No. He'd already come right up to her face and cornered her against the hallway wall, so she'd been forced to look closely whether she liked it or not.

'There's a bit of a shadow under his eyes too. Huh, and his dress shirt's slightly undone...?'

If the white doctor's coat was Noh Do-hwa's symbol, then a neat appearance anytime, anywhere was the Undertaker's emblem.

'Did he, did he go drinking like me too?'

But whether her nose was numb or for some other reason, no trace of alcohol whatsoever could be detected from the Undertaker's body as he lowered his head to envelop her.

"You're a free-spirited soul. Left alone, you could fly off anywhere you pleased, however you pleased. I know that well."

"Uh... huh?"

Not even twenty seconds after they'd met, a strange mood was hanging in the air.

Feeling she ought to say something, Dang Seo-rin opened her mouth, breaking out in a nervous sweat.

"Um, look. I don't really get what you mean. Anyway, you've got it wrong, Undertaker. It's not like I met some total stranger..."

"Mm."

Right onto her parted lips, the sound of his breath layered over.

"...?!"

Dang Seo-rin's pupils dilated rapidly. She tried to let out a muffled moan, mm, but even that, before she knew it, her hand had been clasped tight in the Undertaker's hand.

She couldn't move in the slightest.

"...!!"

It wasn't only her hand that was caught.

The tip of her chin. As if he wanted to kiss her even a fraction closer, he'd lightly taken hold of her chin, adjusting the angle at which their breaths flowed together.

A moment that felt like eternity.

In Dang Seo-rin's head, countless question marks and exclamation marks crossed back and forth in turn.

Was she flustered? Of course. Was it a little unfamiliar, this being so different from usual? Maybe.

But just one day earlier, Dang Seo-rin had nearly fired off the proposal of a lifetime, and even before that she'd had countless, truly countless, will-they-won't-they moments with the very man before her now.

The fluster and unease settled, and his breath and touch came to the fore.

In the middle of the red carpet.

Just as the Undertaker had taken her hand and chin without realizing it, before she knew it, without anyone realizing it, Dang Seo-rin too had wrapped her arms around the Undertaker's waist.

"..."

"..."

Their lips drew apart. A little.

It was the perfect distance for gazing into his eyes, so Dang Seo-rin saw. And felt.

'Is he feeling anxious?'

Who? The Undertaker.

'Why?'

Because he hadn't seen her face for a day. Because in the meantime, she might have spent time with someone he didn't know about.

'No way.'

This man, who was always composed and as carefree as though he stood one step removed from the secular world, and yet, despite all that, who'd been bound to the secular world more than anyone and had tried to save people.

'The Undertaker? Him, the Undertaker?'

Dang Seo-rin looked up into his eyes once more. In the pitch-black darkness, only she was reflected.

'He was... fixated on me? Just now?'

Thump.

'The Undertaker is fixated on me.'

Her heart went all ticklish.

In this very moment, Dang Seo-rin newly became aware of a preference of hers that she'd never once noticed across all those tens of thousands of years, whether she'd been an Outer God or a human.

'It's not... bad.'

It seemed that she.

'No, I actually like it!'

It seemed she liked it when the person she loved fixated on her like mad.

* * *

The night had flowed on for a while.

Even though Dang Seo-rin had slipped away, the drinking didn't break up. From the start, for Noh Do-hwa, liquor had been something to drink alone.

And so, taking her time, now that she'd even gone and secured a bartender to use exclusively, Noh Do-hwa ran through a full course of cocktails.

The flavor wasn't as deep as wine, but cocktails had their own way of being enjoyed too.

Freely changing the strength and taste of her cocktails, Noh Do-hwa savored the night thoroughly.

And then, on the way back to her room.

"Management Captain Noh Do-hwa."

"Mmmmm...? Oh. Who do we have here. Heh. The day before yesterday, or is it the day before the day before yesterday now? The regressor fellow whose wedding I officiated, donning a wedding dress and all, isn't it."

"You smell of alcohol."

"Alcohol? Aaalcohol? Ah, well. I had a bit. Having money sure is convenient. I'm seriously thinking I might just go mooch off that Cheon Yo-hwa's place from now on."

"Who did you drink with?"

In that moment.

"...?"

Even dead drunk, Noh Do-hwa sensed something ominous. Her vision, this, sloshing around with the liquor, wasn't seeing too well.

'What is this?' 'Something.' 'I'm getting,' 'a seriously moronic feeling here?'

Still, Noh Do-hwa was Noh Do-hwa. The seasoning of her days reigning as the absolute power of the Korean Peninsula hadn't gone anywhere.

Putting the part of her brain not yet drowned in alcohol into maximum operation, she tried to read the expression on the man's face before her.

Fortunately, Noh Do-hwa had a very good read on the human called the Undertaker.

She'd known him well to begin with, but in a world destroyed by a bad ending, the two of them living together through thick and thin, eyes gouged out, marriage held, she'd come to know him even better. After all, he was her husband.

That instinct of hers was whispering.

"Who did you drink with, Noh Do-hwa?"

That this son of a bitch was up to something weird again.

Footnotes:

1 - Taeguk (the Korean form of the taijitu) is the red-and-blue swirl on the South Korean flag, dividing cosmic forces into yang (the active, bright half) and yin (the passive, dark half); calling her the one who "handled the yin" casts her as the dark, concealing counterpart of the pair.

Chapter 483

The That Woman D X

Sinnoa

The word that fit "closed retreat" the worst was "group."

If you likened wuxia to Pokemon, it had evolved in stages, from classic wuxia to new wuxia to web wuxia.

And among those, the stage called MZ wuxia1, also known as xianxia2, was basically its Gigantamax evolution.

Anyone who'd encountered Pokemon back in the day, the moment they laid eyes on a Gigantamax, would let out an involuntary Lion's Roar3 of "Hah! What kind of Pokemon is that?!"

Xianxia was bound to exactly the same fate.

Even so, there was one rule of grammar that hadn't changed from past to present.

The unwritten law that a "closed retreat" had to be done alone.

Obviously, if you did it not by yourself but as a like-minded group all hyping each other up, how was that a retreat at all?

Even if it happened at some little spring deep in the mountains, that wasn't a retreat. It deserved to be called a vaguely offbeat team-building lodge instead.

"...Hey."

In that sense, Noh Do-hwa was a flawless, perfectly normal person who had never read so much as a single volume of wuxia in her life.

But even she could sense that the present situation was deeply abnormal.

"We've been holed up in a hotel room for over ten days now without even getting to see the sun outside. Is this normal? Huh...?"

"Go get your sunlight on the terrace."

The Undertaker answered.

For the record, besides the two of them, several other people were sprawled out across this ridiculously spacious suite. Dang Seo-rin was over there, Cheon Yo-hwa way over there...

Damn it, Noh Do-hwa cursed under her breath. For someone with misanthropy as a passive trait, far too many people were living here.

"Outside. I said outside, you bastard..."

At that, the Undertaker's eyes flashed. They gleamed like a beast's in the dead of night.

"Why? You want to leave? You're saying you want to get away from me?"

"You, dog..."

It had been ten full days since the Undertaker had evolved into the most insane, obsessive man the world had ever seen.

As though the grammar of the genre were no concern of his, this atrocity called "team-lodge training" was being carried out with perfect composure.

Noh Do-hwa came to a deep, deep realization. Mostly a reflection on her past self, and especially on the way she herself loved.

The realization that maybe the sight of someone obsessing over another person like a lunatic could, from that person's point of view, be way more screwed up than she'd ever imagined.

* * *

To run quickly through the various incidents that occurred during

those past ten days of madness, it went like this.

First, Lee Ha-yul ended up with a whole pile of mothers.

Even Silence Suzuka[4], seeing Lee Ha-yul as she was now, surely couldn't have spouted the nonsense, "It must be nice to have so many mothers."

[Hmm.]

Lee Ha-yul's attitude toward the mass-produced mothers was complicated too.

Dang Seo-rin, Noh Do-hwa, Jeong Ye-ji, Yu Ji-won. For people like that, Lee Ha-yul was willing to put on a thick face and cling to them going "Mama."

But little-sister Cheon Yo-hwa and big-sister Cheon Yo-hwa? Not so easy.

Sim Ah-ryeon? Get lost. Oh Dok-seo? Has the world ended?

[Now that I really think it over.]

Lee Ha-yul solemnly raised her sketchbook.

[I'm pretty sure I only ever had one mother to begin with.]

"You're only realizing that now??"

Oh Dok-seo, Lee Ha-yul's best friend, was dumbfounded.

If Lee Ha-yul's mother, who was probably tending the household plants in Busan right now, perfectly fine, had heard it, it was an unfilial remark scandalous enough to make her faint.

[More to the point, I never expected even you to make a move on Dad. I trusted my friend just as much as I trusted you.]

"No. I'm not in that closed-retreat crew, am I. Mister and I have a noble spiritual love. Author-to-reader platonic love, okay?"

[I'm gonna puke.]

"What's really gonna make me puke is the plain truth that Ah-ryeon unni walked into that gate of hell on her own two feet. She was even the most eager one about it..."

[Our Dad has something wrong with his head.]

That's right.

Lee Ha-yul and Oh Dok-seo, the only two who had not joined the genre-shattering atrocity of the group-cohabitation closed retreat, were savoring a trip to California in the United States together.

The travel expenses they could foist off onto the Cult. The cultists would tag along as bodyguards and even interpreters. They had a friend whose heart matched theirs. It was just a gold mine.

And in the middle of the two of them savoring it.

"Hello?"

They ran into an irregular they never saw coming.

A being whose hair color should have gone back to ordinary after the final subjugation battle.

And yet, for some reason, here was someone with pink hair flowing down again. Go Yuri.

"Hwuhk!"

[Oh. Auntie, hi.]

Oh Dok-seo jumped like a Joseon villager who'd run into a tiger on a hillside, but Lee Ha-yul actually welcomed her.

Go Yuri gave a wry smile.

"I'm Auntie because I'm Go Yuir's little sister? Hmmm. Ha-yul. No, niece, the way you address people really does have a lot of depth to it."

"H-how did you get here?! You shouldn't be able to use your

Teleportation anymore! And why has your hair color regressed again too?!"

"Ahaha. Dok-seo."

Go Yuri smiled demurely.

"I have a lot of money. I've got private jets in every major city, you know."

"..."

It was true.

These days, a mysterious investor going by the nickname "Saintess" had been showing off insane returns and slowly building a reputation on the dark side of Wall Street, but to Go Yuri, even that was just a cute newbie.

Add up all the assets she'd scattered across nominee accounts and countless organizations, and Go Yuri's wealth was on an overwhelming level. She hadn't been all talk about saving the world.

The moment she came to her senses after the final subjugation battle, what Go Yuri had said was this.

"Hmm." "I should head down to South America to manage the organizations." "And tidy things up while I'm at it." "There are a lot of useless places now."

Right after that, Go Yuri vanished for a while.

She wasn't missing, exactly. You could reach her by phone reliably enough.

But her number changed every single time you placed a call, a regular circus trick, so Oh Dok-seo cleanly gave up caring. Her life was precious.

So coming face to face with Go Yuri like this was a reunion after quite a while.

Go Yuri walked over lightly and sat down across from them at the cafe's outdoor table. Exactly like a friend you'd hung out with yesterday and parted from, only to meet again today.

"By the way, niece Ha-yul can talk in her own voice as much as she wants now, can't she? There's Uehara Shino's potion. And the surgery should have finished successfully too."

[Yes.]

[But to draw out my own voice, you have to clear the Lee Ha-yul exclusive route.]

[When you reach the route's climax, this me, who has only ever talked through a sketchbook and tablet, gradually opens her mouth and answers her partner's proposal...]

["Yes," like that.]

[Hwaaaahk.]

[That's when, for the first time, a line comes out in my own raw voice, and it's seared in clear as day that this Lee Ha-yul has been conquered.]

[Jackpot. Mega jackpot. Total mega jackpot.]

[The plain, undeniable fact that the one true heroine of supreme dignity is me, Lee Ha-yul, will be revealed to all the world...]

[From now on, I shall stand atop the heavens.]

"Ahaha. That route sounds fascinating. Though Go Yuir would probably get killed at the hands of the other members."

Watching the two of them talk in front of her, Oh Dok-seo's face soured into a "Bleagh."

It bore repeating. Lee Ha-yul and Oh Dok-seo were best friends.

Just as Lee Ha-yul would sooner choose death than call Oh Dok-seo "Mom," Oh Dok-seo too found the Lee Ha-yul route utterly

revolting.

And likewise Lee Ha-yul found the route of being called "daughter" by Oh Dok-seo very, very revolting, and conversely, on the matter of being called "Mom" by Lee Ha-yul, Oh Dok-seo actually found it very, very, very, et cetera omitted. They were an ouroboros of mutual disgust.

There was a solid reason these two could become friends.

"So why'd you suddenly show up like a wild Pokemon? Weren't you busy as anything tidying up the organizations you'd scattered around the world?"

"Yes. I've about finished tidying up now."

Go Yuri demurely covered the corner of her mouth.

"Above all, my information network brought me some very interesting news. Not just Yu Ji-won and Oraboni alone, but the whole group going on a trip together! What on earth happened?"

"I'd love to ask what kind of information network that even is, but... well. It's a straw you stuck inside the Cult, I'm sure."

Oh Dok-seo shrugged.

She'd thrown her own weight around internationally trying to save even one regressor, but the spies Go Yuri had recruited really did operate in the shadows everywhere.

"I'll explain."

A little while later.

"Wow!"

Clap, Go Yuri brought her hands together.

If you put her current expression into words, it was nothing but all smiles. Her whole face was brimming with delighted laughter.

"Going along with everyone. I never expected that at all!"

"...Really? But Mister had tons of people with a thing for him from the start."

"It's a matter of Oraboni's personality. For Oraboni, the final stage of love is, in the end, 'the resolve and the decision to spend a lifetime with the person in front of you.' No matter who he was close with, or how close, up to that point, once he decides on love he unconditionally puts that person at priority zero."

Go Yuri smiled brightly.

"You peeked through the Infinite Metagame's mischief too, Dok-seo, so you'd understand. Even when he ended up with Sim Ah-ryeon, Oraboni vowed to give everything for that one person, you know?"

"..."

"That's why I predicted that no matter how Oraboni reached a happy ending, the conclusion would have him joined with no one... in other words, a no-romance ending, or an ending where he lives only with Ha-yul."

Go Yuri giggled and stirred her lemon tea with a spoon.

"My goodness. So that's it. Making a time capsule by taking advantage of the cycle where I was killed. As expected of Cheon Yo-hwa. Every now and then she leaps right past my predictions!"

"..."

Watching that purely, genuinely fascinated reaction, Oh Dok-seo couldn't help feeling it all over again.

Ah, the one whose way of thinking and emotions resemble Mister's most really is the person right in front of me.

Even if the members had ended up with other people, the Undertaker would have blessed it purely. Just like Go Yuri was doing now.

Only.

'Mister is someone who can change even his own way of thinking for the members' sake.'

That he would turn into an insane, obsessive man, even Oh Dok-seo couldn't have imagined, but in any case the Undertaker had abandoned a superior position of his own accord.

He'd lived loftily above the clouds as though lust and carnal desire had nothing to do with him, then deliberately fallen from heaven, you might say.

'Enlightenment is awakening. Go Yuri, who stays in the realm of enlightenment forever, and Mister, who hands down a death sentence even on his own enlightenment. Maybe that's the decisive difference between the two...'

In the end.

Oh Dok-seo had searched every cycle, mobilizing the Infinite Metagame and even collaborating with Cheon Yo-hwa's Taeguk, but there was no "Go Yuri route" to be found there.

Of course. If even a single bad ending with Go Yuri had ever come about, every worldline would have ground to a halt that very day.

"By the way."

Go Yuri said to Oh Dok-seo, who was lost in thought.

"I'm asking in case there's a cycle I missed again. Dok-seo."

"Y-yeah. Ask me anything."

"Among the observed bad endings. Was there a separate Dang Seo-rin route too?"

"Hm? No?"

Oh Dok-seo denied it at once.

"Seo-rin unni's bad ending was the cycle where 'Utopia' descended, right? So that bad ending already existed in the main story, not the side stories. There were a few cycles where Seo-rin unni and Mister got to flirt a little, sure..."

"There were?"

"Mm. Well, it didn't work out."

It couldn't be helped.

Unlike the other members, Dang Seo-rin had already 'been dead' by the time she met the Undertaker.

Only Hecate, who had inherited Dang Seo-rin's personality and memories, existed.

This death of hers, which could never be undone even through regression, was the very obstacle that blocked the progress of the "Dang Seo-rin route" time and again.

The deeper the relationship between the Undertaker and Dang Seo-rin grew, the more sharply the odds rose that she herself would realize she was a false existence.

A figure for whom only catastrophe was fated as an ending.

No matter how romantic the mood, no matter how much love there was, there simply was no route that ever joined them. The absolute "sub-heroine" in that sense.

That was the Dang Seo-rin Oh Dok-seo had looked upon.

"Ahaha."

After hearing out Oh Dok-seo's view, Go Yuri laughed softly.

"That's a mistaken view, Dok-seo."

"Hm? What is?"

"All the others were joined with Undertaker through the side

stories. But only one single person. Only Dang Seo-rin's bad ending was included in the so-called main story..."

A grin.

"Couldn't that be read to mean that this worldline is, of all things, the route joined with Dang Seo-rin?"

"Uh... i-is that so?"

"Yes."

Go Yuri rose quietly.

"It's a relief for me too. Dang Seo-rin, surely, will face any hardship head-on together with Oraboni and press on. The two of them are the finest of companions."

She turned her back.

"W-wait. Where are you going?"

"My curiosity's been satisfied. I'm content. Now I have to go do what I have to do again."

"You came after so long, at least see Mister and the other members before you go, come on..."

"I can call anytime, after all."

Go Yuri turned her head slightly to look at Oh Dok-seo, the one who had dragged this route all the way here.

A being who was, in a sense, like a child born between the two of them, regressor and reincarnator.

"All of you are very, very precious to me. But as you know, among the people living and breathing on this earth, there isn't a single one who isn't precious to me."

"Ah."

"I'm not a god. And I couldn't become one, either. But I still want to

try to save as many people as I can."

"..."

"Take care, Dok-seo unni. Ha-yul unni. Let's meet again next time."

Step.

Go Yuri's back grew distant.

It was an age where awakeners and anomalies alike had died down now, so that back didn't vanish in an instant the way it used to.

Instead, a jet-black limousine glided smoothly along the road and, as if it were only natural, stopped right in front of Go Yuri.

Go Yuri opened the rear door herself and got in. And the limousine departed without a sound.

Still the person with the faintest presence of anyone, and the densest presence of anyone.

So Oh Dok-seo thought.

[Hey, Ms. Oh.]

"Why?"

[That stuff you explained to Auntie Yuri earlier. Real? The simulations you ran. The ones you said you wrote as 'side stories'?]

"Yeah. Taeguk ran the simulations, but anyway it's a washed-up loser-god whose juice has all run out now, so I figured I'd better lend it at least a bit of the Infinite Metagame's power."

[Is there a route for me in the side stories?]

"As if."

[Why not?]

"Hah? Damn it, so you want me to write the part where you and Mister are left alone, just the two of you, chattering away in a

destroyed world? My fingers cringed themselves into knots even writing the Final Weapon BUSAN part5! Are you insane?!"

[It's not Final Weapon BUSAN, it's the Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Fortress Humanity's Final Defense Ark City 『BusaN』. Don't ever get it wrong again.]

"Get lost! Hey! Get lost!"

The next day.

After enjoying their trip to the fullest, Oh Dok-seo and Lee Ha-yul returned to the hotel in San Francisco, where they got word that Dang Seo-rin had splurged on an ultra-luxury yacht.

After much deliberation, the naming rights for the boat went to Lee Ha-yul.

The name of this nice boat was, of course, the Mobile Sea-Based Aircraft Carrier Fortress Humanity's Final Defense Ark City.

It was 『BusaN』.

Footnotes:

1 - "MZ" is Korean shorthand for the "MZ generation," a popular media coinage lumping together Millennials and Gen Z; here it jokingly frames the newest wave of cultivation fiction as the genre's youngest, trendiest stage.

2 - Xianxia ("immortal heroes") is a Chinese fantasy genre about cultivators pursuing immortality through martial and spiritual training, an evolution of the older wuxia (martial-hero) tradition.

3 - The Lion's Roar is a stock wuxia martial-arts technique that channels inner energy into an overwhelming shout; the

accompanying cry "Hah!" is a cliché villain/elder exclamation in the genre.

4 - Silence Suzuka is a character in Uma Musume: Pretty Derby, a media franchise personifying real racehorses as girls; the joke alludes to a well-known fan meme about her in-game story.

5 - A parody of Saikano ("She, the Ultimate Weapon"), a tragic manga/anime about a girl turned into humanity's final weapon; the gag swaps in the city of Busan, then bloats the name into an absurdly long mecha-anime-style title.

Chapter 484

The That Woman D XI

Sinnoa

Time passed and passed, and then one day.

A rookie struck the VTuber streaming scene, which had already turned into a red ocean, like a bolt from the blue.

Not in a good way.

『Goryeojang』

goryeochan_ra_vtuber

The center of the Regression Alliance! The rightful master of Pyongyang, the Saintess of the North, everyone's lover, Goryeojang♡

『(●LIVE) Hawawa, I saved the world from world annihilation and woke up a super-bishoujo genius painter?!』

A thunderbolt really was a thunderbolt.

It carried the implication that everything where it landed would burn to the ground.

“H, hello! I’m the Saintess who saved a world that nearly fell into ruin. A, and. I’m also Goryeojang, the guardian of Pyongyang and the North...”

“A, also, I’m the best artist in the universe. Me. Anyone acting all cocky because they can draw should get under me and lick my toes...”

-?

The viewers could not hide their confusion at this rookie who had

shown up with such a bizarre concept.

Sure, this scene had turned into a red ocean fast, but even concepts had their limits.

A Saintess? Fine. There were plenty of streamers everywhere, regardless of nationality, who came out with a Saintess concept.

A genius painter? Also fine. Plenty of streamers sold themselves on their drawing skills.

The master of Pyongyang? The guardian of the North? The center of the Regression Alliance? What even is that, you weeb?

-Excuse me, streamer, but could you maybe settle on one concept?

-fr saintess, painter, Pyongyang citizen, I have no clue what's going on here;

"B, but... Hng. This is me."

It was some truly shameless bullshit.

And it did not stop there.

-guess streamers have a hard time making money these days too

"Huh? N, no? I'm rich, though. I live off spending money and it still never runs dry..."

"H, here. I'll show you my bankbook!"

-?

An internet first. A VTuber who started broadcasting and immediately proved she was rich by showing her bank account had appeared.

The viewers were stunned by a bankbook showing not tens of billions, but hundreds of billions of won.

That shock spread through the communities like wildfire, and the beasts startled by that wildfire slowly began gathering around the

rookie's stream.

-is this real???

-obviously fake lol do you know how easy it is to fake screenshots like that these days lol

-fr if you trade stocks you see fake proof posts like that every day

"I, I figured you wouldn't believe me. So if you go post something praising me in your community right now and send me the link and your account number by DM, I'll give you a million won..."

-?

-?

-?

-wow this girl's actually insane;;

-until just now I just thought she was weird, but that got creepy fast...

-the avatar quality's decent, but the person inside is deranged

Of course, nobody believed the rookie liar's wild claim.

However, the time minimalists who had devoted their lives to the internet were the sort who would happily act for the fun of it even without believing.

Two or three viewers really did post praise for the "Saintess" in the communities they used, then verified it, and,

-???

-holy shit

-guys jackpot

-why what happened?

-I literally just got one million won deposited into my account

-?????

Something.

Something had started happening.

-what? did she hire shills?

-no I'm serious it actually got deposited!!

-?? I got one million won too?

-what the fuck

Even the "sensible people" who had first assumed the streamer must have hired part-time workers herself,

once the witnesses saying they had gotten a million won stopped being one or two people and started reaching the dozens, then the hundreds, had no choice but to doubt their own common sense for a moment.

Otherwise, the only explanation was that every single one of these people, chatting and posting proof in every community under the sun, was a paid shill.

Then what, she had hired over a hundred of them? A rookie on her very first stream? Did that make any sense either?

"S, so. Today I'll just keep it simple and hand out one billion won. Posts I don't personally see don't count..."

"I'll come back tomorrow too, at the same time!"

The next day.

-openupopenupopenupopenup

-Saintess, I wrote a proof post! I sent you a DM too! Please check it, Saintess!

-My dog is starving, Saintess. If your grace can save my dog, I'll become the dog instead

-ugh all the beggars in the world gathered in this room;;

-and you're saying I'm supposed to resist a million won??

A mere two days after debut, thousands of viewers flooded in.

It was a comedy born from this insane stunt sweeping through every community overnight.

And what did the culprit behind all this chaos, the VTuber who had shown up with the ridiculous nickname "Goryeojang," say?

"T, today I'm giving away ten billion won."

Just.

"This time it's not one million, it's 100 million each. No more, no less, e, exactly one hundred people. I'll pick them starting now and send each of you 100 million won..."

That day.

Every community was annihilated.

* * *

After gaining fame as "the lunatic who burned ten billion won on her own debut stream,"

Goryeojang kept streaming with surprising ease.

"T, today. I'll draw an anomaly called Udumbara. It'll get auto-filtered a little on its own, so please keep that in mind..."

Because of the early ragebait, chats begging please just 100 million or no, please, even just one million kept popping up every now and then for more than half a year.

Even after that period passed, however, Goryeojang's stream kept cruising along, boasting an average viewership of around 5,000.

Why did people even watch this kind of stream?

The reason was simple.

-Saintess! Tell us about what happened in Sinuiju today!

“A, the b, battle for Sinuiju? That place was always the same. But when the aliens invaded, even I got a little scared.”

The occasional stories she told from her days as the Saintess were unexpectedly, no, genuinely, strangely,

full of realism.

“Mo Gwang-seo Christ Cathedral... Ah. It’s Kumsusan Palace of the Sun now, right? Hehe.”

“T, they really layer the defensive lines around that palace tight, one after another. But then the aliens invaded from Sinuiju in less than thirty minutes while we let our guard down for just a second!”

“I, I was still fighting the defensive battle in Sinuiju with the Paladins back then... It sent a chill down my spine, seriously.”

“At least it was raining, thank goodness. I, if it hadn’t, the northern front would’ve collapsed that very day.”

On and on.

Once she got going, her lips twisted and her tongue stumbled, but she kept forcing the story out, and some parts were so vivid it almost felt like she had experienced them herself.

There was even one viewer working in the National Intelligence Service who fell into serious thought over, Wait, why is this girl’s information on North Korean geography so accurate?

Then one day,

-hey

-but you’ve got tons of money

-and it doesn't even seem like you need to stream

-so why do you work this hard at it?

one viewer asked out of simple curiosity.

Then an ah slipped out from beyond the speaker.

"Sooo. U, um, everyone. You're almost all guys, right...?"

-nope?

-I'm not a guy

-hawawa I'm a 15-year-old bishoujo-jang

-graduated from an all-boys high school, graduated college, did my military service, but I'm still a bishoujo anyway deal with it

"A, anyway!"

Goryeojang spoke before five thousand viewers.

"I'm doing this stream b, because. Most of you are probably men..."

The viewers tilted their heads. The viewer listening to the stream through earbuds while bench-pressing only twitched an eyebrow.

She was streaming because we were men?

What did that mean? Did she just enjoy drawing broth out of us that much?

"U, um... I, I have a b, boyfriend."

?

"But my boyfriend's possessiveness is. Hwaaa, i, insane. He's suuuper possessive."

??

"I'm secretly streaming with all of you without telling my

boyfriend... Because, hehe. Becauseee...!”

“If he finds out I’ve been secretly chatting away all lovey-dovey with men for over half a year! Then my boyfriend will get r, really, really really!”

“Jealous...”

???

At that moment, about five thousand viewers briefly got confused over whether they were really human, or maybe Protoss.

All their hearts were connected through the Khala and displaying a single word, a question mark.

For the record, the viewer bench-pressing got pinned under the barbell. The gym erupted into chaos.

-no

-what the hell is this

-a VTuber just openly admitting she has a boyfriend like this??

“W, what? Y, yes. Yes!”

“Actually, calling him my boyfriend is only technically true... Since we’re going to live together forever, he’s basically my husband anyway, isn’t he?”

-???

What the hell was this nonsense?

When people saw something beyond the limits of imagination, they could only freeze up.

And so, astonishingly, the number of viewers watching Goryeojang’s stream neither increased nor decreased.

Everyone was glued to the screen.

“Hwak! T, the boat rocked again...”

“Mmm. Yachts are nice and all, but sometimes the boat sways and it makes my stomach churn. I changed the antenna to an expensive one too, but it still lags sometimes.”

-?

-Saintess, are you streaming from a boat?

“Ah, yes. I guess I never mentioned that until now.”

“U, um. My husband is seeing quite a few people. So while we’re at it, we’re traveling together on a yacht...”

-?

-?

-?

What the hell was this nonsense?

The viewers’ heads, already suffering from setting overload, started exploding by the dozen.

-so she’s rich and doesn’t need money at all

-and she just threw ten billion won into thin air purely for attention

-and she goes live diligently every day on the dot, draws, tells stories, and built herself up to mid-tier size

-and all of that was purely to drag out her boyfriend’s? husband’s? obsession and jealousy

-and that boyfriend or husband is dating other people besides you?

-and all this is happening on a yacht??

It was torture to link together even a single sentence without a question mark.

The moment it got expressed in human language, it felt as if the brain itself might become contaminated.

“Yep!”

And yet Goryeojang’s voice was utterly bright as she answered the viewers’ questions.

“Hauuu. The Guild Leader... Ah. Guild Leader is what I call my boyfriend. A, anyway.”

“It’s nice when the Guild Leader gets all possessive over me, but what I really want is for that person to get the most j, jealous over me.”

“So fooling around with other men would probably work best. But this is our private yacht. There’s nobody else here.”

“And if I try to go ashore at a port, the Guild Leader will figure out exactly where I went and who I met. So I can’t make the operation succeed...”

“S, so! Internet streaming!”

“I’m usually just holed up in my room surfing the internet anyway. So the Guild Leader never touches what I do on the computer, and lets the guard down... Hehee.”

“So... I’m having a secret affair with all of you. I’m cheating...”

“E, even if! It’s online romance!”

“Romance is still romance.”

“And cheating is still cheating.”

“R, right?”

“Answer me.”

By this point, the viewers’ heads had already exploded, and yet they were still somehow exploding further.

A secret affair? Wasn't that usually what VTubers hid from "us" and then carried out in "reality" behind the screen?

Why were we the secret affair?

Why were we the objects of the cheating?

How did this logic even exist? How was this mindset possible?

"I, I should stream on Christmas too. And it'd be nice if I got caught having a secret affair on Christmas..."

The viewers realized.

This.

Had.

Transcended.

Humanity.

-we've never dated someone like you in our lives, fuck

"Eh. Th, that's mean. Why are you being like that? You sent huge superchats before too... Chat messages are that, you know? They're like the love letters you and I keep exchanging."

"I, I saved every single one."

"I'm going to show them to the Guild Leader..."

-hwaaaaaaaaah

-crazycrazycrazy

-run holy shit

There was no escaping.

On Christmas Day,

"T, ta-daaaaaan!"

“Oh. What’s this, Ah-ryeon?”

a man’s voice the viewers had never heard before came out of the speakers.

Even though a real man’s voice appearing on a VTuber stream was the kind of event that could burn related communities to the ground,

the chat was silent.

Perfectly silent.

It was not normal.

But then again, if anyone wanted to talk about what was normal, the very title of today’s broadcast was already not normal.

『Goryeojang』

goryeochan_ra_vtuber

The center of the Regression Alliance! The rightful master of Pyongyang, the Saintess of the North, everyone's lover, Goryeojang♡

『(●LIVE) Christmas Boyfriend Grand Reveal』

A stream title so soaked in dopamine that it felt like some substance that should never be secreted by the brain was being squeezed out like juice.

Pure entertainment. No, pure violence.

All the viewers became one and clasped their hands in desperate prayer. Mister nameless boyfriend, Mister Guild Leader, please run!

Someone might ask, if that was the case, why not just turn off the stream and ignore it?

That was impossible.

Miss this huge premium event? Resist this?

-the Guild Leader has a nice voice...

-runrunrunrunrun

-nice to meet you, your girlfriend threatens us with a knife all the time, so if it wouldn't be too much trouble could you please take her away

-so your name was Ah-ryeon, Saintess

The current viewer count was a whopping 160,000.

It was a record-breaking number.

Truly a fitting finale for the greatest villain of the year, who had started with the shocking "ten-billion debut" and set countless communities and shorts vultures on fire all year long.

"It's my stream!"

"A stream?"

"Yes! I, actually. I've really been streaming for a whole year. A, a VTuber. Guild Leader, you're an o, otaku too, so you know all about it, right?"

"..."

"Hehe. Look at this! I have 160,000 viewers! I'm super popular. Just a second, Guild Leader. I'm going to greet the Paladins watching right now!"

"..."

"H, hello, my beloved Paladins? Today is Christmas. Even on this most holy of days, you came here to love me, so I'm sincerely th, thankful."

The viewers had no idea when this streamer had started referring to them as "my beloved Paladins."

They truly had no idea.

Wasn't her daily routine just mocking this bastard and that bastard all day long?

Even the hardcore viewers who had been there since the ten-billion debut were only just now learning for the first time that their fan name was "Paladins."

"And to show my gratitude to you all in that spirit... I specially prepared an ASMR microphone!"

"Just a second. I had everything ready in advance, but I, um, need to change the settings a little. Ah. There."

"E, everyone."

"Hwaaaa."

"I love you..."

Before she could even finish saying I love you,

"Ah."

somehow, that sounded delighted.

"Ah. Ahaha, aha. G, Guild Leader. Your face right now. Y, your faaaace... Hwak."

Then the sound of something crashing around.

"M, Merry Christmas! This is my present, Guild Leadeeer... W, were you surprised? Right? Right?"

And then.

A moment later.

『This broadcast has been terminated for violating community guidelines.』

Everything fell silent.

And that was the "Christmas retirement live" of the rookie VTuber

Goryeojang, who had appeared like a thunderbolt.

For some reason, from the very next day onward, videos and recordings related to it started disappearing one by one,

and so it became the end of a streamer whose fate remained only in legend.

* * *

“Ah-ryeon.”

“Yeees, Great Witch...”

“Undertaker.”

“...”

“Answer.”

“Yes.”

“Right. The only Undertaker I need is the one kneeling in front of me, but goodness me. This time you went and hired hundreds of internet Undertakers?”

“I’m sorry...”

“I have to deal with this starting on Christmas? Huh? Do you know how busy Yo-hwa and I have been?”

“I’m sorry...”

“That’s enough, so drop that ridiculous obsession concept already! I know! I get it! I know how much you love us, so do it in moderation! For once!”

“Yes.”

“Ah-ryeon, you’re banned from the internet for one year.”

“Hieeeeeeeeeek!”

Sim Ah-ryeon, internet confiscated.

This too must be Great Witch's grace.

"Hoo."

Dang Seo-rin, worn out from erasing traces from the internet over the last few days, let her shoulders droop.

This damn household, no, this damn ship-hold, really never had a quiet day.

From an outsider's point of view, this "Goryeojang fiasco" might have looked like some kind of grand incident.

Of course, it really was grand. If a person had to experience something like this in life, that event would usually occupy the place of a final battle.

But in this godforsaken ship-hold, it was only around the level of the first Cooper trial.

Just the week before last, Dang Seo-rin had needed to suppress an incident called Riot of a Hundred Flowers, and the week before the week before that, she had been forced through that damned event called Great Debate! Philosophy Battle, and the week before the week before the week before the week before the week before that...

Dang Seo-rin pressed a hand to her forehead. She had poured this much mental energy into it, yet she did not feel in the slightest that anything had ended.

The only thing that somehow felt rock-solid was the certainty that this kind of bullshit would keep repeating forever.

If this were a novel, it was the kind of absurd uproar that would consume nearly 200 chapters, yet nobody would want to describe it.

"Hey. Undertaker. We'll reach the northern Mediterranean around January or February, right?"

“Yeah. R, right. We were planning to stop by Venice then too.”

Undertaker’s voice shrank. Even a once-in-an-age obsessive lunatic became subdued in a situation like this.

“So, about that... Mm.”

Dang Seo-rin quietly ran the numbers.

At present, the Mobile Land-Based Aircraft Carrier Fortress Humanity’s Final Defense Ark City BusaN was continuing its voyage in full swing.

Sometimes the members split up into one group traveling by land and another by sea.

In any case, the world tour was proceeding smoothly.

“When that time comes, set aside some time just for me.”

“Hm? You mean the two of us should go around together?”

“Yeah. Honestly, I’ve been through a lot lately, so even if I tell the others, they’ll probably let...”

“No.”

Undertaker said it. His voice was still quiet, but there was a bitter smile mixed into it as well.

“I can’t keep making only you suffer. I’ll handle getting permission from the others myself.”

Venice, between January and February.

Right in time for Carnival season.

It was winter.

Footnotes:

Chapter 485
The That Woman D XII (Fin)

Sinnoa

Now and then.

Dang Seo-rin would have a dream like this.

-...

A dream where she opened her eyes to find the Undertaker right in front of her, weeping.

An intersection.

The intersection where she had first met the Undertaker at the start of every cycle.

-...?

Naturally, there was no way for Dang Seo-rin to figure out why the man before her was crying, or who he even was.

His face, at least, was her type.

'Good. So this isn't real.'

Dang Seo-rin accepted it quickly.

The intersection itself had been strange from the start. Instead of living passersby, only bloodstains went clomping along on their own. It would have been harder to believe this wasn't a dream.

A dream within a dream.

-I'm sorry. Dang Seo-rin.

The man always held her close and repeated his words of apology.

-I'm sorry.

-Uh. Um..., excuse me. Who are you?

-I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I was a fool. I went and used up your entire lifespan. I didn't know that a lifespan could not only be whittled down, but go into the negative.

-...? ...?

-I'm sorry. Even just talking with you like this is allowed only for a brief moment. Truly, I'm sorry.

It was nothing but riddles.

Still, the word 'lifespan' somehow landed with her.

Ever since she had opened her eyes at that intersection, her eyelids had been terribly, unbearably heavy.

'Ah, so in this dream, I'm dying.'

Why was that? She had surely never experienced death before, yet, strangely enough, she could feel it clearly.

It was as though her real self had died long ago, and that believing herself alive was, on the contrary, the illusion of the dream.

-I'm sorry, Dang Seo-rin. I'm sorry...

The man apologized.

Over and over.

Her eyelids grew so heavy that she couldn't bear it, and when she let them slip shut for just a moment, just the briefest blink, and opened them again,

-I'm sorry. Dang Seo-rin.

the man was repeating the very same apology, as if no time had passed at all.

It was eerie.

-...?

The eerier part was that, after each blink, she could no longer remember anything about the man.

-Uh. Um..., excuse me. Who are you?

-I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

The same question. The same answer.

The same forgetting. The same repentance.

Dozens of times, hundreds of times, thousands of times. She blinked and blinked again, far too many times to count.

-I'm sorry.

The man always held her close at that intersection and confessed nothing but his apology.

-...

Then, at some moment, Dang Seo-rin felt the self held in the man's arms split apart from the self watching that scene.

How should she put it?

Maybe the one over there gazing at the man's weeping in bewilderment was the 'real' Dang Seo-rin, and the one blankly watching the two of them was the 'dreaming' Dang Seo-rin.

In any case, Dang Seo-rin thought:

'He doesn't have to hurt himself that badly.'

It was clear that some mistake had occurred between that man and herself.

What kind of mistake had it been?

She couldn't know for sure, but it was probably because of it that she had fallen into an irreversible fate.

And yet, if it were her, if it were 'Dang Seo-rin,' she would surely forgive a person who was apologizing this hard.

'It's all right.'

Dang Seo-rin was someone who knew how to love.

She cherished her family. She held pride in herself. She knew how to sacrifice for the ones she held dear.

That proud life of hers had surely been built up for the sake of people who wept on and on, like the man before her.

Dang Seo-rin could say it honestly.

'I'm fine. Please don't cry so much.'

But.

-I'm sorry.

She couldn't reach out her hand.

No matter how much she wanted to send her voice across to say it was all right, the 'Dang Seo-rin' at that intersection beyond the fog couldn't put those words to her lips.

'I'm really fine.'

-I'm sorry, Dang Seo-rin. I'm so sorry.

'...'

After all, the Dang Seo-rin over there was a being inside a dream.

She was a being separate from herself here, within the dream inside the dream.

She couldn't reach her.

'...'

If asked which of the two was the false one, then naturally the one over here, watching the intersection from afar, would be the false one.

Dang Seo-rin thought quietly.

'I don't want to die.'

Once, it seemed, someone had wished such a wish.

But she actually knew the truth. Back then, that girl hadn't prayed out of some greed to never die, or to live forever.

'I don't want to die like this.'

So in what manner had she wanted to die?

With what kind of death could the being that had wished its wish upon her have smiled and accepted death with peace of mind?

Dang Seo-rin pondered it for a long while.

'I don't want to die leaving you behind like this.'

She traced the outline of the wish with her fingertips.

'Death is frightening. But...'

'If I'm with you, I think I'll be all right.'

That was Dang Seo-rin's wish.

It was her own wish.

'So, here.'

She reached out her hand.

And at last, she parted her lips.

-I'm counting on you from now on. My companion through time.

* * *

With a rattle and a jolt, Dang Seo-rin's eyes opened.

Her vision was a little hazy.

"Ah. You awake?"

A familiar voice came from right beside her.

When she turned her head, the Undertaker was sitting there, peeling a peach with practiced hands even as the train car swayed.

Had she gone and dozed off with her head leaning against him? The area around the Undertaker's shoulder was wet with drool.

"...Eugh."

The moment she saw it, the computer OS in Dang Seo-rin's head began booting up at high speed.

"Sorry. I dozed right off..."

"It's nothing. You only slept about thirty minutes. Call it a nap, and it was just the right amount of rest."

"Hwaa. Where are we right about now?"

Dang Seo-rin pulled a handkerchief from her front and wiped briskly around the Undertaker's shoulder. There wasn't any particular meaning to it, but a thing like this was really about wiping the heart, not the object.

The Undertaker smiled.

"We'll be in Venice soon."

"Where do you think the kids will be docking?"

"It's too big, so they'll probably have a hard time bringing it into the city center. I figure they docked out in the outer harbor through some agent."

What the two of them were calling docking was, of course, the matter of the 'Mobile Maritime Carrier Fortress Humanity's Final Defense Ark City' BusaN.

Even though she had gone to the trouble of acquiring an ultra-luxury yacht, there were times when Dang Seo-rin would do exactly this, sending the other members ahead and traveling separately with the Undertaker by train.

Traveling by boat wasn't bad either. But a train trip like this was exactly what stirred Dang Seo-rin's sense of romance.

'When I think about how I had to clean up after that Sim Ah-ryeon just to get to enjoy this romance, my head still spins...'

Well. It was already water under the bridge.

"We've arrived. Shall we get off?"

"Ah, yeah!"

The Undertaker and Dang Seo-rin shouldered their backpacks and got off at the train station.

By every measure, they looked like a backpacking couple. Who, seeing these two, would guess they owned wealth beyond imagination?

The life goal that crowds of people might envy, being a 'rich person nobody's heard of,' was something these two had already achieved.

A reward for the heroes who saved the world from an eternal apocalypse... perhaps that was too trivial a word for it.

But the two of them were satisfied, calling it more than enough, overflowing even. Then again, it was precisely because they'd had that disposition from the start that they'd been able to claw their way out of the apocalypse.

"Wow!"

A white breath rose, haa-, from the corner of Dang Seo-rin's mouth.

She was wearing a thick fur coat.

"Look at that, look! Undertaker! People are actually walking around in masks!"

"Mm."

"I'd only ever seen it in videos! It's a real carnival...!"

Winter in Venice.

Even though the weather wasn't exactly great for traveling, this wintertime Venice was hitting its peak season thanks to the festival, the Carnevale di Venezia.

Look here. Look there.

Crowds of people walked around in cosplay, decked out in masks and costumes that probably cost a fair bit to rent.

For Dang Seo-rin, a master craftsman of cosplay, it was the kind of event to make her head spin.

"Hold on. I get that you're excited, but let's go to the room first and drop off our bags. If we walk around with our packs on, it'll be hard to rent costumes anyway."

"Okay!"

The lodging was right up against the Grand Canal.

Back in her student days, it would have cost a per-night fee she couldn't have dreamed of, but now there was no problem at all even if she rented out an entire hotel.

The staff served the two of them with the utmost devotion as well.

Especially when fluent Italian came spilling out of the Undertaker's mouth, it felt like their friendliness doubled in an instant.

(The best moment when traveling with the Undertaker was exactly this dramatic shift in courtesy.)

"Hng?"

At last, after coming to the room and setting down their backpacks, Dang Seo-rin tilted her head.

"Why is everyone else gone? Did they go out to play?"

As far as she knew, she'd been traveling around with just the Undertaker until now, but around this point they were supposed to be sharing the same lodging.

At that, the Undertaker shrugged.

"Who knows. Guess they haven't arrived yet. When I reached out yesterday, they said they might be a day or two late."

"Yeah?"

Dang Seo-rin nodded without much thought. If the Undertaker said so, then that was how it was!

Any other time, maybe. But she didn't want to go checking the schedule or making calls one by one when they were finally getting to spend precious time, just the two of them.

"You wash up first."

"Hmm? Aw, no. It's fine, it's fine. It takes a lot of time, so let's just wash up together. The bathroom's huge."

"Mm. Shall we?"

One hour later.

Her body, grimy here and there from travel, had been made cleanly refreshed.

As Dang Seo-rin came out drying her hair, the likewise freshened Undertaker gave a knowing smile.

"Take a good look, Dang Seo-rin. If you open up this wardrobe here... ta-da."

"Hraaagh."

"I didn't know which mask you'd like, so I had them gather every kind. The witch costume is perfectly prepared too. It's a present for you."

"Hraaaaaagh...!"

Looking closely, it was perfectly identical to the witch garb she had worn back in her days as the Samcheon World Guild Leader.

When she flipped the lining inside out, she could see traces of stitching done by hand, one careful stitch at a time, not by machine.

Dang Seo-rin's emotion, which had already been running at maximum from the moment she stepped off at the Venice train station, broke right through its limit.

"D-don't tell me. Undertaker. You...?"

"Aah. Managing the Guild Leader's wardrobe is, by tradition, a duty entrusted to the Vice Guild Leader."

"I love you!"

One hour later, again.

Inside the belly of the witch-costumed Dang Seo-rin, a biological-clock alarm went off with a growl.

"I'm hungry...!"

"Traditional seafood dishes? Pizza?"

"Hm. Is Venice pretty good at pizza?"

"It's Italy, isn't it? Wherever you go, it'll be way better than franchise pizza."

"Then pizza!"

"Always the right choice."

Filling her stomach inside her freshly cleaned body, there was no happiness quite like it. Add a glass of wine to that, and Dang Seo-rin had nothing left to ask of life.

"Hwaaaaa... This is nice."

"That café over there, Caffè Florian, is that famous spot Goethe is said to have visited too. In the masterpiece manga ARIA1, they say you can refill café au lait however many times you want, but that's actually a load of bull."

"You really do let your otaku side slip out so casually sometimes... ARIA? What's that?"

"Ho. You're missing out on half of life."

"Then would you mind returning the other half of me I left in your keeping?"

"I've got all the volumes of Aqua and ARIA stocked in the yacht's library, so be sure to read them later."

"And what's Aqua now..."

A boisterous bustle.

Dang Seo-rin in her witch costume, the Undertaker draped in his cape. The two of them strolled freely through the alleys and squares of Venice, masks on.

A festival night.

Everyone was giddy. To Dang Seo-rin, who had at least wet her throat with wine, every breath she drew in now felt giddy too.

'Huh.'

Besides them, plenty of people were dressed up in all sorts of outfits. A few of them caught Dang Seo-rin's eye.

'There are more people in pointy hats and witch costumes like mine than I'd have thought. Hm, is it always like this?'

It wasn't a terribly strange thing.

Witches were, after all, a regular guest at carnival as a theme.

'But... Their outfits really do look so much like mine. Oddly familiar.'

While her attention was elsewhere, oop, her shoulder bumped into a traveler. Dang Seo-rin quickly took off her mask and met their eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"Ah, no. The fault's mine."

The other person took off their mask too.

"Huh?"

In that instant, Dang Seo-rin was swept up by a powerful sense of déjà vu.

The other person was wearing a witch costume similar to her own, and... their face, too, was familiar.

"Have a good night!"

But the other person didn't seem to recognize Dang Seo-rin. They gave a bow of the head and moved off.

They weren't alone. The other person had a friend traveling with them too, and that friend was wearing a witch costume as well.

Dang Seo-rin watched their retreating backs in silence.

"You finally noticed?"

said the Undertaker.

Beaming, with a face somehow brimming with mischief.

"Noticed...? Noticed what?"

"That person we just bumped into. Didn't they look somehow familiar?"

"Yeah. But... I can't quite place it. They were Korean, right? Who was that again?"

"My, my. To forget your old subordinates. The Great Witch of Samcheon World has fallen on hard times."

"...Huh?"

"They're your guild members."

He was smiling faintly.

"The witches of Samcheon World. Comrades who once ran across the sky with you and saved this world alongside you."

"..."

"The main players who held off the apocalypse may have been the Regression Alliance, but we still ought to remember their struggle. I kept it secret from you, but all this time I've been supporting them as Anonymous."

"Ah."

"Of course, those people have already forgotten us. They weren't deeply affected by unconscious memory the way you and I were, and they never opened a time capsule. That's why they didn't recognize you."

Only then.

Dang Seo-rin stood still and looked around the square.

There were many people. But among the crowds, there were so very many 'witches' walking about.

Some alone. Some in pairs. Some in groups.

That day, now grown as distant as a dream.

Just as it had once been, in a square of some Utopia that no one could remember anymore.

"The one condition I set as Anonymous, their sponsor, was just this. Each year at this time, I'll book lodging at the Venice carnival, and when you come to travel here, you have to wear the costume prepared on this end."

"..."

"As the price for living your whole life free of money troubles, a condition this light isn't half bad, is it?"

Dang Seo-rin understood.

That the reason Yu Ji-won and the rest of the members, who'd be on the yacht right about now, hadn't arrived in Venice today was no coincidence at all.

That sponsoring the witches of Samcheon World. Preparing the lodging and the costumes. Sending out the invitations. And then timing it all to the moment she, traveling the world, arrived in this city on this day, none of it was a coincidence.

That perhaps, even before she had first asked for time alone, just the two of them, the Undertaker might have been preparing for this day from far, far back.

A festival dream that existed for this one night alone.

'...I. I forgot something.'

No one remembered that the people walking around in witch garb now had once fought against the malice of the void.

Not even the people themselves.

'Forgetting is a deeply sad thing.'

How someone lived. How they died.

What wish they made looking up at the night sky. How desperately

they wished it.

Nothing had been left behind.

'But... even if I don't know, I think it's all right.'

The fireworks bursting in the night sky cast a brief shadow across the side of her face, then died down.

Forgetting was still sad. It was sad, but.

If it were forgetting of this kind, if forgotten memories were scattered across a night sky where the breath of the festival had settled,

then she could accept it.

"Undertaker."

She was someone who loved.

With every rash love, a wound had healed over. And from the blood she had shed, she grew a red flower in her heart.

She couldn't love the wounds, but she could love the flower, and so she could accept the wounds as well.

"Mm."

If that was so, then for the petals that had died too soon, she could sing forever.

Without hatred, without contempt.

A song where neither this world hated humanity, nor humanity hated the world.

"I'll love you, forever."

Simply a story about a certain red petal.

-I'm an infinite regressor, but I've got stories to tell. END.

Footnotes:

1 - ARIA (2002-2008) is a slice-of-life manga by Kozue Amano set in Neo-Venezia, a recreation of Venice on a terraformed Mars; it follows trainee gondolier-guides. Its prequel was originally titled Aqua, mentioned a few lines later.

Translator’s Afterword 2

ZERO_SUGAR

With today's release we're finally done with IRS. In the April 2025, on a random evening @resnut pinged me saying sinnoa has released another novel and I immediately went to LiteraryGirl and spam pinged her saying we have to translate this. I remember, I had semester finals back then but I still spent 2 whole days translating back then so we could get ahead of the mtl competitors then. I don't know how good of a decision that was but I'm glad that it got us here at the completion of this masterpiece.

I've never seen a community be as involved theory-making and sharing fanarts/fanfictions, props to everyone in the discord for that. If everyone wasn't eagerly waiting throughout the ups and downs this novel had, I don't think I would have had the motivation to continue it through the several takedowns it took.

I'm not going to take more of your time but please enjoy reading and check out Sinnoa's new novel, The Regressed Gangwon Hunter, which I'm also translating (and the other fabulous works we have here :)

A big thank you to LiteraryGirl for her proofreading and editing work on the novel, even though she may have gotten busy now, she's done more than I could ever ask of anyone for the novel.

The entire main story is available for free on the website and the side stories are all in advanced chapters right now which will be freed up at 1ch/day till completion.

Note: As of now all chapters are available for free, we highly recommend reading the series there.

Thank you everyone and enjoy reading!